

Utah's Ten Most Threatened Wilderness Treasures

A Report by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance



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What is Wilderness?

As defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964, Wilderness is an area of public land 5,000 acres or more in size “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man . . . retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation . . . affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable . . .” 16 U.S.C. § 1132 et seq.

UTAH’S TEN MOST THREATENED WILDERNESS TREASURES

Quiet Escapes and Family Getaways in Nature at Risk from ORVs, Roads and Drilling

Utah’s wildlands are some of the most spectacular in the world. They provide scenic, peaceful backdrops for family camping trips where we can reconnect with nature and introduce our children to the wonders of the natural world away from video games and television. The red rock canyons are also home to the first Americans, the Ancestral Puebloans, who left a rich cultural legacy in their intricate stone structures, pottery and mysterious rock art from thousands of years ago.

Wilderness lands also provide a source of clean water and a peaceful, scenic refuge from the sights and sounds of city life, oil and gas rigs, roads, and off-road vehicle (ORV) use. Even the Bureau of Land Management, tasked with managing these public lands, recognizes that much of the land described in this report still qualifies for wilderness protection. Yet these special places are under increasing threat, most commonly from uncontrolled ORV use, highway right-of-way claims under a now defunct law known as R.S. 2477, and oil and gas development. Sadly, looting and vandalism of archaeological sites, often associated with roads and increased ORV access in these remote places, is all too common.

The Problem: Destructive Policies from the Past Administration Remain in Effect

These problems became even worse when the Bush administration inked an unprecedented back-door agreement in 2003 with the State of Utah in which it wrongfully gave up its authority to protect lands eligible for wilderness designation.

This “No More Wild” pact set the stage for new land use plans issued by the BLM in late 2008 in the waning hours of the Bush administration. These long-term plans, governing 11 million acres of public lands, designated an astounding 20,000 miles of ORV trails and routes, and opened 80% of public lands to oil and gas drilling.

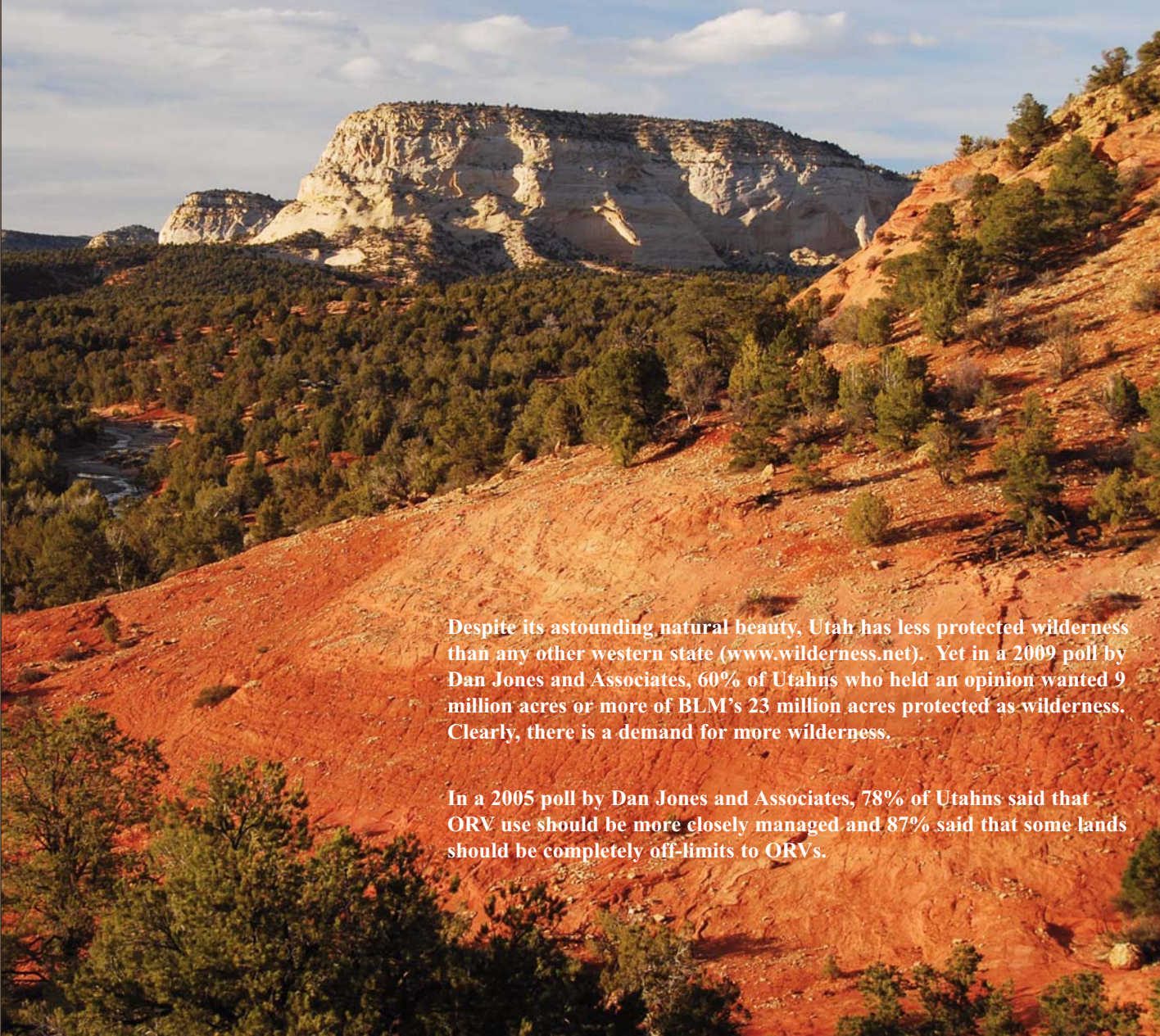
The Obama administration has yet to reclaim its well-recognized authority to protect lands with wilderness character and to fix these destructive and unsustainable land use plans. It must do so now if our children are to enjoy the natural wonders we experience today.

