

The Public Trust Doctrine in Environmental and Natural Resources Law

The Public Trust Doctrine in Environmental and Natural Resources Law

THIRD EDITION

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Dedication

Throughout the ages, the public trust has come to life as a result of extraordinary vision and courage on the part of jurists, lawyers, and scholars. We dedicate this book to all of the pioneers, past and present, with particular recognition of the contributions of Justinian,¹ Sir Matthew Hale,² Justice Andrew Kirkpatrick,³ Justice Stephen J. Field,⁴ Justice Stanley Mosk,⁵ Justice Alan Broussard,⁶ Justice Paula Nakayama,⁷ Justice Presbitero Valasco, Jr.,⁸ Judge Gisela Triana,⁹ Chief Justice Ronald Castille,¹⁰ Judge Ann Aiken,¹¹ and Professor Joseph Sax.¹² And, too, we dedicate it to our own children, all children on Earth, and to future generations—all of whom have a stake in the legal evolution of a doctrine that advances their inalienable rights to a balanced and healthy ecology.

1. For his influential code, the Institutes of Justinian, see J. Inst. (T. Sandars trans., 4th ed. 1867).

2. For his treatise, *De Jure Maris*, reprinted in Stuart Moore, *A History of the Foreshore and the Law Relating Thereto* (3rd ed. 1888).

3. For *Arnold v. Mundy*, 6 N.J.L. 1 (N. J. 1821).

4. For *Illinois Central R.R. Co. v. Illinois*, 146 U.S. 387 (1892).

5. For *Marks v. Whitney*, 6 Cal.3d 251, 491 P.2d 374, 98 Cal.Rptr. 790 (1971).

6. For the “Mono Lake” opinion, *National Audubon Soc. v. Superior Court of Alpine Cty.*, 33 Cal.3d 419, 189 Cal.Rptr. 346, 658 P.2d 709 (1983).

7. For the “Waiahole Ditch” opinion, *In re Water Use Permit Applications*, 9 P.3d 409 (Haw. 2000).

8. For *Metropolitan Manila Development Authority v. Concerned Citizens of Manila Bay*, 574 S.C.R.A. 661 (Phil. S. Ct. 2008).

9. For a decision recognizing atmosphere as a trust asset, see *Angela Bosner-Lain, et al. v. Texas Commission on Environmental Quality*, No. D-1-GN-11-002194 (201st Judicial District Court, Tx., Aug. 2, 2012).

10. For *Robinson Township v. Commonwealth*, 83 A.3d 901 (Pa. 2013).

11. For *Juliana v. United States*, 217 F.Supp.3d 1224, 1255 (D. Or. 2016), rev’d and remanded, 947 F.3d 1159 (9th Cir. 2020).

12. For his path-breaking article, *The Public Trust Doctrine in Natural Resource Law: Effective Judicial Intervention*, 68 Mich. L. Rev. 471 (1970).

Contents

Table of Cases	xiii
Table of Secondary Sources	xxv
Authors' Note	xliii
Preface to the Third Edition	xlvii
Preface to the Second Edition	xlix
Preface to the First Edition	li
Acknowledgments	liii
Chapter 1 · Introduction	3
Putting the Public Trust Doctrine to Work	12
Waters and Water Rights	20
The Public Trust Doctrine in Natural Resource Law: Effective Judicial Intervention	27
The Headwaters of the Public Trust: Some Thoughts on the Source and Scope of the Traditional Doctrine	43
The Public Trust as an Antimonopoly Doctrine	53
Chapter 2 · The Foundation Cases	57
<i>Arnold v. Mundy</i>	57
<i>Martin v. Waddell's Lessee</i>	64
<i>Pollard v. Hagan</i>	67
<i>Illinois Central Railroad Co. v. Illinois</i>	70
<i>Shively v. Bowlby</i>	81
<i>Pennsylvania Environmental Defense Foundation v. Commonwealth</i>	90
Chapter 3 · Navigability and Its Evolution	101
A. The Evolving Geographic Scope of Navigability	103
<i>Phillips Petroleum Co. v. Mississippi</i>	103
The Public Trust Doctrine: A Twenty-First Century Concept	109
<i>Lamprey v. Metcalf</i>	110
<i>People ex rel. Baker v. Mack</i>	114
<i>Parks v. Cooper</i>	117
<i>Wilbour v. Gallagher</i>	124
<i>Arkansas River Rights Committee v. Echubby Lake Hunting Club</i>	129

