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EDITOR'S NOTE: Please be sure to read Lynn Jackson's "Wilderness Quandary: Does 'Pretty' Make Wilderness?" elsewhere in this issue. The retired Utah BLM staffer offers his views on another aspect of the wilderness debate—the nuts and bolts of the law and the process and its various interpretations...JS

**UTAH WILDERNESS. DEBATE...part 1
Does Anybody Still Care?**

"We must not be afraid to follow the truth, no matter where it may lead."

---Thomas Jefferson

More than forty years ago, in a world so different from today as to almost be unrecognizable, Edward Abbey wrote about the need for wilderness and offered this unique suggestion:

"The wilderness should be preserved for political reasons. We may need it someday not only as a refuge from excessive industrialism but also as a refuge from authoritarian government, from political oppression. The Grand Canyon...may be required to function as a base for guerilla warfare against tyranny."

Oh the Irony. Almost half a century later, Abbey's rant sounds more like a passage from a Tea Party Survival Manual; yet, one would be hard pressed to find a Utah Tea Party member willing to support even one acre of congressionally-mandated legislation to designate "wilderness."

Meanwhile proponents of Utah wilderness have spent the last 20 years urging the passage of a massive "Redrock Wilderness Bill" promising first and foremost that its commercial development and exploitation via a "tourist/amenities" economy will generate untold revenues for the rural West. They say very little these days about solitude, remoteness and the need of a base camp for revolutionary warfare.

From these two ignominious positions comes Utah's decades old battle for wilderness, a fight that for one reason or another, has been waged continuously for almost a quarter century. In 2011, I'm not sure anybody even gives a damn.

The Utah Wilderness Debate reminds me of the Vietnam War. For those of us who lived through that strange time, it was one of those stories that was always there. Every day for 20 years. We grew up with Vietnam, it was always in the headlines, we participated in it on one level or another—either for or against---and for many of us, it seemed as if the story and the war would go on forever. When it

finally sputtered to an end, we hardly knew what to do with ourselves or what to make of the outcome. A generation later, Vietnam's "threat" to the United States manifests itself mainly in the manufacturing base it has established for itself. Like its Chinese neighbors, Vietnam's cheap labor force has grabbed many of America's industries, including Osprey outdoor gear, once manufactured exclusively by Native American craftsmen in Cortez, Colorado. Now much of the work is done in Ho Chi Minh City.



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Last year Osprey partnered with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance at the Outdoor Recreation Show in Salt Lake City, distributing pro-wilderness post cards and donating a few "made in Vietnam" packs. Welcome to the new Global Wilderness Economy, 2011-style.

This is what the "fight for wilderness" has become. How did it get like this? Consider this brief history...

The Wilderness Act was passed by Congress in 1964 but it wasn't until 1976 that the BLM, mandated by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), initiated an inventory of road-less areas across the country.

In 1980, Utah BLM came up with about 2.5 million acres of "wilderness study areas (WSAs) that it deemed wilderness-worthy. Later that number climbed to 3.2 million. These acres would be henceforth managed as wilderness, though to this day, Congress has not passed a comprehensive wilderness bill.

Environmentalists at the time were outraged and thought the inventory failed to include all BLM lands with wilderness potential. One group, the Utah Wilderness Association, was agreeable to a compromise to get some kind of bill passed, but otherwise, opposition to the BLM inventory was adamant.

The Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC), a collection of 40 state and national groups supported a larger wilderness proposal of 5.1 million acres. The most visible and vocal of these groups would be the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA), originally a grassroots organization based

out of Boulder, Utah. SUWA was not well-received by a mostly rural Southern Utah population and its founding members were even burned in effigy in 1982.

The UWC proposal grew to 5.4 and then to 5.7, when the first "Redrock Wilderness" bill was introduced in Congress by then Rep. Wayne Owens in 1989. The late-Congressman Owens is the only Utah congressional representative of either party to ever support the bill. Since 1993, Rep. Maurice Hinchey of New York and Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois have introduced the legislation in Congress.

In 1996, under the direction of Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, the BLM re-inventoried its Utah lands and concluded that environmentalists were right. The BLM now determined that 5.8 million acres possessed wilderness values, more than matching the acreage in the UWC proposal.

