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# *Letter From the Secretary*



What a difference three years makes. In this the fourth year of the Clinton Administration's tenure, the Department of the Interior has dramatically changed the way it does the business of protecting and managing our natural and cultural heritage. We have been forging new partnerships to protect and restore the American landscape while at the same time leading the drive to cut costs and doing our part to meet President Clinton's goal of a balanced budget in seven years. We've streamlined our organization, returned to our core missions, and eliminated reams of regulations, but we've also assumed many new challenges and looked to partnerships as a new way of doing business that not only makes fiscal sense but also makes common sense.

Many of the partnerships we have built in recent years have now begun to bear fruit, from the waters of San Francisco Bay and the coast of Southern California, across the western rangelands all the way to the Appalachian Mountains and the Everglades of South Florida.

In the Sacramento River Delta, for one, where the fisheries of San Francisco Bay are collapsing due to massive water diversions from the river system that nourishes it, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Environmental Protection Agency brought together diverse and competing interests -- the Pacific Federation of Fishermen, Trout Unlimited, fruit and vegetable growers, and cities and communities from San Diego to San Francisco -- in a partnership to ensure thriving farmlands, growing cities, and restoration of fish and waterfowl up the Sacramento and the San Joaquin River watersheds.

Amid the dwindling coastal sage scrub between Los Angeles and San Diego, where over 50 species of rare, threatened and endangered plants and animals make their homes in some of the most valuable real estate in America, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, together with the State and local governments, developers and other private landowners, have embarked on a comprehensive early planning effort to demonstrate that we can use the Endangered Species Act to achieve balance and long-term certainty even in constrained circumstances such as this.

On the Western range, the Bureau of Land Management has called together advisory councils with local memberships representing the interests of everyone affected by land use decisions, environmentalists and ranchers alike. We've stopped acting like it is the government's land and the government's business and recognized that it's the people's land and the people's business and that everyone who cares about the public lands in their communities ought to have a say in how they are managed.

Across the Appalachian region, where thousands of miles of lifeless streams run orange and drinking water is laced with acid draining from coal mines, the Office of Surface Mining has taken action to restore the quality of the water and of life for the communities struggling with this crisis. Historic partnerships of Federal, State, and local governments, industry, environmentalists, and coal field residents are now focusing attention, energy, and money on this problem to bring back the streams, the fish, and the tourism, and to ensure that the environment is clean and safe for future generations.

In Indian communities across the country we have paved the way for greatly expanded partnerships between the Federal Government and Indian Tribes. Further advancing the United States' government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes, these partnerships are empowering local people to make decisions affecting their futures. For example, many Tribes are now assuming primary or greater responsibility for managing wildlife and parks and other resource management activities.

Over the course of the last hundred years, the Everglades of South Florida has been leveed, diked, transected by canals and roads and drained by agricultural and urban needs until now it has been pushed to the very limits of viability as an ecological system. That constitutes a threat not just to the saw grass marshes, the egrets, the alligators, and the marlins in Florida Bay, but to the burgeoning population of South Florida that depends on the Everglades and the Bay for fresh water and tourism. In response, the Department of the Interior brought a host of Federal, State and local agencies, farmers and environmentalists to the table and hammered out an agreement and an unprecedented plan to restore the natural flow of water that once flowed down through the Everglades to Florida Bay and the Keys. This plan is already changing the landscape of South Florida, cutting levees and sending more life-giving water coursing through an ecosystem now on the mend.

All across the country, we are enjoying the fruits of years of work over the last three and, indeed, over the last twenty-five years to protect and restore our natural heritage. During my first years as Secretary, I've seen that the sky is not falling, but that the sky is cleaner. That our air is less polluted and our rivers run cleaner. That striped bass are back in the Atlantic, wolves again roam Yellowstone National Park, and that bald eagles once again soar over just about every state in the union. I've seen local partnerships forged by businesses, churches and homeowners, laboring side by side to make our conservation laws work. I've looked at rivers that once burned from oil and grime, but now host sportfishing championships. Waterfronts once abandoned, now spur new growth and bring people back to the banks to fish and swim and eat and work and live.

I've seen that a new generation of Americans is awakening to a new and larger vision -- to the possibilities that we can use our laws not just to stop decline, but to reverse it; not just to preserve the isolated parts, but to protect and reconnect whole landscapes and entire watersheds; not just to fence off the local greenway or trickling neighborhood stream, but to unite them with the great National Parks and the wide ocean bound rivers.

When I gather with them, Americans say to me: we have done this, and we are proud of what we have done. But we can do more. We have stopped the decline of our rivers, the erosion of our soil, the disappearance of our open land, but we can go further. We can, and will, bring life out of death, we can roll up our sleeves and continue the task of cleaning it up, bringing back native fish, reconnecting the entire landscape, reclaiming our heritage. I'm proud to say the Department of the Interior has been with them every step of the way.



**BRUCE BABBITT**

*Secretary of the Interior*