

A New Angle

Episode 63

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Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, we bring you part two of my conversation with acclaimed outdoor and conservation journalist Hal Herring.

Hal Herring: The best way to move forward is to work together, recognizing, never denying the history, but to recognize that these lands are best if we hold them together.

Justin Angle: We go deep on the history and significance of public lands.

Justin Angle: Conflict is, in many ways, it's a feature, not a bug of the system.

Hal Herring: That's it.

Justin Angle: And so how in your exploration of this history, what are some of the best examples of successfully navigating that conflict in such a way that it builds public trust and enhances the strength of the public land system?

Hal Herring: Well, one of them I can point to, ironically, is at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge that the Bundys took over. It's kind of exhibit A of cooperative public private partnerships to create a more sustainable landscape for all the players. It was really ironic that the Bundys and the militia picked that place.

Justin Angle: Right.

Hal Herring: You know, and it was... They have an ignorance here. I've interviewed them. I've talked with them. But the Malheur is one, the Bitterroot National Forest for all the conflicts, the Lolo National Forest for all the conflicts. It is beautifully done. If you're in Missoula and you go fish Rock Creek, the headwaters of Rock Creek on the national forests are roadless because there wasn't a lot of marketable timber in there and that system is incredibly healthy and it can just go on and on and on that way

because it is I mean, it'll burn. But it is protected on federal public land that we all have access to, but we can't go and just tear it up. That's one of them. Rock Creek is one of my favorite examples of protecting the headwaters and getting a creek that sustains an enormous amount of public use and just keeps delivering year after year.

Justin Angle: Okay. So, something that, Hal, it's a question that we could have asked or pulled on this thread at any moment during this conversation, starting when you introduced the concept of public lands with the Romans, you know, seizing land from a tribal population. You know, as a citizen of the West, you live out in Augusta. The concept of public lands is sort of at loggerheads with the tribal history on these lands as well. How are you treating that thread in the history?

Hal Herring: Any discussion of the American public lands right now, it should have been discussed for decades, were that these lands were originally the home territory of hundreds of different Native American groups. There were, I can't remember how many languages were spoken across the United States when Lewis and Clark left St Louis to go to Oregon, but nobody during the conquest of the United States, the conquest of what became the United States, believed that these lands were unoccupied. Right. What I've done in the history is to try to determine how we took these lands from their original owners. And some of it was through trade and some of it was through outright

warfare. A lot of it was through simple white people crowding. I think of the Shoshone people a lot. They were incredibly diverse group of people. One of the great histories is Chief Washakie, but just the history of Chief Washakie himself, who navigated the Shoshone people through some of the most tumultuous times that people have ever lived through on Earth. So, these are lands that once belonged to various native, many different Native American tribes, there's no doubt about that. However, it is my contention now that as we move forward with the management of these public lands that we recognize that and that we embrace a larger role for Native Americans and Native American tribes in the management of these lands. There's no doubt about that. The Bears Ears National Monument in Utah was a beautiful example of how five formerly adversarial tribes came together to assist and make a better management plan for public lands that belong to all of us. That's kind of my model, and that's one reason that, in my opinion, that that monument was attacked so soundly was because it was kind of a blueprint for the future of these things. And in my opinion, it's a very successful blueprint. And so that was very threatening. You know, here's the thing, Justin. I believe that history is always with us. The weight of history is carried around in a toe sack that we carry, but that if we look with a clear eye at the future, that there are threats to these lands that create a situation where most of us, regular Americans, including Native Americans, we're kind of all in the same place now. And the best way to move forward is to work together, reconcile, recognizing, never denying the history,

but to recognize that these lands are best if we hold them together rather than being divided and have these lands perhaps taken from us where neither Native Americans nor our or you will be able to use or enjoy them.

Justin Angle: Let's press on that a little bit, Hal, I've heard you in other venues refer to public land and kind of your experience in public land is an important source of your patriotism. So, talk about how our public ownership of so many of these resources is part of what can kind of make you an American.

Hal Herring: I always think about the United States in as a series, we go back to the idea of conflict, as a series of incredible contradictions. And on the Declaration of Independence being written, while most of the colonies were, most of the states were slave states. Right.

Justin Angle: Right. Written by many slaveholders. Yeah.

