

**Ted Wilson, Former Executive Director
Utah Rivers Council**

Interviewer—John Howe

Ted let's start out by telling me a little bit about the Washington County Wilderness Bill, and the wild and scenic protection for the Virgin River. Why is the Virgin River important, and why is it in this bill?

Ted Wilson

Well the reason Virgin River was important for this bill is the fact that the designation of the Virgin was the first river designated Wild and Scenic in the state of Utah, and the bill itself is the first time we have seen a successful negotiation between the more conservative county commissioners, county interests, and environmentalists. SUWA, Utah's River Council and others participated, and we see that as a tremendous way of saying to Utah people that wild and scenic is an acceptable designation.

Interviewer—John Howe

What does wild and scenic status mean?

Ted Wilson

Wild and scenic status was part of the wild and scenic river's act of the United States Congress, and it was designed to give different categories to rivers in a protective way. It protects riparian zones, it protects rivers from overdevelopment, and it keeps rivers from being dammed, and diverted-which is a very important part of it, because when rivers become dammed they become salty, they become destructive to the riparian areas, and they take a valuable scenic or farmland in the process. So we feel that wild and scenic is a very important designation for the future of this state where we have an inclination to overdevelop things.

Interviewer—John Howe

Tell me a little bit about the character of the Virgin River. Why do you think that it's important for being wild and Scenic River?

Ted Wilson

The character of the Virgin is amazing. I mean if you go to the upper tributaries, there are these classic slot canyons that we're used to thinking about when we think of the Virgin narrows, but they feed the narrows, and inside those canyons are the most amazing natural features one could ever see. Many are accessible; thousands walk the subway every year a very part of the Great Western Canyon. Others go into the upper canyons, canyoneers, hikers and others. And so the amazing display of the Red Rock stratas and the importance of water and how water geology can cut these narrow passageways is almost an exercise for a physics class. So it just has important scientific and very important tourism aspects to it.

Interviewer—John Howe

You mentioned when we talked before that the national parks are not really wilderness.

How would you define wilderness?

Ted Wilson

The definition of wilderness is really very simple; the wilderness act of 1964 signed by Lyndon Baines Johnson simply says that wilderness is where man does has only gone and left footprints, and is road less. And therefore any tract of land that we designate with high quality value-either scenic or scientific or for biology or ecosystems can qualify under the law for wilderness area, and that's why it's important in an America that must look forward for great-future generations and for itself to make sure that these extraordinarily values are kept for our people.

Interviewer—John Howe

What would you say are the greatest threats to the Virgin River, and wild and scenic rivers in general?

Ted Wilson

Well, the greatest threat to the Virgin River and all wild and scenic rivers is simply the tendency for all of us to want to put our cabin or home to close to the stream, or a polluting industry right next door, or to overrun it with chemicals and other kinds of water additives. So, from the standpoint of water quality, from scenery, and even for good planned recreation we need to have wild and scenic rivers. The act does allow for some development to occur near the river, and in the scenic areas or in the recreational areas, and only portions of the river are absolutely wild. So it makes it a fairly easy law to negotiate with people who might be more conservative on these issues.

Interviewer—John Howe

Tell me a little bit about West Water Canyon. We spoke about that before West Water Canyon and the Colorado, why is that important, and tell me what's scenic about that?

Ted Wilson

Well the West Water Canyon is important and scenic simply because it's so accessible, so wild, and for a river runner it's just an absolute classic. I mean we're talking about really class four rapids, some of the most fascinating rapids in the world-skull rapid, the room of doom, begins to define that amazing section of the river, and for the tourist industry in Utah, and for Utahans and others that wish to recreate, you can't do better than West Water. And so that really deserves wild and scenic status also, so we make sure that no one goes in there and does something to destroy what people value so highly. Thousands use that amazing canyon every year. You can run it in one day, and so you don't even need to disturb your schedule very much.

Interviewer—John Howe

What do you think is the most significant wilderness in Utah, and why?

Ted Wilson

Well I like to think the most significant wilderness in Utah is the Lone Peak Wilderness. It was the first wilderness under the forest service round, and the first wilderness in Utah,

and it sits right next to Salt Lake County, and everyone in Salt Lake County has looked to Lone Peak, and looked at some beautiful wilderness land and many people hike in there and enjoy it. It's our sales piece, it's a piece of wilderness that urban Utahans can take a look at and really appreciate wilderness values. So to me in the greater sense, that's the most important. I like to follow up on that if I could.

Interviewer—John Howe

Go ahead.

