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Loving it to Death: Land Use Conflict, Outdoor Recreation and the Contradictions of Wilderness in Southeast Utah, USA

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Cultural valuations of landscapes often underlie land use conflict. This paper draws from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with recreational land users (primarily rock climbers), land managers, ranchers, and others in the Indian Creek area of Southeast Utah to understand how actors engage in the cultural valuation of the landscape. The findings center on the following puzzle: how do actors maintain a vision of public land as a vestige of wilderness values while experiencing socio-ecological dynamics that either impinge upon this vision or unravel the basis of their values altogether? We draw two conclusions from the analysis. First, as land managers regulate outdoor recreation in multi-use settings, policies should recognize the embodied cultural values that underlie conflict and address the contradictory social pressures (namely wilderness ethics vs. high-impact consumption) that define outdoor recreation culture. Second, land-use conflict should be understood generally as having cultural roots developed through embodied engagement with the landscape.

Keywords: land management; outdoor recreation; valuation; land use conflict; Utah; public lands; Bears Ears National Monument

Introduction

Conflict over land use and management has long shaped the relationship between society and landscape in the U.S. West. In recent decades, federal land management has re-entered the realm of contentious politics. High-profile events like the 2016 armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, political movements to transfer title of federal lands to states, and actions of the Trump Administration to loosen federal land protections together demonstrate that the meaning and future of “public land” in the United States remain contested and unclear.

Although alignment between political and economic interests often drives land use conflict, cultural values regarding contentious landscapes shape how social interests and land users engage land management practices and policies (Zillman and Smith

2019; Ruple 2018; Hobbs et al. 2014). Existing research demonstrates that the processes by which areas are made valuable play a role in determining how areas are allowed to be exploited (and by whom), contaminated as “sacrifice zones,” or granted special protections as “wilderness” (Lerner 2010; Smith and Hooks 2004; Farrell 2020; Cronon 1996; Wilderness Act of 1964; Martinez-Alier 2002). In the case of Southeast Utah, these possibilities have overlapped to shape political contention and land governance (Robinson 2018; Utah Wilderness Coalition 1990; Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance 2015; McPherson 2011; McBrayer and Roberts-Cady 2018; Smith 2020; Patagonia 2020). Recent and ongoing controversy surrounding the Bears Ears National Monument (henceforth BENM) in the region provides a test case for the larger social process by which place-based values shape social interests at play in conflicts over land use and land management.

A relatively recent development in the contention over western landscapes is the rise of outdoor recreation, specifically on public lands in Southeast Utah where BENM is located. Although overall trends in outdoor recreation and tourism are mixed (White et al. 2016; Outdoor Industry Association 2020), visitation of public land in southeast Utah has risen dramatically in recent decades (NPS 2021a, 2021b). Recreational users represent a group of stakeholders with growing political and economic influence in the region (Schwinning et. al 2008). Growth of the recreational sector is reflected in regional shifts of land management agency priorities toward managing recreational use alongside mineral and grazing leases. Given this context, the meaning that users (recreational and otherwise) bring to and derive from their experiences on public land is important to explore as a cultural domain of meaning- and place-making practices.

This article draws from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with recreational users (primarily rock climbers), as well as land managers, ranchers, and others to gain

insight on how these actors construct divergent meanings about the landscape of the Indian Creek area of Southeast Utah. The findings presented center on the following puzzle: how do actors maintain a vision of public land as a vestige of wilderness while also experiencing socio-ecological dynamics that either impinge upon this vision or unravel the basis of their ideals altogether? Particularly significant to this puzzle, our analysis shows, is how the cultural valuation of the desert landscape among land users engage the following trends: a persistent value attached to wilderness and a sacred landscape; environmental disturbance caused by recreational use; the mainstreaming of “climbing culture” and commodification of experience through the outdoor recreation industry; and an undesirable trajectory of land development in the area. As analyzed below, these trends are in part recognized among land users, resulting in a common narrative that the landscape may be getting “loved to death.” Rather than a physical description of the landscape, however, discourse of love and dying speaks to the antinomies at the center of “wilderness”: can experiences of wilderness reconcile with the pressures of land-use conflict on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the rapid expansion of “outdoor” culture and industries?

We draw two conclusions from our analysis. First, to the extent land management agencies plans seek to regulate outdoor recreation in multi-use settings, they should recognize a contradiction between cultural values of wilderness and sacredness on the one hand, and social pressures driving environmental disturbance, consumption-based participation in a new mainstream climbing culture, and the commercialization of outdoor experience on the other. Second, we argue that land-use conflict should be understood more generally as having cultural roots developed through embodied engagement with the landscape, as opposed to mere economic and political interests.

The article proceeds as follows. We initially provide some background on the Indian Creek case and outline the land management struggle centered on the establishment of BENM. We then situate the study in literature in political ecology and cultural sociology, problematizing the relationship between land, social interests, experience, and valuation. Next, we discuss our data collection and analytic approach. The presentation of results is organized in four subsections. We first demonstrate the persisting cultural value of wilderness among recreational users and a discourse of sacredness among others. Second, we address evidence and interpretations of environmental disruption, specifically that caused by recreational land use. Third, we reconstruct how recreational users, land managers, and ranchers resent the mainstreaming of “climbing culture” and the commodification of experience. Fourth, we identify how actors’ visions of a degraded or commercialized future landscape inform conflicting views of land management in BENM. The paper concludes by discussing how these results demonstrate the contradictions of wilderness as a basis for experience, landscape valuation, and land management.