<i>Glass v. Goeckel</i>	133
<i>Montana Coalition for Stream Access, Inc. v. Curran</i>	140
B. Purposes of Navigability	147
<i>Munninghoff v. Wisconsin Conservation Commission</i>	147
<i>Marks v. Whitney</i>	150
Chapter 4 · Wetlands	159
<i>Just v. Marinette County</i>	162
<i>Rock-Koshkonong Lake Dist. v. State Dep't of Natural Resources</i>	169
<i>Palazzolo v. Rhode Island</i>	181
<i>Palazzolo v. State</i>	181
<i>McQueen v. South Carolina Coastal Council</i>	184
<i>Esplanade Properties, LLC v. City of Seattle</i>	190
Chapter 5 · Water Rights	197
Restoring the Public Trust: Water Resources and the Public Trust Doctrine, A Manual for Advocates	198
<i>National Audubon Society v. Superior Court of Alpine County</i> ("Mono Lake" Decision)	199
<i>Environmental Law Foundation v. State Water Resources Control Board</i>	215
<i>In re Water Use Permit Applications, Petitions for Interim Instream Flow Standard Amendments, and Petitions for Water Reservations for The Waiahole Ditch</i>	223
Hawai'i Water Commission Splits Over Waiahole Water Case	239
Water Privatization Trends in the United States: Human Rights, National Security, and Public Stewardship	245
Chapter 6 · The Wildlife Trust	249
The Pioneer Spirit and the Public Trust: The American Rule of Capture and State Ownership of Wildlife	250
<i>Geer v. Connecticut</i>	253
<i>Cawsey v. Brickey</i>	264
<i>Barrett v. State</i>	267
<i>State Department of Fisheries v. Gillette</i>	272
<i>Owsichek v. State, Guide Licensing and Control Bd.</i>	275
<i>Center for Biological Diversity, Inc. v. FPL Group, Inc.</i>	280
Advancing the Sovereign Trust of Government to Safeguard the Environment for Present and Future Generations (Part I): Ecological Realism and the Need for a Paradigm Shift	290
The Public Trust in Wildlife	293
Chapter 7 · Beaches	297
<i>Borough of Neptune City v. Borough of Avon-by-the-Sea</i>	297
<i>Matthews v. Bay Head Improvement Ass'n</i>	301
<i>Raleigh Avenue Beach Ass'n v. Atlantis Beach Club, Inc.</i>	307

<i>Nies v. Town of Emerald Isle</i>	312
<i>State ex rel. Thornton v. Hay</i>	320
<i>Stevens v. City of Cannon Beach</i>	333
<i>Stevens v. City of Cannon Beach</i>	335
The Comedy of the Commons: Custom, Commerce, and Inherently Public Property	340
Chapter 8 · Parks and Public Lands	343
A. State Parklands	344
<i>Gould v. Greylock Reservation Comm'n</i>	345
<i>Big Sur Properties v. Mott</i>	349
<i>County of Solano v. Handlery</i>	351
<i>Raritan Baykeeper v. City of New York</i>	354
B. Federal Parks and Public Lands	359
<i>Sierra Club v. Department of Interior</i>	362
<i>Sierra Club v. Department of Interior II</i>	364
The Federal Public Trust Doctrine: Misinterpreting Justice Kennedy And Illinois Central Railroad	370
Chapter 9 · The Atmospheric Trust and the Climate Crisis	377
A. The Vision and Need for Public Trust Protection of the Atmosphere and Climate System	377
Atmospheric Trust Litigation Across the World	378
B. Atmospheric Trust Litigation (ATL) as an Emerging Front of Public Trust Law	383
1. Atmospheric Trust Cases Against the Federal Government	383
<i>Juliana v. United States</i> (district court decision)	383
<i>Juliana v. United States</i> (Ninth Circuit decision)	397
2. Atmospheric Trust Cases Against State Trustees	410
<i>Foster v. Washington Department of Ecology</i>	410
3. The International Atmospheric Trust Litigation Campaign	417
<i>The State of the Netherlands v. Urgenda Foundation</i>	417
Chapter 10 · Private Property and the Public Trust Doctrine	425
A. The Public Trust Doctrine's Accommodation of Private Property	425
The Public Trust Doctrine and Private Property:	
The Accommodation Principle	425
<i>Boone v. Kingsbury</i>	427
<i>State v. Central Vermont Railway</i>	432
B. The Public Trust Doctrine as a Background Principle of Property Law	439
<i>National Association of Home Builders v. New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection</i>	440
<i>Coastal Petroleum v. Chiles</i>	442
<i>R.W. Docks & Slips v. State</i>	444

