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IS THERE ANYWHERE ‘GOOD’ TO FRACK?

In February, despite citizens’ objections and a petition that contained 75,000 signatures, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved the lease of 26 parcels of public land for possible oil and gas development south of Moab. All the parcels were purchased for more than \$4 million. Almost half the money will go to the State of Utah who will then distribute the funds to various agencies that fund projects in Grand and San Juan Counties. The BLM originally considered 48 parcels but deferred 22 of them, mostly for environmental concerns

Leading the protesters was longtime resident Kiley Miller and her partner, John Rzczycki. Their concerns ran deeper than most—years ago they were able to purchase a parcel of land from the Utah State Institutional Trust Administration (SITLA) and build a home, completely off the grid. Selling state lands for private homes is, in itself, a policy change for that agency that has led to the promotion and sale of SITLA land parcels in some very unlikely locations.

For Miller and Rzczycki, the threat of nearby oil and gas projects meant more commercial traffic adjacent to their property and, of greater concern, water contamination. They specifically objected to two parcels near their home. One was removed from the sale for that reason, but the other remained.

In addition, Living Rivers, an environmental group out of Moab, objected to 24 of the 26 remaining leases. All of them were approved by BLM. Spokesman John Weisheit noted that development of one of the parcels posed a water contamination threat “to residents of Kane Creek, Bridger Jack Mesa, and Brown’s Hole. These homeowners,” Weisheit noted, “have investments in infrastructure that provides clean drinking water. Other investments at risk include depreciation of property values.” Most of these housing developments were also on SITLA lands once used only for grazing and mining but which, recently, as noted, have been developed for their residential real estate value.

In addition to these specific objections, there is a growing movement to reduce or eliminate further oil and gas development in the area via the introduction of a plan to create “Greater Canyonlands National Monument.” Proponents of Greater Canyonlands call for the immediate protection, by presidential proclamation, of 1.4 million acres of public lands adjacent to the national park. According to their literature, “Proposed oil and gas drilling, tar sands exploration, and potash development—some of which would be within sight and sound of Canyonlands National Park—would carve up this wild landscape, harm-

ing air and water quality, fragmenting wildlife habitat, and degrading spectacular scenery.”

Moab environmentalist and monument supporter Bill Love wrote, “The area surrounding Canyonlands will be lost to the public unless protected from the extraction industry.” And he pointed out that, “Monument status will protect our tourist economy and hundreds or thousands of jobs.”

Many others share Love’s view and his suggested bottom line—that the scenic beauty of southeast Utah is simply too valuable, measured in tourist dollars, to be degraded and diminished by the extractive industry.

We can all complain about the world and insist we’re trying to save it, but more often than not, we wage battles on our own behalf.

But again, to be the broken record I have become, a tourist/amenities economy is based by definition on the massive consumption of natural resources, especially including oil and gas. Moab City officials released data last month revealing that commercial construction in the community exceeded \$16 million in just the first quarter of 2013. The reality is, a tourist economy desperately needs an ever-growing supply of affordable oil to meet expected increases in tourist visitation. But they fear oil exploitation in their area will adversely affect tourism. In their 3 AM hearts, they WANT the oil...but they do NOT want it coming from their own backyards. I posed the question of putting restraints on tourism in Moab to a few prominent locals during a recent facebook discussion and have been suggesting the same idea via this publication for more than 20 years. The silence remains deafening.

So where? Where do we get the oil to keep Moab and the rest of the country rolling? Clearly, nobody wants to live with less. It’s not an idea that’s even remotely considered by politicians or their constituents or even mainstream environmentalists. Long term threats like climate change fall away when it means making a sacrifice or living with less.

But are there places to exploit oil we can all agree on? While advocates of fracking (Where are you, Hal?!) loathe the film and believe its message is seriously distorted, the documentary ‘Gasland’ has raised alarms for many people across the country about the health hazards generated by

the hydraulic fracturing process. Critics insist that stories of water faucets catching fire and shooting blue flames across the kitchen are rare. And they may be right. But no one has conclusively proven that water contamination is an impossibility and more evidence is being gathered to suggest that the threat is real.

And EPA data shows that not only is aquifer contamination a real threat, air quality degradation from thousands and thousands of venting condensate tanks is a major concern too, especially when those tanks are concentrated near urban areas. Urbanites will not accept the idea of a harmonious relationship with large-scale fracking next to the neighborhood school.

So where? For much of the year we’ve been living in a very small town on the western Great Plains. The economy here is depressed—our town once boasted 2500 residents; now we barely muster 700—and what economy does survive has been based on agriculture, mostly wheat, milo and cattle.

But the fracking boom came here two years ago and now farmers compete for the one commodity they and the oil companies both need—water. They fear contamination of the water table but more than that, they fear being unable to compete financially for the water. Some, seeing the writing on the wall, have stopped farming and resorted to selling some of their water to the frackers as the only means left to stay afloat financially, at least for now. But here is where the country grows much of its food. Are Americans willing to put at risk the bread basket of the nation to protect their special interests? Should we resort to getting ALL our food from other countries?