Background and Literature Review

Indian Creek and Bears Ears in Political Context

Indian Creek is located in remote San Juan County, Utah, approximately 60km south of Moab. The landscape consists of open grass and shrub-covered structural benches and alluvial plains bordered by towering 100m pink-colored wingate sandstone cliffs. The burnished surfaces of wingate sandstone are marked extensively with petroglyphs, granaries, and other archaeological evidence of Indigenous Peoples, who variously inhabited the area starting approximately two thousand years ago (Anderson 1978; Burrillo 2017). Although traversed by early European explorers, white settlers began to

permanently settle Indian Creek and its neighboring valleys as a site for winter forage for cattle ranching by the mid-nineteenth century. Current land ownership in Indian Creek is a patchwork of public and private land (See Figure 1, below). Public land is predominantly administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and to a lesser extent the State of Utah Institutional Land Trust Administration (SITLA). The private land is primarily owned and managed by local ranchers and The Nature Conservancy.

Various groups, including Indigenous Peoples, non-Indigenous local residents, ranchers, and extractive industries, along with federal, state, and county-level government entities, hold different interests in the property regime and larger land management governance of Southeast Utah. To redress land management disparities across eight counties in Eastern Utah, Rep. Rob Bishop formed the Public Lands Initiative (PLI) in 2013 to integrate stakeholder concerns and form the basis of a comprehensive Congressional bill. However, engagement between the County's disproportionately powerful non-Native residents, the area's tribes, and industry and environmental stakeholders unravelled. For example, in May 2014, Phil Lyman was hailed a champion of the anti-government Sagebrush Rebellion cause when he organized a protest ride through Recapture Canyon, which had been recently closed to protect natural and archaeological resources. Lyman, the County Commissioner at the time, was joined by local ATV riders and others, including a member of the Bundy family, among the most prominent anti-federal land management provocateurs (Siegler 2017).

Organizing efforts among Native Americans to advance recognition of the cultural and spiritual significance of the land (Keeler 2017) led to the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition (BEITC) in July 2015. Coordinated by the *Ute Dine Bikeyah*, the BEITC included the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, the Pueblo of

Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe. The Coalition aimed to establish and co-manage public land in Southeast Utah (BEITC 2015a; Robinson 2018; Keeler 2017; Trimble 2017).

Although the Coalition initially worked with San Juan County and the PLI, they later turned to the Obama Administration whereupon local and state interests circumvented Tribal involvement and thus failed to secure a future of Tribal co-management (Utah State Legislature 2015 H.B. 393; BEITC 2015a, 2015b).

In December 2016, President Barack Obama signed a Proclamation that established the BENM, invoking executive privilege under the 1906 Antiquities Act that provides protections for public land (White House 2016; Harmon 2006). In December 2017, President Trump reduced the area of BENM by 85% (White House 2017; Zillman and Smith 2019; Robinson 2018), a decision that resulted from coordination between the Trump Administration, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), extractive industries, and their supporters (Lipton and Friedman 2018; Higgins 2018). Lawsuits followed. The Trump Administration was sued by numerous parties, including the BEITC (Hopi et al. v. Trump 2017) and environmental groups (NRDC et al. v. Trump 2017). BENM and its reduction have since been litigated in federal court over whether the Executive may rescind a Monument designation. Indian Creek, our primary research site, remains within the reduced Monument as of 2021. The Joseph Biden Administration has stated an intent to restore the Obama-era boundaries of the Monument, although many are pressing for a legislative solution (Podmore 2021; Maffly and Podmore 2021).

The BLM approved a Monument Management Plan (MMP) for BENM in February 2020. Major differences from prior policy included Monument-related restrictions on mineral, oil and gas development, minor restrictions on recreational

activities, and a provision to allow further recreational infrastructure development.¹ The MMP was criticized by pro-Monument advocacy groups for being rushed and providing insufficient protections (Podmore 2019; Access Fund 2019a). The Plan also deferred development of a cultural resource plan by two years and a recreation management plan by five years. Climbing advocacy organizations were particularly critical of this deferment, citing the need for immediate planning to address recreational visitor impacts (Access Fund 2019b). Land management struggle in the case of BENM is thus ongoing. As discussed below, work in political ecology and cultural sociology help to understand the social and cultural bases upon which land use and associated struggles proceed.

Land, Narratives, and Cultural Valuation

Political ecology situates socio-ecological relations with reference to political-economic forces and embodied human experience, often by emphasizing how contradictions between structural forces and grounded experiences shape ecological and social outcomes (Robbins 2019). Political ecologists have thereby shown how landscapes get constructed through practices on the land and through accompanying cultural narratives that give meaning to land and natural resources (Neumann 2011; Davis 2005; Robbins and Sharp 2003). The meaning of a given landscape, this literature shows, is always plural and often overlayed with historical and ongoing conflicts (Leach and Mearns 1996; Martin et al. 2019; Walker and Fortmann 2003). Interaction between embodied experiences *in* a landscape and visions *of* that land, these scholars find, form the cultural basis of land use practices, which are often manifest in struggles over land tenure,

¹ Plans, preparatory documents, record of consultation, and formal deliberation regarding BENM from 2017 to 2020 can be obtained at <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/94460/570>.

access, use and management.

Work in sociology further problematizes the relationship between culture, valuation, and visions of the future. Economic sociologists have demonstrated how social processes establish value or worth given to an object, place, or experience (Fourcade 2011; Zelizer 1979; Lamont 2012). This literature anticipates that multiple, alternative valuations of a given place structure the identities, practices, and meanings that people bring to their engagement with landscapes (Williams 2014; Angelo 2013; McIntyre et al. 2008; Brehm et al. 2013; Gieryn 2000). In periods of social change, the valuation process may depend upon how actors position themselves with respect to an uncertain or threatened future (Brace and Geoghegan 2010).

