

**Heidi McIntosh, Associate Director  
Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance**

Interviewer-John Howe

Heidi let's start out by talking about, is wilderness in danger, and why is it important?

Heidi McIntosh

Wilderness is in danger right now, and the past eight years have been particularly rough. There has been a significant uptake in oil and gas development that we've seen in wilderness lands in Utah. There's also been a growing use of off-road vehicles, where, every weekend you'll see an expansion of new trails pioneered by ATV riders, or bike riders, who can now go far into the backcountry and access sensitive wildlife habitat, water resources, riparian areas, and those are the two big threats right now: off-road vehicle use and oil and gas development.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me the importance of the Wilderness Act, the Washington County Land Use Bill and the potential Red Rock Wilderness Bill. Why is this legislation important?

Heidi McIntosh

Well, there have been a number of bills recently, a couple of them which created, one, the Cedar Mountains Wilderness, just about forty miles west of Salt Lake City, and then the Washington County Wilderness Bill, which is, of course, centered around St. George, Utah. Both of those were real landmark pieces of legislation for Utah, because it was the very first time that Congress created wilderness lands for BLM lands in Utah. A lot of the wilderness we have here and elsewhere is managed by the Forest Service, so, it's the high peaks, it's the forests; it's the places that people often think of when they think of wilderness, but the BLM manages these fabulous red rock canyon landscapes here in Utah. It was the land that people thought was only good for grazing, and oil and gas, and mining back in the 40's and 50's. They were orphan lands that people have really come to love and appreciate, particularly in the 70's and afterwards. So, it was a real breakthrough in Utah, and those places, those two pieces of legislation protected some magnificent country. In Washington County you have the Sonora Desert, the Mojave Desert and the Canyon Country coming together in one place with a really magnificent diversity of landforms and species.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why do you think wilderness has been controversial?

Heidi McIntosh

You know, I don't think that wilderness itself, the idea that land should be protected for the benefit of future generations as well as leaving places that are open and available for us to, to go to, to hike, to seek some peace and quiet. Many people go to wilderness for spiritual renewal because it's quiet and they feel like they can really meditate and contemplate things in wilderness. It's also important because the ecological values that wilderness areas possess, particularly in a time of climate change. Climate change has put these places under stress like never before, so we're seeing shrinking water resources, less wildlife habitat, hotter, drier conditions which lead to bigger wildfires, and what scientists are saying now is that one of the

best ways to protect the lands and increase their resilience is to just leave them alone. So I think these ideas are very well-known and very well-accepted. I think that wilderness gets controversial because it is about not just the land sometimes, but it's about the cultural divide between the people who live near the wilderness areas--not all of them, but some of them--are afraid of the designation and what it might mean for their futures. Some ranchers believe that wilderness will keep them from ranching in the future, which is not true. You can actually graze livestock in a wilderness area. And, sometimes they see people who want wilderness as people from the outside, people who may be from the east coast, for example, or people from the cities, and the values are different, and so I think it's really more of an outgrowth of kind of a cultural divide, as opposed to a disagreement about what wilderness is. When we go out and talk to people in rural communities, and we have excellent relationships with some folks in rural communities, we really want the same things. We look out over these landscapes, and their beauty is self-evident, and we love them, and they love them, and we all want them to stay the same, and so you wonder sometimes, what's the argument about? It's about something else. It doesn't really have to do with wilderness and the willingness and interest in protecting these areas.

Interviewer-John Howe

You talked about a little bit, but who do you think owns the public lands, and should rural residents have a say in that arrangement?

Heidi McIntosh

Well, all Americans own these lands. They are as relevant and important to people who live in New York and Hawaii as they are to people who live right here in Utah. It's the same way, the same sense of ownership that we as Utahans have about the Statue of Liberty, or even Yellowstone and Yosemite. Everybody owns them, all Americans. And, of course, rural Utahans live close to many of these places and they should have a say in exactly the same way as everybody else has a say, and their voice is important and it ought to be heard along with everybody else's.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk about the creation of Grand Staircase a little bit and why was that so controversial, and why do you think people were upset about that? What, maybe, should have been done there?

