



cczephyr@gmail.com

**‘SUSTAINABLE’ MOAB---  
A Reality Check**

Among many Moabites who instinctively label themselves, “progressive environmentalists,” their collective vision for a better future in Southeast Utah is frequently and inextricably linked to one word--- it’s almost a rallying point:

‘Sustainability.’

I see the word enthusiastically bandied about and with great confidence. Several environmental organizations embrace the idea of a sustainable future for Moab and believe the path to sustainability is within their grasp.

One group wants to “build a sustainable community and teach others how to do it.” It states, “We build energy-efficient housing, provide education on sustainability, and improve the housing conditions of the workforce through an affordable program.”

Another non-profit, “is dedicated to facilitating an open-minded, non-partisan discussion about sustainability in Moab and Grand County Utah, and across the larger southwest region.”

The Chamber of Commerce points out that their, “primary purpose...is to ensure economic success and sustainability for your business and improved quality of life for our community.”

The City of Moab gets in the act as well with its “Green Power in Moab” program and claims the community is, “a leader in sustainable energy.”

Moab even had its own “Sustainability Festival.”

But how does Moab become the sustainable community that so many of its residents trumpet and how do they aspire to achieve that goal?

**REALITY CHECK**

A recent evaluation of Moab and Grand County’s economy by county councilman Chris Baird is revealing. He looked at the area’s two major economic drivers---Mineral Development and Tourism.---and he could not have been more optimistic

Baird told the *Times-Independent*, “In 2014, we literally quadrupled oil production from the previous high in 1993. So we’re doing very well in terms of that particular industrial expansion. And recreation, at the exact same time, has been growing 10, 15, 20 percent a year, so we’ve been very successful. We’ve done what we wanted. You can plan these things out and have your cake and eat it too.”

That’s stunning growth, for sure, and as he notes, it’s



growth that has been “planned.” But does Baird’s enthusiastic description of the community’s booming economy sound sustainable to anyone? How does a community manage that kind of growth and convince itself it’s ‘sustainable?’

Baird explained, “Careful planning does require that both the recreation industry and the oil and gas industry

must both make concessions. However, it seems that the concessions that we want from the oil and gas industry are being perceived as all-out opposition to the extraction economy...The reality is that careful planning has enabled record growth in both industries.” (emphasis added)

Can “record growth in both industries,” as a consequence of “careful planning” lead to a sustainable economy in Grand County? Is that a “reality” to boast about?

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**SEEKING ‘SUSTAINABILITY’...  
CONTROLLING MINERAL DEVELOPMENT...**

Efforts by the environmental community to extract “concessions” for the growth of the energy industry in Grand County were rewarded recently when the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released its Moab Master Leasing Plan (MLP), a “guiding document” for the management and development of 785,000 acres of BLM-adminis-

tered lands in Grand County over the next 15 years.

The BLM plan offered several implementation alternatives for public review and discussion. Recently the Grand County Council, on a close 4-3 vote, supported “Alternative D.” Under this option, energy development would continue in Grand County, but with some restrictions. It would prohibit extractive industries in locations with “high scenic quality, some high-use recreation areas, specially designated areas, and in other areas with sensitive resources.”

Previously, Ashley Korenblat, of Public Lands Solutions, told the Moab Sun News, “We want to prohibit some resource extraction. Recreation provides long-term sustainable jobs so we don’t want to accidentally wreck it by allowing resource extraction to proceed on unequal footing...We don’t want to kill the goose that is laying the golden egg.”



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For Korenblat and the environmental community, implementation of Alternative D will constitute a significant victory for those seeking to protect Grand County’s scenic lands from energy exploitation.

**SEEKING ‘SUSTAINABILITY’...  
CONTROLLING TOURISM/RECREATION?**

But what about the other part of the economy---the “Golden Egg” as Korenblat calls it. How does the environmental community plan to make tourism and recreation “sustainable” as well?

Councilman Baird speaks highly of “10, 15, 20 per cent” growth in tourism. Is that sustainable? Does anyone remember Moab’s very recent past?

Last summer, national parks across the American West, and the gateway communities that benefit economically from them, saw jaw-dropping increases in visitation. No one in Moab can forget last Memorial Day Weekend, when Arches National Park closed its entrance for the first time in its almost 100 year history, because it was “FULL.” Gridlock in Moab itself was staggering, with bumper-to-bumper traffic extending for miles. Moab was overwhelmed.

But it didn’t just happen in Moab.