Literatures on socio-ecological contradictions and landscape valuation raise important questions about how values and experiences shape competing visions of a given landscape. This can inform how scholars and land managers comprehend the social dynamics at play in multi-use landscapes and politically charged contexts.

Situating Recreational Rock Climbing

Although part of a larger study, the analysis below focuses primarily on recreational users. Rock climbers are a relatively new but growing primary user group in Indian Creek who have recently become active in the political discourse around BENM via advocacy groups and social media campaigns. Many recognize rapid growth in recreational use as potentially unsustainable and problematic from a land management standpoint (BLM 2020; Snider 2018). Our analysis of outdoor recreation and rock climbing is informed by cultural analyses that collectively show how climbing is a “conflicted site for symbolic configurations of human interaction with the environment,” through which people express both the conquering of nature and

transcendent connection to place (McCarthy 2002:179; Bayer 2003; Mendoza 2018; Robinson 2008; Dilley and Scranton 2010). Our focus on this population of land users thus helps to explore the relationship between spatial ideologies of public land management and meaningful, place-making practices related to wilderness.

American rock climbing developed since the mid-twentieth century through local practices in iconic landscapes, principally California's Yosemite Valley (Taylor 2010). Climbing in Indian Creek began in earnest in the late 1970's, facilitated by the development of spring-loaded camming devices ("cams") for fall protection. Cams allow users to protect ascents of vertical "splitter" cracks. Through the development of "crack climbing" as a unique aesthetic and set of techniques augmented by special gear, an entire ethic and identity has since formed around what it means to be a "Creek climber," colloquially called being a "Creek freak" (Kelley 2018).

Methods and Data

For this study, the authors conducted a total of 48 interviews, supplemented by observational fieldwork during two periods of peak visitation (November 2018 and April 2019). All interviews were conducted in-person, primarily one-on-one and on-site in Indian Creek. Most interviews were conducted at the Donnelley Canyon climbing area, Creek Pasture Campground, and Superbowl Campground (see Figure 1). Interviews not conducted in Indian Creek were conducted in offices, public spaces, or homes in Moab and Monticello, Utah.

All interview audio files and fieldnotes were transcribed by the authors and a student research team. Following transcription, the authors coded interview transcripts using open coding techniques and supported by Dedoose, a data analysis program. Analysis of interviews through coding and memo writing were guided by the

methodology provided by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011). Interviews conducted in 2018 were initially analysed prior to research conducted in 2019, allowing us to test, follow-up and deepen our analysis. Memos and iterative coding ultimately yielded persistent themes, which we have organized into the Results section below. Regarding interview notation: all names are pseudonyms, italics strictly represent speakers' emphases, ellipses represent a break in the excerpt, and brackets represent the authors' clarification of the speaker's clear intended meaning.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1. Map of Study Area: Indian Creek, Southeast Utah, USA.

Results

The persisting cultural value of “wilderness”

The draw to mountainous and arid lands, as places representative of “waste” and the “sublime,” has long marked Euro-American culture (Nicolson 1997[1959]; Hollis 2019; McGinn 1994). The Southwestern U.S. is exemplary (Teague 1997; Davis 2016; Andrade et al. 2019). Encapsulated in the work of Edward Abbey (1968), the cultural trope of the “desert rat” that combines individual autonomy with a transcendental wilderness aesthetic persists especially in Southeast Utah.

Rock climbers embody the cultural value of wilderness in these terms, inflected as it is through the special nature of Indian Creek. Indian Creek is first valued for the special nature of the rock, which climbers recognize as “world class” for its cracks to climb. Climbers likewise value the expansive desert landscape. Many noted a comparison between the open and “wild” feeling they experience in Indian Creek, compared to other destinations. Kris expressed a comparative sentiment common among climbers:

It was pretty empty when we came here [for the first time]...it felt relatively remote in comparison to other places I've climbed, like Yosemite or Squamish, where it feels like you're inside of a city [chuckles] with cell phone service and a lot of people everywhere. [Here] I was drawn to, like, the *vastness* of the desert.

The open landscape, featuring few amenities and regulations, provides for climbers a sense of freedom: As Kai, a travelling climber, put it: “A big part of it is just the *freedom*, [without] rangers policing everything—that would completely ruin it for me. It’s having the freedom to be *out* here, having fun...in this wide-open desert, you know?” One long-time Indian Creek climber, Brenden, addressed how the landscape became so important to climbers. As he explained: “As the classic Old West, just the mesas [and] the little spires when you’re driving out, it’s kind of the *quintessential* desert landscape.” Over time, Brenden described, it became “an iconic place” and retains its quality of “mystique, [along] with such a historical context.” As he evaluated, “it’s kind of a special feeling when you’re down there.” He stated that the “special desert quality” is brought out by climbing, insofar as “[other] folks didn’t necessarily see the area [Indian Creek] as anything but a scenic *backdrop*.”

Others situate themselves, and the “sacred” value of the land, with respect to a narrative of climbing history that features exploration. James put it this way:

“This place is like a sacred, hallowed ground for people, and for climbers too...People migrated out West here. All the big guys, Warren Harding, were out there in Yosemite, and these guys came over here and started picking off the towers. I’d always heard [the] legends...[That] is one of the biggest things that draws me out here...everybody is coming here to climb.”

One retired land manager echoed this perspective based on her career encountering recreational users. As she characterized, “You have this ‘*I’m a big explorer*’ kind of thing going on.” Although climbers typically position their activities with reference to the particular history of climbing subculture, others clearly consider their activities in the wilderness as an expression of human nature. As one climber put it, “Humans are primates, and climbing is in our *DNA*.” Yet, as this individual noted, climbers recognize the tension between universality and the peculiarity of American rock climbing culture and exploration: “if you follow it back to its origins, [climbing] is kind of like an Anglo pursuit.”