Heidi McIntosh

The creation of the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument has an interesting, long history, and I think some of the controversy has to do with the fact that there was a coal mine proposed, for a long time, in the heart of the Kaiparowits, which includes the National Monument, and the fact is, that the coal company was having a very hard time getting the permit for the mine, and, in fact, at the time that the monument was designated, did not have a permit, and the Board of Oil, Gas and Lighting here in Utah actually rejected the permit shortly after the monument was designated. So, the future of the mine was a little iffy, but people in that area had started to count on that coal mine being there. And again, I think it goes back to some of that feeling that people who want to protect lands are from the outside. The people who live there don't want to protect the lands. I don't think that's true so much anymore in Kane County. There are a number of people who are wilderness advocates in Kane County who will come out to

events and support wilderness. They write about wilderness. There are wilderness outfitters in the Monument. Overall, I think the Monument has been a good thing. And when you look back in history too, Zion National Park, one of the most beloved landscapes in all of Utah, started out as a national monument, and so did some other places in Utah--Arches National Park, for example. And, over time, people really come to see the value in these places and their availability for other things, for hunting, for fishing, for going out and just marveling at the spectacular beauty of it all; being able to do that with your grandkids, and knowing that their grandkids will do it with theirs.

Interviewer-John Howe

Some rural residents, well, I won't mention any names, look at SUWA as their arch-enemy, in fact, once that they were very unethical. Why do you think that is, and what would be your response to them?

Heidi McIntosh

You know, there is some antipathy and mistrust in rural Utah, not overall, and there are many local county commissioners and other residents who have a very good relationship with SUWA, and we've tried hard to nurture that relationship and we have on-going communications, and those relationships are very important to us. I think that there are some hard feelings still in some parts of the state about the designation of wilderness and, perhaps, about the Monument as well, but as we get to know more and more of the county commissioners, and as they get to know us, the relationships have really been, with very few exceptions, nothing but positive. And again, I think it's because when we sit down with groups with different opinions, when we go out into the desert with some of these people, we look across these landscapes and they hit us pretty much in the same way, that these are beautiful places and everybody wants them to be pretty much the same way in the future as they are today. I think one of the reasons that these landscapes is so special, and that wilderness is so special is because it evokes the better part of human beings, when they come to these places, it evokes a sense of awe, and wonder, and generosity towards future generations, of openness that very few places do, and that's true, I think, across the board, whether you're talking to a wilderness advocate or whether you're talking to a rural Utah county commissioner.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about the Pariah Canyon off-road "protest," if you will. Tell me your opinion of that and whether or not any law was broken at that point.

Heidi McIntosh

Well, a few weeks ago, a number of off-road vehicle riders, encouraged by some local politicians, went to a place called the Pariah River, which had been closed in the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument Land Use Plan, and the reason it was closed is because the Pariah River is a river, and rivers are enormously important for ecological reasons in the desert, for obvious reasons. I mean, they are about 1% of the landscape now, but they still provide habitat for about 80% of the native wildlife there, and so they're very important resources, outsized in proportion to the amount of land that they cover, and, under the Antiquities Act, which governs the monument, they're supposed to be protected, so the BLM did just that. So, they closed the route, but they never enforced it and it gave some people the idea that, if the BLM's not