Hal Herring: But. America's contradictory. Can you imagine a situation in which one of the most capitalistic nations in world history has held on to 640 million acres? In common, a Commonwealth. I find that to be just like one of the most interesting things about our history and about our country. We have, these are deep contradictions. And

I've described it before as like two turbines turning that create the dynamism that is the United States of America that draws people from all over the world that want to be here because these turbines of contradiction are turning all the time that the balance between individual liberty and the common good, the balance between capitalism and the public lands. And they're never solved. It's like balance. There's no fixed place where it's balanced. So, I see this as uniquely American and uniquely positive. And it's something that, it is the basis of my patriotism, it's land. It's the ability to experience our own land, no matter whether you're rich or poor, whether you just showed up from Bangladesh or Mexico, whether you are a blueblood scion of some Wall Street family. I mean, it's there for all of us. And that's just like that's just not true in other countries in the world.

Justin Angle: What responsibility do you think comes with that for the ordinary citizen?

Hal Herring: Well, to whom much is given, much is expected. And I would say that it is to not be exhausted by the conflicts over the asset. It is to take the asset and pass it on to future generations in as good or better shape than you got it. And I'm assuming your listenership is mostly Montana and like we have, just speaking for my personal view, I raised two children, a son and a daughter on public lands. My wife and I, I have lived a kind of unimaginably free life, like the essence of liberty, being able to make these

huge trips. And I am not a well-heeled person. I have climbed in the Bitterroots. I've skied the Bitterroots. I've hunted and hunted and hunted, the Bob Marshal and the Bitterroot and the Little Belts. I just have a, it's a quid pro quo deal for me. I have to say what I know on this subject, because I've gotten so much in my life.

Justin Angle: Well, that maybe is a good time to transition to another topic of, you know, that in many ways is sort of a new form of extraction industry on the rise, and that is the tourism industry. Montana is experiencing a big shift from, you know, mineral and natural resource extraction to a tourism industry. We saw that accelerated by pandemic hordes of new folks coming in to the state and other states in the West trying to, you know, enjoy and experience public lands in the way that those of us who have the great fortune of living here do. But with that comes a pressure on the resource. It might come with it an opportunity to bolster support for public lands, but it also might lead to sort of an over consumption of the resource. Talk about that new tension that we're, it's not necessarily new, but it's sort of playing out with additional pressure.

Hal Herring: Yeah. I mean, I thought when I saw the kind of the rush on public land during the pandemic that the silver lining to the cloud would be that we would gain more advocates in the constituency for public lands and better management and more

engagement, and to hold off the privatization of public lands movement. I haven't seen that yet, but I still think that's cooking. But you know, if you go to places in Utah which are around Moab, there's a great writer, old curmudgeon writer. I would describe him, Jim Styles, and I really appreciate his work. His thesis is that industrial tourism is worse than extraction on public lands, and I think his argument is very strong. But there's going to be extraction on public lands as well as high levels of recreation and tourism. And we are going to have to learn to navigate that one as well.

Justin Angle: Mm hmm. More conflict.

Hal Herring: More conflict. And I think of the Smith River, you know, and it's the only permitted float in Montana. And it works very well. There's a substantial loss of freedom. But the tradeoff is that there's solitude and beautiful campsites and still a clean river. You know, change is the only true constant in humanity. And numbers of people are going up and numbers of people who want to enjoy the backcountry are going up. But, you know, California has been dealing with this for a long time with varying degrees of success. I think, I just believe I'm an optimist on our ability to navigate. I'm not a believer that we will navigate without serious consequences, losses, conflict, occasional missteps and some successes.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to my conversation with Hal Herring after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Hal Herring about public lands.

Justin Angle: And how does that optimism persist in the current political environment? I mean, we're dealing with a time where, you know, we said this before we started recording like it's easier to throw money at a problem for our politicians than it is for them to actually work together on policy. You know, our government can't seem to get much done at the moment, although this new environmental package notwithstanding, what kind of is the source of that optimism that we'll find a way to navigate these conflicts productively?

Hal Herring: It's, there's a caveat with it. It's a guarded optimism.

Justin Angle: Sure.

