

## **Wild Utah Podcast, Episode 29: Reimagining Recreation**

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### **Dave Pacheco:**

Welcome to Wild Utah, the podcast of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. I'm Dave Pacheco.

Non-motorized or human-powered recreation is growing on public lands throughout the west with Southern Utah becoming somewhat of a poster child for unsustainable growth and associated impacts to resources, backcountry values and user experiences. This increase is due to a host of factors including: widespread advertising, Western population expansion, and a renewed interest in public lands, especially during the pandemic. Not surprisingly, these problems are compounded by under-staffed and under-resourced federal land management agencies. They are not well-equipped to proactively manage for this explosive growth in visitation, so instead, agencies like the Bureau of Land Management tend to operate in a reactionary way. They should be putting effort towards developing landscape level strategies that will both protect public lands and provide a spectrum of high quality experiences for a diverse recreating public.

It's SUWA's goal to work with the Bureau of Land Management to proactively address non-motorized recreation in a way that's sustainable for wildlife and wild places while also providing meaningful and positive experiences for public land users. With that in mind, we set out to develop a report, synthesizing the scientific research on the impacts of non-motorized recreation on public land resources.

Dr. Christopher Monz, a self-proclaimed recreation ecologist, is Professor of Recreation Resources Management in the Department of Environment and Society at Utah State University. He's conducted over 30 years of research on national parks and other protected areas worldwide, and is the primary author of this new report, prepared for SUWA in late September, titled Outdoor Recreation and Ecological Disturbance. On September 28, Dr. Monz participated in a webinar with SUWA Wildland Director Neal Clark to summarize his findings. In this episode we bring you highlights from that webinar.

Dr Monz starts out by talking about the broad framework and fundamental principles behind the report.

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

The other aspect of recreation ecology is really looking at how and when environments are disturbed in some way, obviously from human activity, that affects the visitor experience. Most visitors to our public lands come from urban environments, and they're trying to engage with nature in a fundamental way. So that aspect of understanding the human dimension and the ecological dimension is oftentimes part of a recreation ecology study. Of course, where we want to go with all of this is to inform managers, to give them the tools to develop sustainable management strategies in dealing with visitors in public land settings.

I want to start at the beginning and really talk about some fundamental principles and theory. This is kind of infused throughout the report. It really forms a basis for a lot of the management suggestions that we came up with towards the end of the report.

The first thing I want to introduce is this “use disturbance impact theory” which has really been around since about the seventies or eighties. In general,

the initial use results in the vast majority of disturbance. That disturbance proceeds quite rapidly up to a point where additional use results in little to no additional impact in that finite area. Basically, what happens here is that impact proceeds rapidly and then those impacts are done. So, that initial use in an undisturbed area results in the vast majority of disturbance.

The second being, as use increases, if we can contain use to that same finite area, very little additional disturbance will take place and that would be the case regardless of the ecosystem type.

Common language in land management is this idea of “dispersed use”, in my opinion, is really a misnomer because it's not really dispersed camping or dispersed use. It's really unmanaged or at large.

This idea of at-large or unregulated types of camping situations, commonly referred to as “dispersal”, oftentimes leads to very high levels of disturbance in a lot of areas. As one site gets impacted, visitors move on to another location. This one site is full, take another location. As a consequence, these situations often lead to the most ecological disturbance. Now, if we're in this kind of situation and we can put in some sort of management action and space out use temporarily, that can be confined to a few, very good, very durable sites, overall impact is generally less. These ideas have been applied in many situations, many parks worldwide, and have generally shown to be overall okay.

**Dave Pacheco:**

Here, Dr. Monz talks about some of the basic strategies used to manage recreation on our shared public lands.

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

Some of the easiest data to get on use is from the national park service. Looking at that over the last decade or more, many of our national parks in this area have seen quite a bit of growth.

We're dealing with an incredible period of change in many of our parks and public lands. This is really as a result of many different factors. There's no place distant anymore.

If we're looking at some sort of backcountry management situation...for example, hiking management, we can look at a couple of different strategies and then, based on our knowledge, discuss what might be some of the limitations and the degree of effectiveness.

So, for example, in an unregulated kind of situation. This is where we would have travel in locations without specific management, without specific trails, without formal designated routes. Well, on the benefits side, this gives visitors an awful lot of choice and they can select wherever they want to go. And that freedom to roam. However, on the flip side, from an ecological disturbance standpoint, this is likely to be very ineffective, particularly in areas that are dominated by very fragile soil crusts. So as a consequence, we likely see large networks of disturbance forming.