Regardless of their reflexiveness regarding climbing, many locate Indian Creek as a special site of meaningful transformation, consistent with wilderness values (Nash 1967). As one climber, Seth, discussed:

We all have a hard time talking about why we love coming here...Something about this place just brings a certain type of person...When I come here I feel different...And my friends, they’re like in town doing their thing and [then] they come out and you see the *real them*, and they are just *psyched*...They are like different animals.

The landscape, Seth addresses, brings authenticity. Likewise, climbers value Indian Creek’s public land as a means for hedging against the degradation of themselves and a society confined to controlled urban or private spaces. As Gustavo, a climber from Texas discussed, “the average American kid spends *18 minutes* [daily] playing outside

right now. *That's a problem!*" He cited decreasing access to public land as a primary barrier to accessing the benefits of wilderness.

Local ranchers, like climbers, attach sacred meaning to the landscape. However, they do so on the basis not of "wilderness" experience, but rather values associated with occupying a "working landscape" (Brunson and Huntsinger 2008). Reflecting on her early experiences, one rancher recounted: "I got to experience working in a landscape and came [to] understand the systems that it takes to live out here." As she later explained, "experiencing the Western landscape on horseback was ...pivotal to the way I view the world. My *cosmology* changed." Given this "cosmology," this rancher considered the act of climbing the cliffs as anathema to (rather than defining) the spiritual quality of the place. She narrated a sense of desecration when she first witnessed people climbing a group of towers near her ranch that she calls the "Moki Family" (but what climbers call "The Bridger Jacks"): "Oh, those are towers, let's *climb* them," she stated disparagingly.

Andy, another rancher, reflected on the specialness of Indian Creek landscape in spiritual terms: "The desert country out here and the rock formations are so unique and beautiful and significant—in a spiritual way." Clarifying, Andy indicated he does not interpret his experiences "in a religious sense," but rather in a physical sense: "there's a general spiritual feeling to the desert [pause]...If you spend enough out there staring out at it, then you *feel* it." He connected this feeling to his work as a rancher:

The geologic and ecological aesthetic make it special and attractive to everybody, and to *me*... The term, overused maybe, is a sense of *place*: knowing this place basically for my life and all the subtle variations you get over time [by] being out working in it. To me and other people, a working relationship with the landscape [brings] connection through a dependence on that landscape for livelihood...and *also* a sense of responsibility and stewardship.

The place attachment that Andy displays is present among most land users and has led to a common but fungible ethic marked by “stewardship,” a term that ranchers, land managers and climbing organizations have variously used to name their respective activities. As one land manager described: “I have been impressed with how...all [land users] *love* Indian Creek, right? So the main grazers...you couldn’t ask for people that love that land more than [those] folks. They are *phenomenally* good stewards and care a lot about the landscape.” Another land manager, however, addressed what she labelled a “renter’s mentality” pronounced especially among recreational users: “It’s a renter’s mentality...They don’t live here. They come here to use it. They don’t care how they leave it.” Thus, the ideal of stewardship may face limits among visitors more akin to tourists than caretakers.

How does stewardship relate on the one hand to wilderness experience and, on the other hand, to evidence of environmental impacts? Climbers and ranchers alike recognize that “wilderness” experience and climbing culture are marked by a logic of “discovery,” which is complicated under conditions of increased use. As one rancher described: “I don’t have a lot of hope that people are going to manage themselves well. It’s just more and more people coming out here, more need for infrastructure. The quiet, sacred place feels like it’s been cracked open.” The perspective that Indian Creek has been “cracked open,” and therefore at a breaking point between “wilderness” and degradation was common to many. The next section further considers how land users evaluate environmental disturbance.

Assessing Impacts: Recreational Use and Environmental Disturbance

Long-time land users intimately know and interact with the Indian Creek landscape. Therefore, they acknowledge human environmental impacts. Here, the idea of

wilderness and the practical ideal of stewardship face clear challenges.

First, the rock itself can be degraded. Because sandstone absorbs water and can easily break when wet, one informal but widely understood moral prohibition concerns climbing after rain events. Many climbers detailed their grave concerns over non-local users degrading the rock. For example, one climber narrated an encounter which she stated was typical of interactions with travelling climbers that she believed routinely fail to stay off the rock despite efforts to informally enforce local ethics: “I [said], I know for a *fact* that rock’s not dry, don’t do it! And they were like, ‘oh, blah.’ They had their reasons. It’s like, if they paid thousands of dollars to come here for a two-week trip and it rains...are they *actually* gonna stay off the rock?”

A further problem caused by generally unregulated recreational use is human waste, which cannot easily biodegrade in the arid environment. Although the BLM has installed composting toilets at one climbing area and Indian Creek’s two regulated campgrounds, many areas lack toilets. Climbers and BLM employees recognize that many climbers do not adhere to “leave no trace” ethics regarding human waste. One BLM manager who has worked on recreation maintenance projects, recollected her interactions with someone during their first season working in Indian Creek:

So he came back and said ‘you know what I learned today? *Never* turn over a rock!’ [laughs] Every single place he went to stop to cut brush there was human waste under every rock. And we have toilets out there. We spend fifty thousand dollars a year pumping them and it’s *still* dangerous to turn over a rock.

