

SCRAP ESCALANTE SCHEME AND PUT WILDERNESS ACT TO WORK

Lawson Le Gate

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Creativity is a valuable human quality. Our ability to tap our creative reservoirs gets us out of a lot of tight fixes. We can admire the ingenuity of people whose vehicles have become stuck in the sand. In an effort to dig down to solid bedrock, people have been known to use old boards, pots, plates, even their bare hands.

However, admiration for such creative endeavors would quickly turn to puzzlement if we knew that the hapless traveler had a shovel on hand. Human ingenuity is a wonderful thing, we might observe, but when the right tool is at hand, why don't you use it?

We might ask the same question of Gov. Leavitt's Escalante ecoregion task force. This group has written a concept paper which proposes a preservation and economic development scheme for the Escalante region.

They have identified a problem: Increasing numbers of visitors are flocking to the Escalante canyons, attracted by the beauty and solitude of the wilderness there, and local residents could do a better job of benefitting from the presence of those visitors. The task force correctly recognizes the need to protect these wildlands and thus to take economic advantage of the area's wild, scenic beauty.

Unfortunately, it is at this point where the task force gets carried away by its creative impulses. In the concept paper the writers suggest a complicated and unwieldy set of four new land classifications never before applied to publicly owned lands. These categories -- "wild lands," "natural lands," "multiple-use lands," and "enterprise lands" -- would be applied only to the lands found in the Escalante region.

The definition of "wild lands" which contain "no sign of man's habitation" appears to be so rigorous that it is doubtful very many areas would qualify. If an area contained such "impacts" as trails or structures, it would be classified as "natural land" and would thus be open to logging. If this definition were applied across the nation, then we would likely see logging in all of our wilderness areas.

What is especially puzzling about this proposal is that we already have a good tool which for the past 30 years has done a wonderful job of protecting land: the Wilderness Act of 1964.

According to the Wilderness Act, an area qualifies as wilderness if, among other qualities, the works of man are "substantially unnoticeable," the area "retains its primeval character," and it "offers outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation."

Except where valid existing rights are protected, no development can occur in a designated wilderness. This protective tool has been used successfully time and again by the American people to maintain wildlands in a natural condition in perpetuity.

Congress is unlikely to spend its time developing a whole new system of land classifications when it has a very good one already in hand (and one which was itself years in the making). So why does the task force propose this new system? Some suggest that the answer lies in the distrust which some of the locals in Garfield and Kane counties have for ideas which seem to originate outside their immediate sphere of influence.

Imagine that you're a passenger in a car stuck in the sand, and one of your fellow passengers, a local resident, tells you he prefers to dig with a tin cup instead of the shovel you offer. And when you ask why, you're told that, since the shovel wasn't manufactured locally, he prefers to use a method of his own devising. But since you're caught in the same predicament, chances are you'll roll up your sleeves and go to work with the shovel.

That should be our approach when we answer the governor and his task force. Yes, these precious lands are indeed worthy of protection. And yes, the governor is right to seek their preservation, most certainly for their intrinsic value, but also because their beauty and wildness have an economic value to the people of our state.

But let's not waste our time trying to convince a conservative Congress to build a new system of designations from scratch. Let's recognize that we already have an excellent tool in the form of the Wilderness Act to do the job.

We are fortunate that the canyons of the Escalante and millions of acres of public lands in Utah still meet the criteria set forth in the Wilderness Act. Let's urge Gov. Leavitt to call a spade a spade and to join Utahns and their fellow Americans in getting Congress to use the Wilderness Act to protect our state's remaining wildlands.