Let's take this all the way down to a more "active" management strategy, like a confinement strategy. What do we mean by this? In a confinement strategy, we would have visitors travel on established routes. And so if visitors are compliant, it's likely to be very effective. And this is a good way to allow some degree of choice, but still a primitive experience in very high use situations. We're almost forced to go to a designated trail situation. Visitors have less freedom. They're required to travel on those trails. But as a consequence, it's going to be highly effective at containing and confining impacts to a very

limited area. It takes the most management. It reduces some choice, but it still can provide a very high quality experience.

**Dave Pacheco:**

In this segment, Dr. Monz addresses the differences between frontcountry and backcountry recreation management and why it is important to make the distinction.

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

I want to make a few points about this idea of frontcountry and backcountry. Oftentimes in management situations, management strategies between the two sometimes get confused. In a frontcountry situation, we're dealing with high use intensities. We oftentimes use facility type solutions to provide a visitor experience and maintain visitor safety. This might be developing kiosks, restroom areas, developed trails, hardened surfaces, hardened campsites. It's a high degree of regulation, but it's often accompanied by easy access and we minimize disturbance through active management.

In backcountry situations, we're thinking about something different. It's a fundamentally different experience. We expect lower use intensity. We don't expect a lot of facilities. There may be designated trails, but the built environment is oftentimes not used. We expect less regulations. More challenging access and disturbance is often limited by putting effort into getting visitors to use their best practices, minimum impact, leave no trace type of approaches.

Now, when we start mixing and matching that's when we get difficulties. So for example, developing new areas that allow for backcountry access

oftentimes increases use intensities to locations more than they can handle. We oftentimes see this in parks. We're very good at moving people to new locations and trailheads, but those areas might have low capacity, low ability to maintain and to accommodate visitors in a way that impacts don't proliferate.

I want to leave you with a few thoughts here and allow me to speculate on this overall topic of impact frontcountry, backcountry. Burgeoning nature appreciation and the need for nature experiences, some data that we have been collecting...suggests a couple of interesting things. Traditional kinds of activities that are more focused on the backcountry wilderness experience seem to be less of a motivation for our newer visitors than some types of motivations like visiting with friends and family, and experiences with friends and family, and simply getting outdoor exercise. What I'm speculating here is that, if this trend continues, we can continue to accommodate this burgeoning recreation use mainly in frontcountry areas, and that visitors will still be quite satisfied and be able to fulfill their motivations and gain those benefits.... These are some of the current trends that we're seeing in the survey data.

**Dave Pacheco:**

The report concludes with strategies that should be considered, in particular in this region of the Colorado Plateau encompassing the redrock wilderness.

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

There really is limited, but some high quality research, on the Colorado Plateau. However, in order to come up with a wide variety of management strategies, we've really had to look broadly at the literature. That literature, and the work done on the plateau really suggests that dispersal strategies will

likely tend to increase ecological disturbance due to recreation. As a consequence, confinement will help reduce overall impact. And those strategies should be considered. In many, many situations that are now seeing high use, again speculating here, but this idea of unmanaged experiences may start to be less important to contemporary visitors than it was once. To a certain extent, it's still important for many people. I'm not suggesting by any reason, we should get rid of unmanaged experience. But we've got to think about that as a management strategy as we move forward.

**Dave Pacheco:**

SUWA's Neal Clark asked Dr. Monz to elaborate on the intersection between non-motorized recreational use and access roads and routes, recognizing that recreational users of all types generally need roads and routes to access desired areas, and how management plans, such as the eleven BLM travel management plans currently being written, can be informed by these principles learned in the field of recreation ecology.

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

That question touches on a lot of the complexities of various environmental regulations, planning processes that our federal agencies go through. I think an important lesson we've learned in recreation ecology on that very issue is when we have a high capacity to deliver people to backcountry locations, and those backcountry locations essentially have a relatively low resilience, low tolerance for visitor use, that's when ecological disturbances can proliferate. ...

And so I think our work, from a recreation ecology side, can really inform those planning processes, looking at the unintended consequences of

developing those access areas and instead using access as a management tool in order to minimize disturbance and maximize visitor experience.

**Dave Pacheco:**

Here, Neal elaborates on the practical side of proactive route management.

**Neal Clark:**

“We have to acknowledge that the motorized access routes to travel plans that the agencies are coming up with are going to have a tremendous effect on use patterns. Just as parking lots and trailheads have an effect on use patterns. And what we see often is, instead of proactive landscape-level planning for where that use should be occurring, it happens in a reactive sense...and areas start to become more used for a host of reasons. It may just be publicity and then we're in a position where there's a move to develop trailheads and parking lots. And so we really want to see the agencies move to a system where we can try to manage a lot of that use through just smart, proactive planning.

**Dave Pacheco:**

In response to a question from a webinar participant, Dr. Monz further detailed the distinction between frontcountry and backcountry.