Another major environmental impact of recreational use concerns disruption of the sensitive soils. Biological soil crusts form a protective layer across soil surfaces in plant interspaces throughout Indian Creek. Biocrusts reduce erosion, are vulnerable to trampling by humans, and may take years to regrow, thus compounding other impacts

of human disturbance (Belnap and Lange 2003; Painter et al. 2010). Users familiar with the sensitive environment know not to “bust the crust” by walking or camping on biocrust. However, increased visitation has led to expansion of dispersed camping activities, and many experienced individuals expressed concern about new visitors unaware of their potential impacts. One local guide related finding someone “on their boulder pad, in their sleeping bag right on the side of the road in a patch of crypto. I [was] like ‘A, that’s not a campsite and B, you’re in a patch of mature cryptobiotic soil.’ And they’re like ‘*what?* [bewildered tone]’”

A further documented impact includes disturbances to local archaeology and Native American artifacts. Past routine looting and recent, organized smuggling of artifacts has given way to what observers document as unregulated looting and disturbance, likely a function of increased visitation (US Department of the Interior 2009; Partlow 2021). Climbers plainly encounter the archaeology of the area. As one climber described, “You’ve got petroglyphs, some pictogram panels, [and] tons of ruins as you follow Indian Creek down through the cliffs.” Climbers have been among those disturbing or defacing archaeological sites and petroglyphs in the region, and managers have documented disturbances, including the unregulated establishment of climbing routes on and near sites (see Boster 2021).

A rancher provided a perspective on the increased chances of archaeological disturbance: “With the climbing community it’s kind of like, ‘whoa, this is a really big place; this is *endless*’...But do we *want* to have climbs all around the petroglyphs?” One land manager provides a similar perspective: “A lot of the damage that I see to cultural resources has to do with an attitude of, ‘what does it matter, anyway? It was neat to look at, now I’m going home.’” As she evaluated, “that attitude is *not* doing any favors for the natural resources that people come here to enjoy.” The preservation of

archeological-cultural heritage appears to confront some climbers' understanding of wilderness. Indeed, many climbers expressed neither interest in nor connection to the area's history, and they tended to apprehend land management conflicts as primarily a matter of access to climbing resources rather than legal disputes featuring the Antiquities Act and Indigenous groups. The "empty" time of pristine wilderness (cf. Denevan 1992) along with the immediacy of climbing experiences can make history irrelevant. As one climber and blogger described in 2009, "I was resting up and getting psyched for my main goal of the day, an on-sight [climb] of Ruins Crack." (A climbing route, "Ruins Crack" features a stacked-rock ancient granary at its base).²

Climbers do not regularly report connecting to the cultural history and ongoing Native American significance of Indian Creek and surrounding areas. Generally, their views of the history of the region are not consistent with the history of livelihood, ancestry, and colonial struggle that marks Native American engagement with and valuation of the landscape (Robinson 2018). As one climber reflected, recreational climbers are primarily centered around the rock:

I wouldn't say it enhances or increases the enticement to a place...Indian Creek isn't necessarily a place that...has brought a lot of regional tribal folks there for whatever purposes that they might have...*Climbing* is definitely the thing...on a climber's mind, right? You aren't necessarily drawn to the cultural aspect of a location.

This individual described "the recreational mindset that climbers typically have," such that "the legacy and artifacts and whatnot" are irrelevant to the Indian Creek experience. By contrast, some climbers incorporated history into their experiences. One climber, Sandy, exemplifies this position: "at first, I was very disconnected" from the history of

² Source: <https://dreaminvertical.wordpress.com/tag/indian-creek/>

the area, she described. However, Sandy gradually learned to appreciate the cultural history and discussed drawing meaning from climbing in a landscape long marked by human culture: “It’s just *crazy* to think about someone being there and wanting to let us future generations know, like, ‘hey we were *here*; we *did* these things.’” Her climbing is connected to her “feeling more connected” over time, insofar as she has witnessed ancient sites that relate to her own climbing experiences: “There’s Moki Steps and Moonflower Chimney...that’s *super* cool; we’re climbing what *you* climbed...We use [gear], but some ancient civilization probably just scampered up it daily [laughs]. So, I definitely feel very connected.”

A sense of connectedness—to a pristine wilderness, or in this last example a sense of place in history—is open to ruin. As Mary Douglas (1966) demonstrated, sacredness dialectically entails pollution, a dynamic that can entail strong moral considerations of behavior. Therefore, reflecting a value of wilderness and an ethic of stewardship, climbers differentiate themselves on an axis of conscientiousness about environmental disturbance. As some climbers addressed, “there is that self-enforcement within the climbing world,” through which local users educate, reprimand, or otherwise “self-police” other climbers (see Carter et al. 2020). As one first-time climber at Indian Creek narrated:

I told people in Boulder I was coming out here. Everybody’s first reaction is, ‘take good care of that place!’ Like, everybody had opinions about where I should poop and camp. I’m not new to climbing ethics, but I know a lot of people are starting to come here...I think it’s really special that *that’s* what people start with—passing down how to take care of this place.

As in this example, many climbers measure themselves and their local climbing community with reference to adherence to local “ethics,” which include respect for sensitive environments.

As another example, a climber, Jonnie, outlines the morality and etiquette associated with his climbing experiences. First, he acknowledged, “you get a lot of ego and intimidation” among climbers regarding their physical abilities. Yet, Jonnie stated, “I notice one thing that people do is the *humble brag*,” which he defined with reference to how people subtly indicate their respect for local climbing and stewardship ethics. He believed these performances and interactions are important given the inflection point caused by increased impacts:

That is *our land*, [but] we’ve gotten more lax. Two rangers [are] no longer available because funds have been cut. Now it’s *our responsibility*, so if we [expletive] it up, then they’re going to look at us, like ‘Oh those freaking climbers, we’ll just give it to somebody who’s actually going to take *care* of it, right?’

Perspectives vary on the capacity for land users to “self-police” (a commonly used term among interviewees) one another. Some proclaim that “people have been pretty good at managing themselves here, especially having your outspoken veteran Creek climbers here all the time” reprimanding others—“I think that’s what keeps the place in check,” as one climber stated. Such “outspoken” individuals are variously labelled by interviewees as “crusaders,” “self-proclaimed stewards,” or those that are simply “always on education mode at the crack.”

