

Wild Utah Podcast, Episode 34: Access Not Excess

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Dave Pacheco:

Welcome to Episode 34 of Wild Utah, the podcast of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. I'm Dave Pacheco. Off-road vehicles have been a recurring focus of this podcast, and in this episode we're talking in depth about travel management planning. We're going to someone whose focus is travel planning, and that's SUWA Policy Fellow Kelsey Cruickshank. Kelsey, thanks for joining us.

Kelsey Cruickshank:

Thanks for having me.

Dave Pacheco:

Can you remind folks of what we mean when we say Travel Management Planning, and just give us a general synopsis of why the Utah Bureau of Land Management is doing this planning and what it means for our wild places?

Kelsey Cruickshank:

Travel management planning is the process the BLM goes through to designate routes that are open to motorized vehicles on BLM-managed land. Motorized vehicles include everything from cars and trucks to dirt bikes and ATVs. SUWA is not opposed to motorized recreation everywhere, but we are opposed to motorized recreation that threatens our wild places by damaging air and water quality, causing excessive noise, and harming resources. Not to mention the climate impacts of burning fossil fuels as a form of recreation. Right now,

many of the routes being considered for designation as open to motorized vehicles are in or adjacent to wilderness-quality lands, and the wilderness itself is at risk of being lost through badly done travel management planning. The Utah Bureau of Land Management is doing this planning now because a 2017 settlement agreement requires the BLM to complete new travel management plans.

Dave Pacheco:

Even though we've covered the 2017 settlement agreement on previous episodes of this podcast (namely episodes 9, 17 and 22), it's an important part of the story that bears repeating. Explain for us the events leading up to that settlement, what was agreed to by SUWA, the Utah BLM and the courts, and remind us why the BLM is obligated to do this travel planning now.

Kelsey Cruickshank:

The BLM is required to update its Resource Management Plans or RMPs every couple decades. RMPs are like city zoning plans, they dictate where certain activities are allowed to happen on public lands, like which areas are open to oil and gas development or should be protected in their natural state. In 2008, the BLM released six RMPs that dictated how 11 million acres of some of Utah's most iconic landscapes would be managed for the next twenty years. These RMPs included travel plans that designated a huge number of routes as open to motorized recreation. SUWA challenged these plans and the federal district court agreed with SUWA and found that the BLM failed to comply with federal laws to protect public lands and resources from damage caused by off-road vehicles. Under a settlement agreement from 2017, the BLM is now required to complete 13 new travel plans by 2025, covering more than 6 million acres of southern and eastern Utah.

Dave Pacheco:

We've previously talked about the San Rafael Desert and San Rafael Swell travel planning areas, but more areas are now open or about to open for public comment. Can you bring us up to date on where the BLM's travel planning process is at, and which areas are next up?

Kelsey Cruickshank:

The Paunsaugunt Travel Management Area is open for public scoping now, and we expect a draft for the Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges Travel Management Area to be released for public comment shortly.

Dave Pacheco:

Let's take those one at a time, starting with Paunsaugunt. This is the area immediately north and east of Kanab. Can you elaborate on the specific problems in this area and what a listener who knows this area well might offer to help protect these places?

Kelsey Cruickshank:

The Paunsaugunt Travel Management Area includes almost 200,000 acres of BLM-managed land in Kane County, just west of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. It includes several areas with wilderness character, including Upper Kanab Creek. It's also used for all types of recreation, including hiking, biking, camping, and horse-riding. This area is particularly dense with cultural resources that are at risk of being literally run over by off-road vehicles. Right now, listeners have an opportunity to get involved as the BLM is soliciting public scoping input until March 25th. On their website, the BLM has made available maps of all the routes being considered for designation in the Paunsaugunt Travel Management Area and the public is encouraged to provide comments on any resource issues related to these routes. Comments are helpful when they identify specific areas or

trails, discuss non-motorized uses like hiking and camping, and any ways in which motorized use conflicted with your particular use or enjoyment.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, that's great. We'll have a link to that comment area so people can just click on that and submit their comments. So Kelsey, you mentioned the importance of this Ponant area because of its cultural resources. Can you elaborate a little bit on that? What exactly are we talking about? That's at risk here and what is the problem?

Kelsey Cruickshank:

Sure thing. So Theon again is a really special and unique part of Utah. And one of the things that makes it such an exciting place to visit is just the density of cultural resources, everything from rock art and pictographs and petroglyphs, um, to old habitation sites, dwellings pots, evidence of hunter gatherers and ancestral. Puebloans just the density of resources in the pongan area is pretty much unparalleled. It's really incredible. And that's one reason this area needs to be protected because a lot of the routes that a BLM, a designate from motorized use, they actually travel directly through these sites. So not adjacent, not nearby, not leading to, but directly through we're talking ORVs that are driving right over ancient habitation sites through pots. I mean the physical damage, I is really on a, an unprecedented scale compared or to the other travel management areas.

