LABYRINTH CANYON TRAVEL PLANNING: A NEW OPPORTUNITY TO SOLVE OLD PROBLEMS
The mission of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) is the preservation of the outstanding wilderness at the heart of the Colorado Plateau, and the management of these lands in their natural state for the benefit of all Americans.

SUWA promotes local and national recognition of the region’s unique character through research and public education; supports both administrative and legislative initiatives to permanently protect Colorado Plateau wild places within the National Park and National Wilderness Preservation Systems or by other protective designations where appropriate; builds support for such initiatives on both the local and national level; and provides leadership within the conservation movement through uncompromising advocacy for wilderness preservation.

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Contributions of photographs (especially of areas within the citizens’ proposal for Utah wilderness) and original art (such as pen-and-ink sketches) are greatly appreciated! Please send submissions to photos@suwa.org or via regular mail c/o Editor, SUWA, 425 East 100 South, Salt Lake City, UT 84111.

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THE ELECTION: BETTER THAN EXPECTED, BUT STILL . . .

The 2022 election was expected to be a blowout for Republicans, given historical losses at midterms for the party in the White House, an unpopular president, and sky-high inflation.

Instead, the Democrats narrowly held the Senate, while it appears that Republicans will gain control of the House, albeit by a smaller-than-expected margin. Looking over the hundreds of contests decided on November 8th, including initiatives on abortion, it’s clear that moderation triumphed over Trump extremism. After the January 6th insurrection and the rise of election deniers, this feels like a return to a stabler democracy, even as threats remain.

Republican control of the House will undoubtedly bring gridlock. The House Resources Committee will become the woodshed to which Biden officials are dragged for abuse. The former chair of a House Resources subcommittee, Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-AR), has already promised to hold the Biden administration “accountable.” That means obstructing the administration with onerous document requests and punishing its political appointees.

At the same time, the People’s House may be converted into a circus for President Biden’s ritual impeachment. We can expect that any conservation gains over the next two years will come from the executive branch, not the legislative.

Still, we avoided the tidal wave we feared. We thought it could be similar to what we saw in President Bill Clinton’s 1994 midterm, which emboldened the Utah congressional delegation to try finishing off Utah’s wilderness. Only a Senate filibuster stopped them. Or it could have been like the 2014 midterm drubbing in President Barack Obama’s second term. Then-Utah Representative Rob Bishop tried to ride that wave to enactment of his odious Public Lands Initiative. We blocked that scheme too. President Obama responded by proclaiming Bears Ears National Monument.

SMALLER-SCALE TROUBLE, BUT TROUBLE STILL

Given the parties’ potential split control of the two houses, we don’t anticipate that this election will tempt the Utah delegation to try enacting comprehensive public lands legislation. It is likelier that we’ll get more of the same, such as Rep. John Curtis’s current effort to undo wilderness on the Wasatch Front on behalf of an out-of-state mountain bike group. Or appropriation riders to halt work on management plans for Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments.

We hope the Utah delegation won’t be tempted to add base-pleasing poison pills that would doom the necessary legislation to trade state lands out of Bears Ears National Monument and the recently designated San Rafael Swell wilderness areas. This can be that rare proposal in which everyone wins, if done right.

In federal office elections, Utah remained neon red, with all four House Republican members easily holding their seats. Senator Mike Lee dispatched Independent Evan McMullin by 15 points in what was nonetheless and, quite tellingly, called “the most competitive Senate race in Utah in decades.”

Ditto at the state office level. Democrats lost two state legislative seats (down to 13 of 75) and now hold only 5 of 29 seats in the state Senate. Davina Smith lost her bid as the first Navajo woman to
run for the Utah state legislature, although she surprised some with her strong showing in a heavily Republican district.

COUNTY COMMISSION RACES

Two southern Utah counties have become electorally competitive over the past decade. One is Grand County (covering Moab), the other San Juan (which overlaps with the Navajo Nation and Bears Ears National Monument). County commissioners can be exceedingly powerful on public lands issues: Utah’s congressional delegation defers greatly to them (at least if they hail from the same party) and local county commissioners can often cow Bureau of Land Management (BLM) officials. The election at this level was an extremely dirty affair, with lies flourishing on social media. Then a week before the election, Republican state legislative leaders announced an “audit” into leadership of the two county boards in southern Utah coincidentally led by Democrats. Grand County progressives lost two commission seats but retain a 5-2 majority.