Putting a Face on Threatened Places

The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) recently undertook a statewide review of Utah’s natural wonders and the threats that face them. SUWA completed detailed inventories, studied BLM’s own documentation of the threats, and consulted with experts. The result is this report, which highlights ten wilderness treasures that will be lost if we do not act now to protect them.

Certain types of landscapes bear the brunt of the threat. Nine of the ten most threatened places include streams and water-dependent wildlife habitat. These are ecological treasure troves. Although these valuable places make up just 1% of the landmass statewide, they support about 80% of all wildlife. Will preserving these special places “lock up” Utah’s public lands? Not even close. If all the remaining wild country covered by the plans were protected, 85% of the ORV routes would remain open, and 80% of the proposed oil and gas wells could still be drilled.

Solving the problem of excessive oil and gas drilling and ORV abuse by steering these activities away from the most sensitive places will go a long way towards providing lasting protection to Utah’s remaining wild country and ensuring that there will always be pristine and wild places where we can go with our families to enjoy peace, quiet, and abundant natural beauty.



Despite its astounding natural beauty, Utah has less protected wilderness than any other western state (www.wilderness.net). Yet in a 2009 poll by Dan Jones and Associates, 60% of Utahns who held an opinion wanted 9 million acres or more of BLM's 23 million acres protected as wilderness. Clearly, there is a demand for more wilderness.

In a 2005 poll by Dan Jones and Associates, 78% of Utahns said that ORV use should be more closely managed and 87% said that some lands should be completely off-limits to ORVs.

Protecting Nature in an Era of Changing Climate

Protecting large blocks of undeveloped land with healthy and diverse habitats and water resources is a recognized strategy for ensuring that native plants, wildlife and human communities are best able to adapt to a hotter, drier climate. (Environmental Protection Agency, Global Change Research Program, Science in Action: Building a Scientific Foundation for Sound Environmental Decisions, *Assessment Provides Strategies for Managing Natural Resources in a Changing Climate: Findings of the U.S. Climate Change Science Program Synthesis and Assessment Product 4.4*. www.epa.gov/ord/npd/pdfs/gcrp-factsheet_SAP-4-4.pdf.)

Criteria for Listing:

- ◆ Each area is managed by the BLM, qualifies for wilderness protection and is included in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, now pending in Congress.
- ◆ There is evidence of damage which threatens the area's scenic, ecological/cultural or other natural values.
- ◆ Resources are particularly valuable, sensitive, unique and/or vulnerable to human activity, including climate change.
- ◆ Threats are enduring rather than temporary.

