The Wilderness Problem: A Narrative of Contested Landscapes in San Juan County, Utah

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Abstract
Wilderness preservation has been at the center of debates about public land policy for almost half a century, and nowhere has the controversy been more intractable than in Utah. Despite its vast expanses of unsettled and undeveloped red rock desert, managed primarily by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Utah has less designated wilderness than in any other state in the West. In this study, I focus on San Juan County in southeast Utah to study the conflict over the designation of wilderness. The controversy pits local residents and state politicians against state and national environmental groups, with the BLM shifting positions in between.

I analyze and interpret the wilderness debate from three different perspectives. The first explores the history of the Utah wilderness debate from the first BLM wilderness inventory in the 1970's through its re-inventory in the 1990's. I examine the influence of national, regional, and local forces such as institutional change within the BLM, infighting among Utah-based environmental interest groups, and the sagebrush rebellion and county supremacy movements. The second perspective incorporates the spatial analytical techniques of geographical information systems to provide a relatively objective view of landscape characteristics used to define wilderness. I interpret the landscape as a continuum of varying degrees of wildness, a product of inherent naturalness and the influences of human impacts. Lastly, I examine the personal views of the meaning of wilderness through the words of actual participants in the debate. In an analysis of the statements of both county residents as well as the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, I explore the mental images and ideas that influence the ways in which people value and understand the desert environment.

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San Juan’s unique landscape, rich cultural heritage and monuments are certainly worth a visit. San Juan County, located in southeastern Utah, is known as the world’s largest outdoor museum. It was just over 100 years ago that the first Mormon settlers populated these mighty canyons. Today not only traces of these pioneers remain, but also of the indigenous peoples that lived here thousands of years earlier.

San Juan’s unique landscape, rich cultural heritage and monuments are certainly worth a visit. The History of Pioneers at Bluff Fort. Begin your journey with a visit to the region’s very first settlement. The first Mormons settled in Bluff, Utah, in the 1880s. Remote sensing study in support of mineral resource appraisal of wilderness study areas near Moab, Utah; Dolores River Canyon Wilderness Study Area, Montrose and San Miguel counties, Colorado; Lost Spring Canyon Wilderness Study Area, Grand County Utah; Behind the Rocks Wilderness Study Area, Grand and San Juan Counties, Utah; Indian Creek Wilderness Study Area, San Juan County, Utah; and Butler Wash Wilderness Study Area, San Juan County, Utah. Series title. Open-File Report.