President Obama has gotten some high praise lately from the New York Times editorial board, and this op-ed from Prof. David Brinkley, a presidential historian at Rice noted for his biography of President Theodore Roosevelt. Brinkley compares Obama favorably to Teddy Roosevelt for his conservation legacy.

The specific recent actions by President Obama that prompted this praise were the creation of a number of new national monuments under the Antiquities Act, including the first national monument in the north Maine woods, and a dramatic expansion of the marine national monument in the northwestern Hawaiian islands. These are all terrific steps from a conservation perspective. But President Obama has a ways to go if we are really to conclude that he is leaving office with a strong conservation legacy, particularly when it comes to protecting our public lands from unsustainable development.

In President Obama's first term, he aggressively pursued an "all of the above" energy strategy that included the leasing of federal public lands for fossil fuel production – including leasing off-shore areas in the Arctic Ocean for oil development. He was sharply criticized by environmental groups for these actions, both because of the on-the-ground impacts that fossil fuel development can have on ecosystems and wild places, and because of the climate impacts of taking more fossil fuels out of the ground. (In fairness to President Obama, he inherited a massive increase in fossil fuel production on federal lands from the George W. Bush Administration, and fossil fuel production overall on public lands somewhat decreased from 2003 to 2014.)

Lately, the Administration appears to have been taking a different approach. It has imposed a moratorium on coal leasing on federal lands while it reconsiders overall coal leasing policy, and it has made favorable noises to considering the carbon emission impacts of fossil fuel development on public lands. Still, the Administration is far from wholeheartedly embracing the "Keep It In the Ground" movement that calls for the end of all future fossil fuel leasing on federal public lands. If the President really wants to solidify his conservation legacy, he needs to do more than just create new monuments – he needs to completely restructure and re-envision the role of fossil fuel development on our public lands.