

# LETTER FROM THE SECRETARY

As the Clinton Administration began its second term, America looked to the Department of the Interior for insight into the nature and scope of our commitment to conservation. Even before the inauguration, we gave them a response. Fiscal year 1997 became a dramatic year for earth, air, fire, and water.

## Earth

The act of creating the 1.7 million-acre *Grand Staircase-Escalante* National Monument in Utah was not the first time a President protected a landscape under the Antiquities Act (Grand Canyon and Zion are two classic examples). However, Escalante is the first of its kind, because this newest monument is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Instead of becoming a 1.7 million-acre, self-contained preserve, BLM's management will be closely tied to the local economy, culture, and history of surrounding areas.



While partnerships such as Escalante often work well for public reserves, what about conservation needs on private land? Quite simply, without private land, many rare species may become extinct. To protect endangered wildlife, we need new strategies that take into account the importance of habitat on private property. The Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) are the key to making the Endangered Species Act work. A Habitat Conservation Plan is a land management plan agreed to by the Fish and Wildlife Service, private landowners, and state and local governments to protect endangered species, while allowing some land to be developed. It is a blueprint that says, "Build here, log there, but set some land aside for wildlife so fish can spawn." Today, more than 400 HCPs, covering 18.5 million acres of private land, are approved or under consideration.

## Air

In 1997, the world recognized climate change as a serious issue and initiated an international process for addressing this grave environmental threat. At Interior, we are using our scientific expertise to analyze the potential impacts of a changing climate on our parks, refuges, water resources, endangered species and other resources, and educate and inform the American public about the scientific basis for taking climate change seriously. We also are working closely with the Department of Energy to showcase the deployment of energy efficient and renewable energy technologies, like alternative fuel vehicles, for the lands we manage.

## Fire

Every summer, during the first term, I put on fire gear, went out West, joined a Hotshot crew, and helped put out wild fires. However, in the spring of 1997, I started a fire. What's going on? First, let me assure you that whenever flames threaten lives and property, the fire must be extinguished as fast as possible. But now, we also know that for over a decade, wildland fires have burned hotter, bigger, and faster, growing more lethal, destructive, and expensive to fight. Why? A century of snuffing out all small and regular fires has clogged our wildlands with dense and exotic fuels. Once ignited, flames become intense and unpredictable, leading to mudslides and loss of habitat.

Long ago, natural fire cleared out non-native species, digested and recycled nutrients, and kept landscapes healthy, stable, and resilient. Modern infernos generate intense heat, gasses, and wind, killing even fire-resistant old trees, such as Idaho's ponderosa pine, and wiping out entire populations of fish species, such as rare native bull trout. However, aging wildfires stop in their tracks when they hit a landscape that has been thinned and treated with prescribed fire. We cannot control where all lightning bolts fall; however, we can control what, where, and how much fuel will feed the flames. Under this program, we are working with the U.S. Forest Service to double the acreage of fuels reduction through prescribed fire, treating 1 to 2 million acres in 1998.

## **Water**

Nothing reflects the integrity of a watershed more immediately than the health of native fish. There are many theories on the causes for the population decline of trout, char, and salmon stocks. In essence, we have dammed and diverted America's rivers, mined headwater areas, logged adjacent forests from mouth to source, and imported alien fish species to the waters of native species. To turn around the native fish decline, we have to do more than stop those trends. We have to reverse them.

In 1997, under our drive to "Bring Back the Natives," we released more than \$5 million in new Federal and private grants for 44 innovative projects to replenish aquatic native fish habitat in 14 states. Ultimately, this program will restore habitat on 283,000 miles of streams and 6.5 million acres of lakes within 462 million acres, representing 70 percent of all Federal lands in America. Public and private funds are pumped into the local watershed, generating more than 200 percent in revenues for community businesses in that watershed. This is an example of the Endangered Species Act fueling, guiding, and expanding the base of rural economic growth.

In June of 1997, we entered a partnership with a power company and several conservation groups to remove three dams, restore three entire watersheds, replenish 160 river miles, and protect more than 22,000 acres of pristine lands in the Menominee River Basin of Wisconsin and Michigan. Interior supports decommissioning and removing dams where sensitive habitats and imperiled wildlife populations exist and when the dams no longer serve an important economic purpose. Later in 1997, I climbed aboard a floating barge on the Neuse River near Goldsboro, North Carolina, to demolish the 55-year-old, 260-foot-long Quaker Neck Dam with an industrial wrecking ball. The voluntary removal of Quaker Neck Dam unlocked 925 miles of spawning habitat for shad, striped bass, and endangered sturgeon.

## **Indian Responsibilities**

In 1997, the Office of the Special Trustee redoubled its efforts to reform the management of the financial trust services functions that are an important part of the Federal Government's overall trust obligations to Native Americans. In addition, we have taken steps to encourage and strengthen Indian self-determination and self-governance, increase the resources available for education and the needs of tribal communities, and improve law enforcement in Indian country. Also, on June 5, 1997, Secretarial Order No. 3206, entitled, *American Indian Tribal Rights, Federal-Tribal Trust Responsibilities, and the Endangered Species Act*, was signed by the Secretaries of the Interior and Commerce Departments. The purpose of the Order is to clarify the responsibilities of Interior and Commerce agencies when actions taken under the authority of the ESA and associated implementing regulations affect, or may affect, Indian lands, tribal trust resources, or the exercise of American Indian tribal rights.

## **Other Areas**

Other noteworthy accomplishments include a Memorandum of Agreement signed by Interior and the Department of Transportation to address the transportation problems that are causing air pollution, resource destruction, and general visitor irritation in several of our more popular national parks. We also created a comprehensive recovery plan for Yosemite Valley, which was hit hard by floods in early 1997, and implemented key aspects of the Administration's \$1.5 billion Everglades Restoration Plan.

We at Interior remain dedicated to the important job of protecting our Nation's natural and cultural resources and fulfilling our trust responsibilities to the Tribes. While we have made substantial progress in the right direction, much remains to be done. I am committed to continuing our progress.



Bruce Babbitt  
*Secretary of the Interior*