Chapter 11 · The Public Trust Doctrine Abroad	449
<i>M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath</i>	449
<i>Juan Antonio Oposa et al. v. The Honorable Fulgencio S. Factoran, Jr., G.R.</i>	464
<i>Metropolitan Manila Development Authority v. Concerned Residents of Manila Bay</i>	467
<i>Future Generations v. Colombia Ministry of Government and others</i>	471
<i>Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) v. Attorney General</i>	478
<i>Waweru v. Republic</i>	480
The Public Trust Doctrine, Environmental Human Rights, and the Future of Private Property	484
<i>British Columbia v. Canadian Forest Products Ltd.</i>	489
Chapter 12 · Frontiers of the Public Trust	493
A. Sovereign Co-Tenancies of a Planetary Trust	494
1. The Sovereign Co-Tenancy and the U.S. Federal Role	494
Advancing the Sovereign Trust of Government to Safeguard the Environment for Present and Future Generations (Part I): Ecological Realism and the Need for a Paradigm Shift	494
<i>United States v. 1.58 Acres of Land</i>	496
<i>In re Steuart Transportation Company</i>	500
2. The PTD on a Global Level	504
The Public Trust Doctrine: A Viable Approach to International Environmental Protection	505
The Planetary Trust: Conservation and Intergenerational Equity	506
3. The Ocean Trust	508
The Public Trust Doctrine in the Exclusive Economic Zone	509
The Public Trust Doctrine: What a Tall Tale They Tell	511
B. An Expanding <i>Res</i>	512
Advancing the Sovereign Trust of Government to Safeguard the Environment for Present and Future Generations (Part I): Ecological Realism and the Need for a Paradigm Shift	516
C. The Fusion of Public Trust Principles with Fundamental Rights Approaches	519
The Public Trust Doctrine, Environmental Human Rights, and the Future of Private Property	520
How Courts Are Developing River Rights Jurisprudence: Comparing Guardianship in New Zealand, Colombia, and India	528
<i>Center for Social Justice Studies v. Presidency of the Republic, et al. (The Atrato River Case)</i>	530
<i>Miglani v. State of Uttarakhand (“Glaciers Decision”)</i>	540
D. Innovative Enforcement Models	543
E. Future Evolution of the Public Trust Doctrine	546

“You Can’t Negotiate with a Beetle”: Environmental Law for a New Ecological Age	546
The Public Trust Doctrine in Motion	549
Appendix	551
Office of Legal Guardian for Future Generations	551
Index	557

Table of Cases

- Adjudication of the Existing Rights to Use of all Water in the Missouri River Drainage Area, 55 P.3d 396 (Mont. 2002), 146, 237
- Ackerman v. Steisel, 104 A.D.2d 940 (N.Y. App. Div. 1984), 348
- Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) v. Attorney General, Misc. Cause No. 0100 (High Court of Uganda 2004), 477, 478**
- Aji. P. v. Washington, No. 18-2-04448-1 SEA, 2018 WL 3978310 (Wash. Super. Ct. Aug. 14, 2018), 407
- Alabama v. Texas, 347 U.S. 272 (1954), 361–62, 508
- Alec L. v. Jackson, 863 F. Supp. 2d 11 (D. D.C. 2012), affirmed Alec L. v. McCarthy, 561 F. App'x 7 (D.C. Cir. 2014), 6, 383, 395, 408, 467
- Alford v. Finch, 155 So.2d 790 (Fla. 1963), 266
- Allen v. McClellan, 405 P.2d 405 (N.M. 1965), 266
- Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound, Inc. v. Energy Facilities Siting Board, 932 N.E.2d 787 (Mass. 2010), 349
- Almeder v. Town of Kennebunkport, 106 A.3d 1099 (Me. 2014), 329–30
- American Pelagic Fishing Co. v. United States, 379 F.3d 1363 (Fed. Cir. 2004), 447
- Appleby v. New York, 271 U.S. 364 (1926), 76, 108, 408
- Arizona v. California, 373 U.S. 546 (1963), 70
- Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest v. Hassell, 837 P.2d 158 (Ariz. Ct. App. 1991), 10, 79, 80–81
- Arkansas River Rights Committee v. Echubby Lake Hunting Club, 126 S.W.3d. 738 (Ark. Ct. App. 2003), 129, 187**
- Arnold v. Mundy, 6 N.J.L. (N.J. 1821), 27, 57, 249
- Aronow v. State, 2012 Minn. App. Unpub. LEXIS 961, 2012 WL 4476642, 407
- Atl. Coast Line R.R. Co. v. Goldsboro, 232 U.S. 548 (1914), 76
- Atlanta Sch. of Kayaking, Inc. v. Douglasville-Douglas-County Water & Sewer Auth., 981 F. Supp. 1469 (N.D. Ga. 1997), 500
- Attorney General v. Hermes, 339 N.W.2d 545 (Mich. Ct. App. 1983), 262
- Baley v. United States, 942 F.3d 1312 (Fed. Cir. 2019), 238–39
- Barney v. Keokuk, 94 U.S. 324 (1877), 109
- Barrett v. State, 116 N.E. 99 (N.Y. 1917), 267**
- Berkeley v. Superior Court of Alameda County, 606 P.2d 362 (Cal. 1980), 155–56
- Bernstein v. City of Pittsburgh, 77 A.2d 452 (Pa. 1951), 357
- Big Sur Properties v. Mott, 62 Cal. App.3d 99 (Cal. Dist. Ct. App. 1976), 349**
- Bohn v. Albertson, 238 P.2d 128 (Cal. Dist. Ct. App. 1951), 128