Hal Herring: If we continue to be ignorant of our history. I was reading this book this morning called Montana's Wildlife Legacy. It's Harold Picton and Terry Launer. Brit Launer is our biologist here in Augusta and that's his dad. And that book is all about

the wildlife restorations and the creation of the wildlife management areas and game rangers in Montana. It took an enormous amount of engagement and effort for people to do these things, like Elers Kotch. He was the original U.S. Forest Service guy over here. Kotch Peak in the Bitterroot is his named for him. He was a Forest Service Ranger, and he rode across the Bob Marshall, what became the Bob Marshall Wilderness, without seeing a single shootable animal in like I think it was 1912. I may be wrong about the date. If you do that now, you can go elk hunting, you can see, you know, the game has been restored to some extent. Those were huge choices that people made and money that people spent and political engagement that they did, they engaged in the political process. I do see that we are not doing that as much today and that people are tending to vote on the basis of very abstract issues of like culture war.

Justin Angle: Yeah, yeah. The tribal affiliation, really.

Hal Herring: Tribal affiliation. And unfortunately, the tribe that many people affiliate with has, the last time the Republicans wrote a platform, I think it was 2016, it called for the privatization of public lands. So, if you're voting for that, you're liable to get it.

Justin Angle: Yeah.

Hal Herring: And I'm not going to say that people are fools or idiots or anything like that, but a fool and his money are soon parted is a truism. So, you're not going to be able to keep an asset as valuable as, say, the Bitterroot National Forest or the Flathead National Forest. Unless you are deeply engaged in the future, it's very possible that we will vote ourselves out of a future where the freedom of the public lands is part of it. I hope not, but it's possible. Given the unlikeliness of the experiment in the first place, it's possible that we could lose it.

Justin Angle: Yeah, that's a sobering point. Yeah. Given the kind of uniqueness of this experiment it is, I think it might be more tenuous than people realize.

Hal Herring: I think it is much more tenuous than people realize. In fact, I think it is unlikely. It's like sometimes it reminds me of seeing somebody levitating, you know, in a magician show.

Justin Angle: Yeah.

Hal Herring: And you go like, how does that magician do that? And, you know, that seems impossible. And that sometime that when I take off, say, on a trip into the Bob Marshall or I meet people who are horse packing in across the Bob or whatever,

sometimes it's like watching somebody levitate. How can it be 2022 and we still have this freedom to do all this, all 330 something million of us. The population is more than doubled since I was born.

Justin Angle: And how do you think about that, whether it's 330 million or whatever the number is like we all have, theoretically, we all have equal access. However, you know, that access is not in practice necessarily equally distributed, right? Some people, by virtue of whatever choices or good fortune they've had, like yourself, can probably walk out your back door and get into public land without too much difficulty. Others have to have the resources, the time, the freedom of schedule to make that commitment. You know, a lot of data by one of my colleagues here at the University of Montana, Professor Will Rice in Forestry, shows that the distribution of permits and so forth tends to correlate with income, tends to go more to, you know, white folks who are more educated. Talk about that, how access is kind of distributed and how we might go about making access to public lands spread more equally across our society.

Hal Herring: Well, I can tell you that if we continue to be the only constituency, like white Americans of a certain income group, then the future of public lands is pretty dim.

Justin Angle: Yeah.

Hal Herring: The synching and cultivation of diversity and bringing more people to, and I don't mean more numbers of, you know, inundating the national forest in some place. I just mean having the opportunity, sort of equality of opportunity there for people. I just interviewed Rue Mapp of Outdoor Afro.

Justin Angle: Okay.

Hal Herring: And she's connecting African Americans and with public land opportunities, hunting, fishing, tailgating, parks, whatever. She's a visionary, I can tell you. I felt honored to get that interview because she's doing it. She was also lucky as a young person that her father, who's a successful carpenter, had the chance to take them outdoors and teach them how to hunt and fish.

Justin Angle: Right.

Hal Herring: And she realized so many people where she lives in Oakland never had that. And part of her mission in this life was to connect people with something that she saw as an absolute positive.

Justin Angle: What are some of the key things that are working for her? Like what are the nature of experiences that transform people into proponents of public lands?

Hal Herring: Not telling people that they have to put on a backpack and go mountain sheep hunting on the first trip out in the Brooks Range.

Justin Angle: Sure. Yeah. That they don't necessarily have to suffer, although some people embrace the suffering.

Hal Herring: Oh, yeah, absolutely. She does herself in the Sierras. But no, she said that the part of the key was, you set the bar very low to what people already want to do. You know, she said, I can't really take that many people hunting because hunting has a huge entry. It's apprenticeships and guns and permits. And she said, but I can take them to a park. And walk and show them like the sequoias. Once again, it's about equality of opportunity. It's showing people where the door is. And in the South, I have a friend down there, a black hunter conservation guy, and he was on that, you know, in the South, blacks were kind of cut off from the public lands there because during the civil rights movement, it was very dangerous.

