

MOAB IS ASSIMILATED...BIKE BORG MOVES SOUTH

Is Resistance Futile in San Juan County?

Jim Stiles

PREFACE: This is a story about Change...about the transformation of a small part of the American Southwest. It's about what happened to my old home town of Moab and what may happen next, just 55 miles south.

Some say that 'the Future has not been written.' I hope that's true...JS

BORG (n) : a cybernetically-enhanced race which forcibly assimilates other sentient species into its structure and hive-mind.

It was never really about the bicycle. The contraption was merely a conveyance, a delivery system for a culture and a mind set and an industry that, even twenty years ago, was inevitable. The sport of mountain biking appeared in Moab in the mid-1980s.

Within a decade, the amenities/tourist demographic had established a death grip on my old home-town. We had once been an eclectic mix of miners, ranchers, small-town businesses, government staffers and young hippie/back-to-the-earth types; now we found ourselves in a state of rapid transformation—of upheaval.

Suddenly it was as if those of us who had lived there no longer had a say in our own future. Out-of-town investors with the assets and capital to exploit Moab's new moniker as "Mountain Bike Capital of the World" laid claim to its future. Like a Borg... for lack of a better word, a Bike Borg...opposing "the hive" was not an option.

Some of us resisted, though our own contradictions marginalized our effectiveness. I had started *The Zephyr* in 1989 and, though I made a real effort to present 'both sides' of any argument on environmental or economic issues, my loyalties still resided with mainstream liberal environmentalists, who I believed were dedicated to preservation and protection of this remarkable canyon country landscape for the most honorable of reasons.



I further marginalized my own publication when I continued to oppose the Bike Borg. Advertisers fled. New Moab businesses, with no interest in 'saving' a town that had no meaning to them before they arrived, held my opposition in dubious regard. And of course, what new tourist business would want to advertise in a newspaper that didn't want them to come in the first place? I could hardly fault them.

Realizing I could no longer reside there, I fled with *The Zephyr* to Monticello and for the next decade ran my little rag from the laundry room of my home. Monticello is a small monolithic Mormon town with a disdain for Moab and all things 'touristy.' Their mantra is "We don't want to be the next Moab." So it seemed like a good place to hide out. I thought I was safe there. And in most regards it's still a far cry from the madhouse up the road.

But it's only 55 miles. And it's December 2013... The Bike Borg is watching. IT's coming.

San Juan County has never been a bubbling bastion of enthusiasm for tourism, the recreation industry or any business attached to the legal designation of wilderness. Its hostility toward non-motorized activities like backpacking is almost legendary. It has exhibited an almost pathological loathing of environmentalists and wilderness groups like SUWA.

I still recall a cartoon that the now defunct Elk Ridge Café in Blanding once proudly displayed by its cash register. It depicted a group of cowboys on the phone to a green group in Salt Lake who was, even 25 years ago, pushing for a wilderness bill.

"Sure," the cartoon caption read, "Come on down. We'd love to talk." Each of the cowboys was holding a

rope fashioned in a hangman's noose.

Decades later, anti-wilderness sentiment still burns strongly. Even scaled down proposals for congressionally mandated wilderness designation meet stiff resistance. Few in San Juan County want any wilderness at all. The more

San Juan County has never been a bubbling bastion of enthusiasm for tourism, the recreation industry or any business attached to the legal designation of wilderness. Its hostility toward non-motorized activities like backpacking is almost legendary. It has exhibited an almost pathological loathing of environmentalists and wilderness groups like SUWA.

READ 'NEW WEST BLUES' FROM 1993: <http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/stiles-stories/newwestblues.htm>

By the mid 1990s, I began to have doubts. As the 'green' movement made great concessions to the tourist and recreation industry and embraced and promoted the economic advantages of wilderness designation, the dramatic impacts of a recreation economy became unmistakably obvious. Environmentalism, in fact, became an industry unto itself, with huge budgets, even among the 'grass roots' groups like SUWA and the Grand Canyon Trust. Some of the richest industrialist/financier/capitalists threw their resources and expertise (and their votes as board members) into these organizations. By 2001, it was all over but the shooting. Resistance to an overwhelming, one trick pony economy was futile.

pragmatic among them, including some of its more prominent politicians, believe some kind of compromise is inevitable. Others are practically ready to wage war on the federal government. Literally. The fear among most San Juan County residents is that the passage of wilderness legislation and the associated application of restrictions will further limit open access to public lands.