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

So, back in the 1970s, a bunch of researchers put together what's called the 'recreation opportunity spectrum', and it was the first effort to do exactly what you're asking, essentially, it's a zoning strategy, based on some objective criteria to try to develop different zones. Certain kinds of situations, certain kinds of environments, certain kinds of visitor experiences can be expected.

Different agencies have adopted strategies. But the point being is that oftentimes determining those zones, those boundaries is part of a planning process. It incorporates both of the biophysical characteristics of a location, its proximity to roaded areas and developed areas, and then the fundamental attributes of the visitor experience that can be expected there. And so there really isn't kind of a set distance or set buffer, but it's more part of a broader planning process that's accomplished with those multiple factors. And I would just add for Bureau of Land Management lands in Utah, SUWA has inventoried most of the BLM public lands throughout the state and has America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which are lands that qualify as wilderness under the wilderness act.

The BLM also does its own inventories for wilderness quality areas. And so I think on BLM, you do have some metrics to show you what is like true primitive backcountry versus more frontcountry setting.... I think if you look at the original Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument plan, that's effectively what they did was manage from areas. They determined, they call it primitive to backcountry travel and frontcountry, they had a gradient and each one had different management strategies. And I think it was a really smart way to go about planning. And I'd like to see more of that, as the agencies start to revise their resource management plans in the future.

**Dave Pacheco:**

Another question centered on the conflicting priorities of providing for an unconfined wilderness recreation experience while attempting to discourage dispersed camping that concentrates use in new sites. It's a natural tension that needs to be addressed.

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

So there's a number of strategies. Our wilderness agencies largely have relied on, to a certain extent, minimum-impact education and a well-trained visitor in order to be able to do that. So when we go in the backcountry, we camp in areas where impacts have already formed, right? And as a consequence, we're not increasing that disturbance. How much we can rely on that is always a subject of debate. And as a consequence, many of our more high use areas, like again, referring to national parks, have gone to designated backcountry site situations. Now I would hate to see that happen everywhere because of the loss of that unconfined experience. But you know, we need to do some sort of outreach, some sort of management in order to minimize that disturbance. And, right now I think the most serious issue in this case is really the roads that are seeing a lot of increased use and increased access with camping in association with those roads. Those areas really seem to be seeing quite a bit of increase in disturbance.

**Dave Pacheco:**

Next came a great question about thresholds. How should federal agencies establish thresholds for when recreational pressure gets to the point where they need to move to more of a confinement strategy? Where's the marker set to make those determinations before you end up with a problem?

**Dr. Christopher Monz:**

It's always better to be proactive than reactive. Good management plans will include an indicator and threshold approach. It's one of the fundamentals of planning that we teach and the interagency visitor-use management planning process incorporates that, so some measurable indicator of quality. And then as you measure that indicator, as you approach different thresholds, a suggested management action. We would measure the quality of the resource conditions of visitor experience, and as we approach those thresholds, it suggests management actions. Now these things are hard to do. It requires measurement monitoring, feedbacks into a planning process. It's difficult and time-consuming, but it's a well accepted strategy. And as much as we can do that, it provides a defensible way for us to implement management actions.

**Dave Pacheco:**

Our webinar concluded with Neal providing a summary and an immediate action you can take to get involved in this issue today.

**Neal Clark:**

I also wanted to note that with the release of the report last week, was also accompanied by a sign-on letter from more than a dozen Utah-based and regional public lands organizations, expressing concern over these increasing impacts. And specifically requesting that the Utah Bureau of Land Management establish what we're calling a "non-motorized recreation and visitation working group" to really look at existing management policies, identify issues and gaps in existing management, and to make recommendations for state level policies that will address those management problems.

And so if you want to learn more about the issue and read the report, I encourage you to visit the recreation page on SUWA's website. It's [www.suwa.org/recreation](http://www.suwa.org/recreation). And I will note that at the bottom, that webpage, under the take action heading there's a link to a petition for the public to also ask the Utah BLM to establish this working group. So I would encourage you to take a look at that and check it out. Please sign on if you would like to.

**Dave Pacheco:**

Wild Utah is recorded at SUWA's main office in Salt Lake City on equipment purchased through the generosity of our members. SUWA is primarily member funded. Over 90% of our revenue comes directly from people who care about protecting southern Utah's redrock country. We're proud of that because it keeps our voice independent. If you'd like to help protect wild Utah today, please head to [suwa dot org](http://suwa.org) and click the Donate button. We appreciate your support.

Wild Utah's theme music, "What's Worth?" is composed by Moab singer-songwriter Haley Noel Austin. Our interlude music, "Chuck's Guitar" is by Larry Pattis. Post-studio editing and production is by Laura Borichevsky.

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On behalf of SUWA, I'm Dave Pacheco. Thanks for taking the time to listen. We hope you can join us for the next episode of Wild Utah.