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And I would imagine that the reason for that is because these are user created, routes, writers are just kind of going off creating their own routes. The agency has never taken the time to actually inventory those areas for those resources. And that's precisely what the problem here is.

Kelsey Cruickshank:

Yeah, that's exactly it. A lot of these are user created to try and created by people who aren't archeologists. They don't know what they're doing necessarily. This isn't necessarily intentional, but in some cases it does lead to increased looting and the theft of cultural resources.

Dave Pacheco:

That's because people now have access to these areas because there's a tracks that go out there, right?

Kelsey Cruickshank:

There are roads going right through them.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, thank you very much, Kelsey that really helps, you know, put a fine point on that question. So you mentioned another area where travel planning is well underway, and one where our friends in the river running community are raising concerns. That's the Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges travel plan. Talk about those specific problems being addressed in this area, and what form of help can be offered.

Kelsey Cruickshank:

The Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges Travel Management Area is just outside Moab, and encompasses the famous Labyrinth Canyon section of the Green River, as well as its many side canyons.. Labyrinth Canyon is truly unique, there's no place like it, not only in Utah but in the world. You can spend a week floating the canyon without ever encountering a single rapid. Congress has recognized just how special this place is and designated the river corridor as a Wild and Scenic River and the Emery County side of the river as

wilderness. That means there's no motorized recreation at all on one side of the canyon.. Unfortunately, currently, opportunities for enjoying the quiet recreation and solitude that wilderness is supposed to provide can be ruined in an instant by the sight and sound of ORVs racing up and down the river bank as a result of the BLM's failure to end motorized recreation on the Grand County side of the canyon. River runners and SUWA are advocating to protect this incredible place. We expect a public comment period to open soon for the Labyrinth Rims/Gemini Bridges Travel Management Plan.

Dave Pacheco:

Let's take a step back. Describe for listeners the various stages of public comment that occur in this kind of broad management planning. Define Scoping, Draft Environmental Assessment, and Final EA for listeners who get justifiably confused about this bureaucratic speak, and tell us why knowledgeable, specific comments matter throughout the process.

Kelsey Cruickshank:

What you're talking about is the NEPA process. NEPA, or the National Environmental Policy Act, is the landmark environmental protection law in the United States. Essentially, NEPA requires federal agencies to consider the environmental effects of a proposed action before making a decision on what action to take. For travel management planning, the process begins with scoping. This is the first opportunity for public participation, and the agency uses the scoping period to gather information that will help them make decisions later. After scoping, the agency puts together a draft environmental assessment. This document explains the decision to be made and presents a range of alternatives and their environmental effects. For example, in travel management planning, the decision will be route designations for off-road vehicles within a particular travel management area. Each of the alternatives will then present a different range of routes being opened or closed. From

there, the agency solicits public comments on the draft environmental assessment. It's important to know that the agency has dual obligations. The agency must analyze impacts under NEPA, and the agency is required to minimize damage to resources and minimize conflicts between resource users. This is why specific comments about personal experiences in the backcountry are so important. The final environmental assessment responds to comments on the draft environmental assessment. Finally, the record of decision determines which action the agency is going to take, the NEPA process concludes, and the action is taken.

Dave Pacheco:

Overall, why is travel planning important?

Kelsey Cruickshank:

Travel planning is really the most important planning process going on in Utah today, with long-running implications for wilderness-quality lands, other protected areas, and the 30 by 30. As you know, designated wilderness is the highest level of environmental protection for a landscape, and to qualify it must be 5,000 contiguous acres of a roadless area. So where roads are designated for motorized use makes an enormous impact on what areas of wilderness-quality lands can be permanently protected as Congressionally-designated wilderness. This administration has committed to the global 30 by 30 initiative to protect 30% of land by 2030 in order to help mitigate the impact of climate change, and these areas could play an important role in that, if we are able to protect them as non-motorized wilderness. So while at first you might not think that travel planning makes much of a difference, in fact it could contribute quite a lot to not only wilderness protection in Utah but the fight against climate change as a whole.

Dave Pacheco:

Your time and expertise on this is greatly appreciated, Kelsey. Thanks for bringing us up to date on this timely topic. I know we've not heard the last of it.

Kelsey:

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.