Ted Wilson

Washington County is also an extraordinarily important wilderness area because it is the first major compromise between conservative and growth develop people in southern Utah, and environmental groups. Senator Bennett did an amazing job of bringing both sides to the table, and in that process the Senator was able to go back and forth in a kind of show of diplomacy with his staff in a way that that we found that the conservative people wanted boundaries. They were tired of trying to argue over where wilderness ought to be or not, and the environmentalists wanted something to protect that land from ORVs, and oil drilling. And so all of that came together in a very unusual way, and it may set the tone for five other major counties now as we move ahead in wilderness designation. You can take your choice on which is more important.

Interviewer—John Howe

Why was there so much criticism of the creation of the Grand Staircase National Monument?

Ted Wilson

The controversy over the Grand Staircase National Monument came about when President Clinton in his re-election felt threatened in California and decided he need some environmental votes. So he flew over Utah, landed in Northern Arizona, went to Page and set on the corner of the Grand Canyon and declared a national monument in Utah. Now, it's an amazing place, and it really deserves that designation—at least from my point of view, and I think environmentalists in general, but it did harm the process in Utah and in the minds of Utahans, and it may have caused the defeat of Bill Orton who was then congressman from Utah. And because it happened so quickly, and without even Orton's knowledge, it made him look feckless, and he wound up losing that race to Chris Cannon, so it was disruptive, and it was too bad in a way that it had to come that way.

Interviewer—John Howe

Tell me that story about President Clinton calling you at home.

Ted Wilson

President Clinton called me while I was mowing the lawn one Saturday, because I was a coach here of his Utah campaign, and when I learned the day before he was going to declare the monument and I knew what that would do to Bill Orton, I became a little huffy, called his headquarters in Washington and told them that I would resign as his chair if that in fact happened. So, I'm out mowing the lawn and my wife comes and says

'Ted, you won't believe this, but I think its Bill Clinton'. Well, I thought it was a sales trick, you know, ventriloquist or somebody making it up. I go to the phone and he says 'Ted, it's Bill', and I said 'Really?' and he said 'Bill Clinton', and I said 'Oh hello Mr. President what would you like out of me?' I totally folded, I didn't hold my conviction, and maybe I should of, but I love Bill Clinton and he's very persuasive. I think any President is, and for me he was really persuasive.

Interviewer—John Howe

The late Edward Abbey once told me that the whole key to preservation is controlling population growth. How significant is population growth to wilderness issues in your opinion?

Ted Wilson

Well population growth as a separate issue is important to wilderness because the more people we have the more pressure we put on our native and wild lands. However, I don't think that the environmental side wants to push wilderness on the basis of telling people not to have children. We would rather think of these lands as a way to educate children, to get families out there, to let them see the value of the land, to let them hear a bird chirp in it's natural setting or see a free flowing river, to see the Red Rock unencumbered by any kind of man's influence-is a special treat, and I think what it does is give future generations an oversight that we sometimes lack. I mean we sometimes just look at the world as something we should consume for our own material wealth. A generation of young people educated otherwise will help save this planet and it's future.

Interviewer—John Howe

Let's talk a little bit about climate change and global warming. How big of a threat is that to wilderness?

Ted Wilson

Global warming and it's result-climate change, will have a devastating effect immediately upon the amount of water available on the Colorado Plateau of Utah--the Red Rock country. That's where the impact is supposed to be the highest. At the present time they're projecting Lake Powell to be a dead pool by the year twenty fifty, and that's very frightening. That means a lot less water for human habitation in Southern Utah. It means all kinds of disruptions-dust into our atmosphere, normally wouldn't be there, and a host of factors scientists are telling us that are really unpredictable at this moment, but will really vex us when they come along. So we've got to begin to look at that very carefully, and for the Colorado River System this could be devastating, and could affect very deeply the ability of Utah and the upper basin states to deliver the amount of water they're contracted to do. There are many offshoots of that that will cause a lot of legal and issue struggles over the years.

Interviewer—John Howe

What do you say is the biggest threat to wilderness presently?

Ted Wilson

I think the biggest threat to wilderness comes from just our greed. You know, we all want maybe a little more than we should have, and maybe in the current recession we are willing now to look at it not so much as a business cycle that will come back, as more as a reset of our values, and as those values shift and we begin to really embrace the natural world, I think all of us will begin to understand that that is worth the trade-off. The net result will be worth it to all of us to have a natural world to enjoy, because natural worlds give us a sense of ourselves, they acquaint us with the balance of life that's required both from animal and plants and from the geography. And so all of that comes together and really gives us value that goes far beyond any material sacrifices we might have to make.

Interviewer—John Howe

In some circles wilderness is considered a four letter word, what would you say to those critics?