In San Juan County, perhaps the most important county in the state in terms of BLM wilderness, there was a dramatic change for the worse. The two pro-conservation county commissioners (there are three total) lost their seats. In 2018, after extensive litigation, Kenneth Maryboy and Willie Greyeyes, both members of the Navajo Nation, gave San Juan County Indigenous control for the first time in history (the majority of residents are Native American).

Maryboy and Greyeyes dramatically changed the face of a county commission that had nearly exhausted county funds on litigation unsuccessfully challenging federal land management decisions. The previous board boasted a member who earned jail time for illegally leading an ATV protest ride through a canyon closed to motorized use to protect cultural resources (for the latest on this, see story on page 16). This is the same county that in the past conducted illegal road grading to disqualify lands from wilderness designation—until they were stopped by a federal court.

We are concerned for what lies ahead, but we are hopeful that having exercised power in San Juan County for four years, the Indigenous majority there will help remind the commissioners that extremism on public lands issues can backfire at the next election.

The election doesn’t alter the fact that we face a Utah delegation perhaps more hostile to public land conservation than any other delegation in America. But it does keep open the opportunity to gain more protection through the Biden administration. The shift in House control will complicate this, but the door remains open.

Thanks for being part of the movement to defend and protect America’s redrock wilderness.

For the Redrock,

Scott Groene
Executive Director
LABYRINTH CANYON TRAVEL PLANNING: A NEW OPPORTUNITY TO SOLVE OLD PROBLEMS

Sometimes to really understand an issue, you need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. In the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) travel planning process, it is easy to get lost in the details: how many miles of off-road vehicle (ORV) routes will be designated in a given travel plan, which specific routes will be open or closed to motorized vehicles, has the BLM followed the spirit and the letter of the law in preparing its plan. Details definitely matter (trust us, we obsess over them), but what is really at stake is the protection of some of Utah’s most iconic landscapes.

In late October, the public comment period for the Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges Travel Management Plan closed. This area, wedged between the Green River and Highway 191 just north of Moab, has long been a popular destination for an array of recreational user groups. The area’s unobstructed views, towering redrock cliffs, and Green River corridor provide endless opportunities for hikers, river runners, canyoneers, climbers, bikers, and campers.

However, the area has also experienced a dramatic increase in motorized recreation over the past decade. ORV noise and dust disproportionately impact other public land users as an ever-increasing number of ORVs traverse a maze of motorized vehicle routes that slice up the landscape in every direction.

This dense web of motorized routes is a result of the BLM’s 2008 resource management plan, produced by the agency’s Moab field office. It was one of six pushed out at the end of the George W. Bush administration.

FASTER, LOUDER, MORE INTRUSIVE

That collection of plans smothered southern and eastern Utah with 30,926 miles of ORV routes. In the 14 years since the BLM released those destructive plans, ORV use in Utah has exploded. New ORVs are faster, louder, and more capable of reaching deeper into remote areas than ever before.
ORV riders have taken full advantage of these poorly-developed plans. ORVs traverse virtually every wash and linear feature that can be located on a map (and some that can't). In too many cases the damage they cause to natural and cultural resources is irreparable.

On the eastern rims of Labyrinth Canyon, ORV damage is evident. A tangle of routes crisscrosses its way over the landscape in every direction. Within the 304,000 acres of the Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges Travel Management Area, there are roughly 1,200 miles of designated ORV routes. More than 94 percent of the landscape lies within a half-mile of a route, and 99.5 percent of the area is within a mile of a designated route. As a practical matter, it's nearly impossible to escape the sight and sound of ORVs.

Yet, while the eastern rims of Labyrinth Canyon are blanketed in routes, the western rims are almost completely devoid of them. The Labyrinth Canyon Wilderness, designated by Congress in 2019, may be best experienced by a float trip on the Green River. The flatwater section of the river meandering through Labyrinth Canyon is a designated Wild and Scenic River. It offers recreationists of all ages and abilities the opportunity to experience incredible scenery, cultural sites reflecting thousands of years of human history, and an unparalleled multiday float through wilderness.

But the quiet and solitude abundant along one shore is often shattered on the other by the noise and dust of ORVs racing along the riverbank, up and down side canyons, and along canyon rims. Vehicle tracks cut through riparian vegetation and spread out across the riverbanks, weaving in whatever direction riders choose.

THE MOMENT FOR CHANGE

The BLM has a unique and immensely valuable opportunity before it. The Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges travel plan is one of 11 the BLM is required to rewrite as part of a 2017 settlement agreement between SUWA-led conservation organizations, the BLM, and ORV groups to resolve litigation over the Bush-era plans. These plans will determine where motorized vehicles may legally travel on more than 6 million acres of BLM-managed land. The plans must minimize ORV-damage to natural and cultural resources, wilderness values, and other public land users. They will dictate which of those 6 million acres of public land will be carved up with vehicle routes and which will be preserved.

