

## **WILDERNESS: THE GREAT DEBATE**

For forty years the American West has been the nation's battleground for the preservation of wild lands. But have 21<sup>st</sup> century growth and energy demands relegated wilderness to the pages of history? Robert Redford joins a host of diverse voices in debating the need and purpose of wilderness in a visually stunning new documentary by KUED's John Howe. The film airs February 3 at 7:00 p.m. KUED.

The program is balanced and inclusive, with Redford's eloquence for environmental preservation ably countered by elected officials and industry figures calling for a different mindset. The core of the debate is reflected in the film's open. "Is the West going to be reduced to just photos and films to show young people how it used to be, or are there going to be places where they can go and see the way it used to be, like wilderness and like national parks?" Redford asks. On the other hand, Mark Habbeshaw- Kane County Commissioner, says, "This is a war for rural people, for state and local sovereignty, to protect what little sovereignty we have left as a rural people; to protect our traditions, our culture our ability to manage our lives with a diversified economy."

The wilderness debate, as the film points out, began years ago when "wilderness became the West of the imagination, an almost mythical place attracting adventurers looking for a new life," according to filmmaker John Howe. Changes came with a growing population and the cries for manifest destiny. Some – such as President Theodore Roosevelt -- felt an urgency to protect a rapidly disappearing wilderness.

Howe delves into the history of the debate, placing it in a necessary context, and bringing it to the current day. The film includes interviews with President Obama's Secretary of the Interior, Ken Salazar, who talks about the importance of people connecting to the landscape, which he says "refuels the American spirit." Also included is an interview with Stewart Udall, secretary of the Interior under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and a former Arizona congressman who continued Teddy Roosevelt's legacy of conservation in the West

Writer Wallace Stegner described wilderness as "the geography of hope." But, wilderness has also been defined by legislation. The Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 are landmark examples of environmental legislation. The Wilderness Act, created by Congress in 1964, designated wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

The debate, as Howe points out, regards much more than the legal definition of creating wilderness. As population and energy needs increase, wilderness preservation has become an issue of global importance. "Much of the debate is about access to public land and competition for it. The discussion concerns how public land should be used," he says. "Issues include the creation of national monuments, national wildlife refuges and parks, energy development, off-road access, and ranching. The role of government is questioned regarding federal versus local control."

Says Kathleen Sgamma, Director of Government Affairs for the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States, "Whenever you put land off limits you're taking that energy resource away from the American public. I think that needs to be balanced with the impact that natural gas and oil actually has."

These crucial issues are focused dramatically on the American West.

“The wilderness advocates say that we need to protect those lands for future generations,” says Kane County Commissioner Mark Habbeshaw. “What they’re actually doing is locking those lands up from future generations and there are other designations that can keep those lands open and still protect them from abuse.”

Mike Swenson, who heads Utah’s Shared Access Alliance, is concerned about potential restrictions on roads and trails as well as the lack of a local voice. “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. “

Counters environmentalist Page Stegner, “I think the public land belongs to the public, and that means all of the public, not just the people who live there. Of course, they have a huge stake in it and consider themselves as its stewards, but they sometimes forget that it isn’t, in fact, just their land. It is all of our lands, and it should remain that way. “

Adds Redford, “it goes back to what are we going to preserve, and what are we going to develop, considering we are development oriented society. You’re probably not going to take that away, but the question is what are you going to have left to develop if you don’t preserve something, and also what are you going to preserve for the dignity and the stature of your country in terms of its heritage?”

The 1996 creation of Utah’s Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument provoked immediate and lasting controversy, encapsulating the debate over federal versus local control of the land. Howe interviewed those on both sides of the controversy.

“Every time a president has set aside a conservation area, the reaction from the West has been negative,” says Bruce Babbitt, President Clinton’s Secretary of the Interior. “There’s always been controversy, and it’s always been kind of a question of the extractive interests--miners, the ranchers, the timber industry, looking at their short-term return and saying, ‘Our short-term interest is what counts. We’re not concerned about the long-range sustainability, or beauty, or what we hand down to future generations.’ It takes a national perspective, in this case, and in many cases, the President using his or her powers to make these designations. “

Utah Senator Robert Bennett sees it differently. “The folks that lived there felt abused by people who did not live there, who, nonetheless, wanted to come into their backyard and say, ‘we’re going to take this land and we’re going to lock it off from you and for any activity that you might want to undertake--and, you shouldn’t be living there.’ Actually, there was a situation where some people in Congress said to the people from southern Utah, “You should move. You should not be living on this land.” And, of course, that created a tremendous kind of resistance on the part of the folks who live there. Then, the people who were trying to protect the land, with the wilderness designation, would not listen for many years to any kind of suggestion that, perhaps, this piece of land wasn’t worth the fight. Perhaps that

piece of land had some other uses that could be, could be made, and, it just got deeper and deeper on both sides.”

The film contains beautiful visuals of remarkable scenery as well as compelling action sequences involving disputes over land access, protests and development. Some residents, like Shawna Cox, in communities near the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument felt their voices weren't heard. Cox helped organize a protest rally at Paria Canyon, in the national monument. At issue was the closure of the road through the canyon. Protestors gathered to drive through the road. Law enforcement and supporters of the other side of the issue were also present. Howe's camera captured the event.

“Take Back Utah,” a protest event staged at Utah's State Capitol, saw protestors fill the streets in their off-road vehicles. The creation of wilderness, access to public lands and the role of the federal government were debated.

Howe also examines the debate over gas and oil leases in Utah. Near the end of his term, the administration of President George W. Bush approved oil and natural gas leases in Utah. President Obama's administration postponed some of these leases calling for more study.

Tim DeChristopher was a University of Utah student in December 2008 when he attended an oil and gas lease sale and bid on leases with the intent of disrupting the process. DeChristopher was federally prosecuted on felony charges, which carry substantial prison time and hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines if he's found guilty.

Mike Noel, a rancher and state representative from Kanab, Utah, worries about the effect on local economies if the leases are lost. “We need every dime we can get,” he says. “And there's a lot more out there.” He sees oil shale development as a big issue for Utah. We've got some of the most important deposits in the entire country.... We have the most in the world, and to be able to develop those in an environmentally responsible manner would be huge for the economy of Utah, and, as a policy-maker, I think we need to be able to do that without federal intervention.”

As energy needs mount for the nation and the world, questions arise as to where sources of energy will come from. Coal-fired power plants are considered a primary source, but they create millions of tons of coal ash waste that contribute to greenhouse gases and global warming.

Sigurd, Utah, a like a number of small towns, is caught in the middle. A coal-fired plant has been proposed in the farming town that is a gateway to Utah's national parks. Some want the economy and jobs energy production could bring. Others worry about the cost to the environment and their way of life.

“Powerful forces, all of whom think right is on their side, compete for the land,” says Howe. “Stewardship is questioned as to who loves the land most and to whom should it be entrusted. Ultimately, wilderness of the West belongs to the American people who should control its fate. Can anything wild survive overwhelming population? The great debate is really about planet Earth. The answers hold its future.”