In September, the Associated Press reported shocking increases in visitation at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, but it noted, “The crowds haven’t just been coming to the Grand Canyon, where a sign ahead of the entrance gates warns of limited parking. The throngs of tourists have been showing up in big numbers at other national parks, including Yellowstone in Wyoming, Yosemite in California and Zion in Utah, driven by good weather, cheaper gas and marketing campaigns ahead of next year’s National Park Service centennial.”

*High Country News* and Eric Trenbreath described the debacle at Arches: “At the Devils Garden trailhead, 300 cars were wedged into 190 spaces, and on the road to Delicate Arch, the state of Utah’s unofficial symbol, parked cars lined both sides of the road for half a mile leading up

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**cczephyr@gmail.com**

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to the parking area.”

In the HCN article, Canyonlands National Park superintendent Kate Cannon warned, “This is not the experience people expect, nor the experience we want to provide.”

At Zion National Park, Superintendent Jerry Brady-baugh told HCN that record-breaking crowds were straining the Park Service staff and infrastructure to the limit. “This is not a sustainable situation,” Bradybaugh said.

And yet, in Moab and Grand County and, indeed, throughout Southeast Utah, one would be hard pressed to detect ANY expressed concerns from the environmental/progressives about the explosive growth of recreation and tourism, or the impacts that come with them. And certainly there has been no real action.

In fact, it appears they don't believe a problem exists at all. In a recent “2015 Members/Supporters Survey,” the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Utah's flagship environmental organization, wrote to its members, “Your support and advocacy is crucial to our success in protecting the redrock, so please take a few minutes to give us your feedback.” The first question defined the scope of the group's concerns when it asked:

“Which threats to the Red Rock worry you the most?”

Participants were given four options:

- a) Utah's Land Grab
- b) Mining & Drilling
- c) Off Road vehicle Abuse
- d) Road Proliferation (RS 2477)

Those were the *only* options made available to the participants. While “Off Road Vehicle Abuse” is a valid concern that represents a part of the recreation and tourism industry, it in no way includes the vast, even startling impacts that we are witnessing across the West in 2015.

**What happened last summer--- staggering crowds and out of control recreation... from Moab to St. George---did not warrant even a single line of “worry” from the SUWA architects who devised the survey. For them, it just wasn't a problem.**

What happened last summer--- staggering crowds and out of control recreation, in park after park, on public lands across the magnificent canyon country, from Moab to St. George---did not warrant even a single line of “worry” from the SUWA architects who devised the survey. For them, it just wasn't a problem.

**TOURISM/RECREATION CONCERNS--- THEN & NOW**

It wasn't always like this with SUWA or their kindred spirits at the Grand Canyon Trust (GCT). Bill Hedden is the current executive director of the GCT and an active SUWA board member. In 1998, seventeen years ago, Hedden wrote:



“Throughout the region...visitation has grown by more than 400 percent since 1980. This surge of interest has coincided with a proliferation of new recreation technologies—some exotic like modern ATVs, hum-

vees, mountain bikes, climbing gear, jet skis and hanggliders; and others prosaic like water filters, sunscreen and dry suits. Armed with these new toys, today's legions of visitors can exploit every niche in familiar areas and enter terrain that previously was protected by remoteness...And though it is common to blame the destruction on a small percentage of lawless visitors, my experience brings to mind the old joke that a mere 99 percent of users give a bad name to all the rest. Make no mistake—we are in this together.

“...Everywhere we looked, natural resource professionals agreed that industrial-strength recreation holds more

potential to disrupt natural processes on a broad scale than just about anything else. It's a very tough problem affecting all of us.”

SUWA's executive director, Scott Groene, expressed similar alarm when he was a regular Zephyr columnist and SUWA's attorney in Moab. In the December 1993 issue, Scott would offer his own views when he wrote:

“Abiogenesis (the natural process by which life arose from non-living matter such as simple organic compounds) does not cause Moab tourism. People are drawn here by advertising, guidebooks, and publicity created through travel films, newspaper features, outdoor magazines and the like. And because of the large numbers of people being drawn to the Moab area, frequently, and justifiably, federal land managers now lament the damage being done by too many recreationists. Recreation is like any other public land use: too much in the wrong place can be bad”

Groene's concern was about a film permit that the BLM had granted to National Geographic for a segment of its “Explorer” TV series, “including rafting in Westwater Canyon, climbing, hot air ballooning, a visit to an archaeological site, and a horseback ride; the Moab travel council could not hope for more.” SUWA wrote to the BLM questioning whether the show, “will draw more visitors than the land can handle.”

