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Feature Article

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The West's Biggest Bully

by Ray Ring

Environmentalists in Montana's Flathead County make quiet progress against a 5,000-watt loudmouth

KALISPELL, MONT. — John Stokes, the West's most notorious radio shock jock, begins his show one morning in August with a rendition of the "Star-Spangled Banner," followed by a Bible quotation about how God put humans in charge of nature. Then he launches into his chronic harangue, trying to make sure that Flathead County is the last place the environmental movement will ever make any progress.

"You look around now at all the wonderful things that environmentalists have provided to us," Stokes drawls sarcastically, broadcasting from his KGEZ-AM studio on the southern edge of town. "You know ... we've all bought the propaganda (of Montana being) the Laaaast Best Plaaace, let's saaave the Laaast Bessst Plaaace — this is what you got! This is what you wanted! These are the results."

He's referring to the forest-fire smoke that chokes the area, which he blames on environmentalists, because they don't let loggers remove the flammable trees — and he also claims there's a conspiracy of green arsonists, who just like to see things burn. Even if you can't stand what he's saying, his spirited delivery draws you in; with his shouting, his intimate near-whisper, his rhythm, he sounds like a revival-tent preacher. His anger is pure. He goes on about "the whining liberals and the eco-nuts" and "the fat-bottomed women ... of the Commies for a Better Flathead," twisting the name of one group, Citizens for a Better Flathead.

"A hundred and forty-THOUSAND acres have been burned up!" Stokes blares. "Let's do a little calculation ... Let's say, for instance, there are two bunnies per acre in the forest land. So how many (have) the green policies burned? ... Two hundred and eighty-THOUSAND bunnies have burned. Let's not forget the fawns.

Let's say there is a fawn for every ten acres. So what is that? Fourteen thousand BABY fawns

burned. Are you starting to get the picture here? And let's not forget the little chipmunks ... there must be fifty chipmunks per acre ... and what's that? ... Seven hundred THOUUUSAND chipmunks, burned to a crisp!

"The thing is, you see trees exploding from the heat ... that happens to animals, too," he says. "Animals EXPLODE in front of a fire. I mean, what a horrible thing. And all these animal-rights-and-hug-a-tree (people are saying) we've got to save the CRITICAL habitat, well, not only is the habitat burning up, these animals are EXPLODING!"

Loyal listeners phone in to voice their agreement, and Stokes encourages them. As the smoky week drags on, he continues to slam all environmentalists with his trademark slur, labeling them "the green Nazis." It's a wind that's been blowing hard for three years; as long as Stokes has broadcast on "The Edge" radio, a station he owns, he's led a verbal attack against anyone and everyone who has an inclination toward wilderness, land-use planning or any other conservation goal. He's become one of the most famous people around here, notorious for his harangues, and for stunts like burning green plywood swastikas in his parking lot — an act spotlighted by the New York Times, the LA Times, USA Today and even the Wall Street Journal.

Stokes' reign coincides with an uprising of anti-green locals who appear to have taken control of the Flathead County government. And what's going on here is merely the most vocal version of what's going on around the nation. The environmental movement seems to be losing everywhere, with the Bush administration, industries, Congress, state legislatures and a variety of demagogues ganging up on green policies and green landmarks.

But if you tune out the noise and pay close attention, even here in this blustery, seemingly hottest of environmentalist hells, you might find a surprise: quiet progress on many fronts. Despite what most people have heard, Flathead County may turn out to be a model for how the conservation movement can sail against a strong wind.

"Have you bitch-slapped an environmentalist lately?" —a bumper sticker available in the KGEZ studio

I get an earful of Stokes on my car radio as I drive around Flathead County to get the lay of the land. Through breaks in the wildfire smoke, I see a combination of spectacular natural wonders and spectacular human failures. In the background, ringing the Flathead Valley, are waves of beautiful mountain ranges that include the peaks of Glacier National Park and the Big Mountain ski resort; there is lush national forest where grizzly bears and loggers roam, and the headwaters of sizable rivers. More than 500 lakes are tucked into the contours, and the centerpiece is the valley's low spot, where the Flathead River's flow creates Flathead Lake, bigger and cleaner than even Lake Tahoe.