enforcing the law, then they can go ahead and use it, even though, technically, it's against the rules. So, when the BLM finally did decide to try to put the genie back in the bottle and close the route, people were upset, and you can understand how that would happen, given what the BLM had done. So, they went out and they rode it. There was a lot of fire-breathing rhetoric about the federal government and what they're doing to squelch Utahans rights so, not looking at it from the perspective of protecting something, but being very upset about the limitations that were now in force, and some people went out and they rode it, and it was a violation of the law. BLM, again, did not enforce it, did not attempt to stop the ride, which they should have done, so BLM is now left in the position of having to protect this area, trying to put the genie back in the bottle though, after all these years of expectations that the BLM is going to stand by while you violated the rules. So, a very tough situation, but, you know, emblematic of a lot of the controversy in southern Utah over roads, and off-road vehicle trails. Off-road vehicles have grown exponentially in Utah. There are hundreds of thousands of them here in Utah, about 500,000, and that doesn't even include the vehicles that come from Colorado, Arizona, California, to ride in Utah, and they all want to ride on these primitive trails, some of which are in riparian areas and wildlife habitat and other sensitive places. So, that's become an enormous, sort of a flashpoint, for BLM management, something that BLM really has to get a handle on.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk about the Tim DeChristopher case a little bit, whether there's a parallel there between his indictment, if you will, and the off-road protest.

Heidi McIntosh

Well, in both cases we have a situation in which the law was violated in order to achieve some other means by people who were acting on their conscience, and who felt like something was wrong and that they were going to remedy it through acting in violation of the rules so, those are the similarities there, and it gets into very tricky questions about whether these acts are civil disobedience, or whether they're actually, a violation of a rule that deserves to be prosecuted, and, our take on that is that we have a completely different way of approaching these issues. We have lawyers have on staff here, and we have found that, even in the toughest of times for wilderness and threats to wilderness, the judiciary has been a useful tool for restoring a little more balance to the way wilderness areas are managed, so, in the end, with respect to these seventy-seven oil and gas leases that were at issue, we were able to get an injunction in January, about a month after those leases were bid upon and that so far has been the end of the leasing. The BLM could not go forward and actually issue those leases as a result of the injunction. And so, there's an alternative way of doing that, and that's the way that we have been proceeding. We've been fairly successful doing it that way. And, there are other avenues as well--public education, talking to elected officials--so there is a whole array of tools that advocates can use, and we use them all.

Interviewer-John Howe

Discuss oil and gas drilling in the West, and specifically the leases in question. What kind of impact do they have on the environment not only with drilling rigs, but with roads and potential water issues?

Heidi McIntosh

Well, oil and gas development has a huge impact on wilderness and other landscapes throughout the west in almost every way that you can think about. For one thing, once you lease an area of land to an oil and gas company, it really inhibits the land managers' ability to manage for any other resource or to designate the land as wilderness, because they basically have a renter out there in the form of this oil and gas company. So, the next step is that the oil and gas company will often go out and seek to develop the oil and gas they have out there, so they go out sometimes with these things called thumper trucks and they drive, cross-country over the landscape, over any wildlife habitat or plants that might be out there, and they'll put down a plate and vibrate the ground, and the readings that they get back will tell them something about where the oil and gas resources are. So that leaves tracks on the ground, which is frequently adopted by off-road vehicle users. Sometimes the county claims that they become highways, and then that dissects and fragments the land even further. Sometimes they go out and actually scrape new roads, and then they will eventually get out there with a drill, start drilling the land with the drill, and then eventually the pumping mechanism. You have compressors, which are loud. You have lights. Often times you'll have flaring of the gas that comes with the well, and then you have these waste pits that go along with the wells too, and those are often pits in the ground that are just full of sludge and drilling materials which are toxic, but which are often times proprietary in information so you can't tell exactly what's in there. And then you have a whole network of roads that come along with that, and that fragments wildlife habitat, kicks up dust, and it opens up the territory, again, for off-road vehicle users who often adopt these places. Now, interestingly in Utah, where we have this rich heritage of Native American history, a lot of these places also have archeological sites, and there have been studies that show that once you provide access into an area and people start driving in, the looting of these sites goes up as well. So, there's a full range of impacts to oil and gas development. It's not to say that oil and gas development should never take place under any circumstances. There are some circumstances, but it has to be carefully controlled and you have to consider the losses as well as the benefits when you do it.

Interviewer-John Howe

Discuss climate change in the west. Some rural residents discount it. One scientist called the Colorado Plateau the epicenter of global warming. Is it real, and then, what kind of impact does it have?