- Board of Trustees of Philadelphia Museum v. Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, 96 A. 123 (Pa. 1915), 353
- Bonser-Lain v. Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, No. D-1-GN-11-002194, 2012 WL 2946041 (Tex. Dist. Ct. July 9, 2012), vacated, 438 S.W.3d 887 (Tex. App. 2014), 410
- Boone v. Kingsbury**, 273 P. 797 (Cal. 1928), 427
- Boston Waterfront Development Corp. v. Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 393 N.E.2d 356 (Mass. 1979), 432
- Borough of Neptune City v. Borough of Avon by the Sea**, 249 A.2d 47 (N.J. 1972), 39, 297
- Bott v. Commission of Natural Resources, 327 N.W.2d 838 (Mich. 1982), 137, 222
- British Columbia v. Canadian Forest Products Ltd**, 2 S.C.R. 74 (Supreme Court of Canada 2004), 477, 489
- Brooklyn Park Commissioners v. Armstrong, 45 N.Y. 234 (1871), 348
- Butler ex rel. Peshlakai v. Brewer, 2013 WL 1091209 (Ariz. Ct. App. Mar. 14, 2013), 220, 381, 415
- California Trout v. Superior Court, 266 Cal. Rptr. 788 (Cal. App. 1989), 212
- Camfield v. United States, 167 U.S. 518 (1897), 360, 361
- Cappaert v. United States, 426 U.S. 128 (1976), 368
- Carnahan v. Moriah Property Owners Association, 716 N.E.2d 437 (Ind. 1999), 132
- Carson v. Blazer, 2 Binn, 475 (Pa. 1810), 57
- Carter v. South Carolina Coastal Council, 314 S.E.2d 327 (S.C. 1984), 187
- Casitas Municipal Water Dist. v. United States, 76 Fed. Cl. 100 (2007), aff'd in part and rev'd in part, 543 F.3d 1276 (Fed. Cir. 2008), dismissed on remand on ripeness grounds, 102 Fed. Cl. 443 (2011), 212, 447
- Cawsey v. Brickey**, 144 P. 938 (Wash. 1914), 264
- Center for Biological Diversity v. FPL Group, Inc.**, 83 Cal. Rptr. 3d 588 (Cal. Ct. App. 2008), 6, 154–55, 263, 280, 364
- Center for Biological Diversity, Inc. v. California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, 182 Cal. Rptr. 3d 1 (2014), 288, 289
- Center for Social Justice Studies et al. v. Presidency of the Republic et al., Judgment T- 622/16 Constitutional Court of Colombia (November 10, 2016)**, 423, 477, 507, 539
- Champlin's Realty Assocs., L.P. v. Tillson, 823 A.2d 1162 (R.I. 2003), 184
- Chernaik v. Brown, 367 Or. 143, 2020 WL 6193813 (Oct. 22, 2020), 381, 416, 423, 513
- Chiesa v. D. Lobi Enters., 2012 WL 4464382, 2012 N.J. Super. LEXIS 2218 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. Sept. 28, 2012), 309–10
- City of Clifton v. Passaic Valley Water Comm'n, 539 A.2d 760 (N.J. Super. 1987), 247
- City of Daytona Beach v. Tona-Rama, Inc., 294 So. 2d 73, 78 (Fla. 1974), 329
- City of Madison v. Wisconsin, 83 N.W.2d 674 (Wis. 1957), 357
- City of Montpelier v. Barnett, 49 A.3d 120 (Vt. 2012), 145
- City of Long Branch v. Jui Yung Liu, 203 N.J. 464, 482 4 A.3d 542 (2010), 310–11