Most people recognize that increased land use continues to generate negative impacts, despite the values of wilderness and stewardship that structure land user interactions, identities and behavior. As one climber put it, “climbers have the goal, first and foremost, to climb rocks.” Another challenged what he believed was a mistaken assumption regarding outdoor recreation and care for the environment: “I wouldn’t say they are environmentalists,” he concluded. Even if climbers are primarily rock-centered in their valuation of the landscape, many nevertheless indicated their sense of obligation

to act as stewards, particularly in the face of increasingly evident disturbances. Yet, some drivers of recreational land use and environmental impact, namely the mainstreaming and commodification of climbing culture, is clearly out of control of individual behavior. The next section addresses these drivers, which complicate values of wilderness and stewardship and may rather stand in contradiction to them.

Embracing and resenting the commercialization of “climbing culture”

Climbers often view themselves as part of “the climbing community,” although subcultures are varied and often deeply place-specific. As Kai, a climber who lives in his van at Indian Creek for weeks at a time, described, “the more I’ve come here, the more people I’ve [met] who are involved, [the] more I’m *invested* in the place.” Such investment takes time and work. One must learn places and route names, establish friends with whom to climb and share gear, and learn area-specific climbing techniques. Indeed, place-based identities are formed through the physical struggle of learning to climb Indian Creek’s unique crack features. For example, one climber, Antonio, reflected on the pain, grit, training, and risk that characterized his entry into crack climbing. He used this experience to differentiate the “one in twenty” who succeed in becoming an authentic outdoor crack climber: the rock “will *always* filter out a breed of person,” he stated.

The authentic climber who learns through struggle with the rock itself is often compared to those who’s entry into climbing is marked by highly commercialized means, particularly indoor climbing gyms. Such means have led to a quantitative growth in climbers and expanded the local Indian Creek “scene” (as some call it) but have has also generated patterns of hierarchy and differentiation among climbers. One climber reflects on the “wave” of a new kind of climbing culture he sees as becoming

more prominent among Indian Creek visitors, but which compares sharply with his own entry into climbing culture: “I learned to lead trad from my buddy...but there’s this whole new school gym climber wave. They seem to be all about paying like 200 dollars for a 2-hour course at a gym. They’ll go to full day clinics...and pay money for them.” Another climber compared apprenticeship-based entry into climbing with the “wave” of commercialized climbing culture. As Jonnie evaluated, “Everyone needs a mentor...My mentor, Shay—I learned *a world* from him. We kind of congregated [around] Shay and learned.” The growth of indoor, urban commercial gyms, others addressed, has led to frustrated efforts to transmit place-based climbing ethics regarding safety, environmental impact, and acceptable climbing behavior:

People that start climbing exclusively in gyms don’t learn how to come out in a natural environment and deal with some basic hazards and how [to] come into nature and be humbled, instead of being in a controlled environment where everything is manmade and it’s all competitive, [which] takes a lot of the focus off what’s going on around you.

As addressed in this example, values of wilderness and stewardship require place-specific practices that mainstream climbing culture is not designed to provide. Common to relatively veteran climbers, Antonio resents how mainstream climbing, centered in gyms and tourism, has changed how people interact with landscape:

Climbing has definitely changed in the [eighteen] years I have done it. [It] has become *so* much more popular...Now we are very instant gratification here in America... People [now] complain about the hike, how cold [or] hot it is, and I’m like ‘do you realize you have the *luxury* to be out here?’

As Antonio suggests, consumer lifestyles have changed the nature of climbing. Even those in the climbing community who embrace commercial opportunities, for example by working as climbing guides, similarly recognize the difficulties navigating the new

mainstream culture of climbing. One local guide discussed “two paths” among his clients:

I see strange, negative and annoying ego tendencies. *Or*, you can take the path where [climbing] helps you see through those things and see that the landscape affects you. I try to teach our guests: ‘don’t get too stoked on yourself. Don’t...use climbing and the landscape as a vehicle to bolster yourself. Come, be affected.’

The mainstreaming of climbing culture, with its attendant environmental pressures and social dynamics in places like Indian Creek, clearly confronts peoples’ values of wilderness, sacredness, and stewardship.

Mainstream climbing culture has been commodified in two important ways, each serving as economic drivers of participation in outdoor recreation and associated values. On the one hand are outdoor-focused firms. On the other hand is social media. Let us briefly address them in turn.

First, despite exemplary cases of supply chain sustainability, corporate interests have generally cultivated a wilderness aesthetic attainable through consumption (Nagle and Vidon 2020; Buckley 2003; Vidon et al. 2018). Recreational users acknowledge the contradictory ways in which outdoor industries construct a “natural” aesthetic through exposure to and commercialization of the Indian Creek landscape. One climber addressed his frustration about a lack of environmental responsibility in the outdoor industry: “I think that they all have culpability. It’s like, you manufacture a product. You can’t then say you’re not responsible for its use.” As Conrad, another climber, discussed:

The only reason why we can go climbing today, is because we have this giant economic *machine* [that] has been powering the world for 200 years, which produces stretchy nylon climbing ropes and all this stuff...We’re [just] skimming

off the top, but if climbers really care about long-term conservation, there's going to have to be this point...where we accept less.

Many climbers similarly acknowledge that commercialization has generated a consumer-based climbing culture while also increasing environmental pressures. For example, Bryan presents a critical narrative about recent trends in commercialization. He first acknowledges a “human need to explore and promote.” However, he discussed, commercialization of the landscape and of climbing activities has led to a situation in which “there’s *no restraint whatsoever*” on such needs:

All those products, all that consumerism, and all that marketing is going toward people getting outside and doing that thing they’re marketing toward...So it feels like [a] *headlong rush* to exploit what’s left of our outdoors—the untrampled landscape that we have out here, [but without] building the infrastructure to contain the people that *they’re* sending here.