But between the mountains and the big lake sprawl motorboat and ATV shops, retail strips, tourist traps, big-box stores, welding shops — a whole mess of commercial and industrial sites and new residential subdivisions, scattered willy-nilly across private land once defined by small farms. The boundaries of the three incorporated cities, Kalispell, Whitefish and Columbia Falls, seem irrelevant. Nearly all the private land and 70 percent of the population lie outside the cities, where

the dominant land-use philosophy has long been “anything goes.”

And it's all going fast. Since 1990, more than 12,000 newcomers have moved in, pushing Flathead County's population to nearly 80,000. This is one of the West's destination counties, the kind that graces the “top 10” lists in outdoor-lifestyle magazines, where 100-acre parcels of raw land now go for \$1 million. And it's a place still wrestling with its traditional past. Farmers, real estate barons, wealthy second-home owners, loggers and other blue-collar workers, tourist-business folks, professionals, property-rights zealots and militia types all swirl uncomfortably together.

The conflicts came to a head in 1994. A broad-based campaign made up of concerned county officials and business leaders, the timber industry, neighborhoods and environmentalists, persuaded the Flathead County Commission to adopt a countywide master plan. But at the last second, opposition erupted from property-rights activists — including Stokes, who had just moved to the Flathead from Washington state, where he'd led a secessionist campaign, trying to create a so-called “Freedom County.” The Flathead master plan was forced to a county wide vote and killed (HCN, 12/26/94: Land-use plan is disemboweled).

Also in 1994, a hard-line environmental group, the Swan View Coalition, won a lawsuit that forced logging reductions and road closures in the overworked Flathead National Forest. That victory stirred up yet more enmity, specifically against environmentalists.

Still, the economy marched from Old West toward New West, and people who didn't like it looked for someone to blame. By 1996, anti-planning candidates had taken control of the county commission. New commission chairman Dale Williams set the political tone, adopting the “green Nazis” slur and becoming a frequent caller and guest on Stokes' radio show, which was launched in 2000.

At least 300 people showed up in Stokes' parking lot to celebrate the first burning of the green swastika, timed to coincide with Earth Day in 2001. Environmentalists said they were being targeted personally, and the Montana Human Rights Network, which tracks hate crimes and the radical right wing, collected their accounts in 2002, in a 36-page report titled School Yard Bullies: The Harassment of Conservationists in the Flathead.

“You're getting death threats, and you have to come to grips with it,” says Keith Hammer, head of the small Swan View Coalition. He's been hit with menacing “green Nazi” e-mail, phone calls to his home accusing him of being an “ecoterrorist,” and face-to-face confrontations in public meetings. “You learn to never leave meetings by yourself; you always leave together (with people you know) and walk each other to your cars, especially at night.”

There have been at least eight separate instances of vandalism to environmentalists' cars and other property. Several offices and a microbrewery were plastered with green-swastika stickers. The Human Rights Network concluded there was a “serious problem” with the practice of democracy in the Flathead.

“You're a bunch of vile vomit, you're all vile vomit ... Am I making the community angry

at you? No, I'm just exposing you ... We don't want any harm to come to people, but the agenda you're promoting is destructive to America, and true Americans are starting to see through it."

**—Stokes on the air,
warning environmentalists**

Over the radio, you can hear Stokes puffing on nicotine — he chain-smokes organic American Spirit cigarettes. He laughs often, too, almost wildly, a laugh that ratchets up the scale and seems to crack him open.

When Stokes first broadcast his attacks, environmentalists reeled in disarray. But Stokes and his audience underestimated their targets. That's clear when I begin meeting the professional environmentalists in the Flathead. They have roots here, and they don't tend to be academic namby-pambies; they're the kind of environmentalists who trade stories about their favorite places to hunt grouse, and decorate their walls with trophy antlers. And they're not about to surrender to intimidation.

Hammer is a graduate of Flathead High School who has lived in the area on and off for 39 years. He's worked as a logger and on forest trail crews. When I meet him in a Kalispell coffee shop, I see that he's not a big man physically, but he's fit from years of outdoor work, and his hand feels thick and callused as I shake it. He doesn't dwell on the threats, but says, "What gets you hurt is, if you duck and run, then you look like a coward. If you turn your back, you might" — metaphorically speaking — "get a knife in it. But if they see you stand right up and you say you won't be intimidated, on some level they will respect you."

