

## Box 65: Commentary from the GWS Office and Our Members

## Biosphere Reserves and the “American Land Sovereignty Protection Act”

### Biosphere Reserves

**B**iosphere reserves are under serious threat of termination by congressional action. This is the result of a well-organized, sensationalized campaign which alleges that the United Nations is using biosphere reserves and World Heritage Sites to take control of public and private lands in the United States. The allegation is false, as members of Congress could easily determine if they consulted any competent authority. In fact, in its report for Congress titled “Biosphere Reserves: Fact Sheet” (June 1996), the Congressional Research Service states: “full sovereignty and control over these areas [biosphere reserves] continues as it was before recognition.”

Biosphere reserves are areas given special recognition by the International Coordinating Council of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Program because of their significance in conserving important ecosystems and biodiversity; providing logistical support for research, monitoring, training, and education; and fostering sustainable economic development. Biosphere reserves form an international network for exchanges of information and experience in these areas. As of 1996, there were 337 biosphere reserves in 85 countries. The United States has 47 public and private lands recognized as biosphere reserves. These areas have:

- Fostered numerous cooperative programs among U.S. government agencies, states, local authorities, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, and other countries; and
- Developed model integrated approaches to conservation and ecologically sustainable development. Similar approaches are now being used in other parts of the world with assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), the World Bank, and other multi-lateral development banks.

The United States has had a leading role in developing the biosphere reserve criteria, standards, and program. The network of biosphere reserves developed over the past 23 years is the only international network of protected areas

dedicated to developing scientific solutions to the complex problems of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. It is a valuable information-sharing network, and continuing participation by the U.S. is vital. In spite of this, the movement to terminate biosphere reserves in the United States is growing.

### **The American Land Sovereignty Protection Act**

The American Land Sovereignty Protection Act, H.R. 901, introduced and sponsored by Representative Don Young (R-Alaska), Chairperson of the House Committee on Resources, will require special approval of the Congress before any area in the United States is subject to an international land-use nomination, classification, or designation. The Act would terminate and prohibit all of the currently designated United States biosphere reserves.

A similar bill, H.R. 3752, failed in 1996 to receive the necessary two-thirds majority (under a suspension of House rules), but the vote was 246 in favor to 178 against.

Representative Young's letter of June 25, 1996, to colleagues read:

#### *Is Boutros Boutros-Ghali Zoning Land In Your District?*

Dear Colleague:

Our military personnel are giving up their uniforms for the baby blue berets of the United Nations. This, we are told by *the Administration*, is the New World Order.

Now we find out that an area *on U.S. soil* the size of the State of Colorado has been designated as part of the "United Nations Biosphere Reserve" program? Doesn't this make you feel all warm and fuzzy? At one with the world? This program operates without any legislative direction and no authorization from Congress. A "Biosphere Reserve" is a United Nations experiment within sovereign U.S. borders.

If you are wondering what this is all about, stay tuned. The lid is about to come off this One World Zoning enterprise run by those champions of U.S. sovereignty at the White House and the United Nations.

#### **Congressional Action—To be Based on Truth or Propaganda?**

Representative Young's letter sets the tone of a well-organized movement by supporters of the American Land Sovereignty Protection Act. Another tactic in Congress is to terminate funding for MAB and biosphere reserve activities. For example, the authorization bill for the National Science Foundation now contains a prohibition against NSF using any of its funds to support the MAB program. NASA's authorization bill for FY98 and FY99 contains a

similar restriction on that agency supporting MAB. This movement is growing even though the allegations against biosphere reserves are false and inflammatory, and in spite of the fact that the values of the biosphere reserve program have been recognized by both Republican and Democratic Administrations, and the Congress. For example:

- President Richard M. Nixon of the U.S. and Leonid I. Brezhnev of the USSR issued a joint communiqué at their Summit Conference in 1974 calling for expanded cooperation in environmental protection by “designating in each country ... certain natural areas as biosphere reserves for protecting valuable plant and animal genetic strains and ecosystems, and for conducting scientific research needed for more effective actions concerned with global environmental protection.” The U.S. Department of State also urged other countries to join the U.S. in support of the MAB program by designating outstanding natural areas as biosphere reserves.
- In March 1979, the Executive Office of the President, the Office of Science and Technology, and the Office of Management and Budget issued a “Memorandum for Heads of Certain Departments and Agencies” which stated that the Man and the Biosphere program “provides an excellent opportunity for international cooperation and a focus for the coordination of related domestic programs aimed at improving the management of natural resources and of the environment.” The memorandum also requested that these heads of departments and agencies “take appropriate steps to participate fully in the program and to cooperate with other agencies in the development and management of the program.”
- In March 1987, Congress’ Office of Technology Assessment issued the report *Technologies to Maintain Biological Diversity*. The report called attention to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1983, which authorized the president to furnish assistance to countries in protecting and maintaining wildlife habitats and in developing sound conservation programs. The report found that the U.S. had begun to abdicate leadership in international conservation and recommended renewed U.S. commitment to accelerate the pace of international achievements in conservation. The report referred to the MAB program as an effective international program. In regard to biosphere reserves it stated the following:

Notwithstanding the program’s practical problems, the planning and management principles in the biosphere reserves concept reflect what an international conservation program needs to endorse—conservation as an open system, where areas of undisturbed natural ecosystems can be surrounded by areas of synthetic and compatible use, and where people are considered part of the system.

## Rallying Support for These Valuable Programs

A well-organized effort is urgently needed to defend biosphere reserves and World Heritage Sites. If the American Land Sovereignty Protection Act is passed in its present form, United State leadership and more than twenty years of valuable work in these programs will be lost. It will result in an embarrassment and loss of respect for the United States. It will also mean a loss of these well-established mechanisms for cooperative work within the U.S. and with other countries in the future.

Members of Congress should oppose the tactics of sensationalism and unfounded accusations now being used and help turn the focus to positive actions and the opportunities that biosphere reserves and World Heritage Sites provide.

Increased oversight by Congress would be welcomed if the oversight were conducted in ways such that the needs, merits, and disadvantages of the programs could be fairly reviewed. The entire process under which the United States designates and operates these programs could be improved through such congressional oversight.

Members of Congress should adopt this positive approach rather than support a campaign of misinformation which inflames and divides people. The situation is serious now, but it will grow worse if members of Congress do not stand against their colleagues who use this divisive propaganda.

V. C. "Tommy" Gilbert is retired from the National Park Service. He was instrumental in getting the biosphere reserve program established in the United States. Tommy was also the first president of the George Wright Society, serving in that capacity from 1980-1982.

*Reminder: this column is open to all GWS members. We welcome lively, provocative, informed opinion on anything in the world of parks and protected areas. The submission guidelines are the same as for other GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM articles—please refer to the inside back cover of any issue. The views in "Box 65" are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the George Wright Society.*