So...WHERE do we get our oil? Most of the same people who promote tourism also oppose the Keystone pipeline. And again, the oft repeated irony raises its ugly head. Most environmentalists oppose extraction and speak endlessly of resource degradation and the dangers of climate change and fears that the end of life on this planet as we know it is near. They seek some comfort in deluding themselves with the myth that if we just build enough wind and solar farms and utilize reusable grocery bags that we can restore the life and vitality—and longevity—of the planet and we can keep on consuming as we always have. And recreating. And promoting the endless growth of things like tourism.

It’s a delusion, of course, if not a lie. But no one’s willing to confess to it, at least not in the immediate future.

One of the most basic of economic concepts is the law of ‘supply and demand.’ As demand rises and supplies fall, the price goes up. Conversely, as demand falls and supplies increase, the price drops. If we really reduced our consumption and didn’t get seduced by the lower price, we could change the world. But we won’t. Show me one self-proclaimed environmentalist, of modest means and bills to pay (including me), who doesn’t instinctively jump for joy when the price of gas drops a dime. It’s not going to happen.

So...we can all complain about the world and insist we’re trying to save it, but more often than not, we wage battles on our own behalf. Kiley hates seeing those drill rigs and worries about her water, and Moabites fret that more oil development will mean declining tourist dollars, and environmentalists complain because they get paid to, and I complain because we get sick of the oil companies tearing up the back roads and increasing local traffic. None of us really wants to do anything dramatic...something that might really turn the world around. Many of us think it’s too late for that anyway.

But that won’t stop us from continuing to delude ourselves or going to rallies dressed as forest creatures, or signing online petitions, or ‘liking’ facebook pages that echo our “cause,” or sending twenty bucks to our favorite “green” group, or buying a Prius and a stash of reusable Kroger bags.

Who was it that once said, “If it feels good, do it?” We like to SAY it, even if we never really DO it...and it always makes us “feel” so much better.

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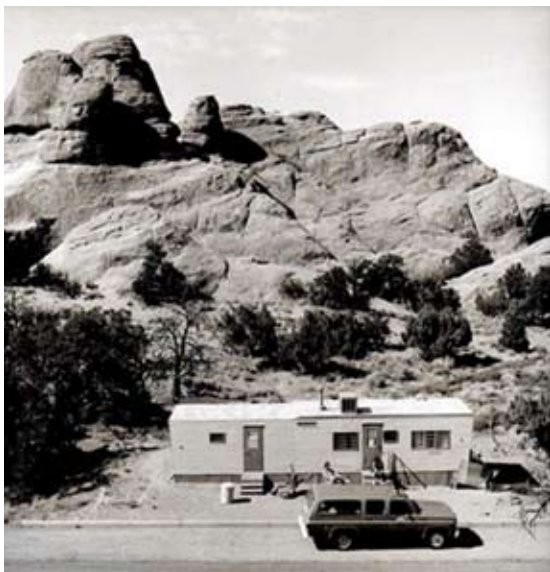
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**MY FAVORITE TOURISTS...#2
Charles Pipes, site 40A &
the Devils Garden Campground**

When I was a seasonal ranger, I lived at the Devils Garden Campground at Arches National Park for a full decade. Some people thought I'd never leave; even I wondered if I'd ever get out of there alive. I worried that the tourists might drive me insane and it's true I could get a bit surly with them from time to time. Over the years, I acquired something of a reputation.



Charles Pipes, at first glance, was an improbable camper. He was a librarian from Elkin, North Carolina and looked like one.

But looking back, I realize how many dear friends I made during my Arches era---friendships that would last to this day. Just recently, I called up my old pal Ken Curtis, a former battalion commander with the Salt Lake City fire department. For years, he and many of his colleagues, and their families, would descend on Arches for Easter Week. Jeep Safari might have been a tradition for some Moabites. For me it was the firefighters. Ken's now in his late 80s; Rubi his wonderful wife of more than 50 years, passed away almost a decade ago, but Ken and many of his pals are still going strong.

At Arches, each month brought familiar faces, returnees from previous seasons. Doc and George Bell, two brothers and self-proclaimed "geezers" from Missouri, made their annual trek in August when it was the hottest. Doc was over 80, George in his mid-70s. They'd set out each morning and head into the desert, traveling off trail, cross-country with a grocery bag for a pack and a mayonaise jar for a canteen (now known as a hydrating system).

They'd come limping back at dusk. Doc, stooped over and in apparent pain, would moan, "George is killing me Jim...he's walking me to death!" Then he'd give me a wink and head back to their tent. The next day they'd get up and do it again.

But every May, I'd keep an eye out for site 40. I knew Mr. Pipes was on the way.

Charles Pipes, at first glance, was an improbable camper. He was a librarian from Elkin, North Carolina and looked like one. Short and a bit frail, with thick, wire-rimmed glasses, and only in his early 50s when we met, Charles spoke with a soft but pronounced Southern accent that was a pleasure to hear. He was a true Southern gentleman, in every sense of the word.

I first met him one night in site 40, at the far end of the campground. It was his favorite campsite, maybe his favorite place on Earth, and each year he managed to snare the same location, even if he had to wait a night for it to open. He had been coming to Arches for years before I arrived, but he was delighted to find a ranger who took an interest in his Arches Obsession.

