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Defying Death in Utah Arches: A Thrill Too Far?

By JACK HEALY JULY 30, 2014

MOAB, Utah — No outdoor pursuit is too crazy for this desert town built on red sandstone and adrenaline. Mountain bikers careen off rocks. Climbers string lines between towering rock spires and dance out over canyons. People build oversize slingshots and launch themselves skyward, recording every scream and scene to post online.

But after a handful of accidents and a rash of complaints, the federal government is weighing whether to crack down on the latest Internet-fueled thrill ride to crop up on public lands: extreme rope-swinging. The sport turns Moab's unique collection of ancient stone arches into death-defying swing sets. People climb an arch, lash ropes to the rock and leap into the air, swinging earthward in a dizzying, 100-foot pendulum.

"It feels like you're cliff-diving, but you're looking down at a solid rock foundation," said Thad James, a tour operator who was one of the first arch-swingers and who led guided jumps off the Corona Arch. "It's so incredibly scary."

But many of the 40,000 hikers and backpackers who visit the arch each year say that rappelling, swinging and other aerial feats have become a nuisance, filling a once-solitary canyon with whooping screams and long lines of adventurers with varying levels of safety skills and experience.

Some have complained that the activity is also wearing away fragile arches that have withstood wind and rain for eons, scoring them with bolt-holes and rope marks. So now, the Bureau of Land Management is weighing whether to bar swingers, jumpers and other participants in aerial rope sports from Corona Arch and Gemini Bridges, another towering arch formation in the area.

It is a new problem for the bureau, whose responsibility for millions of acres of land and mineral rights has long made it a target for populist anger in the

West. This spring, the Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy led a standoff with the bureau over grazing fees that exploded into an ideological battle over the federal government's role in managing open spaces. In Texas, the agency is embroiled in an ownership dispute over 90,000 acres along the Red River. And around Moab, environmental groups have criticized the agency over plans to drill for oil and gas in the canyon lands and a new natural-gas pipeline that crosses federal land.

Here, the fate of the arches has touched off a heated debate about the limits of outdoor play on public lands in an age when X Games daredevils and popular stunt videos beckon more and more weekend adventurers to seek out the same thrills.

One such adventurer was Kyle Stocking, 22, a former Marine from West Jordan, Utah. He had been a rock climber for about five years and, after watching videos of people hurtling down from the arch, he knew what his next adventure would be.

In March 2013, he gathered his gear and friends, borrowed his father's truck and set off for Moab. His parents were worried, but he assured them that he would be careful, said his father, Mike.

"Last words," Mr. Stocking said.

Rigging ropes to leap off an arch takes precision and testing, climbers say. The younger Mr. Stocking miscalculated and left far too much slack in the line. He slammed into the ground as he swung down and was killed, according to the Grand County Sheriff's Office, which investigated his death. This May, a 25-year-old man from New York also left the ropes too long and crashed to the ground, suffering severe head injuries. Swinging enthusiasts say that risk and responsibility are woven into recreation here, whether it is rafting through rapids, riding a scrabbly bike trail or climbing a rock face. The reality, they say, is that people die. The sheriff's office keeps a list of adventures gone wrong: a jumper with a parachute who fell to his death; a Japanese tourist killed after a 60-foot fall at Arches National Park; a hiker rescued after tumbling into a crevice.

Some outdoor devotees have lost patience with the thrill seekers. "Say no to swinging," one hiker wrote in the trail register leading to Corona Arch. "It ruins the arch."

Another lamented, "When did Corona Arch turn into a Disneyland theme park?" Others called the jumpers "obnoxious" and "idiots" who had tarnished the

views.

But Brian Mosbaugh, 29, who has swung over canyons and tiptoed high over the desert on a slack line, said that government overregulation could cripple the spirit of adventure that drew so many people here.

“That’s a reason so many of us love this area,” he said. “There’s just so much freedom.”

Because so much land in the West is owned by the federal government, outdoor recreation usually takes place on public land. And most extreme sports like BASE jumping (leaping from a fixed object, like a building, antenna, span or earth, then opening a parachute), high-lining (similar to tightrope walking, but over a canyon) or rope-swinging are banned or limited in national parks, so they take place on parcels run by the Bureau of Land Management.

Agency officials say they are always surprised by how fast extreme sports evolve around them. One day, they got a call that someone had built a human catapult from the top of a plateau. They then realized they had no rules about human catapults, for or against.

“We’re the petri dish for new recreational activities,” said Beth Ransel, the agency’s field manager in Moab.

The land around Corona Arch had been run by the state for years, but the federal government acquired it in May in a land swap with Utah. The agency is now considering closing the area to rope-swinging for two years to conduct a broader environmental assessment of the best use for the land. It is expected to make a recommendation in the weeks ahead, and will then ask for public comment.

Even though his son died trying to swing, Mr. Stocking said he opposed any closing.

“You can’t legislate people from not having fun,” he said. “They’re going to go find it one way or another.”

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