GRAND WILDS AGENDA IN WEST
THE DREAM: 210 MILLION ACRES OF PROTECTED LAND
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Sculpted by serpentine canyons of red and white sandstone as far as the eye can see, No Man's Mesa in deep southern Utah is most appropriately named. It is rugged beyond description, an isolated, even forbidding, sentinel of wilderness -- literally, if not yet officially.

The Bureau of Land Management, which has identified 5.8 million acres of potential wilderness in Utah, has No Man's Mesa in its sights. So too has the Utah Wilderness Coalition, which includes the mesa in its 9.1 million-acre wilderness inventory.What is not so well known is that No Man's Mesa, and other Utah locales like it, are actually pieces of a much, much grander wilderness agenda -- one involving hundreds of millions of acres of public lands in the West, from the Sonoran deserts of Arizona and New Mexico to the Arctic coast of Alaska.

In fact, conservation groups from Anchorage to Tucson have identified at least 210 million acres of public lands in the Western states they say are deserving of wilderness protection.

To the distress of less-organized and less-technologically adept opponents, fervent campaigns are under way in virtually every Western state to generate public support for a concept of preserving wilderness bigger than anything ever proposed before.

Rep. Chris Shays, R-Conn., for example, has introduced the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act, which would use wilderness designations to protect about 20 million additional acres in northern Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. In scope, this dwarfs the 9.1 million acres of Utah lands included in New York Democrat Rep. Maurice Hinchey's America's Red Rock Wilderness Act.

In Nevada, conservationists are mustering support for protection of 14.8 million acres of Great Basin desert. In Oregon and Washington, they want another 7.1 million acres of forests protected.

To some wilderness advocates, even that is not thinking big enough. The Tucson-based Wildlands Project has an even loftier goal:

Wilderness protection for 50 percent of North America.

According to the group's mission statement, "We live for a day when grizzlies in Chihuahua have an unbroken connection to grizzlies in Alaska; when gray wolf populations are continuous from New Mexico to Greenland; when vast unbroken forests and flowing plains again thrive and support pre-Columbian populations of plants and animals; when humans dwell with respect, harmony and affection for the land; when we come to live no longer as strangers and aliens to this continent."

The bigger picture

And therein lies the soul of the new wilderness movement. It is no longer about 15,000 acres here or 100,000 there. In fact, it's not much about acres at all.

It's about ecosystems.

"Ecosystems are bound together, and when you lose one part of the ecosystem the rest starts to crumble like house of cards," said Heidi McIntosh, issues coordinator for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. "Once you lose bear or cougar or wolves, you start to see unhealthy animal populations all the way down the food chain."

Because predator habitats are inherently large, it becomes imperative to protect large contiguous areas. And there is no better way to do that than wilderness, advocates say.

The notion that entire ecosystems must be protected was part of what drove the Utah Wilderness Coalition to re-inventory Utah lands for wilderness qualities. Among many issues, they looked at migratory patterns of wildlife between mountain and valley environments, between barren deserts and and lush mountains.

The inventory, conducted by 500 volunteers who spent 70,000 hours walking the ground and taking photographs, identified 9.1 million potential wilderness acres in Utah. "Some biologists say 9 million acres is not enough to preserve a viable ecosystem," McIntosh said. "And they may be right."

Still, the Utah Wilderness Coalition inventory was bolder than anything yet proposed for Utah wild lands. Not only was it bigger, but it was unprecedented in terms of on-the-ground documentation, utilization of volunteers and a savvy public relations campaign that included polling, public meetings and a slick Internet site.

"We definitely set the standard," said Tom Price, communications coordinator for SUWA. "It was the most comprehensive inventory ever conducted by anyone, including the BLM."

And it became the model for ongoing inventories by wilderness advocates in other states like California, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon and Nevada.

High-tech advocacy

Unlike the Edward Abbey-reading, Birkenstock eco-warriors of the past, the new generation of wilderness advocates is predominantly young, high tech and well organized.

Today's wilderness inventories are much more likely to involve satellite mapping and technical scientific information regarding watersheds and biology, said Brian O'Donnell, associate director of the Wilderness Support Center in Durango, Colo. "It is no longer about protecting scenic areas but about protecting a diversified ecosystem."

And like everything else, the Internet has played a huge role. The quickness with which information is disseminated to the membership of various organizations has resulted in a far greater number of people who are very knowledgable about the issues.

Members of various environmental groups -- and there are more and more of them -- now receive "alerts" via e-mail within minutes of a key vote in Congress. Within hours, members get breakdowns on who voted what way and why, as well as discussions of what amendments may be coming in the days ahead.

"The new technologies have bridged the gap across time and space," Price said. "Exxon has always had more money, but with the Internet you don't need a lot of money to bring people together to fight for a cause."