(Continued next page)
With this forthcoming travel plan, the agency has the chance to correct decades of mismanagement and harmonize land management on both sides of the Green River. The BLM has the opportunity to complete the protection of Labyrinth Canyon: to preserve for future generations a fragile and vitally important riparian ecosystem, to protect irreplaceable cultural sites, to enhance wildlife habitat, and to save remaining wilderness.

Throughout the BLM’s public comment period for the Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges travel plan, public land lovers called on the agency to do just that. River guides and outfitters in Moab highlighted the unique visitor experience floating this section of the Green River provides and asked the BLM to protect the canyon’s solitude and serenity. River runners from around the country related their experiences floating this unique canyon, recounting the jarring sound of ORVs that can reverberate off canyon walls and travel for miles. Even the Ground County Commission (Grand County is the Utah county that encompasses the planning area) asked that the agency set Labyrinth Canyon aside for quiet, non-motorized recreation. More than 4,500 SUWA members and supporters demanded protection for this special place.

Beyond Labyrinth Canyon itself, the greater Labyrinth Rims and Gemini Bridges area suffers from the same ORV management that prioritizes motorized vehicle recreation at the expense of natural and cultural resources and other public land users. Many currently designated routes head off in straight lines to nowhere, clear evidence that they were originally punched into the wild redrock landscape as seismic lines and built as a part of oil and gas exploration decades ago.

Other routes braid through washes or proceed haphazardly around obstacles. Some routes are lightly used and barely
visible, with nature well on its way to reclamation. ORV use on many other routes in the area is causing significant and well-documented damage to cultural sites, native vegetation, riparian resources, sensitive soils, and wildlife habitat.

A CLEAR IF IMPERFECT CHOICE

When the BLM released a draft travel plan for the Labyrinth Rims and Gemini Bridges area in September, it analyzed four alternative travel networks. Only one of those—Alternative B—would protect Labyrinth Canyon itself and make any meaningful change to ORV management throughout this special place (see map on page 8). Alternative B would still permit ORV travel on nearly 700 miles of routes such that more than 80 percent of the area would be within a half mile of a designated route. Alternative B would allow meaningful opportunities to access and experience these lands from a motorized vehicle. But it would also allow the countless hikers, river runners, climbers, canyoneers, campers, and nature lovers to experience this area away from the ubiquitous sight and sound of ORVs. It would protect precious natural resources under increasing pressure from years of drought; it would preserve cultural sites that continue to be damaged by motorized vehicles; and it would create some balance between ORV use and every other public land use.

The BLM is at a crossroads. It can perpetuate the sacrifice of the Labyrinth Rims and Gemini Bridges area to excess motorized recreation or it can take a step back, recognize what is at stake, and select Alternative B to protect this sublime landscape for decades to come. Labyrinth Canyon deserves no less.

—Kelsey Cruickshank and Laura Peterson
On October 28th, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announced it would close 120 miles of off-road vehicle (ORV) routes it wrongly designated for motorized vehicle use in its 2020 San Rafael Desert travel management plan. This decision is a significant victory and the result of years of work across multiple teams at SUWA.

Encompassing unprotected wilderness-quality landscapes such as Sweetwater Reef and the San Rafael River, the San Rafael Desert features stunning redrock canyons, important cultural sites, and an outstanding diversity of native species—many found nowhere else but in this corner of Utah. Unfortunately, in the waning days of the Trump administration, the BLM approved the San Rafael Desert travel plan and selected the most radical route network—one that emphasized the maximum mileage available for ORV recreation. That plan more than doubled the mileage available for ORVs.

SUWA’s extensive fieldwork conducted in the years leading up to that decision, which we submitted to the agency with our formal comments on the plan, showed just how destructive the BLM’s extreme ORV alternative would be. Many of those newly designated routes were cow paths, naturally reclaiming two-tracks, or simply didn’t exist on the ground.

Armed with on-the-ground information, we challenged the plan in federal court in 2021 and argued that it violated the National Environmental Policy Act and federal regulations requiring that the BLM minimize damage from ORVs when it designates motorized vehicle routes. In February 2022, SUWA and the BLM settled the lawsuit. As part of the settlement, the agency agreed to reconsider the designation of around 190 miles of ORV routes in wilderness-quality lands within the San Rafael Desert or near the Green and San Rafael Rivers.