Solutions:

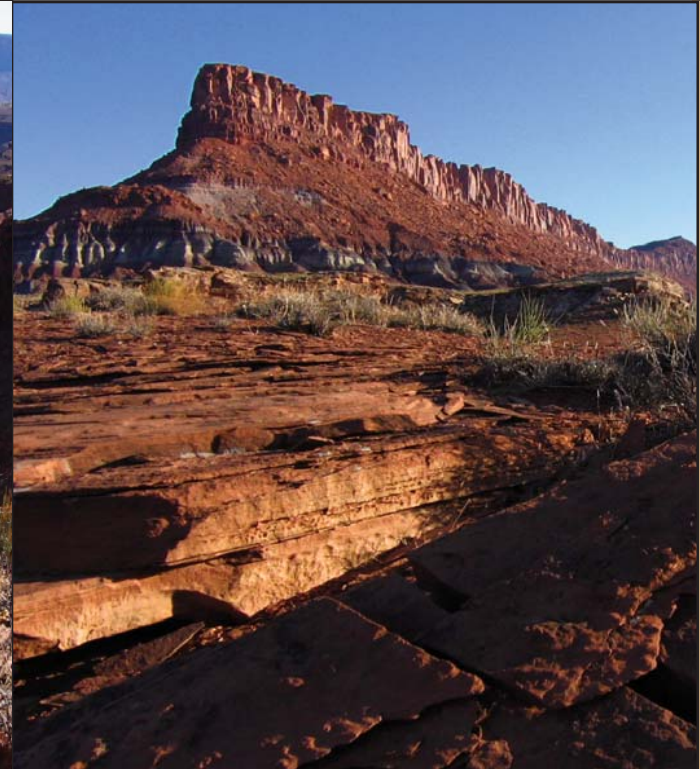
- ◆ The Department of Interior should rescind the Bush administration's No More Wild policy and protect Utah's magnificent wilderness lands from all development, including ORV trails, unnecessary roads, and oil and gas drilling.
- ◆ Riparian areas like streams, rivers and washes should be protected from ORV use and oil and gas drilling.
- ◆ Places of archaeological and cultural significance should be preserved.
- ◆ ORV use should be managed—as required by law—so that it is limited to designated trails with minimal impacts to the environment and wild lands, and it should be managed to minimize conflicts with traditional, non-motorized use. The BLM in Utah has yet to comply with this law.

Glen Canyon-San Juan River

Nestled between the San Juan and Colorado rivers lie some of the most rugged and remote wild lands in southern Utah, including: Red Rock Plateau; Clay Hills; Nokai Dome; and White, Lake, Fortknocker, Cheesebox, Red, Blue, and Moqui canyons. The area is studded with thousand-foot-high slickrock mesas, plateaus and sandstone buttes dominated by Wingate and Navajo Sandstone, incised with a maze of canyons that are among the world's foremost displays of alcoves, arches, and grottoes. Potholes fed by flash flood waters and springs punctuate the canyon floors. Its sheer remoteness has been a key factor in preserving this area's wild and natural character.

Remnants of Ancestral Puebloan life spanning thousands of years of pre-history and several distinct cultures—ranging from scattered stone working sites to impressive cliff dwellings—are located throughout the area. Although isolation and rugged topography have largely protected these artifacts from the vandalism that has scarred so many of southeastern Utah's irreplaceable archaeological sites, the picture has changed dramatically over the past several years. ORVs are now being driven in places that vehicles could not previously access: canyon bottoms, stream beds, ledges, canyon rims, and old, overgrown mining and oil exploration trails.

BLM acknowledges that the bulk of the area qualifies for wilderness protection, providing “outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation,” and that “some of the canyon hiking routes are considered to be among the premier routes on the Colorado Plateau.” Yet, rather than protecting it, the agency designated hundreds of miles of ORV routes in this area—without conducting surveys for archaeological sites. These routes threaten not only the irreplaceable archaeological sites, but also the premier wilderness that even BLM has recognized.



