

TOO MUCH WILDERNESS DESIGNATION COULD HURT RURAL UTAH'S ECONOMY

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In a recent commentary by Craig Axford titled "Wilderness Is at the Core of Who We Are and Where We Came From" (July 25 & 26), the attitude of the extremists in the environmental community is clearly illuminated.

First, Axford falsely seems to assume that Gov. Mike Leavitt has no prior knowledge or experience with the lands in question. He then derides the governor for relying on a helicopter to review the millions of acres of lands scattered throughout the state which are being considered for wilderness. Axford implies that the governor's inability to spend days, if not weeks or months, personally examining all of the dozens of areas proposed for wilderness is somehow a defect.

In public bearing after public hearing on the issue of wilderness, those favoring excessive amounts of wilderness show up in greater numbers than those who do not. In fact, many of those extremists, who appeared to be permanent residents of the wilderness, abandoned their camp sites and drove their pollution producing vehicles all over the state, spending many days attending every public hearing to deliver their highly emotionally charged diatribe that appeared to originate from a single source and contained little or no factual information.

When local county commissioners, legislators and rural citizens are asked why so few of those who support moderate amounts of wilderness are not in attendance, the answer is usually: "Those people are at work."

Unquestionably, those whose views Axford reflects really will and do enjoy wilderness, i.e.: those whose lifestyle of limited responsibility permits them relatively long periods of time to hike, canoe or otherwise enjoy those types of recreational opportunities on the ground. Unfortunately, as the data supplied by federal land managers proves conclusively, such people are few in number.

What is most troubling about the view reflected by Axford is that those of us who either through demands of work, family or other responsibilities are not in a position to spend much time in leisure, or simply as a matter of taste choose not to, are morally inferior to them. The essence of the extreme in the environmental movement is that we should worship the land as a religion and if we do not, we are wrong.

It is only the environmental community who wants lands treated for a single purpose -- a spiritual wilderness experience. Incidentally, a use for which they pay no special fees. While trying desperately to force cattle off all public lands by demanding outrageous grazing fee increases, they are the beneficiaries of the most highly government subsidized use on public lands -- recreation. I have never heard of any rancher who has tried to keep hikers or campers off the public lands. Other than an acre or two that might be fenced around an oil rig or the entrance

to a mine, the extractive industries do not try to keep others off the public lands. It is only the environmental community who insist on the public lands being used as it would dictate.

Perhaps one of the best indications of this was the recently conducted Eco-Challenge Race in Southern Utah. This event was initiated by environmentalists who saw this as an opportunity to educate, inform and further the ethics of proper treatment of the public lands. However, their view of the use of public lands did not match that of some extreme environmentalists who spent months and months trying to sabotage and destroy the slightly broader view of the proponents of the Eco-Challenge.

This environmental elitism is seen over and over again. The essence of it is that we must all think like they do; enjoy what they enjoy; recreate like they recreate; gain spiritual strength from the land as they gain spiritual strength from the land; and if we don't, we are inferior.

I am happy to grant extreme environmentalists whatever belief system they want to believe in regarding the public lands, but I do not believe that belief system should be forced upon the rest of us. While I can and do support a modest amount of wilderness, I do not believe large amounts of the public lands should be managed so that only a small handful of people can enjoy it as they want to, to the exclusion of the rest of us and supported with our tax dollars.

The most ironic part of Axford's commentary was at the end where he indicated that "though we spend much of our lives sheltered from nature and alienated from what sustains us, we need places we can go to that remind us we are part of nature, not apart from it."

Interestingly, it is extreme environmentalists who argue over and over again that man is not a part of nature, but rather, man is a cancer on nature and a most unfortunate accident.

Perhaps the silliest part of Axford's statement is the idea that it is the land untouched by man that sustains us. Quite frankly, I am sustained by food, housing, clothing and water from the tap, etc. It is the extreme environmentalists who have totally lost touch with that source of sustenance. They do not seem to understand that water has to be developed, that food has to be grown, that clothing has to be raised or extracted from the earth in some way or another, that houses have to be constructed from materials emanating from the earth. Those same extreme environmentalists who have completely lost touch with what really does sustain us are the ones who oppose every effort to extract minerals, petroleum, chemicals, food, fiber, timber, etc. from the land.

It should be noted that if the position, to designate 5.7 million acres of wilderness in Utah, of the extreme environmentalists is adopted -- along with the legislative language which they propose that will allow wilderness designation to affect activities outside of wilderness through the excessive use of buffer zones, which also would turn all air quality decisions into buffer zone protection decisions, which would turn the management of great quantities of water in rural Utah over to federal land managers for wilderness purpose -- it will doom the economy of rural Utah. With that doom goes the production of timber, food, minerals and oil and gas, which are essential to the long term survival of this state, nation and world.

We are most fortunate to have reached a state in our society where economic prosperity allows us to be debating issues such as wilderness. It is only because we have adequate supplies of food, clothing and housing that we can have the luxury of spending time and extraordinary amounts of money on such issues. But if we completely lose track of the source of that economic prosperity, we undoubtedly will reach the day when questions of wilderness will become totally unimportant because we will be struggling to survive.