Ultimately, the BLM decided to close 120 miles of the routes it reevaluated. The agency’s decision reflects what was clear to us all along: under the Trump administration, the BLM ignored the evidence SUWA provided and instead designated a significant number of routes that did not exist on the ground or served no public purpose or need. Closing these routes means some of the San Rafael Desert’s wildest corners will remain just that way—without the sight and sound of motorized vehicles.

—Laura Peterson
DEEP GRATITUDE TO RETIRING REDROCK CHAMPION ALAN LOWENTHAL

After eight years in the House of Representatives—and eight years as a sponsor of America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act—Rep. Alan Lowenthal will retire at the end of this Congress. The California congressman has been a powerful presence on the House Natural Resources Committee and chaired its Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources.

After our former redrock champion, Rep. Rush Holt (D-NJ) left the House, Rep. Lowenthal jumped in to lead the charge on Utah wilderness. In 2016, he traveled to St. George for a House subcommittee hearing on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) plans for national conservation areas. On the panel with three Utah Republican representatives, he repeatedly set the record straight as Reps. Rob Bishop, Jason Chaffetz, and Chris Stewart all wrongly claimed that the 2009 Washington County legislation mandated a highway through the desert tortoise reserve. Mr. Lowenthal read quotes from former Utah Senator Robert Bennett acknowledging that he’d failed to get that provision into the bill.

Later that year, he returned to Utah the day after the devastating election of Donald Trump. SUWA and Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC) representatives, along with SUWA board member Terry Tempest Williams, joined him in nursing our collective wounds and vowing to fight back.

SCUTTLING ENERGY DRILLING ON PARK DOORSTEPS

When proposals emerged for oil and gas leasing just outside the boundaries of Arches and Capitol Reef National Parks, Rep. Lowenthal wrote a letter to the Interior Department strongly opposing the leases. The proposal was dropped.

One of Rep. Lowenthal’s crowning accomplishments was his work fighting Rep. Rob Bishop’s bad faith Public Lands Initiative. Demonstrating his commitment to do whatever it took to ensure protection of wilderness lands identified in the Red Rock bill, Mr. Lowenthal made sure the bill never made it to a floor vote.

During many meetings with SUWA, the UWC, and our members over the years, Mr. Lowenthal consistently showed his appreciation for wild places. He also was a champion for climate change issues, environmental justice, and environmental protection across the board. We tried to have him lead a congressional river trip in 2020 but the COVID-19 pandemic intervened.

Congressman Lowenthal: Thank you for your leadership, fighting spirit, and commitment to Utah’s redrock country. Best of luck in your next chapter, and come out for a river trip anytime!

—Travis Hammill

INFLATION REDUCTION ACT REDUCES LEASING SPECULATION

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which President Biden signed into law in August, makes significant investments in our nation’s effort to build a clean energy economy and reduce greenhouse gas pollution. The law contains provisions that will reduce oil and gas leasing speculation in Utah and across the West—a substantial win for America’s public lands. Here’s a closer look at those key provisions:

• The IRA establishes a $5-per-acre fee to nominate parcels for leasing, which discourages companies from nominating...
huge swaths of public land for leasing and development. Previously, it cost oil and gas companies absolutely nothing to nominate public lands for leasing. This encouraged them to nominate as much land as possible throughout Utah, requiring the Bureau of Land Management to expend significant time and energy reviewing the nominations—most of which were entirely speculative.

- The IRA raises the minimum bid price and eliminates noncompetitive, or “over-the-counter,” leasing. Previously, there were two ways to lease a parcel: through a competitive sale via auction with a minimum bid of only $2 per acre, or by purchasing, within two years, a cheaper “noncompetitive lease” that didn’t sell at auction for $1.50 per acre. These bargain prices encouraged speculation and allowed operators to lock up large swaths of public land.

- The IRA raises the rental and royalty rates for leasing and development on public lands, bringing these rates closer to what operators pay for state and private land leases and development. For example, previously, before a lease was put into production, operators paid a nominal rental fee of as little as $1.50 per acre to hold the lease, oftentimes holding these leases for decades without ever putting them into production. The IRA modernized these rates while discouraging speculation by requiring rents of $3 per acre for a lease’s first two years, $5 per acre for the third through eighth years, and $15 per acre thereafter (a lease is issued for a 10-year term).