But money isn't the problem it used to be, either. Bolstered with grants from prominent benefactors like the Pew Charitable Trust and the Rockefeller Family Fund, the new wilderness movement has successfully wedded big money with the $5 and $10 contributions that have been the mainstay of wilderness fundraising for decades.

One recent fundraising campaign among Microsoft employees raised $13.1 million to save a mere 25,000 acres of old-growth forest in Washington. Contributors ranged from stock-option millionaires to cafeteria workers.

Another significant difference in the new wilderness movement is to use the Internet to rally proactive grass-roots support for various causes. In the past, most energies were expended trying

to block developments that threatened potential wilderness -- a practice that earned conservationists the label "obstructionists," and with that the wrath of rural communities dependent on natural resource extraction.

"Focusing on the positive side of wilderness has really excited people," said O'Donnell, whose group trains wilderness advocates throughout the West in how to mount grass-roots wilderness campaigns.

Clark Collins, executive director of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, an Idaho-based activist group opposed to big wilderness designations, admits that the pro-wilderness campaign has been tremendously successful, at least from a public relations standpoint. And it has effectively kept groups like his that advocate multiple uses of public lands in a defensive posture.

"Historically, we have not done a very good job getting our message out," Collins said. As a result, they are way behind in the public relations game.

Groups representing ranchers, miners, loggers, outdoor recreationists and rural county commissioners have been more actively engaged in the public relations wars over in past couple of years. Still, they have generally been slow to adapt to a new world of information technology. Internet sites typically lack the professionalism of their counterparts, and their efforts to sell the message of multiple use has not resonated as convincingly with the general public.

In effect, preserving logging jobs or grazing permits just doesn't have the same public appeal as preserving old-growth forests or red-rock deserts.

Groups opposed to big wilderness are indeed trying to catch up. One exception to the overall technical lethargy of anti-wilderness forces is found in rural Utah, where counties have teamed with the state to use satellite photography to document roads and other developments that could disqualify areas for consideration as wilderness.

And county commissions across the West have led the way in filing federal lawsuits federal courts to defend against land management decisions affecting areas targeted for wilderness.

Congressional reality

The ongoing big wilderness campaign is, perhaps, more than a little audacious given the realities of a Republican-controlled Congress that has been largely unsympathetic to wilderness. Virtually every wilderness bill must pass through subcommittees chaired by either Reps. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, or Helen Chenoweth, R-Idaho -- both of whom are seen as allies of industrial interests opposed to big wilderness.

In fact, with few exceptions new wilderness designations for any state have been stalled since the Bush administration.

"Clearly, Congress has not been as favorable to wilderness as we would hope," O'Donnell said. "There is a huge disconnect between the grass-roots support for wilderness and congressional reality."

But O'Donnell also points out that wilderness is not really a partisan issue. Some of the best wilderness champions are, in fact, Republicans. However, they are by and large Eastern Republicans representing Eastern constituencies unaffected by the powerful lobby of the mining, timber and oil and gas industry that has actively opposed big wilderness in the West.

And in that sense, the new wilderness debate is an issue of urban versus rural and, in some respects, East versus West.

"Easterners realize the value of wilderness more because they have so little of it left," said O'Donnell, who moved West from Pennsylvania to take up the wilderness cause. "They have some great open spaces, but there are no opportunities to see a grizzly bear or take a 10-day

backpack trip and see only a few people. More than Westerners, they see these as national lands, and they feel they have as much right to determine how they are managed as Westerners. They certainly do not see these lands as belonging to a local county commissioner."

But it is not just Easterners. McIntosh points to recent public opinion polls that show a majority

of urban Utahns also support the idea of big wilderness. When Dan Jones and Associates recently asked Utahns how much Utah wilderness they wanted to see designated, the average response was 14.9 million acres -- almost 6 million acres bigger than the amount proposed by the Utah Wilderness Coalition.

McIntosh believes today's increasingly urbanized society is better educated about the environment than ever before, and people see the common sense in preserving ecosystems that include valleys and mountains, deserts and forests. They see it as one affecting everything from water quality and wildlife to the quality of life of those living in the West.

"As humans we have always been part of ecosystem," McIntosh said. "But in past 100 years, we have become so super-dominant that our activities are ruining the very ecosystem of which we are a part. If we lose it, we are robbing our children and grandchildren of an irreplaceable legacy. And we will lose our soul as Westerners."

But Collins says the new wilderness movement "has gone way beyond what original wilderness advocates had in mind" when the law was passed in 1964. What started as a noble attempt to preserve the nation's wilderness gems has evolved to the point "they want it all, and they want it all to themselves. No mountain bikes, no OHVs, no rock climbers, no access to trail heads."

Collins quotes the Wilderness Act itself where it states wilderness lands shall be "administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people." But with big wilderness, only the young and the strong will ever get to enjoy it, he said.

"I could not agree more (with wilderness advocates) that wilderness is a national issue. And the Utah wilderness battle is the front lines in a national war over the future of all Western lands," he said.