Taking on Stokes directly, local progressives and Montana Human Rights members created a Web site, AboutFacts.com, to document Stokes' vicious language, and to keep track of which politicians and other locals appear as guests on his show. They record the shows, and circulate tapes and CDs to let more people know what Stokes is up to. Just as Stokes lists green businesses and calls for boycotts, AboutFacts.com runs an e-mail service, listing the businesses that advertise on his show and encouraging customers to express their displeasure.

But the counterattack has been much broader than that. Ben Long, a veteran Kalispell journalist who now helps local environmental groups plan strategy, wrote an open letter objecting to the "Nazi" slur, and he got a notable list of county leaders to sign it, including the sheriff, the county attorney, the school superintendent, the county librarian, a Rotary Club leader, and the regional supervisor of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Published in the leading local newspaper, the Daily Inter Lake, in 2001, the letter said the slur "insults the memory of millions of people killed by the Nazis," and it called for a "civil level of public discourse."

Long also helped local environmental groups to communicate better and to do systematic outreach, working the middle ground (see story page 11). "We have to talk about people's values. People are here because they love the place, the clean water, the open land, the small-town communities," Long says. "That cuts across politics."

Some of the strategy's results would be surprising anywhere, and some results are surprising only

because they occur here, in such an apparently hostile political climate. The most recent effort appeared in May, in an attractive, full-color 34-page report, *Gateway to Glacier: The Emerging Economy of Flathead County*. It was the brainchild of Steve Thompson, the regional rep for the National Parks Conservation Association. In the report, University of Montana researchers analyzed statistics to show that the Flathead's economy is booming from entrepreneurs, tourism, and professional services — industries that depend on the quality of life. The report concluded that the quality of life needs to be protected, with better land-use planning, such as clustered development, better protection of lake water, well-supported education and a host of other conservation and social measures.

Green economists are turning out similar reports in other Western counties, but *Gateway to Glacier* recruited impressive support from a variety of local interests. The report features endorsements from CEOs of local firms, Montana's top real estate salesman, and the CEO of the regional medical center. A university economist debuted the report with a slide show at an annual Kalispell Chamber of Commerce luncheon, and Thompson had a summary mailed to more than 1,400 business owners.

"Now it is time for community, conservation, and business interests to come to the table ... to constructively contribute to the future of our beloved Flathead Valley," Susan Burch, chairwoman of the Kalispell Chamber of Commerce and owner of a Glacier tour-boat company, wrote in her full-page introduction to the report.

When I meet Thompson in his home on the edge of Whitefish, he pops a videocassette into his VCR to show me how the movement got some free publicity — a local TV news show did a two-part series on the economic report. Thompson says he pitched the story idea to the show's journalists, but the interviews are all with business leaders, and the anchor talks of a survey showing a need for open-space preservation, and the need for "planned and structured growth."

When the tape ends, Thompson points out, "I didn't see any environmentalist speaking there."

"The people are just getting EXTREMELY frustrated out there, and I can't believe this boiling pot ... throughout the entire West has not BLOWN UP yet." —Stokes on the air

Stokes expects the West to blow up, but he doesn't seem to understand that most Westerners don't want that to happen — and they'll work hard to make sure it doesn't.

Environmentalists have notched up a series of recent victories through compromise, working with the leading snowmobile group on winter traffic in the forest, and on a series of small collaborative forestry projects, in which loggers get "stewardship" contracts (HCN, 5/8/00: *After the Fall*).

Working behind the scenes or in supportive roles, so they're less likely to trigger hostilities, environmentalists have also helped some rural neighborhoods devise local zoning to protect open land and farms. And they helped defeat their main opponent in local politics, the county commission chairman, Williams. A small alliance of interests formed a political action committee and ran ads against Williams in the 2002 Republican primary. For a range of reasons, Williams

was trounced by another Republican, Gary Hall, who now holds a seat on the commission and is, by most accounts, at least slightly less extreme.