Despite commercialization, many reportedly view climbing as a unique source of value outside the commodification process. Franklin, in a group interview, discussed what he viewed as a fundamental link between wilderness preservation and the climbing community, guided by what he called “very much a [John] Muir-inspired ethos.” He outlined this “ethos” as including “a sense of inherent value and worth to wild places” that provide “some version of a simple life, even if it’s just for recreational purposes.” Because recreation entails “using [the land] in non-consumptive ways,” Franklin assessed that outdoor recreation stood against commercial valuation. Although acknowledging the gap between the “ethos” and reality, Franklin and others in the group agreed that “the community” stood apart from commercial interests: “we’re leaving tons of traces, but we’re not necessarily extracting resources for commercial goods. I think that ethos really drives the spirit of saving Bears Ears.” In the final statement, Franklin connects climbing, wilderness preservation, and a common position

among recreational users that approaches land management politics through the lens of wilderness values.

By comparison, others addressed how the advent of social media makes a decoupling of outdoor recreation from a commercial logic untenable. Marketing by outdoor companies and through “influencers” on Instagram draw upon the unique aesthetic qualities of Indian Creek to link products and experiences to the wilderness landscape and the special quality of the place. Analysis of the hashtag “#IndianCreek” demonstrates that themes of wildness, toughness, fun, and the desert wilderness seamlessly connect to monetized content and product endorsements.

Although many climbers contribute to social media and report that it helps to build their identities, the following excerpt exemplifies how others view social media-driven, lifestyle-based consumption as a problem:

Now, with the social media revolution [there is] the attraction of the *lifestyle* of climbing...a fad people try to replicate. So I would say there is a little bit of the *soul* of climbing that is being sacrificed to the masses so they can have the *image* they want.

Drew (excerpted above) further draws upon his experiences guiding visiting climbers to suggest that the image of the “dirtbag” desert climber, who is nomadic, poor, and authentically committed to climbing, is falsely stylized via social media. Broadcasting participation climbing culture in a (mediated) wilderness thus provides an additional avenue for practicing what Thorstein Veblen (1899) termed “conspicuous leisure” (see Rickly 2016; Malone 2015). Because stewardship forms one aspect of an authentic “Creek” climber, many who participate in climbing culture via social media were easily activated in social media campaigns, specifically regarding BENM (through the hashtag #ProtectBearsEars). As a result, however, climbers and BLM managers reported that

commercial and political exposure on social media led to Indian Creek's surging popularity and associated impacts.

Many climbers, including those interviewed during their first time at Indian Creek, were therefore familiar with ongoing controversy regarding BENM. All of those who had an opinion on BENM supported the Monument designation, although their evaluations of the situation primarily considered issues of access to recreation, rather than issues of Indigenous rights and preservation of cultural resources. Testimony from Linda, a new climber who stated she was "nerdy" about BENM, demonstrates the common pattern. First, she addresses knowledge about land management issues she has gained through social media and interaction among climbers: "There's been a ton of fundraising [and] efforts to raise awareness...It's kind of all that anybody talks about anymore, which is cool. Like every day...on Facebook, like, 'oh, this could be happening, we still need public comments.'" When asked about local perspectives on BENM, however, Linda clearly indicated that the user groups and values she attached to the landscape did not involve local or non-recreational users, for example Native American nations: "I don't even really know who would be considered 'local' down here. Local, you mean Boulder [laughs]?" By jokingly signifying "Boulder" (a 700km drive from Indian Creek) as "local," Linda, like others, register the place as a destination that conforms to the set-apart wilderness and itinerant recreational values that generally mark climbing culture.

Analysis of climber's participation and interpretation of mainstream climbing culture show that commercialization of outdoor recreation paradoxically upholds wilderness values, an ethic of stewardship, and moral considerations of environmental impact. Commercialization competes with these alternative valuations. As the next section shows, the contradictions inherent to the situation has led to deep concern

regarding the future of Indian Creek, which faces being “loved to death” and transformed into the very kinds of exploited, managed, or manicured spaces that nearly all present land users would like to avoid.

Future Visions and Apprehension Regarding Land Development

Industries wax and wane, creating challenges for land managers who must respond to new land use pressures that may or may not match existing land management practices, infrastructure, or regulations. In Southeast Utah, for example, the uranium industry had been the primary economic sector in the region in the 1950s and again in the 1970s, along with fossil fuel and other mineral extractions, grazing, and timber production. Government supported economic development on federal lands, resulting in a regional political economy with clear priorities, ecological impacts, winners and losers (Ringholz 2002; Voyles 2015; Walls 2020). Each industry has undergone clear periods of boom and relative decline or bust. Given this context, one interviewee, a retired archeologist and former land manager with the US Forest Service, considered the challenges that new outdoor recreational industry trends pose to land managers. Janice highlights a major shift in federal agencies towards facilitating recreation and the kinds of consumption it entails: “They [land managers] have gone from a resource conservation perspective to a resource consumption perspective.” Alice, a federal land manager, confirmed the challenges posed by the rapid rise in unsustainable recreational use while acknowledging a common thread among all land users: “They don’t want to hear ‘no’. They want to do what their families have done for generations. They want to do it for free, unencumbered by seasons or permits...They see government as the oppressor—the person that says ‘no’ instead of ‘yes’.” Although compromise or cultural change may support all users in respecting the place, Alice reasoned, a more likely

future involves recreational visitors coming “in such great numbers [that] it gets loved to death.”

