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Across the American West, efforts to designate new federal wilderness are gaining ground. From New Mexico to Washington State and California to Colorado, western members of Congress have introducing wilderness bills. New wilderness has already been designated in California, Nevada and Colorado and more bills could pass before the 108th Congress ends.

Each of these wilderness efforts is presented and reported as an independent action promoted by grassroots groups; no connection between the various efforts has been acknowledged. The typical westerner is likely to conclude that there is a diverse, grassroots-led movement for wilderness emerging spontaneously from westerner's intense love of their special places.

While the proliferating campaigns do involve grassroots groups, in every instance of which I am aware the campaign is in reality implementation of a wilderness strategy formulated by a small group of professional environmentalists working for the Pew Charitable Trust - a very large foundation headquartered in Philadelphia. Pew professionals advise each campaign, helping develop campaign plans that are then funded by the foundation. The unwritten rule is that if you want funding you must adopt the Pew approach. Pew favors concentrating on "low hanging fruit," that is, wilderness areas which local congressmen and senators are eager to support because they are not controversial.

In April 2001 the Pew Wilderness Center launched with nation-wide TV spots proclaiming a nine-year campaign to protect additional federal wilderness. But today a web search can not locate the Pew Wilderness Center, nor is it mentioned on the Trust's web site. Deeper investigation reveals that the Center has reorganized as the Campaign for American Wilderness which employs the same Pew professionals and promotes the same "low-hanging fruit" strategy. While the money still comes from the Pew Trust, nowhere is the Pew connection acknowledged.

There is little opposition to Pew's dominance; most members of western wilderness campaigns are not aware that strategy and tactics are controlled by Pew. Even Oregon Natural Resources Council, which once challenged the political wisdom of the eastern environmental establishment and thereby created (with help from other grassroots groups) the Ancient Forest Movement, has become meekly subservient

to Pew's views on how to save western wilderness. Consequently, Oregon's Democratic Senator, Ron Wyden, is proclaimed an environmental hero for sponsoring additions to the Mt. Hood-Columbia Gorge Wilderness Areas and avoids pressure to stand up for the largest complexes of roadless lands in the region – the Greater Kalmiopsis and the Klamath's vast roadless areas. Similarly, Washington's Senator Murray, a Democrat, has a bill to designate 106,000 acres of wilderness near Seattle. Three million acres in Washington State are eligible for wilderness designation.

Perversion of the term "grassroots" by the Pew Trust and others, however, has deeper implications than what sort of wilderness bills are passed and which excluded lands become sacrifice zones. The environmental movement has become closely identified with the Democratic Party and this identification is turning what was once a movement into a narrowly partisan interest group. Pew's wilderness strategy allows mainly western Democrats to claim they are wilderness champions without taking substantial political risks.

Pew's control of wilderness policy has another down side. In the 1970s and 1980s a vibrant, truly grassroots public land protection movement emerged – first in the West and then nation-wide. During the 1990s Pew, with support from other foundations, moved decisively to control this movement. In the new century Pew has taken steps to obscure its pervasive influence.

In the short-run Pew's strategy will garner additional success as more, modest wilderness bills pass into law. The price for these victories may include development of larger, more ecologically important natural areas. But more is at stake. Movements are by their very nature not controlled or controllable, that is, they are by definition grassroots. Because distinctions between grassroots and hierarchical and between movement and interest group have been blurred, however, silent control by those with will and money becomes possible while diversity and democracy suffer. Science teaches that, in the natural world, diversity creates resilience and resilience is a key to survival. If this law also applies to human society, public land conservation's journey from diverse grassroots movement to narrow, centralized interest group may involve greater risk than we can conceive today.

The PEW-inspired wilderness strategy and its implication for the Public Land Conservation Movement merit thoughtful examination by rank and file public land activists. That examination has not, at this point, occurred.