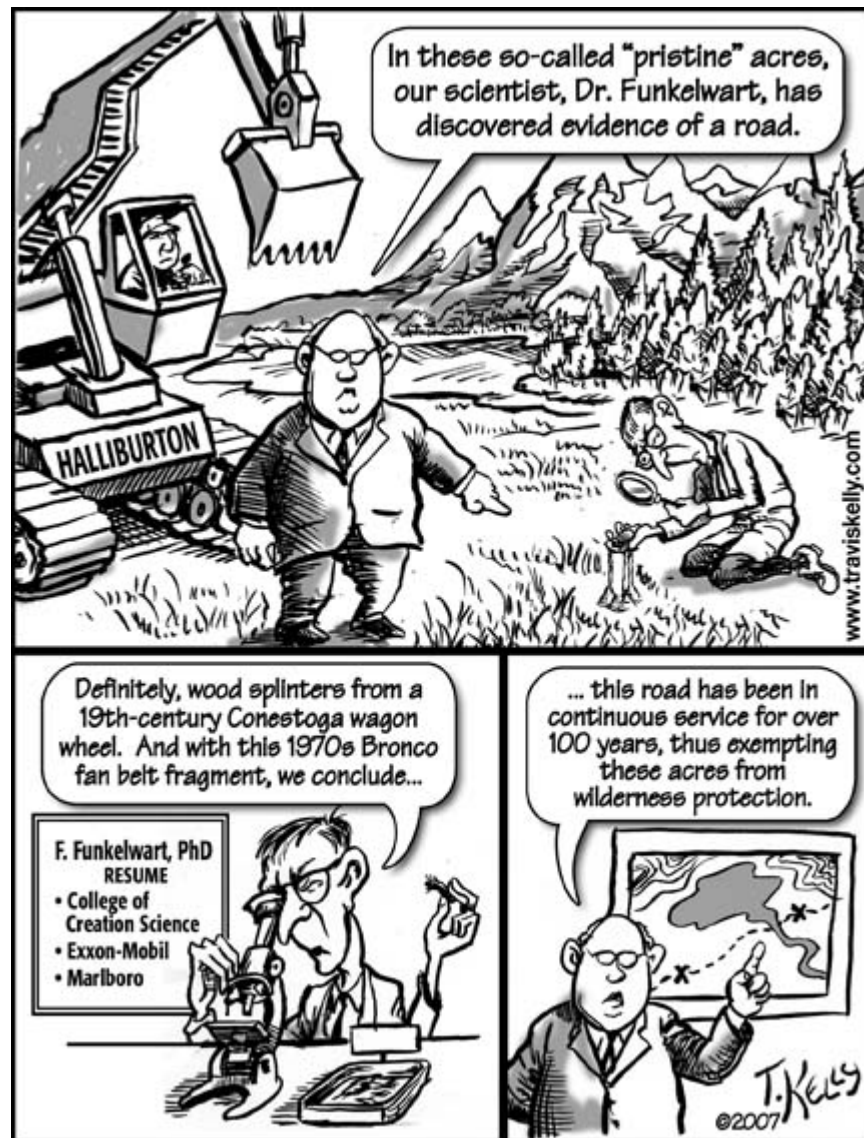


## Roads in Wilderness, Roads to Nowhere: Investigating the Latest Western Land Grab



“Land grabbing is the oldest con game in the West,” Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt once said. Cartoonist Travis Kelly — check him out [here](#) — nails the madness of the latest con-job, which centers on an archaic 1866 public lands law known as Revised Statute 2477. I write about the issue in the July/August issue of *Mother Jones* (“[Off-Road Rules](#)”) and its threat to tens of millions of acres in national parks and unprotected wilderness controlled by the US Forest Service and the DOI’s Bureau of Land Management. RS 2477 provides local government with wide powers of land seizure, for he who controls the roads also controls access for industry and tourism, for off-road vehicles and oil rigs — for use and abuse of the land.

The funny thing is that under the outmoded rubric of the 1866 law, a “road” is just about any kind of track — a cow-path, a foot-trail, a wagon rut. Extractive industries and county

governments who wish to pre-empt new wilderness protections on public lands — lands otherwise exploitable for the profit of grazing, mining, energy and off-road vehicle interests — need only cite RS 2477 to get their wish. This is because the Wilderness Act of 1964, which serves as the legal foundation for protecting public lands, is clarion in noting that wilderness, among other criteria, must consist of at least 5,000 contiguous roadless acres.

Which means that any public lands parcel crossed by an officially recognized “road” — be it ever so specious, an overgrown cow-path, an arroyo of boulders and cliffrose — can never be considered for wilderness protection. It is forever lost.

Meanwhile, the newly formed Rangers for Responsible Recreation, a coalition of retired land managers from the BLM and Forest Service, has declared ORVs the single biggest threat to the health and vitality of public lands (arguably cows are more widespread and more damaging, but we’ll leave that for another debate). As a seminal National Science Foundation study found long ago, in the 1970s, “The deleterious effects of ORVs on native plants and animals is undeniable.” Where off-roading is uncontrolled, the study noted, “virtually all existing life is ultimately destroyed.”

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