- Coastal Petroleum v. Chiles**, 701 So. 2d 619 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1997), Review denied, 707 So. 2d 1123 (1998), 442
- Cobell v. Kempthorne, 532 F. Supp. 2d 37 (D.D.C. 2008), 367
- Coeur d'Alene Tribe v. Asarco, Inc., 280 F.Supp.2d 1094 (D. Idaho 2003), 503
- Coleman v. Schwarzenegger, 922 F. Supp. 2d 882 (E.D. Cal. & N.D. Cal. 2009), 241
- Collopy v. Wildlife Commission, 625 P.2d 994 (Colo. 1981), 266
- Columbia River Fishermen's Protective Union v. City of St. Helens, 87 P.2d 195 (Or. 1939), 273–74
- Commonwealth v. Alger, 61 Mass. 53 (1851), 39
- Conatser v. Johnson, 194 P.3d 897 (Utah 2008), 149, 319
- County of Maui v. Hawaii Wildlife Fund, 140 S. Ct. 1462 (2020), 102
- County of Solano v. Handlery**, 66 Cal. Rptr. 3d 201 (Cal. Ct. App. 2007), 351, 359
- Coyle v. Smith, 221 U.S. 559 (1911), 77
- Day v. Armstrong, 362 P.2d 137 (Wyo. 1961), 122, 146
- Defenders of Wildlife v. Hull, 18 P.3d 722 (Ariz. Ct. App. 2001), 81
- Democko v. Iowa Dep't of Natural Res., 840 N.W.2d 281 (Iowa 2013), 266
- Dep't of Interior v. Klamath Water Users Protective Association, 532 U.S. 1 (2001), 238
- Desert Protective Council v. U.S. Department of Interior, 927 F. Supp. 2d 949 (S.D. Cal. 2013), 289
- Diversion Lake Club v. Heath, 86 S.W.2d 441 (Tex. 1935), 128
- Drewes Farms Partnership v. Ohio, Case No. 3:19-CV-00434-J3 (N. Dist. Ohio Feb. 27, 2020), 542–43
- Duerre v. Hepler, 892 N.W.2d 209 (S.D. 2017), 123
- Economy Light & Power Co. v. United States, 256 U.S. 113 (1921), 499–500
- Environmental Law Foundation v. State Water Resources Control Board** 26 Cal. App. 5th 844 (Cal. App. 2018), 215, 382
- Environmental Protection Information Center v. California Dep't of Forestry & Fire Protection, 187 P.3d 888 (Cal. 2008), 212, 288, 447
- Elder v. Delcour, 269 S.W.2d 17 (Mo. 1954), 114, 146
- Ellington Construction Co. v. Zoning Board of Appeals, 152 A.D.2d 365 (N.Y. App. Div. 1989), 348
- Eldred v. Reno, 74 F.Supp.2d 1 (D.D.C. 1999) affirmed 239 F.3d 372 (D.C. Cir. 2001), sub. nom. Eldred v. Ashcroft, 537 U.S. 186 (2003), 518
- Esplanade Properties, LLC v. City of Seattle**, 307 F.3d 978 (9th Cir. 2002), 11, 190, 195, 235, 440
- Ex parte Maier, 37 P. 402 (Cal. 1894), 287–88
- Farooq v. Pakistan, Writ Pet. No. 192069 (Lahore High Court 2018), 463, 478, 520
- Filippone v. Iowa Dep't of Nat. Res. (In re Filippone), 829 N.W.2d 589, 2013 Iowa App. LEXIS 279, 381
- Flisrand v. Madson, 152 N.W. 796 (S.D. 1915), 113
- Fomento Resorts & Hotels v. Minguel Martins, 1 N.S.C. 100 (India 2009), 457
- Fort Mojave Indian Tribe v. United States, 23 Cl. Ct. 417 (1991), aff'd 64 F.3d 677 (Fed. Cir. 1995), 238
- Foster v. Washington Dep't of Ecology**, 2015 WL 7721362 (Wash. King Cty. Super. Ct. Nov. 19, 2015), 381, 382, 410
- Foster v. Washington, No. 75374-6-I (Wash. Ct. App. Sept. 5, 2017), 415

