

Land Sought as Buffer Around Parks

By TIMOTHY EGAN

With conservationists saying the days of creating large new national parks in the lower 48 states are largely over, nature preservation groups have stepped up a campaign to protect areas around existing parks or add smaller parcels to the wilderness system.

After reports of elk starving and the hunting of bison wandering outside Yellowstone National Park, William Penn Mott, the National Park Service Director, has called on the Government to buy new rangeland outside the nation's oldest national park.

But a coalition of conservation groups says Yellowstone is only a small part of the problem. Land purchases are needed around national parks in 46 states, according to a report in late February by several environmental organizations led by the Wilderness Society.

Land Open to Logging

In many cases, the Government already owns land around the national parks. But much of that land is open to logging or other industrial uses, and the environmental groups are calling for the Government to sharply limit such activity, which they say endangers wildlife and wildlife habitat.

Without such protection, some of America's best-known national parks, set up as living museums of natural history, will gradually lose their character, say the wilderness supporters.

The problem, acknowledged by Government biologists as well as private conservationists, is that instead of natural borders, too many of the parks have straight-line artificial boundaries that fail to protect wildlife or other natural unique features that do not stop at park boundary lines.

The geysers and wildlife of Yellowstone National Park, the marine life of the Everglades in Florida, the grizzly bear population of Glacier Park in Montana, and the ancient forests around Mount Rainier in Washington State are all threatened by human encroachment on the land adjacent to these protected areas, environmentalists say.

"You can't name a park where there isn't some external threat just outside its border," said Steve Whitney of the Wilderness Society. Last year his organization produced a report that criticized timbering, mining, road-building and industrial drilling on the borders of various parks. The drilling seeks to tap into the underground heat of geysers and hot springs.

\$800 Million Program Urged

While wildlife advocates are heartened by a recent Bush Administration proposal to spend \$206 million on acquiring public land, they say nearly \$800 million is needed to buy land that might soon be lost to developers or

Parks 'can't exist as islands,' says a conservationist.

eventually become too expensive. The money would come from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which gets 80 percent of its money from fees on oil drilling on the federally owned outer continental shelf.

The Park Service has 80 million acres, of which 54 million acres are in Alaska. In the first seven years of the Reagan Administration, only one small park in Nevada was added to the system. In the last year, the 600,000-acre El Malpais National Monument was created in New Mexico. Ten other smaller parcels throughout the country were given national monument or national recreation area status, a degree of protection similar to national park designation.

But proposals for several new large national parks, including an often mentioned tall grass prairie park in the Great Plains, were opposed by the Reagan Administration.

Manuel Lujan Jr., the new Secretary of the Interior, whose department controls the National Park Service but not the Forest Service, has yet to announce whether the Bush Administration would favor purchasing new park land.

Short of new land acquisition, critics have been calling on the Federal Government, which owns much of the land around the parks, particularly in the West, to better manage the public trust.

Wandering Elk and Bison

"In a majority of these areas, the evil neighbor is not some private land-

owner but the Federal Government," said Mr. Whitney.

Yellowstone Park, home of the largest bison and elk herds in North America, is surrounded by straight-line boundaries on three sides. During cold winters, elk and bison leave the park and migrate along the upper Yellowstone River, where they are hunted on Forest Service land or die from lack of food.

"What's happening with the bison now is the story of the breakdown of ecosystem management," said Louisa Willcox of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, a private conservation group based in Montana. "If we're serious about protecting Yellowstone wildlife, we should get serious about sharing the land necessary for their survival."

Nearly 500 of Yellowstone's bison have been shot this year after leaving park boundaries — the biggest bison hunt since the 19th century. Under Montana law, all bison that leave the park are to be shot, a measure intended to protect cattle from infection.

Mr. Mott, who toured the park recently, said a new plan on how to manage wildlife in the region around Yellowstone that helps to support its wildlife would be completed sometime in the next six months.

In Florida, polluted water flowing into the Everglades National Park is listed by biologists as a prime threat to wildlife in the swamp environment. Housing developments are fast approaching the park on three sides.