For me, the fight for wilderness has always been a moral and ethical issue. If setting aside the last remnants of God's creations was meant to be a selfless act to save those lands from human intrusions--if our real goal was to say, 'Let's leave some of this beauty ALONE—for its own sake, NOT for ours,'-- then anti-wilderness people and I would be worthy adversaries. I have no problem defending the idea of protecting the rocks, the trees, the critters and the blue skies above, with no expectation of personal gratification.

Some might think that's a foolish and wrongheaded and impractical folly. They associate open access to public lands with the unshakable belief that to block access is a fundamental challenge to personal freedoms and a denial of the liberties set forth in the Constitution. And they see it as a massive intrusion of the federal government.

But protecting these kinds of lands from further exploitation, for ANY purpose, be it energy extraction or industrial tourism, is evidence that we humans can make sacrifices for the good of the planet. That we can still make gestures that are not self-serving and that we can "do good things" with no regard for enhancing the size of our wallets, the balance in our checkbooks, or quenching our insatiable thirst for more 'stuff' via its commodification and sale. It tells us we can be noble altruists in the purest sense of the word.

Or consider this take on wilderness, from a source usually loathed by the anti-wilderness crowd. 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 guerrilla 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."

In the last days of 2013, those kinds of honorable and noble reasons for protecting what remains of America's wildlands are lost in the rush to turn every facet of the land into an industry—a money machine. Environmentalists condemn the "extractive industries"—mining, ranching, logging, energy exploration—and devote their energies to stopping the damage such industries inflict. Yet, they scarcely acknowledge the most destructive industry of all. Words like "reverence" and "silence" and "solitude" are lost from the 'green' lexicon. Wilderness is now exploited for profit as surely as it were gold and silver. Somehow extracting the very heart and soul of the land itself meets little resistance from the same people who once admired and respected the likes of Wallace Stegner and Wendell Berry and Ed Abbey and John Muir.

They will laugh and make the argument, "Surely you're not saying a bicycle is as destructive than a bulldozer!" Well..not exactly. A tourist's direct imprint, no matter what the conveyance, is not nearly as impacting as a CAT D-9. Where they fail to connect the dots and fail Reality itself is the fact that the tourist/amenities economy requires the massive consumption of natural resources and energy to even exist. It requires an exodus of people from urban areas to small remote towns. It demands, in fact, the urbanization of the rural west. This is environmentalists' Achilles Heel.

It was, after all, the Grand Canyon Trust's Bill Hedden who once proclaimed, "Industrial-strength recreation holds more potential to disrupt natural processes on a broad scale than just about anything else." Twenty years later, Hedden and the Trust and other "green" groups seldom talk about the recreation menace. Now, turning wilderness into a cash cow is a favored strategy, not a shameless exploitation.

Wilderness pays...it pays BIG. With Grand County safely in their pocket, the next big market, the next big product to be pitched and packaged and sold is San Juan County. The power brokers, the green bullshit artists, are already on the move. And they know the buzzwords to use. Those key phrases begin and end with dollar signs. And while rural Westerners worry about reduced access to public lands, or whether their favorite jeep trail is about to be closed,

the most potent and irreversible threat to their very existence is knocking at the backdoor. It's the loss of the rural values that most residents of San Juan County cherish, and the creation of an urban population center that bears little resemblance to the place you call home today. Already, the Borg has a secure toehold and few if any seem to realize it. A toe today. Your soul tomorrow.

Ashley Korenblat's Dream Scheme...