- Friends of Parks v. Chicago Park District, 786 N.E.2d 161 (Ill. 2003), 357–58, 431
- Friends of Thayer Lake v. Brown, 1 N.Y.S.3d 504 (N.Y. App. Div. 2015), 145–46
- Fur Seal Arbitration (U.S. v. Gr. Brit. 1893), reprinted in 1 John Bassett Moore, History & Digest of the International Arbitrations to Which the United States Has Been a Party 755 (1898), 499
- Future Generations v. Colombia Ministry of Government and others, STC4360-2018 (Supreme Court of Colombia 2018), 471, 507**
- Galt v. State Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 731 P.2d 912 (Mont. 1987), 144, 149
- Geer v. Connecticut, 161 U.S. 519 (1896), 5, 85–86, 253, 261, 262, 270, 360
- Georgia v. Tennessee Copper Co., 206 U.S. 230 (1907), 306
- Ghen v. Rich, 8 F. 159 (D. Mass. 1881), 249
- Gibbons v. Ogden, 22 U.S. 1 (1824), 52
- Givens v. Ichauway, 493 S.E.2d 148 (Ga. 1997), 500
- Glass v. Goeckel, 703 N.W.2d 58 (Mich. 2005), 133
- Glick v. Harvey, 2014 WL 96413 (N.Y. Sup. Ct., Jan. 7, 2014), judgment modified by 121 A.D.3d 498 (N.Y. App. Div. 2014), 358
- Glick v. Harvey, 25 N.Y.3d 1175 (2015), 358
- Gloucester Resources Limited v. Minister for Planning [2019] NSWLEC 7, 423
- Golden Feather Community Association v. Thermalito Irrigation District, 244 Cal. Rptr. 830 (Cal Ct. App. 1988), 128, 222
- Graham v. Estuary Properties, Inc., 399 So.2d 1374 (Fla. 1981), 166
- Grayson v. Town of Huntington, 160 A.D.2d 835 (N.Y. App. Div. 1990), 348
- Gould v. Greylock Reservation Comm'n, 215 N.E.2d 114 (Mass. 1966), 40, 345**
- Guilliams v. Beaver Lake Club, 175 P. 437 (Or. 1918), 112–13, 117, 146
- Gunderson v. State, 90 N.E.3d 1171 (Ind. 2018), 138
- Hay v. Bruno, 344 F. Supp. 286 (D. Or. 1972), 329
- High Country Citizen's Alliance v. Norton, 448 F. Supp. 2d 1235 (D. Colo. 2006), 239, 368
- Hillebrand v. Knapp, 274 N.W. 821 (S.D. 1937), 113, 178
- Hoffman v. City of Pittsburgh, 75 A.2d 649 (Pa. 1950), 353
- Hughes v. Oklahoma, 441 U.S. 322 (1979), 261
- Hyland v. Borough of Allenhurst, 393 A.2d 579 (N.J. 1978), 301
- Idaho v. Coeur d'Alene Tribe, 521 U.S. 261 (1997), 98–99
- Idaho v. United States, 533 U.S. 262 (2001), 85
- Illinois Central Railroad Co. v. Illinois, 146 U.S. 387 (1892), 8, 63, 70, 188, 197, 263, 343–44, 382**
- In re* Conveyance of 1.2 Acres of Bangor Mem'l Park to Bangor Area School District, 567 A.2d 750 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 1989), 357
- In re* Electrical Power (Indonesian Const. Ct., Judicial Review of Law Number 20 Year 2002, Case No. 001-021-022/PUU-I/2003, Dec. 15, 2004), 488
- In re* Hood River, 227 P. 1065 (Or. 1924), 513
- In re* Kukui, 174 P.3d 320 (Haw. 2007), 238
- In re* Oil & Natural Gas (Indonesian Const. Ct., Judicial Review of Law

- Number 22 Year 2001, Case No. 002/PUU-I/2003, Dec. 21, 2004), 489
- In re* Oil & Natural Gas (Indonesian Const. Ct., Judicial Review of Law Number 22 Year 2001, Case No. 36/PUU-X/2012, Nov. 13, 2012), 489
- In re* Omya Solid Waste Facility Final Certification, Docket No. 96-6-10 Vtec, Decision and Order on Motion for Summary Judgment (Feb. 28, 2011), 236
- In re* Omya Solid Waste Facility Final Certificate, No. 96-6-10 Vtec (Vt. Super. Ct. May 16, 2011), 223
- In Re* Steuart Transportation Co.**, 495 F. Supp. 38 (E.D. Va. 1980), 262–63, 274, 294, 500
- In re* United States, 884 F.3d 830 (9th Cir. 2018), 396
- In re* Wai‘ola O Moloka‘i, Inc., 83 P.3d 664 (Haw. 2004), 238, 244
- In re* Water Resources (Indonesian Const. Ct., Judicial Review of Law Number 7 Year 2004, Case Nos. 058-059-060-063/PUU-II/2004 and 008/PUU-III/2005, July 19, 2005), 488
- In re* Water Use Permit Applications, Petitions for Interim Instream Flow Standard Amend., and Petition for Water Reservations for the Waiahole Ditch**, 9 P.3d 409 (Haw. 2000), 5, 9, 89, 220, 223, 235, 311, 345, 348, 361, 364, 523–24
- In re* Water Use Permit Applications, Petitions for Interim Instream Flow Standard Amend., and Petition for Water Reservations for the Waiahole Ditch, 93 P.3d 643 (Haw. 2004), 234–35
- In re* Water Use Permit Applications, Petitions for Interim Instream Flow Standard Amend., and Petition for Water Reservations for the Waiahole Ditch, 147 P.3d 836 (Haw. 2006), 235
- In the matter of* Cutting of Trees for Canal Widening Project, Lahore, (2011) Suo Motu Case No. 25 of 2009, 2011 SCMR 1743 (Pak.), 459–60, 527–28
- Jamie Lynn Butler v. Governor Janice K. Brewer, I CA-CV 12-0347 (Ariz. Ct. App. Mar. 14, 2013), 514
- Johnson v. M’Intosh, 21 U.S. 543 (1823), 69
- Juan Antonio Oposa et al. v. The Honorable Fulgencio S. Factoran, Jr., G.R., No. 101083, 224 S.C.R.A. 792 (1992) (Phil.)**, 6, 464, 477, 524
- Juliana v. United States**, 217 F. Supp. 3d 1224 (D. Or. 2016), 6, 381, 382, 383, 395, 407, 408, 416, 499, 519, 525, 528, 538–39
- Juliana v. United States, 339 F. Supp. 3d 1062 (D. Or. 2018), 396
- Juliana v. United States, No. 6:15-cv-01517-AA, 2018 WL 6303774 (D. Or. Nov. 21, 2018), 396–97
- Juliana v. United States, 949 F.3d 1125 (2018), 397
- Juliana v. United States**, 947 F.3d 1159 (9th Cir. 2020), 382, 396, 397, 406, 407, 408, 423, 539
- Just v. Marinette County**, 201 N.W.2d 761 (Wis. 1972), 39, 162, 179, 329, 440
- Kaiser Aetna v. United States, 444 U.S. 164 (1979), 297
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Authors' Note