When a Tennessee developer wanted to build Montana's biggest shopping mall on suburban farmland last year, environmentalists helped point out that the property's runoff goes directly into Flathead Lake. They formed an alliance with scientists, anglers and all kinds of lake-lovers — even a group of downtown Kalispell businessmen, who feared the mall would lure away their own customers. The community effort succeeded: The mall was forced off risky ground, and is now proposed for a bluff, farther from the lake and closer to Kalispell.

Professional environmentalists are making smart moves in the Flathead. But the progress is more than a matter of strategy. Much of it has an inevitability, as if there is a kind of gravity pulling many people in the same direction.

That becomes clear one afternoon, when I go out to the shooting range run by the Whitefish Rifle and Pistol Club to meet the club's treasurer, Bryan Luke. The range sits in a forest clearing near Whitefish; the wildfire smoke has receded temporarily, and the conifers around us dapple the sunlight. Luke, a tall and relatively mellow gun collector, has worked 20 years in the timber industry, and he listens to Stokes' radio show. "He's got some pretty good ideas," Luke says. "And some things he's too far out on."

Luke isn't too fond of environmentalists. But he's willing to get together with me, not just to show me some of his favorite weapons, but also to discuss the need for more land-use planning. We take turns firing one big-bore buffalo rifle at a sheep-shaped iron target 300 yards out, ringing the gong.

The shooting range sits on state forest, and development pressure is so strong that the state is beginning to lease its land for big-box retail stores, high-end gated subdivisions and the like. The state has about 250,000 forested acres in the area, including 12,000 acres around Whitefish that it is considering for leasing. This land is now popular open space and important wildlife habitat, enjoyed by nearby residents as well as by hundreds of shooters, and the mountain bikers, hikers and horseback riders who use the trails.

###IMAGE10!### Luke calls it "a little piece of heaven — it's close to town, easy to get to, lots of folks use it for recreation. As a kid, I used to come out here and grouse hunt and camp. And to see it developed would be more than I could stand." So Luke's shooting club is forming an alliance with the mountain bikers, environmentalists and the other interests seeking to keep this state land open. The state could earn more revenue from the land's current users, they point out, by leasing trails to the people who use them, for example. Some locals are organizing a new group with the tentative name "State Lands Stakeholders."

They're beginning to lobby the Montana Land Board and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, dispatching missions to the capital, Helena, and submitting petitions with hundreds of signatures. They believe the partnership could lead the way for other Montana stakeholder groups, demonstrating how to influence the management of many parcels of state land.

The broad support for planning didn't die with the sabotage of the county government's efforts: It merely shifted to other jurisdictions, such as state lands. The state has already been forced to pay attention: A lawsuit by a couple of environmental groups caused the state to redo a development plan on a parcel next to Kalispell. The cities have also stepped up their planning efforts, filling some of the void.

Other grassroots efforts concentrate on creating new hiking trails and bike paths around the Flathead. I walk a portion of one trail with Bob Keenan, president of the Montana Senate and a super-conservative Republican whose voting record has turned negative on environmental issues in recent legislative sessions. Even Keenan shows at least a narrow greenish streak when his backyard is threatened. We set out from the Bigfork Inn, a restaurant he owns in the small town of Bigfork, and walk through the forest along the sparkling Swan River, down an old dirt road where cars are no longer allowed.

Keenan has lived in Bigfork 21 years, and he's been using this trail the whole time. The present owner, a power company, is making noises about selling. "It would be tragic to have condominiums (here)," Keenan says.

So the locals have organized their own group, Bigfork Development Corp., which is dedicated to preservation, and they're working with the Trust for Public Land and the power company to keep the trail public. They've negotiated a first right to buy 475 acres on both sides of the river, as soon as the land comes on the market. The ultimate purchase price may be in the range of \$4 million, so big donors who live in the area are being recruited. The Bigfork Chamber of Commerce and all three local Republican legislators like the idea as well, Keenan says.

"The trail is a tremendous asset to Bigfork," Keenan says. As we walk, we pass joggers, hikers, people exercising their dogs. In the winter, it's popular with skiers. We stop on a big rock over a cascade, and Keenan points again, to a fierce bird landing on a tree limb. "See that? An osprey!" he says. "It just came out of the water, going for a fish."

