

Article Last Updated: 8/06/2005 03:43 PM – published Sunday 8/7/2005

http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/ci_2920320

The Salt Lake Tribune

This land is your land, this land is our land

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Salt Lake Tribune

All Utahns have a stake in Utah's future and a say in how our public lands are managed. Shame on us if we accept Rep. Mike Noel, R-Kanab, and Utah Assistant Attorney General Mark Ward as spokesmen for our public lands in their rage against the federal government, spouting their ideological rhetoric.

To portray the Kane County commissioners' decision to place off-road vehicle (ORV) signs on public lands throughout Kane County in defiance of the Bureau of Land Management as a courageous struggle against tyranny is ridiculous. Comparing the commissioners to those who stood before rolling tanks at Tiananmen Square in resistance to a Communist Chinese government or to equate their actions to the "shot heard 'round the world" (*Salt Lake Tribune*, July 16) is nothing less than delusional.

Rep. Noel does not speak for all of us in southern Utah. We have lived in Kane County for more than 30 years and there are many of us who very much appreciate the public lands of southern Utah. We value the beauty and wildness of this canyon country and wish to protect it for future generations. We embrace the concept of national parks, national monuments and wilderness areas.

Visitors come here from all parts of the world to enjoy our scenic landscapes, yet Rep. Noel and our commissioners are willing to put our public lands at risk while spoiling for a fight with the federal government to further their own political and ideological agendas.

RS 2477 is unsettled law, but you'd never know it by the actions of our local and state officials. Rather than waiting for the courts to clarify the ambiguity of the statute, Kane County officials have chosen to ignore federal land managers, claim ownership to hundreds of trails and roads and promote unregulated, often illegal, off-road travel across public lands.

Unregulated off-road travel in southern Utah is adversely impacting our public lands. Multiple trails, damaged archaeological sites, compacted soils and diminished scenic, wildlife and watershed values are results of ORV abuse. A recent Dan Jones and Associates poll on ORV use in Utah confirmed that many Utahns understand this.

This survey found that a majority (73 percent) of those polled, including rural residents, think ORVs damage public lands. Eighty-seven percent believe there are places where ORV use should be prohibited. Almost half of polled ORV users responded that off-road vehicles are harming public lands. (*Salt Lake Tribune*, July 14).

The best that Lynn Stevens, the Utah public lands policy coordinator, could come up with in response to the results was to characterize the survey as a publicity stunt. Nothing like shooting the messenger. Maybe Noel and Ward would be wise to listen to the people of Utah.

Many of us in southern Utah are growing weary of the anti-federal government, anti-environmentalist rhetoric of our commissioners and representative. If they feel suppressed in Utah, where vast expanses of land are owned by all Americans and managed by federal agencies, perhaps they should live east of the Mississippi, where most land is privately owned. Instead of over-reacting and demonizing those of us who feel a responsibility to take care of our public lands for future generations, perhaps they should participate in finding realistic, workable solutions.

Having been owners and operators of a commercial guiding and outfitting business in Utah since the early 1960s, offering river trips, four-wheel-drive excursions, hiking, skiing and horseback trips throughout the state, we appreciate how important public lands are to our state's economy.

We have taken thousands of guests from all over the world on outdoor trips. Seeing Utah through their eyes reinforces for us how special and unique Utah is and how important it is to take care of the land. It's time to stop this senseless railing against the federal agencies that oversee our public lands, roll up our sleeves and work together to determine how we can better manage the lands held in trust for future Americans.

Jana and Ron Smith live on their ranch outside Kanab.