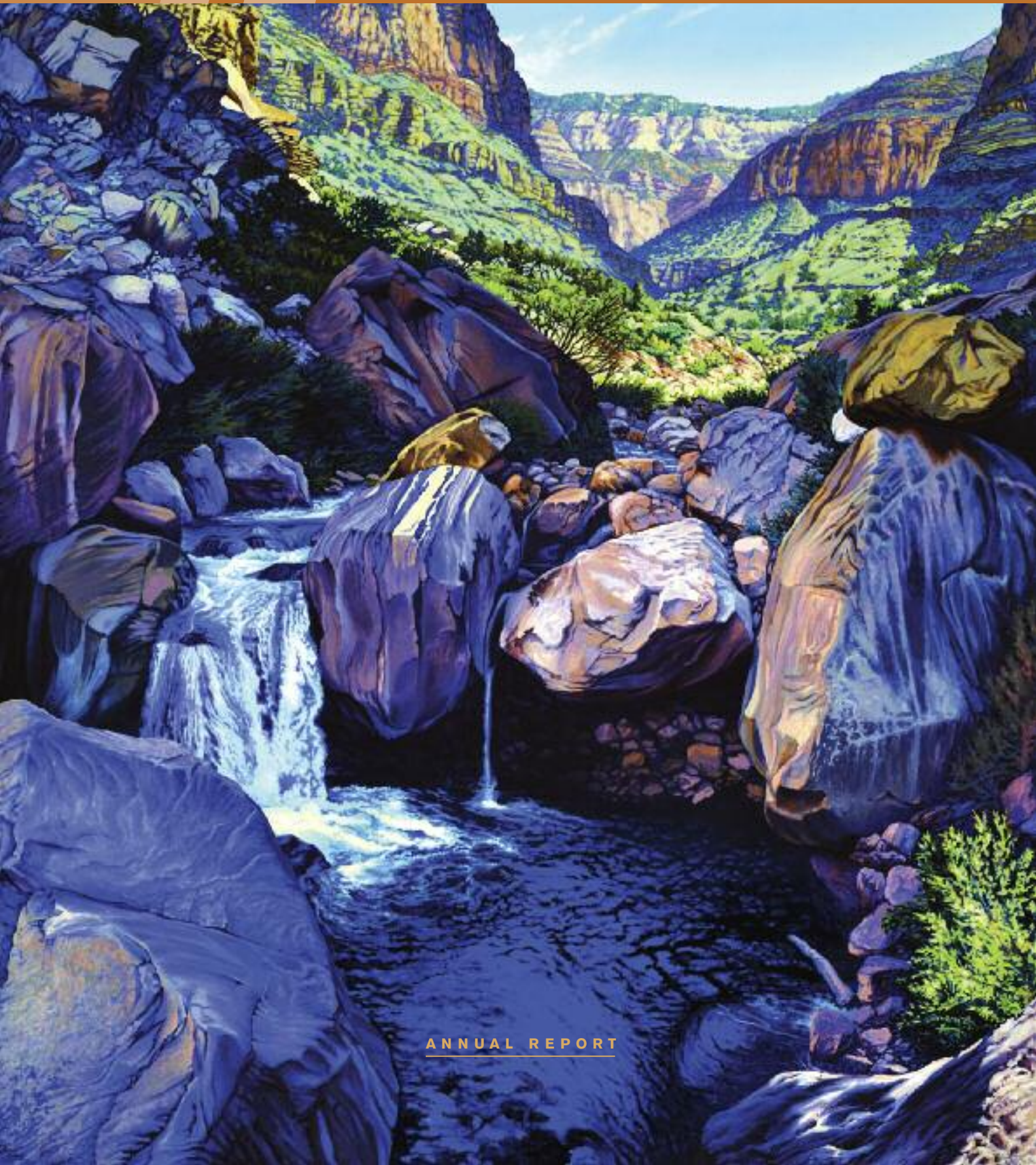


COLORADO
PLATEAU

SUMMER/FALL 2008

Advocate

GRAND CANYON TRUST



ANNUAL REPORT

HYDROCARBON HEAVEN?

by Laura Kamala



This could be heaven or this could be hell for the Cisco area.

