

**Michael Swenson, Executive Director
Utah Shared Access Alliance**

Interviewer-John Howe

What are the goals at Shared Alliance, and what do you hope to achieve?

Mike Swenson

The goals of the Utah Shared Access Alliance are to preserve and protect access to public land in the state of Utah. We hope to encourage the public to become active and involved in the issues and really take the power that is theirs to tell the federal government how they want public land in our state to be managed.

Interviewer-John Howe

What would you say to some critics who say that off-road vehicles are harmful to the land?

Mike Swenson

I would say that they probably ought to open their minds a little. Access to public lands via off-road vehicles, or any vehicles for that matter provide people the opportunity to fall in love with it. When you experience it, you love it, and look at this beautiful place and how could you not help but want to protect it, and the reason we want that is because we have access. And again, off-road vehicles are a great way to access public land.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why has wilderness preservation become so controversial in the American West?

Mike Swenson

That's a very complex question. In the American West, there really is a cold war. It has been brewing for a very long time. The issue is controversial because you have so many different people and groups, entities that want access to land for one reason or another, and sometimes those wants and needs are at odds with one another. I think it really boils down to control and selfishness, quite frankly.

Interviewer-John Howe

What are your main concerns in terms of access to the land? Is too much land being locked up?

Mike Swenson

Without a doubt, too much land in the western U.S., and certainly in Utah, is being locked up. The public is being denied access to the public's land. It's wrong, and it has to change. It can't continue.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about the environmental community. What is the environmental community like to work with?

Mike Swenson

Well that depends on the day I suppose, and depends on the issue. The environmental

community, as a whole, seems to be quite difficult to work with. They're usually unyielding in their wants and their demands. Our community constantly is giving. We are giving up roads and trails all the time. Sometimes we're OK with it; most of the time we're not. But the environmental community, at least here in Utah, is usually unwilling to concede or come to middle grounds, and when the other party is not willing to meet you in the middle, it becomes very difficult to find that happy medium and find a solution that really works for all.

Interviewer-John Howe

What are your concerns with the legislation, like the Washington County Lands Bill, and I guess, more importantly, the proposed Red Rock Wilderness Bill?

Mike Swenson

Some of the large wilderness bills, or bill, that is being proposed that pertains to Utah is huge. It amounts to roughly forty percent of the public land in the state of Utah, over nine million acres. That is more acreage than a lot of eastern states that we would be essentially locking up and throwing away the key. Really, the access to wilderness is next to none, and the ability to manage the land and resource within those wilderness boundaries is very difficult. It is unacceptable. We will not allow that much land to be locked up, and, quite frankly, that much land that is being proposed does not qualify as wilderness. There are roads, mines, airstrips. There are all sorts of manmade features across that land and would disqualify it from true wilderness quality.

Interviewer-John Howe

In your opinion, who owns the public land?

Mike Swenson

The people of the United States own the land, and I think a lot of time the citizens of our great country forget that the power lies in the people. And the ability to manage land, and to say how land should be managed lies with the people, but we forget that because there's a separation between us and Washington, but it really is with us. I would add the caveat that local people should have a little more say. We are directly impacted, whether that road is open, or that road is closed, whereas our brethren in New York State, it doesn't matter to them so much if the road is closed, so the locals need to have a weighted say in these matters.

Interviewer-John Howe

One wilderness advocate said, "the greatest threat to wilderness is off-road vehicle use." How would you respond to that?

Mike Swenson

I'm not sure what he means by off-road access, or use, being the greatest threat to wilderness. A lot of the land that is being proposed by environmental organizations for wilderness doesn't really qualify, doesn't meet the intent of what Congress or the people wanted to be wilderness. It is not the primitive, untouched, pristine land that a lot of environmental groups would like the public to believe. There are mines, roads, airstrips, just tons of things on them that don't make it that primitive, special place we want to preserve. There are those places where man has not touched, and I think it's OK to preserve those, but, are we a threat to it? No. We're just using the

land that we have for decades, and hopefully we'll be able to continue to do so.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me about the ride on the Capitol that's scheduled for August the 8th. I assume that you're probably part of that. What do you hope to achieve by that ride? And, what's the purpose of it?

Mike Swenson

The purpose of the ride, it's called the "Take Back Utah" event and what we're really hoping to do is instill in the public a sense of empowerment. I said it earlier. The people forget that the federal government is theirs. Those folks in Washington D.C. do not work for themselves. They don't work for some ethereal supreme being. They work for the people of the United States. We are gathering people and giving them an opportunity to unite, voice their concerns, voice their opinions, and send a message not only to the public, but particularly to those who represent us at various levels of government and let them know that the issue of public land access matters deeply to them and we expect those people to represent us better than they have in the past.

Interviewer-John Howe

We have two different cases now that have happened lately, the Pariah Canyon protest ATV ride and the Tim DeChristopher case on oil and gas bidding. Do you see any similarities between those two cases, and where do you see the boundaries there?

Mike Swenson

I think the issue that we're driving at is, to what degree is civil disobedience OK? To what degree is it OK for you to take action, and how far does that action go? You know, I'm not a fan of monkey-wrenching. I'm not a fan of people violating the federal laws, meaning tearing across public land that they shouldn't. There's a process by which people can engage in these issues that is set up, and a lot of times, such as the oil and gas lease sale, they weren't participating in that process. That young man did not participate. There were no letters from him. He didn't engage in any public comment periods, yet he took action that caused financial harm to the public, to the school children of Utah, and I think that was terrible. The Pariah Canyon incident, I understand taking a ride on the trail and wanting to do that. I don't blame those folks one bit. Was there financial harm? Did it harm anybody? No, probably not, so maybe a little bit of a lesser grievance there, but, you know, civil disobedience, I think in general, isn't the way to go. There is a process. We should participate in that process, and, if we don't, what do we have? We don't have any order. We've got to maintain order.