NOTE: In this section of the story we frequently quote Ms. Ashley Korenblat of the 'Utah Outdoor Business Network' during a presentation to the San Juan County Commission on June 10, 2013. We transcribed verbatim an audio recording of that meeting and provide several direct quotes here. The complete audio can be heard at:

<http://www.sanjuancounty.org/archives/Commission%20Audio/20130610.mp3>

In some ways, conservative Westerners are their own worst enemies. They have always been torn by two very conflicting, incompatible philosophies. On the one hand, Old Westerners, especially in Utah, have resented us 'newcomers.' They have never wanted our advice or felt they needed it. We are as alien to them as a Martian landing on the White House lawn.

"We don't need you to tell us how to manage our lands." It's a refrain repeated again and again. You'd think nothing could shake that resolve. But something can. Those same independent Westerners, who loathe the sight of an Outsider are simultaneously dyed-in-the-wool capitalists right up to their eyeballs. They never see a money-making project they don't like. They cannot

resist a good deal and, too often, it's the short-term profit that blinds them to the bigger picture.

San Juan County has danced around the edges of a tourist economy for years. Twenty-five years ago, I would never have dreamed that someday Blanding, Utah would call itself, "Your Base Camp to Adventure" and stick that logo on their "Welcome to Blanding" road signs. I wonder what the late Cal Black might think of that. Still the changes are in their infancy. A few shops have popped up here and there, eager to embrace the Borg. But for the most part, San Juan County has held its enthusiasm for a full-blown tourist/amenities economy in check.

In 2014, the "green business community" of Southeast Utah, with headquarters firmly rooted in the Moab success story---the people I call "enviropreneurs"---are ready to sell San Juan County a bill of goods that, if successful, will leave today's San Juan County residents as bewildered in 20 years as Moab's residents of 1993 are now. It can happen fast. Faster than you can imagine. The refrain in Monticello today is, "We don't want to be another Moab." Someday you could be asking, "How did we become Moab?" It's not as unimaginable as you might think.

**Wilderness pays...it pays BIG.
With Grand County safely in their pocket, the next big market, the next big product to be pitched and packaged and sold is San Juan County. The power brokers, the green bullshit artists, are already on the move. And they know the buzzwords to use. Those key phrases begin and end with dollar signs.**

Last summer, representatives from an organization called the Utah Outdoor Business Network (UOBN) appeared before the San Juan County Commission to make their case for a dramatically expanded tourist economy and to discuss a letter they had sent to Congressmen Bishop about wilderness designation in eastern Utah. Ashley Korenblat, Jason Keith, Vaughn Hadenfield and Jeff Barrett, all enthusiastic recreation boosters with decades-long vested roots in tourism, shared their unbridled enthusiasm.

Korenblat, the chief spokesperson, made a pitch to those capitalist instincts when she told the commissioners, "...one thing that I want to make clear is that we're not the conservation community...Our viewpoint, our interest, really derives from recreation and the businesses associated with that right now. We may share some interests with the conservation community on conservation in certain areas. But we just want to make sure it's clear that we are coming from our own specific position and the businesses that signed on to this letter really are...um, their interest is economic."

She added, "All we're doing right now is trying to stake a claim, or at least articulate the places that matter to outdoor recreation.....a reflection of their interest in optimizing the landscape and trying to protect the assets that these businesses rely on."

Korenblat offered examples of ways San Juan County is missing out on tourism dollars. She noted:

"When recreation is not managed, and it kind of happens haphazardly and evolves over time, you end up with issues like the fact that Indian Creek (which)



"...we just want to make sure it's clear that we are coming from our own specific position and the businesses that signed on to this letter really are... um, their interest is economic."

Ashley Korenblat

is a world class climbing area, but the way it works, and the way people visit, there's nowhere for them to... they don't spend their money in San Juan County. They either load up their car in Colorado or... And this is same way with motorized recreation and lots of other types of recreation, where the people are relatively independent. The question becomes, if San Juan County starts to move in the direction of developing the recreation economy here, that's one of the things that needs to be addressed is you want to make sure that the recreation assets are placed in such a way."

next page...