While the IRA includes many welcome provisions for public lands and our climate, it is certainly not perfect. One provision, offered as a compromise to win Senator Joe Manchin’s (D-WV) support, requires the Interior Department to offer two million acres of public land for oil and gas leasing and development each year for the next decade. This provision is frustrating but, nonetheless, the IRA contains more good than bad and represents the largest federal investment in climate mitigation and leasing reform to date.

—Landon Newell
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A little over a year ago, President Biden signed proclamations restoring Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears National Monuments to their original boundaries (and then some, in the case of Bears Ears). Their purposes were also renewed: conservation, science, and cultural resource protection.

The proclamations restored the integrity of both these landscape-level monuments. Though there are no new permanent management plans yet, interim management guidance issued shortly after the monuments’ restorations has helped protect them in the short term. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has now begun the process of developing new long-term management plans for both monuments.

The first stage of this monument planning process—called the “scoping” phase—has just concluded. SUWA and our partners worked hard to provide thorough, detailed comments during this first opportunity for public input. In addition to our own thinking on the plans, we incorporated ideas and concerns from Tribal entities, scientists, historians, and others with on-the-ground expertise on how best to protect each monument and every important object within. SUWA members turned out in droves to provide their own comments too, with over 2,500 individual member comments submitted to the BLM for both Grand Staircase and Bears Ears. Thank you!

In 2020, Trump’s BLM imposed revised management plans for both monuments specifically to weaken protections for what little remained of them after that administration drastically cut both in size and scope. Now is the time for the Biden administration and current BLM leadership to fix these plans, just as the president has done for the monument boundaries.

Our goal is strong, enforceable plans, anchored firmly to science and conservation principles. The next phase of public involvement will kick off early next year, and we’ll need all hands on deck to help the BLM write management plans that will protect and enhance these conservation and cultural gems for generations to come. Please stay tuned.

—Kya Marienfeld
UTAH FILES SUIT OVER NATIONAL MONUMENT RESTORATIONS

In a move that should surprise no one, the State of Utah and Kane and Garfield Counties have formally challenged President Biden’s restoration of Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears National Monuments. They were joined in a companion lawsuit brought by a handful of Grand and San Juan County residents and the Blue Ribbon Coalition, a national off-road vehicle group.

SUWA and our conservation partners, Native American Tribes and others, will soon be moving to intervene in these federal district court cases and defend the monuments.

You could be forgiven for thinking this is déjà vu all over again because, yes, the Utah Association of Counties (UAC) and others challenged President Clinton’s original establishment of Grand Staircase-Escalante in 1996 and, yes, they lost that case. What’s changed?

One thing that hasn’t changed is the state of the law. In the nearly 26 years since the UAC brought and lost its case, federal courts have rejected similar lawsuits which variously claimed that monuments were “too big” or sought to protect objects that were beyond the scope of the Antiquities Act, the federal law that authorizes presidents to establish national monuments. In fact, in the 116 years since Congress passed the Antiquities Act no federal court has overturned the establishment of a national monument. That includes several decisions by the United States Supreme Court, which has reviewed a handful of monument designations.

What has changed, however, is the current make-up of the U.S. Supreme Court, with its six-justice conservative wing, activist bent, and visible disregard for judicial precedent. Add the fact that Utah and others chose to interpret a statement Chief Justice John Roberts made in 2021 suggesting monuments had grown too big for his liking as an invitation to bring suits such as this one, and the stage is set.

But we’re confident that these two national monuments contain exactly the kinds of “objects” (such as sacred sites, fossils, ecosystems) that Congress intended a president to preserve and are the right size to accomplish that goal. We will be doing our best to make sure the federal courts agree. You can find updates on our website, www.suwa.org, as these cases progress.

—Steve Bloch
We're happy to report that the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) has upheld the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) 2017 decision to close the bottom of Recapture Canyon—an archaeologically rich and rare riparian canyon system on the eastern boundary of Blanding, Utah—to motorized use. The canyon has been a flashpoint in the conflict between off-road vehicles (ORVs) and cultural resource protection for nearly two decades. It began with the illegal construction of an ORV trail in the canyon in 2005. The result was significant damage to six cultural sites, conviction of two individuals, and a $35,000 fine.

The public demanded protection of the canyon’s cultural resources. In 2007, the BLM’s Monticello field office issued an emergency order closing the canyon to motorized use. In response, San Juan County submitted multiple right-of-way applications to the BLM seeking a designated ORV trail in the canyon bottom. Before the agency could rule, then-San Juan County Commissioner Phil Lyman, joined by armed members of the Bundy family militia, led a protest ride through the canyon that damaged eight cultural sites. Lyman was convicted by a jury on federal misdemeanor charges (President Trump later pardoned him).