Interviewer-John Howe

Discuss the issue of wilderness airstrip access. What is the issue? And, what should be done there?

Mike Swenson

Well, the issue around remote airstrip access in wilderness is similar to roads and trails for a variety of reasons, whether it's for recreational purposes or using those strips to access areas for resource development and extraction. I don't think anybody, including the folks that are flying in on those strips want airports out there. It is primarily for remote, backcountry experience. It just gives another opportunity for the public to get in there and see some pretty spectacular places. I

don't know that those strips are threatened greatly, but, if wilderness were created around those, it is an issue that would have to be addressed. Would those airstrips be closed? Very possibly.

Interviewer-John Howe

Should there be wilderness areas that are protected from use of any kind?

Mike Swenson

Yes. In fact, I would strongly advocate that if you want to create a wilderness area, maybe we should just close it down to everyone. I don't see why allowing, pedestrians, hikers and such, exclusive accesses is right. Look, there are places that need to be protected and it's OK, but these huge tracts of land that they want to shut down. You know, I often wonder if we said, "OK, fine. No access. Zero human contact," what would the debate be then? What would happen then?

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about the Tim DeChristopher case. Tell me what you think about that. We were talking about it in comparison to the protest.

Mike Swenson

The throw, I guess, or the hijacking of the BLM oil and gas lease sale was definitely a thing that was very harmful to the citizens to the state of Utah. BLM had done their job. BLM had taken the necessary steps to put those parcels up for lease. The thing that was concerning to us was Utah school children, people may not understand that, but they benefit from some of the money that comes from the extraction of resources off of public land. They were harmed, to the tune of millions of dollars, people were harmed. It harmed the citizens of Utah. It harmed the companies that had purchased those lease sales, or parcels. You know, civil disobedience is one of those gray areas, if you will. We don't condone it. I don't think it's the right way to always go. There's a public process by which people have to engage. I understand that if you engage in that public process, and you take all the necessary steps, and you do everything you can and it doesn't work, that you may feel the need to protest in a way that may be civilly disobedient. In that instance that's one thing. That did not happen with that case. With Pariah Canyon, the public had gone through extensive public comment periods, had voiced their opinion, had done all that they could through their local representatives and through personally contacting BLM, and they still had an historic route closed that we believe the state and county owned. You know, whether it's right or wrong that they rode on that road, I'm not going to judge, but certainly people need to engage in that public process before they ever think about doing anything that would be civilly disobedient.

Interviewer-John Howe

One wilderness advocate said that "the greatest threat to wilderness is off-road use." How would you respond?

Mike Swenson

The claim by the environmentalist that off-road access, or recreation, or use is the greatest threat to wilderness is bogus. I can't help but answer the question with a question. In the Mid-90's, the first proposals you saw for wilderness were 1.9 million acres of wilderness. Some of the first bills were around four or five million acres, and these inventories and recommendations to

Congress were done by land-use professionals who have training in this. And suddenly environmental organizations send out, their foot soldiers to look at land and inventory it, and it grew and grew, and grew, and grew some more, and it continues to grow. And it seems like more wilderness keeps popping up every day. If we're such a threat to wilderness, and our numbers have continued to grow, and so has wilderness, maybe we ought to just leave things alone and wilderness will continue to grow. What do we really need to protect? Are we really protecting anything with it anyway? I don't think so.

Interviewer-John Howe

You were talking about the community here. Why should we care in the people that are involved in this shared access and also off-road vehicle use?

Mike Swenson

I think that there is a huge misconception among the public and especially those who are either not on the environmentalist's side, which by the way, I think we certainly are environmentalists-- I think we care and we do want to conserve the land--or whether you're just kind of aloof to the whole issue, the people that are involved in motorized recreation are some of the best people in the world. These are hard-working Americans that are raising families and contribute to our communities and this is one of their means of recreation. This is one of the benefits of living in a place like rural Utah where there's not a lot of other benefits, quite frankly. I want the public to really understand that these people are not out here tearing the land up. There's that story that's being told that we're a bunch of uneducated, rednecks out here tearing stuff up, and it's just not true. These are good folks who love the land. Some of them actually make their living off the land and, as long as they do it responsibly, they should have access as much as they want.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why is wilderness important?

Mike Swenson

Wilderness certainly has its place. It can be a tool that is used to take areas where people have just not touched. There may not be resources we want to extract, and so wilderness has its place in the land use paradigm, in the tool box, if you will, of the land use manager, but, by and large, it is something that really doesn't work, I even think, for the preservation and protection of the land. Having access to land is very important. The reason the environmental community wants to protect it, the reason the off-road community wants to protect it, is because we've all been here. We see this beautiful, amazing place. We want to continue to see it. It's because we've been here that we've fallen in love with it. It's because we love it that we will continue to protect it. If we turn it into wilderness, and we lock it up and throw away the key and all we ever get to do is look at pretty pictures on the wall of what wilderness is. In a few generations, will we continue to protect it? Will we continue to love it like we have? I don't think so.