On a late spring field trip with David Smuin, the Trust’s watersheds manager, we noticed that the grey skies and fifty mile per hour winds choking the air with dust lent to the general ambience of doom out on the Cisco desert. New roads led in all directions to drill rigs, compressor stations, pipelines, and piles of oily junk. It was a stark contrast to the profusion of wildflowers carpeting a reputed barren landscape—cloud-white Cisco woody asters, sego and rosy mari-rosa lilies and crimson Indian paintbrush. Orange fields of globe mallow were just beginning to bloom on the low hills where white-tailed prairie dogs and pronghorn antelope live.

We then decided to drive by the new Danish Flats oil and gas wastewater disposal facility. Located only twenty miles northeast of Arches National Park, it’s an area described by Danish Flats chief operating officer Jim Bradish as “...not located close to anything, there are no neighboring homes or residences or farms or ranches or anything. It is totally by itself.” The facility

consists of eight, five-acre ponds and a two-acre sludge pit, and can accept 20,000 barrels of contaminated water a day.

I disagree with Grand County councilman Gene Ciarus, who heartily welcomed this project after it was rejected by savvy western Colorado residents. He claims there will be no environmental hazards to the county from 40 million gallons of water containing benzene, toluene, xylene, naphthalene, methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE), polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, and numerous other toxic volatile organic compounds (VOCs) evaporating into the regional airshed encompassing Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, Moab, Cisco, and several other communities. The company plans to increase the capacity of the facility to 100 million gallons of wastewater.

Oil and gas companies are *not* required to fully disclose the identity of all chemicals used in drilling and production or the quantity and concentration of those substances. Additionally, *no* baseline assessment of

water quality, VOCs or ozone levels before oil and gas development begins, nor any monitoring during operations is required by regulators. Recent studies by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources revealed high concentrations of methylmercury (a result of the region's many coal-fired power plants) in fish and waterfowl in Utah's lakes, reservoirs, and mountain streams. These findings indicate that airborne toxins, like those evaporating into the region's air from Danish Flats, can range long distances before being deposited on soils and in waterways. This is the kind of information that should be provided to all communities near such development.

When oil companies are being closely scrutinized, during the permitting process for example, they do their best to comply with agency regulations. However, this is a dirty business by nature and things happen that cannot be mitigated by regulation or managed by over-worked agency enforcers trying to cover the vast reaches of these altered lands. Unfortunately, Utah regulations are less stringent than Colorado, where citizens have been trying to convince the Colorado Oil and Gas Commission that even stricter regulation is needed to protect their health, welfare, and private property rights. Public meetings there are often packed with industry workers and officials attempting to override the voice of impacted citizens.

David, who once did hydrological consulting work in the industry, says, "sloppy operations routinely occur in the oilpatch." We saw evidence of this in a graveled staging area on BLM land where a 55 gallon plastic drum of oily liquid had been emptied on the ground next to its twin, which was still awaiting disposal. The BLM's hazardous material people had not responded in time to David's call a few weeks earlier reporting the presence of the two, partially-full barrels discovered on a previous field trip.

Evaporation pits are known to kill birds and other wildlife plunging into them. The Danish Flats company intends to cover their ponds with netting to discourage wildlife. On our last visit to the site in mid-May, the netting was not yet in place but a noisy propane gun was firing off regularly to scare intruders. The evaporation ponds are dangerously located at the head of Danish Flats Wash on private land that was



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purchased by the company from a rancher. In a worst case scenario, a catastrophic breach of the ponds would send millions of gallons of toxic waste seven miles downstream to the Colorado River.