Photos (clockwise from top):
White Canyon, © Chris Case
Redrock Plateau, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA
Upper Red Canyon, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA

Cedar Mesa-Comb Ridge

Although the Ancestral Puebloans left the Cedar Mesa-Comb Ridge area 700 years ago, traces of their civilization are abundant. Cliff dwellings made of sandstone and mud cling to canyon rims, nestle into alcoves, or perch on ledges hundreds of feet above canyon floors. Artifacts, such as pottery, tools, and ceremonial objects have survived intact for centuries in the dry desert air. The concentration of archaeological sites in this region, up to several hundred per square mile, may be as great as anywhere in the United States—yet the BLM has inventoried less than 6% of these lands. Even today, the area is highly valued by the Hopi, Rio Grande pueblos, Navajo, Ute and others for spiritual sites and native plants important to their cultural and religious traditions.

Cedar Mesa is incised with numerous canyons, such as Fish, Owl, Bullet, Road, and Slickhorn. Unfortunately, late in 2008 BLM designated dozens of ORV routes on Cedar Mesa in areas known to have significant cultural resources. Several of the routes go directly through cultural sites eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, increasing the risk of damage and vandalism.

Arch Canyon on the northern periphery of Cedar Mesa exemplifies the worst of these threats. Its perennial stream is a rarity in the arid desert of southeastern Utah and is critical for many wildlife species. It is also rich in archaeological sites. Yet BLM recently designated an ORV route in Arch canyon with a disastrous 60 stream crossings in the eight-mile trip from the mouth of the canyon to the U.S. Forest Service boundary where the canyon is closed to ORV use (120 stream crossings for each round trip). ORVs are destroying the banks of the stream at each crossing, causing increased erosion and damaging fish habitat. Looting of cultural sites has also been common.

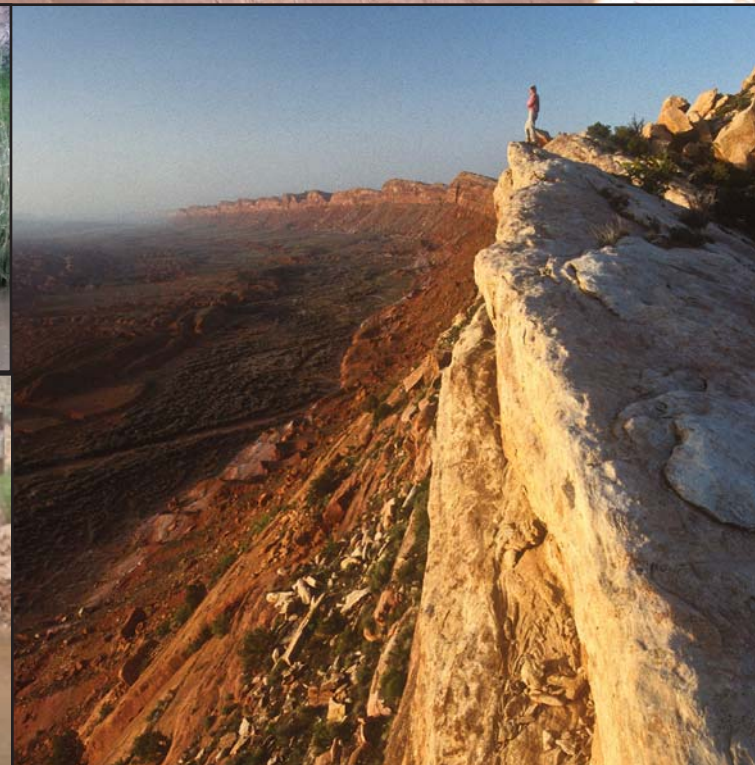
Photos (clockwise from top):

Arch Canyon ruin, © Liz Thomas/SUWA

Comb Ridge, © Stephen Trimble

Dirt bikes in Arch Canyon, © Liz Thomas/SUWA

Jeep crossing stream in Arch Canyon, © Liz Thomas/SUWA



Canyonlands Basin and Rims

Geographically, geologically and esthetically, the Canyonlands Basin and Rims east of Canyonlands National Park hold some of southern Utah's most outstanding attractions. From Hatch Wash with its deep, twisting canyons and stream to Lockhart Basin's stunning expanses; from Indian Creek's wonderland of hoodoos, spires and knobs to Harts Draw's natural bridges, year-round stream and abundant wildlife; and from Bridger Jack Mesa and the Sixshooter Peaks up to Shay Mountain near the headwaters of Indian Creek, this large area offers visitors a myriad of experiences and expansive wilderness.