Ted Wilson

Yeah, wilderness is a four lettered word for some people, obviously they don't spell very well, but I think it comes from people who are quite desperate or very deeply committed to some other values, and some of those values are very important. We have to sustain our lives; we need jobs and a whole host of things. I like to be an optimist on that, because what I saw in the negotiations on the Washington County Lands Bill was people who did think wilderness or at least the word wild was a four-lettered word, come together with environmentalists and find common ground. And it was very encouraging to me also now to hear that county commissioners in at least four or five other counties in this state are saying we need boundaries, we'll work with you, and it says that even people who use four lettered words can sometimes learn to negotiate, and settlement maybe ought to be a four lettered word because that's what we're seeking.

Interviewer—John Howe

What do you think the common ground is between those sides, and how do you bring those sides together?

Ted Wilson

Well the common ground on wilderness is newly discovered, and it's a piece of gold on both sides. It is county commissioners who now realize the fight is not worth fighting, and want to have clear wilderness boundaries in their counties so they can go about the legitimate act in their minds, and I think in other's minds, to bring jobs and economic vitality. On the other side of it, environmentalists are realizing that if we let these lands go much longer without designation, relying on the old the fact of wilderness as our wilderness, we will lose it to ORVs on the land-off road vehicles-we will lose it to oil and gas drilling, and many other interests of practices. And so those two things have recently come together in this one really marvelous bill, the Washington County Bill, and giving us a prototype for the rest of the state of Utah, and to me that's a very encouraging sign, and one that Utahans can begin to look to as they begin to solve the problem.

Interviewer—John Howe

What would you say to some who just simply don't believe in climate change?

Ted Wilson

Well to those that don't believe in climate change, I say, all you got to do is get the thermometer out this summer and compare it to the one you had five or six years ago. Look at the climate maps. I think the big debate today is not so much on global warming because almost all people recognize the atmosphere is warming. The big debate is over whether man is causing it, because for those who don't think man has a role through carbon buildup, they more easily justify over-development and continued use of carbon as an energy source, and that's where the real debate is and I think as long as we focus on that, we use our science, let's not be afraid of science. It'll give the human race a lot better chance of mitigating global warming, and if mitigation doesn't do the entire job, because we may be behind the curb already, we'll at least learn to adapt, and that's going to be very important for all of us.

Interviewer—John Howe

What do you see as the future for wilderness in the American West? What do you think is going to happen over the next ten, twenty years?

Ted Wilson

Well the future of American wilderness is a tough one to call, because there will be many disputes, many fights over it. But I do believe that the new generation of Americans, the younger people coming up, kind of the Obama kids, if you will, and even those who have been more conservative traditionally, are starting to really understand the sensitivity of our earth and how everyone lives in a fine balance. The food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we use, and drink, all these things take a balance and we have to be careful not to dirty it up. Now, in the 1900's we learned to clean our houses and to bathe to avoid illness or other kinds of infections, it's the same process, we need to learn now as they did in the nineteenth century to apply the preventative elements to quit disserving our environment so it might be constructive to all of us. And so that is why this is very important, and I think the new generation coming up is going to help us do that.

Interviewer—John Howe

What do you see for the value of wilderness between people who simply don't see that—see that it's not really something for them, for example, something that they can't go into, or something that they would not use? What value do they have, if they're not a backpacker or river runner?

Ted Wilson

Well wilderness is often criticized because it does not allow access for wheelchair or for some kind of mechanized travel that disabled people or others might be able to use to get in, but when I think about that I do feel kind of bad that it keeps people like that out, but we're all kept out of a lot of things and I like to go back to what Wallace Stegner said. He simply said 'that it's important that wilderness exists, even if we have no access, even if we can never go there', because in recognizing the value of a wilderness area we say we know how to let things be. We know how to give nature its space. I have another thought about that because we live in a Mormon state, and Mormons along with

Catholics and many other religions use a concept called tithing, and tithing means you give back to God something for the religion. In my thought, wilderness is a tithing. We give to nature, and to God, a portion back, and we say 'we're not going to goof with you, we're going to leave it'. It becomes a museum, it becomes a place for inspiration, and it becomes something that just in it's being gives us value, and that's pretty amazing.

Interviewer—John Howe

Do you have a favorite quote or passage on wilderness or a favorite writer on wilderness, and if so, what?

Ted Wilson

Ed Abbey cut my heart. Stegner because his narrative is so descriptive and so beautiful and it is so given to understanding the deeper issues. Abbey because of the fight in the guy, and I'm not a real good fighter myself, I'm kind of a conciliator type guy, but I love the idea that people can have the passion of an Ed Abbey, can commit themselves a hundred percent, can live on the desert for extended periods of time, and come back with a message. So I'd put Stegner and Abbey at the top of my, the Gods of writing about wilderness. In the more modern sense, I'd give it to Terry Tempest Williams, a Utah woman who writes about delicate things in the wild setting, and uses that language to really inspire us. It's important stuff.