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Saving the Desert Southwest

By Tom Kenworthy
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Late last month, my wife and I took one of our semi-regular treks in the [Grand Canyon](#), a two-day, 23-mile hike from the North Rim down to the [Colorado River](#) and back up, to the South Rim. As always, it was a test of aging knees, a massage for the soul and a total immersion in geology and natural spectacle.

Even more than usual, it was a reminder of the sometimes erratic course of our collective stewardship of the red rock country of the desert Southwest.

Today we take protection of Grand Canyon National Park for granted. But a little more than a century ago, the canyon was being overrun by speculators filing mining claims, building toll roads and establishing other commercial enterprises. In a 1903 visit, President [Theodore Roosevelt](#) signaled his intention to protect the canyon as a national monument; he achieved the designation five years later. "Leave the Grand Canyon as it is," Roosevelt said. "You cannot improve upon it. What you can do is keep it for your children, your children's children, all who come after you."

If only the Bush administration would heed that advice and apply some of Roosevelt's wisdom to the landscapes north of the canyon in Utah. But as it prepares to leave office, the administration is working quickly to hand over much of southern Utah to the oil and gas industry and off-road-vehicle enthusiasts.

In less than two months this summer, the federal [Bureau of Land Management](#) released six new proposals for managing 11 million acres of public land in Utah. Under the plans, which will soon become final and will then govern activities on these lands for the next two decades, 80 percent of some of the Southwest's most spectacular treasures will be open to oil and gas development. Dirt-bike riders and all-terrain-vehicle drivers will have 17,000 miles of overland travel routes. Some 85 percent of roadless areas that the bureau itself acknowledges have great wilderness value will be sacrificed. A half-million acres protected as "areas of critical environmental concern" will lose that status.

Last month the Salt Lake Tribune editorialized: "The Bureau of Land Management under the Bush administration is trying to make a clean sweep of it before [President Bush](#) leaves office," favoring "all-terrain vehicles and energy development over wildlife, water, scenic beauty and archaeological treasures."

What the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance rightly calls a "legacy of [destruction](#)" is just the latest chapter of a decades-long fight to preserve this remote corner of America, a place where the Western writer Wallace Stegner said that "much of the wilderness is unique, unmatched in any part of the world."

Some of that history came back to me as we drove south of Moab toward the canyon. At the height of the Great Depression, Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes proposed to create a 4.5-million-acre national park stretching from the outskirts of Moab all the way south to the San Juan River and west to the Escalante River.

Ickes's audacious idea died in the arms of Utah politicians who preferred grazing, mining and other development. FDR saved a piece by creating Capitol Reef National Monument, now a national park. In 1964, Congress established Canyonlands National Park, and 32 years later President [Bill Clinton](#) designated nearly 2 million more acres as Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

To some, all that protected federal ground is enough. But southern Utah is big country, full of canyons large and small, hidden gardens of plant and animal diversity, endless rock formations that dazzle the eye, and rich archaeological reminders of ancient Pueblo culture. There's a lot more that deserves much better than what the Bush administration has in store for it.

In the midst of a presidential election campaign and a global economic meltdown, it's probably too much to ask of the public to rise up and put the brakes on. But maybe the next administration and Congress can reverse direction.

"The Utah deserts, and plateaus and canyons are not a country of big returns," Stegner wrote, "but a country of spiritual healing, incomparable for contemplation, meditation, solitude, quiet, awe, peace of mind and body."

In these troubling times, we need to preserve as much of that as we can.

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