Magnificent geology is on display in the thousand-foot-high cliffs of Harts Draw exposing the Navajo, Kayenta, Wingate and Chinle Sandstone layers. The eroding pinnacles and twisting canyons of Indian Creek leave visitors in awe of the erosional effects of time, water and wind on sandstone. The cool, clear streams with stately cottonwood trees are a haven on hot summer days, and likely attracted the prehistoric populations that left behind intricate rock art, granaries and dwelling structures.

This area has long been considered for inclusion in Canyonlands National Park. Indeed, viewing the area from the Needles Overlook or Dead Horse Point State Park, it is impossible to know where the park ends and BLM-managed lands begin. However, management between the two agencies stands in stark contrast. Even though it noted that this is an "exceptionally scenic wild area," BLM designated most of these lands as open to oil and gas exploration and development, and designated hundreds of miles of ORV routes. Resulting ORV use in the area is drastically changing the landscape and the type of experience visitors can expect in this wonderland of stone.

Photos (clockwise from top):
Lockhart Basin, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA
Hatch Wash, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA
Faint track designated as official BLM off-road vehicle route,
Canyonlands Basin, © Liz Thomas/SUWA



Labyrinth Canyon

In 1869, near Bow Knot Bend, Major John Wesley Powell named an impressive canyon system of the Green River “Labyrinth Canyon.” Floating the still waters into Labyrinth Canyon is like entering a portal into the heart of the red rock. This stretch of the Green from I-70 to Canyonlands National Park provides a relaxed journey into the backcountry for families, with long stretches of calm water and welcoming sandy beaches for overnight camping. Sheer 1,000-foot walls of sandstone tower overhead and cool side canyons invite exploration. Labyrinth Canyon’s geological and archaeological wonders are internationally recognized, with artifacts dating back to the mammoth hunter era 10,000 years ago.

Tenmile Canyon, one of Labyrinth’s many side canyons, winds its way through Navajo Sandstone, cutting deeper through layers of red rock until it reaches the Green River. Tenmile’s sinuous perennial stream, which winds through cottonwood galleries and alongside smooth sandstone walls, seems out of place in this hot, arid desert landscape, making this canyon a rare desert gem. Ancient civilizations likely treasured this stream as well, as there are haunting rock art panels and numerous granaries, storage cists, and other cultural sites in the canyon. BLM designated a dense maze of ORV routes in Labyrinth’s side canyons and on adjacent mesas, undermining the potential for visitors to enjoy a quiet canyon experience. For example, the designated route in Tenmile Canyon allows dirt bikes to race down the canyon to the Green River. Boaters on the Green River, expecting a quiet experience, encounter engine noise and fumes. ORV use has damaged Tenmile’s stream so that it is no longer a healthy, functioning riparian area, and several of its archaeological sites have been vandalized and damaged. In addition, most of the Labyrinth area is open to oil and gas leasing and development.

Photos (clockwise from top):

Labyrinth Canyon, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA
Floating the Green River in Labyrinth Canyon,
© Ray Bloxham/SUWA

ATV crossing stream in Tenmile Canyon, © Liz Thomas



Upper Desolation Canyon

North of the popular Sand Wash put-in, where boaters begin their float through Desolation Canyon, is a relatively unknown stretch of the Green River where calm waters lead to spectacular and remote areas of quiet beauty. Upper Desolation Canyon offers one of Utah's finest canoe trips suitable for families and river runners alike. Centuries of Native American habitation are richly portrayed on the canyon walls. As its name implies, Desolation Canyon remains a remote place of uncommon beauty. According to the BLM this is "one of the largest blocks of roadless BLM public lands within the continental United States. This is a place where a visitor can experience true solitude—where the forces of nature continue to shape the colorful, rugged landscape."

However, the encroachment of oil and gas development is drastically altering the wilderness experience of Upper Desolation Canyon. Boaters reaching the put-in point in Ouray, Utah, must navigate a maze of oil and gas roads, traffic, and drill rigs. The droning sounds of traffic, popping pump jacks, and the ever-present sounds from the expanding oil and gas fields now penetrate the river bottoms during calm weather. Views from the canyon rims are punctuated with new drill rigs, lit round-the-clock and fed by a constant stream of 18-wheelers, pickup trucks, and workers.