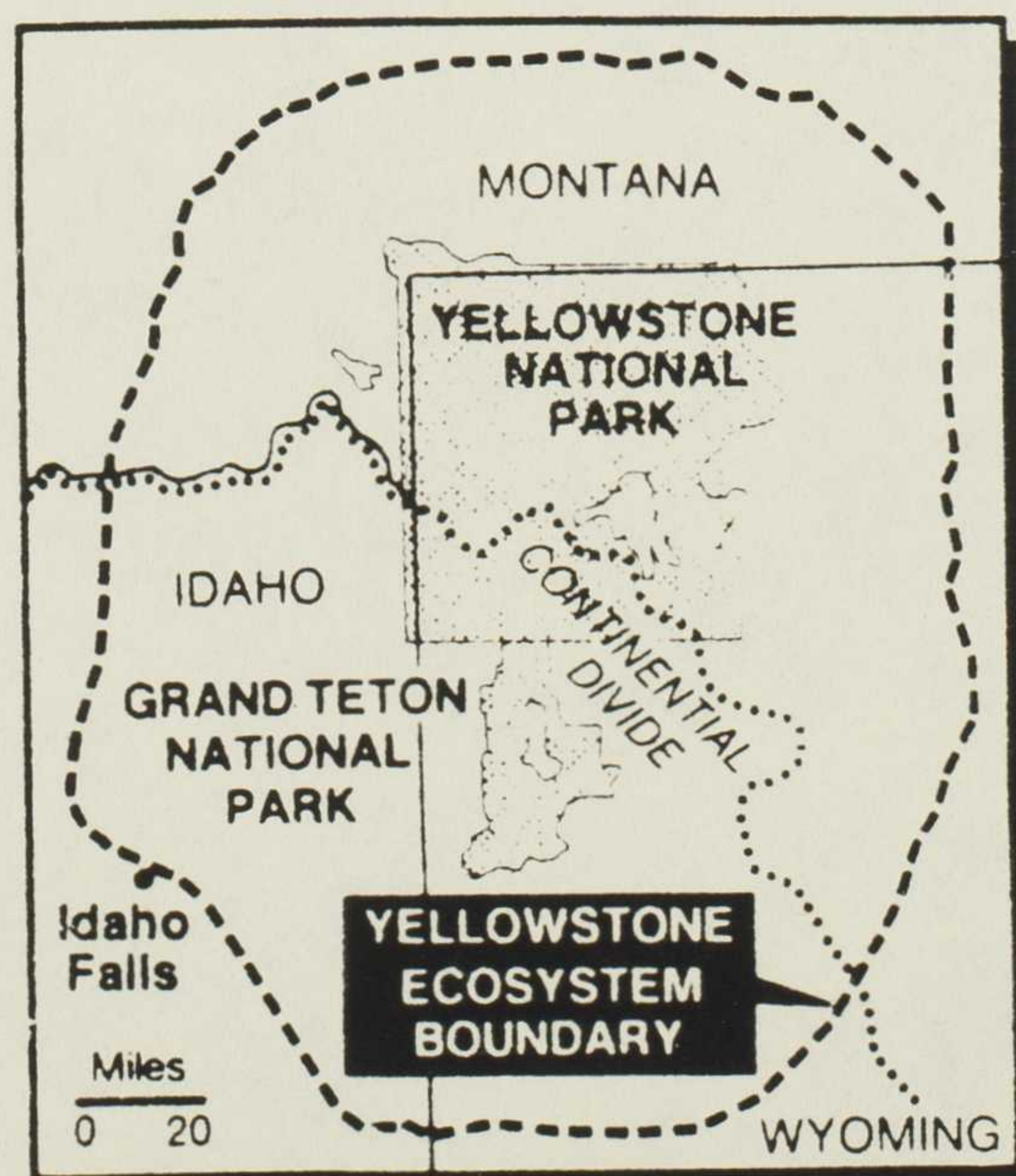
Visible Boundary

Near Mount Rainier, the Forest Service has been selling off ancient timber in valleys that Rainier-based elk and owls use for winter habitat. The denuded land forms a visible line at the park's boundary.

"If we don't do anything now, eventually these parks will not look like they do today," said Jim Blomquist, a lobbyist with the Sierra Club. "They can't exist as islands."

Government officials blame squabbles between Federal agencies for the lack of unified management of areas around national parks. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, two Federal agencies that control the land adjacent to many parks, allow timber harvesting, mining, hunting and off-road-vehicle use on their property — all of which is banned inside the national parks.

National Park Service officials say they sympathize with many of their critics who want cross-border protection. "There's a real clash between political reality and scientific desire," said Duncan Morrow, a spokesman for the Park Service. "There's a lot of good cooperation between agencies at the park level, where people want to work together. It's at the higher levels that things get shaky."



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The Yellowstone ecosystem goes well beyond its straight borders.