"(Forest) supervisors are always women ... You've got to have a woman back there, crying and ... FEEEEELING all the pain of the greens ..."

—Stokes on the air.

He likes to belittle women who hold power in government, schools and other institutions; he calls them "babes" and implies that they're lesbians.

Another day, as Stokes continues the attack on his radio show, my attention is drawn to the third annual Artists for Open Space bash. Women in black dresses and men who look like wealthy anglers mingle at the rustic-chic Flathead Lake Lodge resort; by the dozens, they board a double-decker 65-foot motorboat for cruises on the lake. Under the shade trees, plein air painters are demonstrating their strokes; horses are tethered here and there for Western ambiance, and there are trays of fancy munchies, microbrew kegs, a band.

But the environmental movement is also working the crowd. Inside the log lodge, 122 pieces of art are up for auction, many created by local artists, and all of them inspired by nature. The minimum

bid for a 15-inch-tall bronze mountain lion is \$5,000; for one colorful oil painting of a mountain landscape, it's \$14,000. It's an effort by the Montana Land Reliance to raise money to purchase conservation easements.

The Land Reliance, headquartered in Helena, has only two branch offices, and one is in Flathead County. "We've been doing 20 to 25 easements a year in the Flathead," says Rock Ringling, the group's director, dressed like a Western gent in a leather vest and fooling around with a lariat. The easements tend to be small, because the land is already divided up, but "the trend really got going around 1995. We started doing outreach, and landowners knew there was someone to come to."

More groups are working with Flathead landowners to arrange easements, but they often have to overcome suspicion first. One of the most noteworthy efforts has been along the North Fork of the Flathead River, just west of Glacier National Park. The North Fork has the wildest private land in the Lower 48, habitat for grizzlies, wolves, wolverines, lynx. A North Fork rancher, Tom Ladenburg, had a long history of cantankerous opposition to environmentalists; Ladenburg drilled for oil and gas in the 1970s, and liked to boast that he'd kill any wolf he saw on his land.

But Marilyn Wood, the regional rep for The Nature Conservancy, began to visit Ladenburg on his Rocky Bar O Ranch. "He and I would sit in his house, drinking bad coffee, and talk about the land," she says. "It was very interesting. While he didn't like environmentalists at all, he was very concerned about the land and what would happen to it after he died." Ladenburg was growing old, his health was fading, and he was worried that his heirs might break up the ranch and sell it off.

"It took quite a while," Wood says, but as the feeling of mutual trust grew, in October 2001, Ladenburg agreed to do an easement with Wood's group on about 1,200 acres; he also agreed to a kind of easement with the Forest Service on another 512 acres. That totals more than 10 percent of all the private land in the North Fork's million-acre watershed. Ladenburg died shortly after the agreements were made, but the land he loved is protected forever.

"Some of these things take a long time — they're not done by leaps and bounds," Wood says. "The importance is developing relationships. You work locally, get to know people, understand what their values are — that's where the success comes."

There's been an explosion of right-wing hate radio and right-wing TV "news" shows nationwide since 1987, when President Ronald Reagan killed the Fairness Doctrine. The doctrine, enforced since 1949 by the Federal Communications Commission, had required all broadcasters to balance one-sided shows with shows from the other side, even if it meant providing free air time.

"My first job out of college, in the early 1970s, I was news director of a radio station, and we had the Fairness Doctrine and had to be very sensitive to it," says Bob Ekey, a former journalist who is now Northern Rockies regional director for The Wilderness Society. "People could challenge your license. The idea was that the airwaves are owned by the public. That's all gone out the window."

A loudmouth like Stokes has more impact here than a national radio celebrity like Rush Limbaugh, because Stokes is a local who names local names and targets people in the community. "In terms

of Stokes (and the airwaves), I don't know of any place that's as bad as the Flathead," Ekey says.

Flathead County remains a complex, uneasy place, despite the recent environmental progress. Growth, traffic jams, developments — even loud racetracks installed in rural neighborhoods — continue at a breakneck pace, with little oversight where the county government has sole jurisdiction. The county planners are still toiling on the update of their old master plan, a relic dating back to 1987. Lawsuits fly in many directions, for and against the environmental movement; county officials, even schools, are targeted. The county planning board — which commission chairman Williams stocked with anti-planning appointees before his defeat — has a tendency to shoot down the concerns of the rural neighborhoods.

