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HUFFPOST GREEN

Getting Outside to Heal Inside



Michael Cumming: Veteran, climber, Operation Climb On founder

Michael Cumming directs Operation Climb On, a non-profit therapeutic program that uses climbing and nature as a tool to build camaraderie, trust and promote healthy lifestyles in the veteran community.



Greater Canyonlands, photo courtesy Ray Bloxham

There are many reasons why President Obama should protect Greater Canyonlands -- the stunning 1.8 million acres of public land surrounding Canyonlands National Park in Utah -- as a national monument. It is a place of incredible beauty. It is rich with rock art, cliff dwellings, stone ruins and artifacts from ancient peoples. It has some of the most amazing hiking, rafting, climbing and camping in the world.

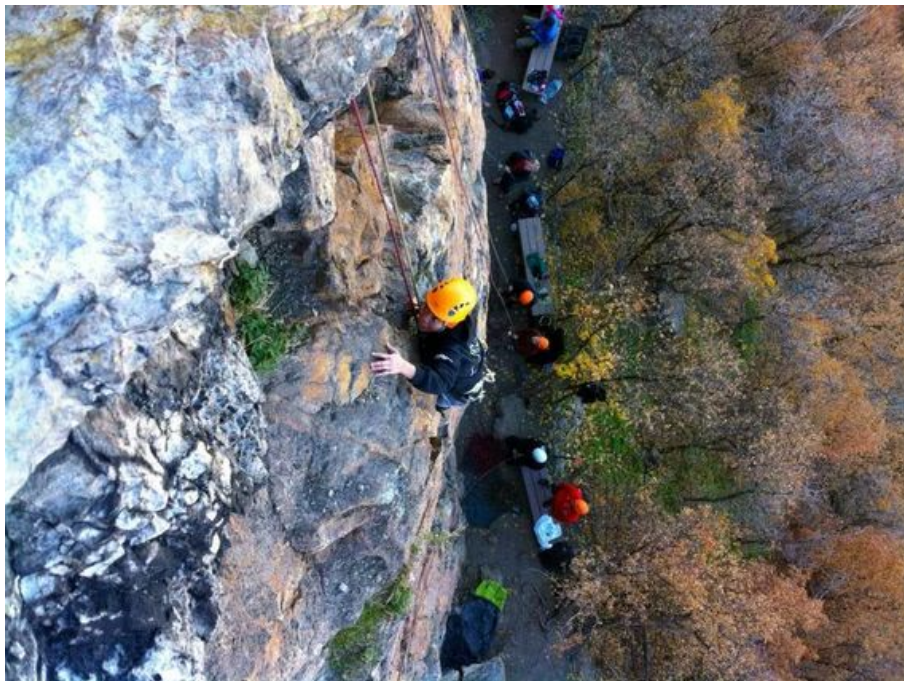
But there is yet another reason the President should act: This wild landscape is a vital sanctuary for the health and healing of body, mind and spirit. I know. Spending time with fellow veterans in Greater Canyonlands and other wild places saved my life and is helping to save the lives of many of my brothers and sisters in arms.

I served almost 12 years as an infantryman, including a couple of combat deployments to Iraq. After leaving active duty in 2011, I faced a lot of the same issues that I've seen other veterans confront. I was lost and did not feel like I fit in as a civilian. I struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and what the Veterans Administration (VA) diagnosed as Survivor's Guilt. I fell into alcohol abuse, lost my family, and became suicidal because of the memories that haunted me night and day.

At my lowest point, I was lucky to have some fellow veterans help me face this new fight for my health and soul. I sought help at the VA. When my counselor learned that I used to be an avid climber he encouraged me to begin climbing again.

Getting out on the rock in big wild landscapes like Greater Canyonlands became my lifeline to healing. There is something about the peacefulness and ruggedness of nature that calms and centers me. No matter how stressed I am, when I get into big wild country and step up to a canyon wall I am able to put everything aside and just focus on the puzzle of how to climb.

I discovered this is true for many other veterans as well, and have since developed a non-profit therapeutic climbing program to help other veterans. Climbing and camping together in wild places fosters a sense of trust and community that allows a special kind of healing. The pristine landscape of Greater Canyonlands provides the therapeutic backdrop and serenity that is essential to the healing process.



Operation Climb On event

This is why I joined with more than 200 health and well-being professionals in Utah to send a letter to President Obama asking him to protect Greater Canyonlands to foster a healthy

America. The letter stresses that protecting Greater Canyonlands would provide physical, psychological and public health benefits to all Americans.

With its lure of extraordinary beauty and exceptional hiking, climbing, biking and rafting, Greater Canyonlands inspires people to get outside and move, reducing the risk of conditions like heart disease, obesity and diabetes that increasingly plague Americans. It provides a reservoir of clean air and water, providing health benefits for millions of people who live far beyond its borders. And, as my story attests, Greater Canyonlands is a place of emotional healing and rejuvenation for people who have suffered trauma, or face emotional challenges.

Greater Canyonlands is a part of the America our veterans signed up to defend. Protecting this world-class landscape would not only preserve an area of unparalleled scenic beauty, it would help to foster a healthy America and protect a refuge for those in need of healing. Veterans have given so much for our country. Protecting Greater Canyonlands can do so much for them.

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