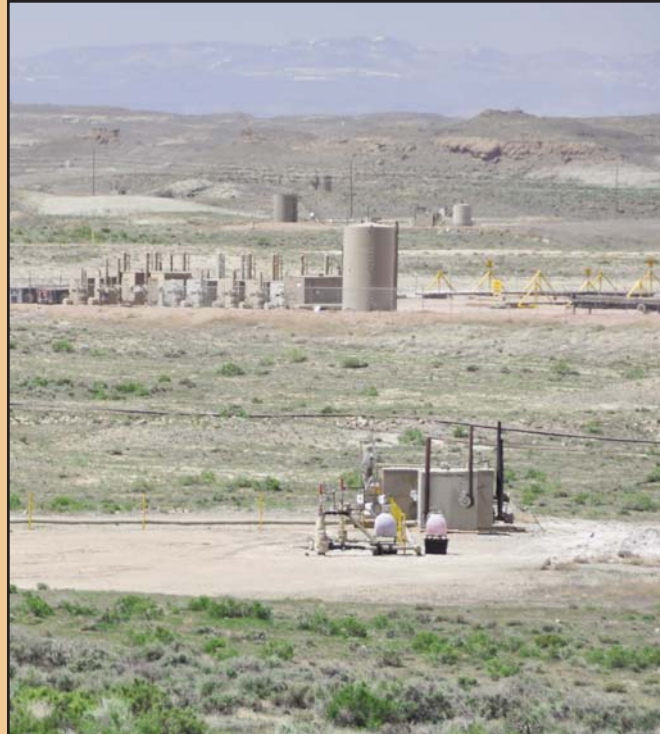
While these impacts are dramatically altering the landscape to the north, today the Upper Desolation Canyon proposed wilderness still remains intact. New oil and gas leasing, development and related infrastructure, however, would undoubtedly detract from its outstanding wilderness experience.

Photos (clockwise from top):

Upper Desolation Canyon, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA

Canoeing in Upper Desolation Canyon, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA

Oil and gas development, Upper Desolation Canyon, © Ray Bloxham



Dirty Devil Country

Southeast of Hanksville, the Dirty Devil River winds for ninety miles through one of the most rugged and remote landscapes in the American West. This is desolate country where place names have a Wild West flavor—No Man’s Canyon, Robber’s Roost, The Big Ridge, Sam’s Mesa, Bull Pasture, Happy Canyon, Poison Spring Canyon, and Twin Corral Box Canyon. Adding to the intrigue, Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch reportedly used these canyons for hideouts during the 1890s.

It took millions of years for this small desert stream to carve the canyon system that sprawls across hundreds of square miles west of Canyonlands National Park. The landscape is an infinite series of winding canyons, colorful cliffs, massive buttes and monolithic towers, cool damp alcoves and clear pools. In good snowmelt years, boaters float the Dirty Devil River. As with most places in southern Utah, prehistoric artifacts are abundant here, with Archaic lithic scatters, stone tool quarries, rock art panels and rock shelters dating back 10,000 years

The primitive beauty of the Dirty Devil country has inspired proposals for a national monument, a national park and wild and scenic river designations. And although BLM acknowledges the vast majority of this area has wilderness character, the agency is failing to protect its wild beauty. The BLM has designated ORV routes on old, reclaimed uranium mining and oil exploration trails, bisecting large undeveloped wildlands with motorized vehicle routes. The agency failed to check for archaeological sites before designating these ORV routes, so some of the BLM-sanctioned routes cross through archaeological sites. The BLM’s current management plans also allow oil and gas exploration and development, as well as tar sands development in this extremely remote and unspoiled natural landscape.

Photos (clockwise from top):
Kayaker on the Dirty Devil River, © James Kay
Dirty Devil slot canyon, © James Kay
Dirty Devil River, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA



Moquith Mountain Wilderness Study Area

Simply put, there is no other place in the world like Moquith Mountain, including the Coral Pink Sand Dunes that extend into this remarkable BLM Wilderness Study Area. Towering salmon-hued sand dunes harbor green islands of ponderosa pines, manzanita, and bright yellow mule's ears, which bloom in the spring. It is the only place in the world one can find the Coral Pink Sand Dunes tiger beetle, and one of only five places the Welsh's milkweed is found—both protected under the Endangered Species Act. Moquith Mountain reaches 7,000 feet, with stands of ponderosa pine and aspen. Natural springs provide water in an otherwise dry environment, supporting hanging gardens that cling to the base of cliffs and alcoves. Prehistoric populations used the springs, streams and surrounding areas, leaving behind mysterious rock art and artifacts, the vast majority of which have not been surveyed, much less protected.