In addition to the Danish Flats facility, there is an onrushing wave of industrial development proposed for southeast Utah. All are heavily polluting and require very large volumes of water to function. A new industrial park in Green River may one day house two, side-by-side nuclear power plants, a black wax crude and oil shale refinery, and a uranium mill in the town now famous for growing watermelons. On the periphery, Delta petroleum anticipates a full gas field development of up to 800 wells near the Crystal geyser and 430 new wells are now permitted within a 50 mile radius of the popular tourist town of Moab. Talk of reviving the nuclear power industry has inspired the staking of thousands of new uranium mining claims on public lands. The combined environmental effects of these proposals are hard to quantify, especially since various regulating agencies don't take into account cumulative impacts of multiple projects outside their jurisdiction. Consequently, there will not be an inclusive Environmental Impact Statement for these immense projects.

continued on page 29



continued from page 17 **BEAVERS**

Or do we want upland plants like rabbitbrush moving onto banks that once were “riparian areas” but are now isolated high, hot, and dry above incised creeks? Floods that erode creek beds and banks? Grandparent cottonwood and aspen trees with no parent or teenage cottonwood present? Eighteen-inch tall, gnawed stumps of ten-year old willows that should be eight feet tall? Creeks that dry up in August?

The Trust believes our nation deserves the former on southern Utah’s three national forests. But here’s the rub: Beaver engineers, like human engineers, need to eat to live. If beaver are going to eat, the forests’ riparian willow, cottonwood sprouts, and young aspen need to find relief from too many big game and live-stock mouths. If beaver colonies are going to survive, Utah’s current allowance for unlimited trapping of beaver must be modified.

Throughout 2008, the Trust is gathering field data and working on both these reforms with private landowners, the Three Forests Coalition, Tushar Allotments Collaboration (including livestock permittees), US Forest Service, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and, hopefully, you. 🐿

continued from page 19 **ESSENCE OF A MOUNTAIN**

towards implementing landscape-scale restoration across the Plateau, relationships built with partners will be critically important.

Finally, landscape-scale restoration will require substantial on-the-ground capacity. We have begun to build a critically important volunteer stewardship corps that will provide some of this capacity. So far, dedicated volunteers have provided tens of thousands of hours of time assisting with necessary research, monitoring, and on-the-ground project implementation—efforts that are vital as we work towards meeting landscape restoration goals across the Plateau.

In the Kaibab Plateau, Teddy Roosevelt once saw an iconic and invaluable landscape worthy of special protection—that of the Grand Canyon Game Preserve designated in 1906. Just over one hundred years later,

and with an eye to the coming century, it is time that we again clarify and voice our collective will. Without landscape-scale conservation and restoration-based forest management, the Kaibab Plateau will succumb to the effects of unnaturally severe fire, cheatgrass invasion, and a greatly imbalanced predator-prey system. With such management—supported by strong science, collaboration, and collective leadership—the Plateau will stand tall in the face of daunting ecological and management challenges.

The Kaibab Plateau has long provided sustenance and inspiration. Please work with us to give back to the Plateau. Visit www.gctvolunteers.org to learn more about opportunities for assisting in Kaibab Plateau volunteer projects. 🐿

continued from page 21 **HYDROCARBON HEAVEN**

We’re oil addicts. Here in the Paradox Basin we suck up carbonized algal slime from the Pennsylvanian geologic age like it’s our last drink of water before a long trek across the Arabian Desert. Oil is a finite resource and one day we’ll be down to our last drop. A 2005 study on peak oil by the Bush energy department stated, “Previous energy transitions (wood to coal and coal to oil) were gradual and evolutionary; oil peaking will be abrupt and revolutionary.” The same administration has encouraged a gold rush mind-set on developing our domestic reserves. Utah’s Senator Bennett has said, “If we are serious about reducing the price of gas at the pump we don’t do it by relying on more foreign oil; we do it by opening up our own capacities in an environmentally responsible manner without harming our public lands.” But the days of cheap oil are over and the price will continue climbing no matter where we acquire it. We pay an even heavier price for the long-term impacts to our air, water and public lands.

There’s nothing heavenly about the conditions in the new oil fields that are springing up and pressing in on all sides of southeast Utah’s spectacular canyon country. I’d call it hydrocarbon hell. 🐿