Heidi McIntosh

Well, in this case you've got to give the benefit of the doubt to the scientists. These are people who are well-qualified, very sober people who have been concluding, based on years of evidence and study, that climate change is, in fact, occurring, and there's more and more information about what that means for the intermountain west. The U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Climate Change Science Program have concluded that what we're going to see here in the west are shrinking water supplies, diminished wildlife habitat, fewer native plants, less water. We are going to get some precipitation, but it's going to come in concentrated, more violent storms with more run-off, more rapid run-off, that doesn't allow the water to sink into the land where it can be used by plants and animals and replenish riparian areas and other rivers and waterways. This all means too, more non-native, invasive plant species, like cheat grass, and often times these new species are highly flammable so they are going to lead to bigger and hotter wildfires than ever before. And we're already starting to see some of these things in our wildfire seasons,

which are lasting longer, and we're getting these enormous wildfires, less water, more dust storms. In Colorado now, when you go to the San Juan's in the western part of the states in the spring, instead of the white fingers of snow coming off of the peaks, what you're seeing are reddish-brown fingers of dirty snow coming off of the peaks, and that, in large part, is Utah dust getting blown. It's getting churned up from land disturbance, oil and gas drilling roads, off-road vehicles in Utah, and getting blown over to Colorado. That dust on the snow acts as a thermal blanket. It heats up the snow faster. It melts faster, and so you've got a shorter season where you've got run-off just pummeling down those mountain slopes, causing flooding, and then it's gone; and the rest of the summer, when it's really hot, you've got a lot less water. So those are the things that are happening right now. We're already seeing them, so it's very hard to deny them and it lends credence to what the scientists have been saying, and what they've been saying, in particular, about the need to protect the land, leave it the way it is, so it's as healthy as possible, so you don't have as much dust kicking up on the disturbed ground and heightening the resilience of these places to climate change.

Interviewer-John Howe

Where do you see common ground between both sides of this issue? And what do you see for the future of the West?

Heidi McIntosh

What I see for the future of the west is a period in which people are going to be talking more and coming to the table more and I think it's going to be fueled by a number of things. One is that people are coming to realize that we're never going to drill our way into energy independence in this country. Our resources are much, much too meager. Utah, in particular, has something like one to two percent of the oil and gas reserves in the country, and the United States only has about three percent of the resources, oil and gas resources available in the world, and so, there's just no way we could do it. The numbers don't add up. I think there's an increasing realization of this, and an increasing realization of the importance of turning to alternative fuels, and that's going to mean solar. It's going to mean wind, geo-thermal. And there's also going to be a heightened awareness of the importance of conservation. And so, it's going to be a whole new way of thinking about land use, where we site things. Already there have been a number of proposals for solar and wind in Utah. They tend not to conflict with the wilderness proposal, and they're going to provide jobs for locals and others who live in the area. So, I think it's just going to be a whole new way of thinking about how we live in the West. It's going to take some time to develop, but we can't wait that long, so I'm hoping that when we have this conversation in five years, things will be in place. There won't be as much controversy around wilderness. People are going to be talking about these other uses and other needs, other imperatives that are going to steer us in another direction.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me just about the value of silence in wilderness. What value do you see in that?

Heidi McIntosh

Silence is becoming a rare and endangered resource in our daily lives. We hear traffic. There's always a computer on, a radio or a TV. Population is rising everywhere and so that ability to go into a quiet, silent place is sort of a centering, I think, for almost anybody who goes there, and it's

the same reason that people will also visit churches and synagogues and other houses of worship. It's a way of connecting with something that's bigger than yourself, or connecting with yourself, or connecting with your family. Now, I've seen women talk about how when they take their family camping, it's the only time they're able to get their teenagers' attentions because they don't have a computer and they don't have a Game Boy. It's just the family, and I've heard descriptions, and experienced this myself, of families sitting around a campfire, and they're actually talking, and talking about meaningful things while they're roasting marshmallows, and that's something that you really can't get anywhere else, and I think a lot of people identify with that.