Off-road vehicles, and the scars they leave through the ponderosa stands and other dune vegetation, have been a constant challenge at Moquith. Because this is a designated Wilderness Study Area, the BLM is required by law to protect it. Yet the agency has treated this unique gem as an ORV playground by allowing cross-country, no-holds-barred ORV use on the dunes, with demonstrably feeble and futile requests that ORV riders stay off of vegetation. Fortunately, a reasonable solution to ORV damage here is readily available: limit ORV use in the Wilderness Study Area, and manage it for foot traffic and the preservation of its natural beauty. The neighboring Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park where ORV use is legal is better suited for such use.

Photos (clockwise from top):

Moquith Mountain sand dunes, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA

Mule's Ear wildflowers blooming on the dunes, © Tom Till

ATV rider on dunes at Moquith Mountain, © Heidi McIntosh/SUWA



Factory Butte

The Mancos Shale that surrounds the iconic Factory Butte formation provides one of the most extensive and spectacular badland displays on the Colorado Plateau. At the eastern doorstep of Capitol Reef National Park, this landscape is revered for its incomparable scenery, drawing admiring visitors from around the globe. Professional photographers covet the perfect shot of prominent Factory Butte, a scene that has been featured in countless books, magazines, and other media venues over the years.

While the Factory Butte badlands might appear “moon-like” for most of the year, the carpet of yellow and purple spring flowers are beyond compare, and made even more dramatic by the stark shale soil. Two cactus species protected by the Endangered Species Act, the Wright’s fishhook and the Winkler pincushion, are found only at Factory Butte and nearby areas. Although landlocked now, ancient shark teeth and other primordial marine fossils are found in this ancient seabed.

This picturesque landscape has been the target of a small group of extreme dirt bike riders that have crushed rare cactus plants and destroyed the scenery with their machines, leaving deep, long-lasting ruts that scar the landscape. Scientists are documenting the consequences of ORV use on Mancos Shale, including damaged soil crusts which accelerate both wind- and water-borne soil erosion and water pollution from salt and selenium runoff into the nearby Fremont River. The pulverized soils are also easily carried by wind, creating dust storms and degrading air quality.

For nearly thirty years, BLM has known that ORV use degrades the scenery, the native plants and the soil integrity at Factory Butte, yet the agency’s recent management plan actually contemplates an expansion of cross-country ORV use there.

Photos (clockwise from top):

Factory Butte and surrounding badlands, © Tom Till

Factory Butte in bloom, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA

Dust and scars caused by ORVs at Factory Butte, © Ray Bloxham



Vermilion Cliffs-Upper Kanab Creek

The rich red Vermilion Cliffs and the thousand-foot-high White Cliffs of Upper Kanab Creek form two of the “steps” in the Grand Staircase, a series of great cliffs and plateaus rising 7,000 feet between the floor of the Grand Canyon and the rim of Bryce Canyon. These cliffs are a spectacular backdrop for visitors traveling between Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Eons ago, lava flows from craters to the north filled the bottom of Kanab Creek. Sand dunes have since formed on the benches below the cliffs. Stately ponderosa pine trees cap the benches above the White Cliffs, while rustling cottonwood trees border Kanab Creek. Until recently, the prehistoric archaeological sites situated on the mesa tops of the Vermilion and White Cliffs were relatively undisturbed (even though many archaeological sites in this region have been looted and vandalized over the years).

BLM has described the area as “exceptionally scenic [with] an abundance of primitive recreation opportunities” due to the “natural character, rugged terrain and size,” and concluded that the bulk of the area qualified for wilderness protection. Yet BLM recently designated dozens of miles of ORV routes here, including in streambeds and other areas known to have significant archaeological and cultural resources. Some of the routes go directly through large cultural sites that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The broad network of ORV routes is dramatically changing the character of this area, from a quiet, remote, primitive area, to a noisy, damaged and scarred playground for motorized recreation, and will lead to increased vandalism and inadvertent damage to the archaeological resources.