He told me that his wife Wanda had accompanied him once---just once---to Utah. But she failed to see the attraction. She told Charles it was too hot, too dry and too far away and she had no interest in returning. But she saw the look in his eyes and understood how important this was to

him, so she urged Charles to make the return, even if she stayed home.

He came back again and again. Charles said he'd start getting the urge in the early spring. Wanda would hear him downstairs, rummaging through his camping gear, checking his sleeping bag and tent and cook stove. Just thinking about Arches kept him going. Finally Wanda would say, "Is it that time, Charles?" And he'd nod and begin to load up the trunk of the Buick.

He'd set up his camp chair in the shade of a mighty pinyon, pour himself a Scotch and sit quietly, absorbing the sight and the light and the sounds of the desert. Every year, a pair of Western Kingbirds built a nest near his camp and he watched for hours, absolutely enthralled. He loved the way the small birds fought off a couple of persistent ravens who kept trying to get at their nest. Not only did the Kingbirds manage to drive off their much larger cousins, they'd fly just above them and peck the ravens in the back of their heads as they flapped furiously to escape. He was one to root for the little guy. He loved it all.

He had one vice and he knew it. Charles was a chronic chain smoker, addicted worse than any man I have ever known. He lit one cigarette with the embers of the last and kept it up from breakfast to bedtime. He looked quite elegant with his Scotch and his smokes and his casual Southern manners, but the smoking took an awful toll. At 50, he already suffered from emphysema and even the shortest of hikes, especially at an elevation of over 5000 feet, left him breathless. And so, over the years, I would tell him of my wanderings and explorations at the park and, when possible, bring him photographs.

One place, in particular, caught his interest. An archaeological site in the Devils Garden became almost an obsession with him. Someday, he insisted, he would make the hike and see these great petroglyphs for himself.

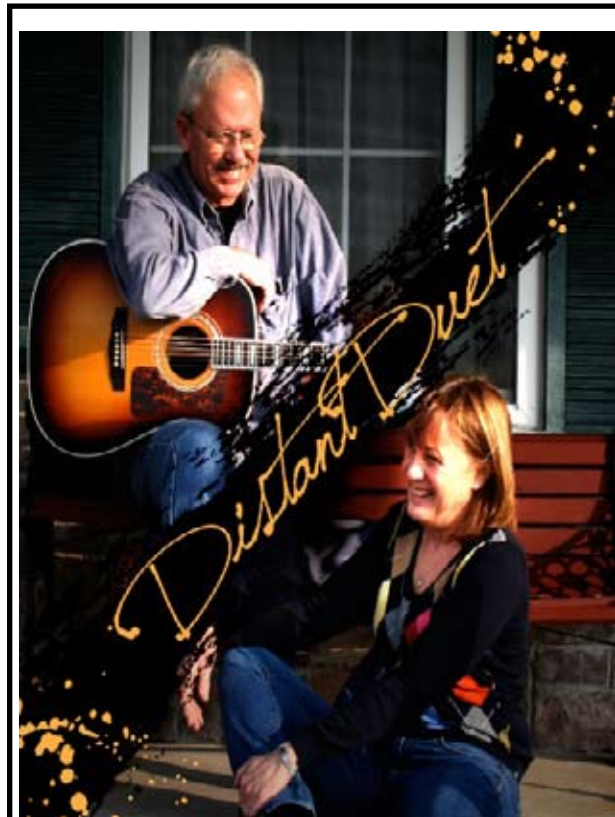
One morning in late May, toward the end of his latest visit, Charles was feeling especially energetic and announced he was ready to visit the rock art site. I was skeptical but he insisted, so we loaded our packs and hit the trail. It was an ordeal for him---the two mile walk took us all day but the absolute triumph and unbridled joy on his face when we reached our destination made it all worthwhile. For both of us.

But the hike took its toll, he felt awful that night and when he broke camp and prepared to head back home to Elkin, I worried that I'd never see him again. I never did.

The next winter Charles' health began to decline. He suffered from congestive heart failure and found just breathing a chore. And yet, even then, with my old friend in a hospital bed, with an oxygen cannula trying to fill his lungs, Charles still managed to slip a pack of Marlboros into his room. Lighting a cigarette in an ICU unit with an oxygen tube running into his nose. It was amazing he didn't blow himself up.

Charles died a few months later. It was his wish that his ashes be returned to Arches, to the site of the petroglyphs he worked so hard to see with his own eyes. His friend Ed McLaughlin came West the next summer and together we made the hike and scattered Charles along the remarkable wall of thousand year old carved images.

Nowadays, I think of that long hike and his happiness and relief when we reached our goal, I think of his ashes still blowing and scattering, out there somewhere in the sand and the sage. But mostly, I think of the image of Charles, blissed out in his camp chair, drink in hand, smoke dangling from the corner of his mouth, smiling contentedly and saying, "What a lovely evening, Ranger Stiles...Can I offer you a drink?"



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Language... has created the word "loneliness" to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word "solitude" to express the glory of being alone.

~Paul Johannes Tillich