IBLA REJECTS COUNTY’S CLAIMS

In 2017, the BLM issued a decision that lifted the 2007 emergency closure, barred ORV use in the canyon bottom, and designated a system of ORV trails on the canyon rim. San Juan County was not satisfied and appealed the decision, claiming violations of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. While we disagreed with the BLM’s decision to open the rim to ORV use, we intervened to support the agency’s effort to act responsibly for resource protection. Partners joining SUWA were the Grand Canyon Trust, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, and the Utah Chapter of the Sierra Club.

In October, the IBLA ruled that the BLM’s decision to close the Recapture Canyon bottom to motorized use was within the agency’s discretion and lawful. We’re pleased to see the decision upheld and thank all who advocated for the canyon’s protection.

—Neal Clark
AUTUMN/WINTER 2022

CANYON COUNTRY UPDATES

SUWA APPEALS TO EXPAND ROLE IN RS 2477 LAWSUITS

Passed in 1866 as part of the Mining Act, Revised Statute (RS) 2477 is an obscure law that granted “highway” rights-of-way over federal lands in certain circumstances. Congress repealed RS 2477 in 1976, but Utah’s politicians later seized on it as a means of preventing redrock wilderness designation and asserting local control over federal public lands.

Last June a federal district judge denied SUWA’s motion to intervene “as of right” in an RS 2477 lawsuit known as the Kane County “bellwether” trial. The bellwether trial involves 15 claimed RS 2477 rights-of-way in Kane County, many of which are within Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Although the three-week trial occurred in February 2020, closing arguments have not yet been presented (largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Currently, SUWA has “permissive” intervention status, and our ability to participate in the litigation has been significantly curtailed. For example, we cannot examine witnesses or present evidence. Our goal in requesting intervention as of right is to have a meaningful seat at the table both in this bellwether case and in the roughly 20 or so other pending RS 2477 cases in federal court in Utah.

SUWA would have to wait until the end of the bellwether proceedings at the district court to appeal the judge’s denial, both the district judge and the 10th Circuit granted SUWA permission to appeal immediately.

We hope that briefing and argument on the appeal will be complete by early 2023. We’ll be sure to keep you posted.

—Michelle White

SKUTUMPAH PAVING PLAN WOULD IMPAIR MONUMENT

SUWA is already an intervenor as of right in the Kane 1 (or Bald Knoll) RS 2477 lawsuit. This litigation involves determining the width of three RS 2477 rights-of-way in Kane County and is scheduled for trial in early December. Similar to the Kane County bellwether trial, each route in the Kane 1 trial is adjacent to or within Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

As part of the Kane 1 case, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has evaluated Kane County’s recent proposal to pave the southernmost 3.4 miles of the Skutumpah Road, a remote gravel road winding through the largely undisturbed natural landscape of the western section of the monument.

The proposed project is designed to support a high-volume paved road capable of handling thousands of vehicles per day and is intended to cater to the needs of a private gravel mining operation. Though the county has denied it, we suspect that paving this stretch is just the beginning, and that additional paving demands won’t be far behind.

Fortunately, the BLM recently (and correctly) decided that the proposed paving project is not necessary to facilitate safe travel and, therefore, does not fall within the scope of Kane County’s (and the State of Utah’s)
RS 2477 right-of-way to the Skutumpah Road. The BLM’s decision-making process included evaluating significant public comments, including SUWA’s, that were submitted as part of a draft environmental assessment. The agency’s ultimate decision highlighted (among other points) the lack of information regarding “how paving will fundamentally change the character of the road and may create new safety risks, which in turn may beget the need for more future proposed improvements.”

Although we believe the BLM has made the correct decision, this saga will undoubtedly continue when the district court reviews the BLM’s decision during the Kane 1 trial. As the agency has recognized, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is an “unspoiled natural area [that] remains a frontier with countless opportunities for quiet recreation and solitude.” We believe that paving the Skutumpah Road would irrevocably damage the integrity of these spectacular public lands.

SUWA will continue to defend the BLM’s decision at every step to ensure that the monument remains a remote and remarkable landscape.

—Hanna Larsen

KEYS TO SUWA’S STEWARDSHIP SUCCESS: DILIGENCE AND DIRT

Autumn in southern Utah is our season of momentum. At this writing, our Stewardship Program is in the midst of a string of six projects over five weeks, addressing issues identified in the course of early spring fieldwork. Our long-term planning continues to prove invaluable to our program’s goals. Knowing the landscape helps us know where best to position ourselves to ensure the health of our wildest places.