Maybe an agreement was at hand.

Instead the UWC undertook another "citizens' inventory" of potential wilderness lands in Utah. When the process was complete, environmentalists announced that they had, in fact, found another three to four million acres of wilderness-quality "road-less" areas.

But what does "road-less" mean?. In the late 1970s, the BLM decided that a "road" had to be constructed and maintained and that usage, no matter how frequent or heavy, was irrelevant. Rural Westerners objected and even today, many pro-wilderness environmentalists fail to understand this important fact. A Moab businessman and "proud business supporter of SUWA" recently complained to me, "What more do all these jeepers want? There are hundreds of jeep roads left over from the uranium days." When I explained that hardly any of those "roads" met the definition, he was dumbstruck.

In any case, the proposal for wilderness jumped from 5.7 to 8.3 to 8.8 to 9.1 to 9.5 million acres. Some even suggest the number is in excess of 9.8 million...nobody, neither pro- nor anti- wilderness advocates, seems sure of an exact number.

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And that's where the process has stayed for the last decade with a couple exceptions.

Most notably, in 2009, environmental groups working with local and state politicians put together the Omnibus Public Land Management Act. It included wilderness designation in the Zion-Mojave region of southwest Utah. According to a SUWA press release, it "contains the much improved (and SUWA supported) Washington County Wilderness Bill," already passed by the Senate. The bill was subsequently signed by President Obama and became law in March 2009.

It was supposed to resolve wilderness disputes in southwestern Utah. The SUWA letter said: "Now, the Omnibus bill only needs President Obama's signature to ensure a lasting conservation legacy for the Zion-Mojave region and for American citizens both in Utah and around the country who appreciate their open spaces and oppose unfettered sprawl."

The letter even encouraged all wilderness supporters to thank Senators Bennett and Hatch for their support.

But by December SUWA and other Utah groups were disenchanted. In a 12/9/09 press release executive director Scott Groene wrote, "The Washington County wilderness legislation enacted earlier this year was not the result of consensus as some now claim, but rather a multi-year political fight in Washington, D.C...Importantly, because it was not a consensus bill, there was no agreement to remove lands from America's Red Rock Wilderness Act that were not protected by the Washington County bill. There is still work to be done in Washington County to protect this proposed wilderness."

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In other words, no ‘agreement’ or ‘consensus’ had been reached after all, and certainly no compromise. The battle for more wilderness in Washington County and southwest Utah would continue, as it would everywhere else in the state.

For decades, Utah environmentalists have blamed their inability to get a comprehensive state-wide wilderness bill passed on their perceived conservative adversaries. They got nowhere with their 5.7 million acre bill in the late 80s and early 90s and held a Republican White House and a split Congress responsible. With the inauguration of Bill Clinton, spirits rose but the bill still went nowhere and in 1994 Newt and the Republicans re-claimed the House. In ‘96 the Clinton administration raised its estimate of wilderness-quality Utah lands and UWC promptly raised its own estimate by another 4 million acres.

Then came President George W Bush and 9/11 and the War on Terror and about all that Utah Greens could do was wait. They dreamed of a Democratic president and a filibuster-proof Senate and in November 2008, they got everything they could ask for.

And they still couldn’t get a Utah wilderness bill passed.

On the day after Obama’s election, SUWA’s Groene wrote, “The new Obama administration and Congress will give us an unprecedented opportunity to protect the redrock country...Yes, we still must work hard to reverse the awful legacy of the Bush administration. But after eight long, hard years, we are about to face perhaps the best opportunity for wilderness protection in SUWA’s 25-year history.”

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Wilderness is the soul of America

But the celebrations were short-lived and hardly anything went as planned. For Redrock Wilderness advocates, Obama’s new Interior Secretary Ken Salazar was a particular disappointment. Last year, when Salazar came to Utah to talk wilderness, he made his views clear. He told a packed room of Utah citizens—dominated by SUWA supporters— that he favored a “from the ground up” process that supported local participation and opposed federal designation. Specifically, Salazar insisted the Obama Administration had no intention of creating national monuments on public lands and side-stepping the legislative wilderness process, an idea pushed by SUWA.