He concluded, “The BLM will continue to wring its hands about overuse by recreationists. But unless managers get the spine to say no to the causes of too many users, agency staff will get stuck treating the symptoms.”

I cannot overstate how gratifying it was to have Scott Groene as an ally in those early days. We both shared a blinder-free view of the West and the impacts that could diminish it, whether the damage came from an oil rig, a jeep or a bike. Or too many motels and second homes. Scott's denunciation of the National Geographic program proved his willingness to see all sides of an issue, even the ‘motorized’ vs ‘non-motorized’ component of the tourism debate.

In 1994, *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported on the growing number of backcountry/wilderness guidebooks being sold and the way different Utah environmental groups were dealing with them. “Within conservation groups,” the *Tribune* reported, “where-to-go journalism has become a contentious issue. While organizations like the Sierra Club sell trail guides, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance will not endorse any guidebook. The decision apparently came after a SUWA official allowed his accolades to be printed on the back of a guidebook. The book revealed details of several little-known hiking destinations in Utah's San Rafael Swell.”

According to the story, Groene explained, “We have not actually come out yet and started burning guidebooks, but given our goals of trying to protect the land, we felt we had to adopt this policy to be consistent in our position.” That said it all and should be as true now as it was 20 years ago. And it's worth repeating, in BOLD type...

**“...Given our goals of trying to protect the land, we felt we had to adopt this policy to be consistent in our position.”**

Groene's concern for the recreational exploitation of wilderness even extended to *OUTSIDE Magazine*. In the *Zephyr*, Groene wrote, “I quit buying *Outside* magazine a long time ago, when it transformed into little more than a plug for the over-consumption of expensive and unnecessary gear and silly ‘gonzo’ activities. I do still read it, standing at the newsstand, to learn which ‘secret’ places have been doomed by irresponsible publicity (unfortunately, southern Utah sites are frequently targeted). Some federal agency staff have also commented about the



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magazine's practice of ‘Outsiding’ little known places.”

**‘BACK TO THE FUTURE’...OF 2016**

But all that has changed...

Years later, SUWA withdrew its opposition to guidebooks and, in fact, engaged one of Utah's most prolific guidebook authors, Steve Allen, to represent SUWA on a series of promotional cross-country tours. Concerns about media coverage of over-promoting sensitive environmental gems faded.

On its facebook page, SUWA posted this for its followers:

“National Parks Traveler picks Natural Bridges National Monument as the #1 most interesting and overlooked national park unit in the country. What do you think? What hidden gems managed by the National Park Service do you think are overlooked?”



Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

National Parks Traveler picks Natural Bridges National Monument (which is part of the Greater Canyonlands National Monument proposal -- learn more at Protect Greater Canyonlands) as the #1 most interesting and overlooked national park unit in the country. What do you think? What hidden gems managed by the National Park Service do you think are overlooked? <http://bit.ly/L6Rqf5>



National Parks | National Parks Traveler

www.nationalparkstraveler.com  
It very likely is true that one person's overlooked national park is another's jewel.

View Post January 28 at 2:33pm

Susan Laffer and 154 others like this.

Top Comments -

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SUWA encouraged its followers to provide their favorite “hidden gems.” Many did.

Last year, the Wilderness Society (TWS), in true *Outside Magazine* fashion, posted an article called: “America's Best Kept Secrets---20 Unique National Parks,” including Utah's Capitol Reef NP. TWS boasted, “Camping, hiking, backpacking, rock climbing, biking, horseback riding and scenic drives offer visitors all sorts of outdoor play,” at Capitol Reef.

This time, the “best kept secrets” list didn't ruffle a feather and the link was posted on numerous “green” sites. Even the noted author and environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams linked the Wilderness Society's promo-



Terry Tempest Williams

July 2 at 10:18pm  
America&#amp;#039;s best kept secrets: 20 unique national parks wilderness <https://t.co/gSiMw4cGhz> via @sharethis #findyourpark



America's best kept secrets: 20 unique national parks

America is blessed with a national park system that protects some of our most beautiful and unique landscapes. Our national parks are treasures for people of all ages. More than that, the national parks contribute greatly to the economic...

SHARES

**Even the noted author and environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams linked the Wilderness Society's promotion on her public facebook page. Comments from her followers were almost entirely favorable.**

tion on her public facebook page. Comments from her followers were almost entirely favorable.

Opposition to tourism/recreation impacts by mainstream greens has slowed to a trickle. Indeed, some of the environmental community's biggest supporters and most lucrative contributors come from the Outdoor Industry Alliance. Peter Metcalf, the CEO of Black Diamond, a