Case in point: last winter SUWA’s legal team sought the stewardship program’s help to manage off-road vehicle (ORV) travel and camping violations in the Circle Cliffs region of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. SUWA’s GIS team provided maps to help us assess the integrity of wilderness study area (WSA) and national monument boundaries last spring. Several days of our time in the field produced new maps and a written report outlining issues in the region. We shared this information with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The result was a three-day program, with a fantastic crew of volunteers, to counter recreational impacts over a long National Public Lands Day Weekend in late September.

The nine volunteers logged a total of 187 hours of work. They restored over a mile of illegal routes, remediated or removed 17 dispersed campsites, and retrieved over 300 pounds of trash from public lands. Discussions with the BLM on-site during the project now inform this winter’s fieldwork schedule as we plan to monitor these worksites and expand our 2023 proposal to steward in perpetuity this magnificent landscape. This willingness to maintain a consistent and wholistic approach defines our program.

A PRODUCTIVE YEAR

As our 2022 season draws to a close this November, our crews have already restored nearly 33 miles of illegal ORV routes and 20 social trails. We’ve built more than 2,550 feet of fence and barrier and installed nearly 100 signs identifying wilderness, WSAs, and restoration areas. We have also remediated more than 70 user-made campsites and removed 1,325 pounds of trash from our public lands.

Learn more about our work at suwa.org/stewardship and join us in the field in 2023!
LEGAL TEAM WELCOMES HANNA LARSEN

We’re pleased to introduce Hanna Larsen to the SUWA legal team in Salt Lake City.

Although Hanna only recently became a staff member this past June, she has already demonstrated a deep commitment to Utah’s redrock wilderness by both interning and then working part time with the SUWA legal team—all while finishing her law degree at the University of Utah and passing the bar exam!

For the moment, Hanna is playing the role of a highly talented jack-of-all-trades and covering a wide variety of issues, including the expansion of the Lila Canyon coal mine and the proposed paving of the Skutumpah road in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

A lifelong Utahn, Hanna studied Cell and Molecular Biology, Computer Science, and Chemistry at the University of Utah before obtaining her law degree in 2022. During law school, Hanna clerked at the United States Attorney’s office in Utah and was a judicial extern for Justice Paige Peterson at the Utah Supreme Court.

When Hanna is not busy at her day job, you’re likely to find her camping, rock climbing, or hiking with her dogs, Juniper (pictured) and Lexi, and her partner, Zach, while Dina the cat generally opts for the safety of their backyard.

OLIVIA JUAREZ JOINS STAFF AT GREEN LATINOS

Five years ago, SUWA launched an effort to organize support for Utah’s redrock wilderness among the fastest growing population group in the nation: our Latinx-Hispanx-Chicanx communities. Hiring Olivia Juarez (they/she) to head the project in 2017 proved to be an excellent decision and helped SUWA grow in more ways than one.

Olivia introduced us to a mostly new audience, hosting field tours and camping trips to the San Rafael Swell and listening sessions at Wasatch Front community centers. They also wrote and produced SUWA’s Utah Silvestre podcast. Those projects helped the Latinx community find its voice and engage in public land decision making in Utah.

Olivia has always approached work with enthusiasm, intelligence, and an infectious laugh. They were even recognized by the National Parks Conservation Association on its 2021 list of “10 under 40” who are making a difference in conservation. There is simply no way to keep someone like that a secret. Success at SUWA has led Olivia to a new position as public lands program director with Green Latinos, a national non-profit organization that brings to bear a broad coalition of Latinx leaders to address national, regional, and local environmental problems.

Though already greatly missed by colleagues and friends at SUWA, Olivia hasn’t gone far: they are currently
renting space in our Salt Lake City office and continuing to do great work. We are grateful to have someone with Olivia’s drive and talent fighting on the side of public lands.

Thank you, Olivia, and buena suerte!

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCATE CHRIS RICHARDSON MOVES ON

Contrary to the snowman photo at right, our legislative advocate, Chris Richardson, has returned to his homeland of sun, surf, and sweat in Miami, Florida. SUWA’s DC office feels a bit colder without his warm presence.

Chris came to SUWA in late 2019, taking up the challenge of defending America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act through advocacy on Capitol Hill. He was the driving force behind our finishing out the 116th Congress with a huge contingent of cosponsors and supporters.

Unfortunately, we only had a few months in the office with him in the “before times.” During an extremely hectic Wilderness Week, right before the COVID-19 lockdowns started, Chris was guiding and advising activists in DC not only about how to lobby, but how to stay safe as well.

