Twenty years of proximity have led me to see the Gunnison National Forest in west-central Colorado as a rogue outfit. I first saw ruggedness in 1982, when it did an environmental impact statement to justify construc-
tion of a made-in-China mine by AMAX.

The EIS was shameless and contemptuous of the public, spurning the very idea of intelli-
gent analysis. It said the mine would be econom-
ic even though the price of moly was in the cel-
lar (and stayed there, forcing AMAX to abandon the project after it got its permits). The EIS said building a powerline through a scenic corridor would eliminate the need to build a powerline later, thus creating the concept of "pre-emptive impacting." And it paid meek lip service to the Antiquities Act by saying that the 155 million tons of tailings to be dumped in a scenic valley would preserve and protect that valley's archeological sites by burying them.

Even AMAX was embarrassed. But the then-
supervisor of the Gunnison, an old-school forester named Jimmy Wilkins, couldn't have been prouder. People outside the agency may be critical, he said, but he'd gotten lots of praise "in-service."

I've since learned that many agency employees "in-service" counts for everything, and outsiders, the public, other agencies, the forces of nature - count for nothing. Jimmy Wilkins and his forest were marching to a drum I couldn't hear - a drum I naively hadn't realized existed.

Wilkins retired shortly after the EIS. With mining and coal and gas dead, his successor concentrated on enticing Louisiana-Pacific to build a mill to process the aspen trees that were clogging the forest. To justify massive roadbuilding and logging, Ray Evans warned the public that spruce-fir would take over aspen stands in western Colorado were so enraged that a new for-

test supervisor was brought in to redo the plan.

I've been jolted from my dogmatism. The old-Gunnison, it seemed, reigned supreme. Its forest managers would get their way, no matter what. Some trails have been neglected for decades, and now consist of a rat's maze of parallel, eroding ribbons of dust.

Our "trail" is kept clear, however, the Beckwith Stockyard to Swampy Pass - a 150-200 foot wide, eroding cattle road paved with stones and cowpoop that makes its four-miles way up, over and down a steep ridge. That ugy, destractive, linear clearcut has destroyed small drainages and makes a mockery of multiple use, let alone of wilderness.

So long as I only looked at the Gunnison, it seemed a rogue forest. But High Country News covers many national forests. And from that broader perspec-
tive, the Gunnison is not unique. It is a perfectly aver-

ging, conforming part of the U.S. Forest Service. If I lived near Arizona's Colonnado or Prescott national forests, I would be outraged by inappropriate land transfers and recreation development. If I lived near Wyoming's Thunder Basin National Grassland, admin-

istered by the Medicine Bow National Forest, I would be incredulous at a land trust that every public official, including Gov. Mike Sullivan, and most locals oppose, except for the Forest Service and the man who initiated the trade. And so the trials is going ahead.

People in the Northwest are near forests the agen-
cy has devastated ecologically even as it allowed some logging companies to steal trees. Forest Service Chief Dale Robertson's excuse for not stopping the thefts is that efforts to switch to a new system have met with "significant resistance" in the West. So here's an agen-

cy that can't stop theft because the thieves have too much influence over it.

Robertson, so colossally out-service he is almost transparent, is a tiger "in-service," as shown by the forced resignation of Northern Rockies Regional Forester John Mumm. In addition, nine of the 13 Northern Regions forest supervisors who signed a letter in 1989 saying the agency had lost its sense of mission are gone. Instead of taking the letter as loyal criti-
cism, Forest Service brass treated it as treason.

Rather than reform, the agency went to the

mourners.

Forestry professor James Kennedy of Utah State University, who is both a critic and fan of the Forest Service, says its staff can be divided into "cats" and "dogs." The "cats" show loyalty to their disciplines. The "dogs" show loyalty to the organization.

Kennedy's distinction recalls...