As a result of land use pressures, most managers and users believe that infrastructural development and intensive regulation will commence, but not necessarily in a way that supports the values presently driving land use. One interviewee envisioned a future of recreational development by explicitly comparing oil extraction platforms to parking lots built to alleviate the presently congested roadsides. In 20 years, she imagined the following: “everybody wanting to be as close to the base of the cliffs as possible. It [will] look from the air like an oilfield, just *roads and pads*, only in this case it’ll be roads and camping areas or parking lots.” A local rancher provided a similar comparison:

The recreation industry is the newest player in the Manifest Destiny story, and that story is: whoever can capitalize the public lands the most gets *carte blanche*. They are just the latest one...Like Silicon Valley tech companies, they like to think they’re the good guys, and *clean*, but in my opinion they’re the *greatest threat* to these unique landscapes—not energy or other industries.

One former leader of a national climbing organization, interviewed in Moab, was less pessimistic but expressed the common, frustrated sentiment that the future is deeply threatened: “everybody loves the undeveloped character of the Creek, *right?* They don’t *want* to see it turn into Yosemite” (a typical comparison drawn by interviewees to represent an over-developed land management scenario). “But on the other hand,” he continued, “*something* has got to change...so the place can be protected.”

Two climbers interviewed together reflect a common view among many recreational users that believes intensive infrastructural or industrial development would destroy the landscape and experiences they seek. Jacob and Jackie referred to Indian Creek as a “magical” place. As the sun set over Creek Pasture, Jacob reflected: “This

place is *amazing*.” Like others, they are willing to accept minimal regulations (for example, more parking and paid campsites). Yet many consider regulation as a sign of what else might happen to the landscape that, to them, would fundamentally alter the experiences they seek on the land. When asked how increased energy or mineral extraction activities would change their experiences, Jacob responded quickly: “*Ruin it!*” Jackie, in agreement, added: “It would make it feel less magical and natural,” a sentiment that others expressed with regard to increased recreational infrastructural development. The frustration regarding “ruin” exemplifies how many recreational users interviewed in this study commonly viewed recreation and alternative commercial land uses in binary yet unsettling terms: wilderness is pristine, and although presence of other activities may spell ruin, increased use of all sorts may necessarily lead to a degraded future landscape.

Conclusions

Multi-use landscapes are marked by competing visions and goals, which land managers must balance under pressure from diverse land users and political priorities, often with limited resources and management capacity (Behan 1990; Gorte 1999). Indian Creek, like other places including designated wilderness areas and multi-use public lands, may face being “loved to death” in objective ecological terms but also in subjective terms clearly demonstrated by many interviewed as part of this study. Are there ways out of this situation?

To the extent land management plans seek to manage outdoor recreation in multi-use settings, policies and development plans should recognize the cultural values that characterize different user groups and the contradictory social pressures that mark participation and growth in “outdoor” culture. One possibility involves increased

advocacy and enforcement of cultural “ethics” among recreational users. As a veteran climber involved in regional climbing organizations put it, if the place is being “loved to death” by land users, climbers themselves might need to play more of a direct role as “gatekeepers” who, “as advocates for these places, have to make the leap” and protect “how *we* want the landscape to look.” Yet this possibility does not absolve the basic tension between the ideals of “wilderness” and the economic and social pressures resulting from the mainstreaming and commercialization of climbing culture.

Much less do appeals to self-enforcement deal with the visions and interests of other land users, who, our analysis shows, hold to sacredness, stewardship, or land value in different terms. Perhaps most important, it remains to be seen how recreational visions of the future may intersect those that have guided the BEITC’s political mobilization: “Our people revere the Bears Ears area...where we can be among our ancestors and their songs and wisdom, where the traumas of the past can be alleviated, where we can connect with the land and our deepest values and heal” (BEITC 2015b). Although climbers believe the struggle over public lands is largely taking place to advance their own interests, other cases (for example Cave Rock near Lake Tahoe, California) suggest that recreational climbing and the interests of Native American tribes may lead to direct confrontation (Makley and Makley 2010). Indeed, some climbers in this study speculated that if Native Americans maintained land management rights, then climbing would not be allowed (a position refuted by the BENM Management Plan).

Analysis of how climbers, a relatively new user group, have come to engage with the landscape and interpret their own practices on it holds larger lessons for how scholars and land managers understand the valuation of landscapes. Land use, including land use conflicts, should be understood as an embodied cultural process. As our

analysis shows, in the heart of a political-economic struggle over the future of public land in the United States lay deeply seated and competing cultural valuations of landscapes constructed through active, physical experience with the landscape. These values can be variously activated in power struggles, coalition-building, and democratically responsive land management in multi-use landscapes. Consistent with political ecological consideration of valuation conflicts (Martinez-Alier 2002), our analysis does not suggest that land management can be rid of conflict. As Indigenous writer Jacqueline Keeler (2017:2) has argued, for local Indigenous Peoples, “There is no way our traditional culture and worldview can persist without being permitted actual space in the physical world to live out these ideas” that attribute central economic and spiritual significance to the landscape. Efforts to redress colonial dispossession, like efforts to increase fossil fuel and mineral extraction or permit unregulated grazing, are likely to persist in a manner that is only tenuously related to recreational ideals of wilderness and stewardship. Furthermore, it is likely that wilderness will continue to be challenged by a recreational culture and industry. Whether or not those who deeply value Indian Creek and other wilderness areas based on their deep, physical interactions with rock or other features can reasonably build common ground and reconcile multiple land uses is an open question. Even so, the multiple ways through which people make landscapes meaningful and valuable should be deliberately recognized in land management policy and in scholarly accounts of land use conflict.

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