We edited the case law liberally throughout for readability, eliminating redundant citations and sometimes creating paragraphs. Any footnotes are numbered consecutively throughout chapters; we did not retain the original footnote numbers.

Case citations in the text, the footnotes of judicial opinions, and the writings of commentators have been omitted without so specifying. Footnotes in judicial opinions and articles are also omitted without specifying. Asterisks and brackets are used to designate omissions from the original materials.

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Preface to the Third Edition

The public trust doctrine continued to evolve in the five years since the second edition was published. Among the more notable new court opinions was the Pennsylvania Supreme Court’s decision in *Pennsylvania Environmental Defense Foundation v. Commonwealth* (p. 90), recognizing the inherent nature of the public trust doctrine in the state’s constitution and applying it to funding decisions; the California Court of Appeal’s decision in *Environmental Law Foundation v. State Water Resources Control Board* (p. 215), extending the public trust to groundwater extraction; the North Carolina Court of Appeals’ decision in *Nies v. Town of Emerald Isle* (p. 312), recognizing the doctrine’s application to North Carolina beaches; and *Juliana v. United States* (p. 383), in which a federal district court found a constitutional right under the public trust principle and the Constitution’s due process clause to a “climate system capable of sustaining human life,” but a divided panel of the Ninth Circuit dismissed the case on redressability grounds.

Even more startling developments occurred beyond the boundaries of the United States. Perhaps the most noteworthy was the Dutch Supreme Court’s affirmation in *Netherlands v. Urgenda Foundation* (p. 417), finding a sovereign duty of care to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in compliance with international climate obligations. Other important court decisions were handed down in Pakistan (pp. 459–464), Colombia (p. 471), and more cases in India (n. 6, p. 458–59, p. 540). A potential pathbreaking decision is the Constitutional Court of Colombia’s Atrato River opinion (p. 530), extending constitutional protection to biodiversity and indigenous culture.

These and other developments are examined in this edition of the casebook. Its publication comes during a time when the world is in the throes of a global pandemic and intensifying climate disasters, and when communities in the United States and around the globe are making renewed demands for justice. In a time of turmoil and transition, the public trust remains an ancient obligation anchoring the fundamental expectations of democracy, ensuring access to and protection of public resources, and providing a steady force of government accountability. We hope that students of the public trust doctrine will find the third edition to be of value in their study of this dynamic and consequential area of the law.

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Preface to the Second Edition

Our goal in publishing the first edition of this casebook a couple of years ago was to create a systematic approach to the study of the public trust doctrine (PTD), and we think our book has helped to begin the institutionalization of the doctrine in law study.

In this second edition, we have included several significant developments in what is a rapidly evolving body of law. The most notable new decision is *Robinson Township v. Commonwealth* (p. 82), a decision of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court which has quickly become a foundational decision. We have also included the Wisconsin Supreme Court's opinion in *Rock-Koshkonong Lake District v. Department of Natural Resources* (p. 147), in which the court narrowly interpreted the scope of that state's PTD, arguably misinterpreting that court's seminal decision of *Just v. Marinette County* (p. 141) in the process. A case which may expand the scope of the PTD in California to groundwater is *Environmental Law Foundation v. State Water Resources Control Board* (p. 184), although whether California will join states like Hawaii and Vermont that recognize groundwater as a trust resource awaits whether the environmental claimants can prove a link between groundwater pumping and the surface flows of the navigable Scott River.