“That’s not going to happen,” Salazar said. “That would be the wrong way to go.” Instead he proposed working with locally elected officials to find consensus on wilderness. He hailed the 2009 Washington County lands bill—the legislation so distasteful to SUWA’s Groene—as a model for future legislation.

Salazar said, “I think this is what people want from their government. They want solutions and conclusions.” And, in a reference clearly intended for the litigious SUWA lawyers, Salazar added, “They don’t want interminable processes that don’t lead anywhere.”

According to a news report on Utah public radio’s KUER, “He also insisted that Utah’s Red Rock Wilderness Bill before Congress is the wrong way to go.”

Things only got worse. Salazar briefly agreed to extend administrative protection for some UWC proposed wilderness lands in Utah, but after the Republican midterm sweeps, the Obama administration withdrew the plan. By April 2011, SUWA’s press releases took on an almost desperate tone: “Last Friday night, in a stunning show of disrespect for the last remaining magnificent wild lands in Utah and throughout the West, the Obama administration struck a deal with Republicans that threw the Interior Department’s recently established Wild Lands policy out the window.”

And Groene noted, “The Obama administration has been a steady and enormous disappointment on public lands, but they are very sensitive to public sentiment...”

So what came next? What would anyone in the second decade of the 21st Century do to alter or affect “public sentiment?” With the financial backing of some of America’s richest capitalists, SUWA initiated a massive \$2 million media campaign to win the hearts and minds of Utah residents. The slick 30 second tv spots have run frequently in the Salt Lake City market and confidence is high that the

saturation ads are working. Matt Gross, SUWA’s media director notes, “...the media campaign is making a difference -- attracting more than 18,000 new fans of Utah Wilderness on Facebook, and making it harder than ever for our opponents to demonize wilderness as something Utahns don’t support.”

If it’s on *facebook*, it must be true. After all, “friends” don’t lie.

But doesn’t this really cut to the heart of the problem? How can we trivialize an issue like wilderness with facebook clicks and slippery tv spots?

These are not ordinary times—to many of us it appears the world is dangerously close to falling apart. Politically and economically, the country seems to be splitting at the seams. Millions of American are out of work or under-employed with no real hope that things will get better.

Meanwhile we face the real threat of climate change, driven by an ever-expanding human population and, just as importantly, an insatiable growing demand for consumer products. America always wanted the rest of the world to be “just like us” and now we hover on the brink of getting our wish. The demand for energy and what’s left of the earth’s natural resources is exploding across the “developing world.”

Some scientists fear that the effects of climate change have already reached a tipping point, that only the most draconian measures can allow us any hope of saving the planet as we now know it. How we deal with these kinds of impacts when the planet is already staggering under the weight of our present and past impacts is almost unfathomable.

So worrying about wilderness designation at a time like this, to the exclusion of everything else, feels like a quaint gesture to days-gone-by. To paraphrase Ed Abbey, ‘What good is wilderness without a decent planet to designate it in?’ Single-issue organizations like SUWA have come to view the world through such a tiny aperture, I wonder at times if they realize what’s happening elsewhere.

SUWA recently addressed the issue of global warming in its own predictable way. It proposed that climate change is at least partly caused by all the dust thrown into the air by the object of their constant scorn and mortal enemies—the ATVs. No love is lost between me and those noisy monsters either, but I’m not quite ready to blame them for global warming. Are they noisy and dusty on a local scale? Absolutely. Are they to be held responsible for the possible Coming of the Apocalypse? I don’t think so.

In fact, it’s hard to take mainstream environmentalism seriously, from the Big Green national groups, clear down to the grass roots. The “movement” has become fat and bloated, powered (and compromised) by the wealth and influence of some of the world’s wealthiest capitalists, most of them with agendas of their own. At a time when environmentalists should be focused on a message that demands a dramatic reduction in our consumption, that opposes growth for growth’s sake and condemns greed and out-of-control development, it has instead turned to Big Money and all the contradictions that come with it. Environmentalists should be leading by example. Instead they have turned to people like David Bonderman.