The county commissioners — who in their previous careers were a highway patrolman, a county road-grader driver, and a Salvation Army officer — just agreed to join a wise-use lawsuit against the Flathead National Forest, allying with the locally based Montanans for Multiple Use. That lawsuit seeks to restore road access and logging to the highs of 20 years ago. Most environmentalists are trying to ignore that case, which they see as symbolic but doomed, a remnant of the past.

And they even see the battle with Stokes as little more than a distraction now. There are signs that Stokes himself is losing ground. When he held his second annual swastika burning, around the time of Earth Day 2002, the Daily Inter Lake didn't even run a news story, but an editorial in the paper observed that “the end result (of the stunt) is bad publicity for Kalispell and the Flathead Valley — bad publicity that we can ill afford.”

This year, Stokes didn't burn a swastika. He has begun to sound desperate, attacking the county commission, the Flathead Valley Community College, even the right wing of the Republican Party. He's run for political office twice (for state Legislature and U.S. Senate), and both times he was thoroughly defeated. It's only a matter of time, some say, until he has to give up his radio show. At least, the people he's targeting hope that's true.

When I call Stokes, he responds with typical bravado. He denies he's losing his audience; he says his talk show has “the biggest market of any radio station in Montana ... tens and tens of thousands of listeners,” including fans as far away as Alabama, who listen to the show through his Web site.

Why didn't he burn the swastika this year? “We made a choice not to do it this year ... we were right in the middle of launching our newsletter ... (or) that was it — the war in Baghdad was hot and heavy, and we were really involved with that thing, with all of our correspondents over there, our soldiers and sailors going over there, all the send-offs we gave them, the timing was just bad for us ...”

Curious about the man behind the harangues, I ask a few questions. Stokes tells me he's 51, belongs to no church or club, shops at Costco; for recreation, he likes to fish for trout with lures, water-ski, and go camping in his RV. He has only a high school education, and it wasn't easy for him to get that; he attended 28 different schools, moving around the U.S. as a kid, because his father was an enlisted man in the Navy who was often transferred.

He says he's a self-made man, who made his money in commercial real estate in Washington. "I'm an American ... just an average guy," he says, and laughs his distinctive laugh.

Talking to him, I have to admit: Like many devils in mythology, he's personable, when he's not tearing your head off. "I've raised money for orphans and widows and veterans," Stokes says, and it is true. And he's not the only famous person to hold the opinions he does: President Bush himself also blames environmentalists for a range of problems, including forest fires. Bush even calls the fires a "holocaust" — but leaves it to the listeners to complete the Nazi innuendo. At least Stokes has the guts to say exactly what he thinks. Stokes' goal is to attack "stupid people" everywhere, he says. He's determined to expose the green conspiracy to de-industrialize America, which, he says, is backed by powerful foundations. He describes the battle from his perspective, and says that, since he began broadcasting his anger, vandals, stalkers and other troublemakers have targeted him and his station.

Still, he seems to be having a good time, I remark. He laughs again. "I'm having a ball ... I'm having the time of my life, to tell you the truth. It's a hoot." But he has trouble pointing out any tangible wins for his side, since he helped to sink the county plan nine years ago. And he definitely sees environmentalists gaining ground.

"They are making tremendous progress," Stokes says. "That's what is scary."

Ray Ring is HCN editor in the field.

Editor's note: Two sources in this story, Ben Long and Steve Thompson, occasionally write for HCN.

John Stokes at KGEZ-AM, 406-752-2600; his talk show runs 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. weekdays, and can be heard on his Web site, www.z600.com

Citizens for a Better Flathead in Kalispell, working on planning and other issues, 406-756-8993 and www.montanaweb.com/citizens/

Steve Thompson National Parks Conservation Association, in Whitefish, working on the economic picture, 406-862-6722

Ben Long Resource Media, in Kalispell, working on strategy and communication, 406-257-8302

AboutFacts.com, the Web site monitoring Stokes, also has links to news coverage and other reports

Montana Human Rights Network in Helena, 406-442-5506, and www.mhrn.org.

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