After the office closed and Capitol Hill went digital, Chris made sure SUWA’s legislative team was able to continue protecting public lands by meeting with congressional offices from a distance. We don’t know how we would have done it without him.

Come back and visit us anytime, Chris, and good luck with your next chapter!

BIG THANKS TO CHRIS FOR HELPING OUR DC OFFICE NAVIGATE PANDEMIC CHALLENGES.

THERE WOULD BE NO SUWA WITHOUT OUR MEMBERS

Since our inception in 1983, SUWA has been fortunate to have members who are so passionate about protecting Utah’s redrock wilderness. Over the years you have shown that, together, we have the power to prevent land managers from tearing the backcountry apart with energy development, roads, and off-road vehicle routes.

Our collective voice speaks loudly to decision-makers who can either protect or destroy the lands we all cherish. Your membership provides both the political and financial strength needed to continue our work. Thank you for your investment in Utah’s wilderness movement and your role in protecting the redrock.

If you are not yet a member, please join today at suwa.org/donate. If you are already a sustaining supporter of SUWA, please consider giving an additional $5 or $10 a month to defend Utah’s wilderness. Thank you!
MAKE A LONG-TERM INVESTMENT IN UTAH WILDERNESS

Please consider leaving a gift to SUWA in your will or trust. Bequests are a simple, effective way for those of us who love the redrock to ensure that when we’re gone, the work to protect these amazing landscapes continues.

A gift to SUWA from your estate, whatever the amount, is entirely free from federal estate taxes. This means we are able to use the full amount of the bequest to protect the redrock. Bequests generally are not subject to state inheritance or estate taxes, and you can create a bequest so that the needs of your heirs are taken care of first.

A bequest for SUWA (or any other charitable organization) is very simple to establish. Just name the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance in your will, trust, retirement plan, or life insurance policy, along with our contact information and tax ID number and the dollar amount or percent of your estate you wish to contribute.

If you’d like to make a gift to SUWA or have already included a gift to SUWA in your estate, please contact Michelle Martineau at (801) 236-3763 or visit suwa.org/plannedgiving.

SUBSCRIBE TO OUR WILD UTAH PODCAST!

Have you listened to SUWA’s podcast yet?

Wild Utah, now in its fourth year, explores issues central to the Utah wilderness movement through interviews with staff experts and special guests.

Recent episodes featured Indigenous perspectives on Bears Ears, management planning for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, and an in-depth look at the Bureau of Land Management’s process for designating motorized routes on Utah’s public lands. A popular miniseries, Utah Silvestre, explores the Latinx connection to redrock country.

Our podcast is a great way to learn more about the lands you love while deepening your understanding of the complex issues affecting these remarkable places. Listen to Wild Utah on your next afternoon hike or morning commute by visiting suwa.org/podcast or subscribing via your favorite podcast app.
GIVE THE GIFT OF UTAH WILDERNESS THIS YEAR

GET A FREE SUWA BEANIE WITH YEAR-END GIFT MEMBERSHIP PURCHASES!

Tis the season for SUWA gift memberships! Purchase a $25 gift membership during the month of November or December and your gift recipient will receive a welcome packet that includes SUWA’s newest beanie, a subscription to our quarterly newsletter, the instantly recognizable “Protect Wild Utah” sticker, and a special letter naming you as the membership donor. Get your loved ones involved in the fight to protect Utah’s redrock wilderness! You can even buy a gift membership for yourself—we won’t tell anyone.

Give the gift of Utah wilderness this year by visiting our website at suwa.org/giftmemberships (please order by December 9th to guarantee delivery in time for Christmas).

FIND MORE GREAT GIFTS FOR THE HOLIDAYS IN OUR ONLINE STORE

Looking for the perfect holiday gift for that wilderness lover on your list? Our online store has you covered. In addition to gift memberships, we offer SUWA logo tees in multiple fits and sizes for just $25, a limited edition collection of monument-themed merchandise (see special offer below), and our ever-popular trucker hats in two different styles. Visit our website at suwa.org/goodies or click ‘SHOP’ at the top of our home page to get started.
America's Red Rock Wilderness Act
A Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in Utah

- Proposed Wilderness
- Designated Wilderness (BLM & FS)
- National Park System
- National Recreation Area (FS)
- San Rafael Swell Recreation Area
- National Conservation Areas

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3. Recapture Canyon (p. 16)
4. Skutumpah Road (p. 17)
5. Circle Cliffs (p. 18)