Photos (clockwise from top):

Vermilion Cliffs, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA

White Cliffs, © Chris England

ORV Damage in the Vermilion Cliffs area, © Ray Bloxham

Price River-Lost Spring Wash

The Price River, Never Sweat Wash and Lost Spring Wash wilderness complex is located along the eastern flank of the San Rafael Swell in central Utah. This vast expanse includes the seldom visited Price River, which creates a serpentine path through an undulating high desert landscape. Surrounding the Price River are various uplifts and reefs that contain unusual pockets of ponderosa pine and Douglas fir—rare finds in Utah’s deserts.

Further south, Never Sweat Wash and Lost Spring Wash are comprised of sublime red desert hills leading into the San Rafael Swell. The Old Spanish National Historic Trail passes through this area. Antelope are often seen browsing in the area and the spring wildflowers can be prolific.

All of this geographical variety and history combines to create a wild area with little development or impact.

In the past decade oil and gas companies have taken a renewed interest in potential natural gas deposits in this region and worked throughout the Bush administration to accumulate leases here. Other schemes include plans to burn coal and sequester the carbon dioxide on state-owned lands in the heart of the Price River proposed wilderness. Also, in its 2008 land use plans, the BLM designated many damaging ORV trails through this area. Combined, energy development and ORV use pose a potent threat to this wilderness complex.

Photos (clockwise from top):
Price River proposed wilderness, © Ray Bloxham/SUWA
Price River proposed wilderness © Ray Bloxham/SUWA
Sludge pit from oil and gas development, © Ray Bloxham



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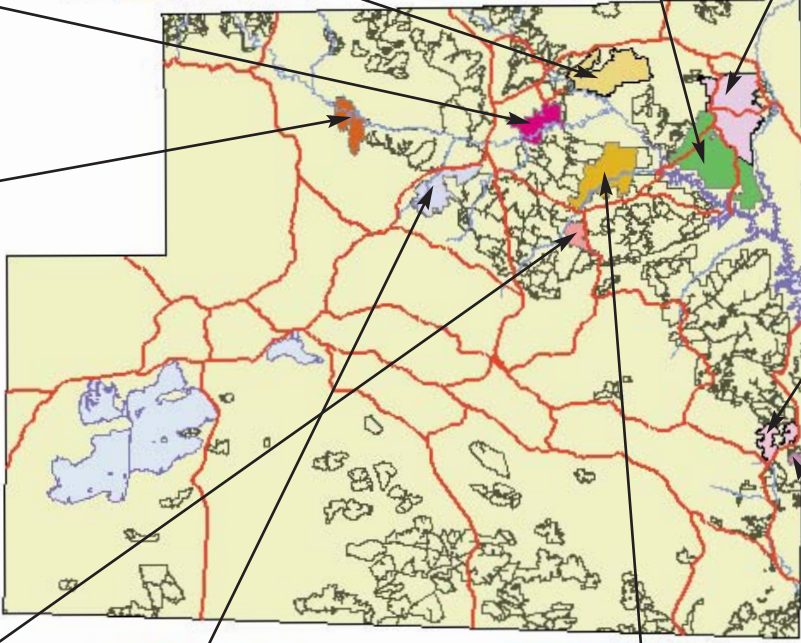
Factory Butte



Upper Desolation Canyon



Labyrinth Canyon



Price River-
Lost Spring Wash



Canyonlands Basin & Rims



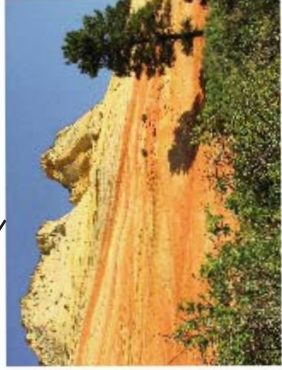
Dirty Devil Country



Glen Canyon-San Juan River



Moquith Mountain
Wilderness Study Area



Vermilion Cliffs-
Upper Kanab Creek



Cedar Mesa-Comb Ridge

* Black-outlined areas on map represent lands in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act

For more information, please contact the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance
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