There have been a considerable number of developments in the cluster of cases that seek to recognize the atmosphere as a trust resource, and we discuss these developments in some detail in chapter 11 (pp. 365–405). A steady stream of case law also continues to arise out of efforts of members of the public to access trust resources, mostly in the context of waterways experiencing monopoly control (chapter 3, pp. 95–138). We also have updated the text to expand our consideration of the PTD abroad to include considerable case law from Indonesia (p. 352), a constitutional amendment in Norway (p. 359), and statutory developments in Britain and the Nordic countries (p. 360).

There are other changes as well. The above summary reflects only a snapshot of developments in this rapidly expanding area of law. We expect the pace of change to accelerate in the near future, and we pledge to try to keep current with it.

We continue to believe that this course is an ideal upper-level course in environmental law. It offers a common-law-based approach to environmental decision making, a contrast in a field dominated by statutes and administrative regulations. Although there is a role for statutory and regulatory interpretations of the PTD, there is little doubt that the vibrant center of the PTD lies in a judiciary that understands the importance of trust resources to both present and future generations. That in

turn requires courts that are schooled in the doctrine's history, its evolution in other jurisdictions, and the fundamental anti-monopolistic purposes it has always served and continues to serve, including intergenerational equity.

We hope this effort contributes to the evolution of the PTD in the 21st century by educating the next generation of lawyers who must convince judges of the role the PTD can play in a world that is becoming increasingly crowded, experiencing the diminishment of trust resources, and threatened with climate change which will imperil trust resources first.

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Preface to the First Edition

The public trust doctrine (PTD) is an ancient doctrine of property law that governs sovereign stewardship of natural resources. First surfacing in Roman law through the Justinian Code, it was revived in medieval England largely through the efforts of Sir Mathew Hale and became entrenched in American law in the nineteenth century through the process of statehood. In the twentieth century, the doctrine became a favorite of the law professoriate and the environmental community for its potential to recognize public rights in private property. The doctrine both promotes public access to trust resources and justifies government protection of them. It also equips the public—the beneficiaries of the trust—with the right to challenge government on the management of their ecological assets. This doctrine, remarkable for its endurance through the ages, now brings populist overtones and human rights underpinnings to the modern fields of environmental law and property law.

We offer the first casebook on public trust law. In it, we have endeavored to capture the rich history and considerable diversity of the field. Although the PTD is often characterized as a doctrine of state law, we think the perception is erroneous because the PTD is an inherent attribute of sovereignty and, accordingly, should apply to both the federal and state governments. The origins of the American PTD lie in bilateral federal-state agreements admitting states to the Union, but the doctrine is also recognized in countries as far-flung as India, the Philippines, Kenya, and Brazil. We survey the PTD’s application from the local to global level.

The wellspring of the American PTD lies in a distinctive antimonopoly sentiment that, widespread in the nineteenth century, continues to inspire a vibrant body of case law concerning public access to trust resources. That case law—as well as state constitutions and statutes—has expanded the scope of trust assets from lands submerged beneath navigable waters to wetlands, beaches, parklands, wildlife, air, and groundwater. Internationally, the doctrine has advanced concepts of sustainable development and the precautionary principle, and thus is frequently linked to the public’s right to life, health, and environmental protection. There are ongoing efforts to use the PTD to combat climate change by applying it to curb carbon emissions.

While the origins of the PTD date to Roman times, the PTD carries enormous importance today, as many statutory systems fail in their basic purpose of protecting public resources from private exploitation. A course in public trust law allows students to break out of the narrow confines of statutory law and immerse themselves in fundamental principles that provide a fulcrum for sustainable environmental management. The course can, and we think should, delve into the most basic questions of

constitutionalism and the role of the judiciary, legislatures, and courts in allocating natural resources.

At less than 500 pages, we think this book is ideal for an advanced course or seminar in environmental, natural resources, or property law. The casebook is accompanied by a teachers' manual as well. We have designed the text not only as a set of teaching materials, but also as a research platform for further inquiry into public trust law. We have relied heavily on the rich scholarship in public trust law and have tried to supplement it. Students in our classes have produced multiple summaries of state public trust law as well as law review notes and articles analyzing some of the most intriguing questions generated by the doctrine. We encourage you to send us cases and materials and as well as your contributions to the law of the public trust, which we will use in new editions of this text and in a treatise on the subject.

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