Justin Angle: Mm hmm.

Hal Herring: There was a time from after the Civil War through whenever, now, where it could be dangerous to be caught out there without any, without your people, with you to protect you. And so those connections were broken. And they were, which is particularly tragic, really, because those connections were so strong during, say, from after the Civil War, when subsistence hunting and fishing was such a big part of black culture in the South. If you want to shift over to the Bipoc kind of world, some of the best conservationists and public lands people I know are in the Hispanic communities of New Mexico and Southern Arizona.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And what sets that group apart?

Hal Herring: It sets them apart because they have relatives and family on the Mexican side of the border, a lot of them. And they know what is at stake. They know what freedoms are available here to Americans in a way that people like myself take totally for granted.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Yeah. There's an irony to that, right? That the people that might most appreciate the unlikelihood of this public land reality that we're fortunate enough to live with are those that might be new to it, that sort of understand its uniqueness.

Hal Herring: Or even generationally, like generationally, these people, they have a wisdom about it by having something to contrast it with.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Yeah, that makes good sense. So, Hal, we covered so many threads in this conversation. It sort of boggles my mind how you can go about a writing project of such depth. I hate to ask any writer when something will be out, but when might folks hope to be able to consume this great body of work that you're putting together?

Hal Herring: I need to deliver in the next year. I am, right now I'm doing various profiling different public lands across America. And I do find that a little more manageable than the part that I'm emerging from, which was the history.

Justin Angle: Well, I mean, folks can find so much of your writing at your website and in Field & Stream and in other prominent outlets. They can also listen to you on Backcountry Hunters and Anglers' podcast. Take a moment to talk about that podcast project.

Hal Herring: Well, I think we talked about it a little bit earlier, it was a completely organic project that emerged from a campfire in Alice Creek down by Lincoln, Montana, where I was in conversation with a Forest Service guy, retired, long retired named Greg Munther, who was in Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. And Greg was such an encyclopedia of Forest Service history that this one woman was listening to us, and she said, I wish that we could have this recorded, because I can't imagine that this conversation could be, you know, that you could ever get this again. That was true of another one that I had years ago with a biologist named James Estes and Michael Sue Ley. And I would give anything if I had that podcast. And that opportunity is gone. But so, we created with Backcountry Hunters and Anglers and my friend there, Katie McCalla, she kind of drove this, they drove this forward, and I started the podcast. It's been almost five years ago, and I've gotten to interview people both within that public lands, writers, conservationist, bison ranchers. It's, you know, people who are experts at shooting guns for hunting. And it's been a quite a wild ride, to tell you the truth.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Such an opportunity to speak with interesting folks. I have to say, Hal, that's a feeling I've gotten frequently during this conversation. And I'm grateful for you to spending so much time with us. I just feel like it's so important for our listeners to hear this history, to appreciate this history. In the meantime, I mean, not all of us are

excited to wait a couple of years for your book. But if listeners want to learn more about this history and get involved in being part of preserving these resources that we can all enjoy, where would you direct them? How would you harness that energy?

Hal Herring: It's good to read some of this history and some of it, actually, my friend Nate Schreiber from Missoula has just written a book on Bernard Devoto. I'm just now starting it and I'm not going to be able to have the title here, but you can look it up and it's about Bernard and Avis Devoto and Devoto's work is key to all of this. A Western Conservation Reader, it's a collection. Nate's book will put you into the driver's seat for finding the rest of the Devoto's stuff. Douglas Brinkley's *Wilderness Warrior* has a huge amount of history. I think that we need to know the history of how we got where we are in order to figure out how to move to the next place. I mean, without tooting my own horn, I think David Byers and my friends made a pretty good movie at Public Trust, the Patagonia movie.

Justin Angle: It's outstanding. Yeah.

Hal Herring: I think that's a good place, that's kind of more current threats to public lands. But there's some history there as well.

Justin Angle: Well, Hal, best of luck as you forge ahead on this big project. It's been great sharing some time with you and educating listeners on this important topic. Yeah, best of luck and happy trails.

Hal Herring: Thank you very much, Justin. I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.