Multi-billionaire venture capitalist David Bonderman is a master of LBOs (leveraged buyouts); he pursues money wherever he can find it—from exploiting the debt crises in Europe to building coal fired power plants in Texas to developing coal mines and palm oil plantations in Indonesia. He doesn’t seem to worry about the contradictions his dealings might have on his moniker as “one of the great conservationists in America today.” (From the Grand Canyon Trust) A recent news story reported that,

“Proposed clean air rules recently released by President Obama’s Environmental Protection Agency that aim to cut mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants...will also produce other, unexpected winners -- private-equity heavyweights Henry Kravis and David Bonderman. The two, whose firms have invested in an energy company that runs coal power plants, will see more than \$1 billion in savings because the EPA’s proposed rules go easy on the type of coal used in their plants. The huge savings...is tied to the EPA proposal which exempts lignite coal-fired plants, like those run by EFH from having to spend money to reduce pollution levels at the plants.”

None of the environmental groups funded in part by Bonderman raised a voice in protest. And yet, those same groups, like the Grand Canyon Trust and SUWA oppose coal plants in their own back yards.

I once compared the environmental movement to the

civil rights battles of the 1950s and 1960s. But imagine the NAACP opposing segregation in Utah but tacitly supporting the same practice, by their silence, a few hundred miles away in Texas. Imagine the NAACP receiving funding from a company that refuses to hire African-Americans. Imagine Martin Luther King accepting support from members of a whites-only country club.

That’s precisely what’s happening now.

Recently, Nobel Peace Prize winner Al Gore talked about racism and climate change in an interview with former advertising executive and Climate Reality Project collaborator Alex Bogusky:

“I remember, again going back to my early years in the South, when the Civil Rights revolution was unfolding...My generation asked old people, ‘Explain to me again why it is okay to discriminate against people because their skin color is different?’ And when they couldn’t really answer that question with integrity, the change really started.”

“We have to win the conversation on climate. I think it’s the same where the moral component is concerned and where the facts are concerned I think it is important to get that out there, absolutely.”

According to the story, “The former vice president recalled how society succeeded in marginalizing racists and said climate change skeptics must be defeated in the same manner.”

Instead, Americans are growing more skeptical of climate change and environmental issues. A recent Harris poll revealed some troubling trends. “Not only are fewer Americans behaving in environmentally-friendly ways, but many are now also less likely to embrace, or be influenced by, “green” attitudes - just over 1 in 3 U.S. adults (36%) say they are concerned about the planet they are leaving behind for future generations, compared to more than 2 in 5 adults (43%) who said so in 2009.”

Is it little wonder then, that the most notable sign of wilderness support in Utah is a quick count of facebook ‘fans’ and a recitation of the economic advantages that wilderness offers?

Wilderness was once a moral issue. We sought protection for wildlands because it was the right thing to do. We wanted to protect the plants and the critters and the rocks for *their* sake, not ours. The idea was to leave something *alone*, to preserve the last untouched corners of America. And we certainly didn’t promote wilderness because it would be a boon to the amenities/tourist/recreation industry.

If we gained some spiritual or personal satisfaction and happiness from the presence of wilderness, it was a secondary benefit. We were grateful for its existence, but it’s not why we thought wilderness was important. Abbey wrote that we need wilderness “as surely as we need hope.” But he also noted, “I may never in my life get to Alaska, but I am grateful that it’s there.”

He also once proclaimed that the environmental movement needed fewer lawyers and more poets. Today the wilderness movement in Utah and elsewhere needs to take a hard look at itself. Is it really being honest with the people?

Is UWC’s inability to secure a comprehensive Utah wilderness bill really the fault of everyone else? Do they share any of the responsibility?

Is UWC’s inability to secure a comprehensive wilderness bill for Utah really the fault of everyone else? Do they share any of the responsibility? After all, it’s been almost a quarter of a century.

Are environmentalists looking at the broader picture that includes the dramatic downturn in the economy, the ominous threat of climate change and hard political realities?

If Utah greens can’t even come close to a wilderness bill with the Obama administration, what does the future hold?

Do, in fact, groups like SUWA really WANT a wilderness bill passed in Utah? And can they really justify their growing dependence on big money and the influence of wealthy benefactors who also sit securely on their boards of directors? Does the end really justify the means, even when the “means” smack of hypocrisy?

As years and decades go by, more and more supporters of wilderness are losing interest in the ‘fight,’ because no one is sure who the Good Guys are anymore.