

Testimony of Bryson Garbett

Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

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My name is Bryson Garbett. I am from Utah. My great grandmother and my great great grandfather were Utah pioneers. They made the journey from England across the ocean and then by covered wagons across the plains. I was born and raised in Utah and I was taught to appreciate those pioneers that made so many sacrifices to settle Utah.

I am married to Jan VanDenBerghe Garbett. Her great great grandfather, Lemuel Hardison Redd, was one of the scouts for the Hole in the Rock expedition, which traversed much of Utah's redrock country and stopped in southeastern Utah. That is where he settled.

We have eight children that we have raised in Utah. They were educated in our public schools.

From the time I was a young man I have been involved in politics. At eighteen I voted in the first national election an eighteen-year-old could vote in. At twenty-two I was elected as a delegate to the Republican state nominating convention. It was 1976. We nominated a young attorney by the name of Orrin Hatch to run against the long time incumbent, Ted Moss. At twenty-eight, in 1982, I was elected to the Utah Legislature. Those were tough times for Utah's economy; I was the chief sponsor of the Interstate Banking Act. This bill revamped banking and capital in Utah and allowed banks from other states to come and do business in Utah. Before that it was very difficult for banks to do that. It brought much more capital into the state.

After my service in the Legislature I turned my attention to my business and service in the community. I am one of the founders of Foundation Escalera, a humanitarian organization providing a step up to impoverished communities in Mexico. We do this through education, thereby giving young people the tools they need to stay in Mexico and provide for their families. I served for six years on the board of directors of Salt Lake Habitat for Humanity and served one year as the President in 2007-2008.

I am the President of Garbett Homes which provides work for hundreds of employees and sub contractors. We have been a leader in building good communities with homes that Utahns can afford. Even in these very tough economic times we continue to sell homes. I have been very active in our trade association and I am now the President of the Salt Lake Home Builders Association.

We are here today to talk about America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. I have visited many of these areas over my lifetime. My father was a loan guaranty officer for the Veteran's Administration. He would travel the state to check on homes and borrowers. He would take me with him. In the early 1960s we would drive throughout Utah visiting many small towns. I still remember being in the government car driving on the backroads of our state. It was summer and the windows would be down and the warm wind would rush in. We would pass green pastures with cows and horses, old barns, and miles of barbed wire fences with old pine poles. We would stop in little towns and eat broasted chicken in the café on Main Street. What I remember best were the large open spaces with redrock everywhere and hardly anyone on the road. I would stick my head out to get a closer look at those huge red mountains and wonder if anyone lived up on top of those red mesas with the sheer red walls and the green table tops.

This was the spark for my interest in these isolated and wild places. I have now been in many of those places that we drove by in the early 1960s.

Wilderness in Utah is unique in all the world and it is one of our greatest state and national resources. It is incredibly beautiful but also very fragile.

I mentioned earlier that I have eight children. Raising a family is the hardest thing I do. As a young father I looked for something that we as a family could do together. I could not afford a boat, as many families could. In fact there were many things I could not afford. However, I did think we could backpack. I was a novice, so we learned together. When we went into these areas proposed for wilderness we were isolated. It was just us and what we could carry on our backs. No iPods, no phones, no TVs, no newspapers. We grew closer together and we visited wondrous places. I have seen other families in Utah have this same experience. Our experience is not unique.

The first place we went was to Grand Gulch, which is proposed for wilderness designation in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. I was nervous and a little afraid. I hoped we would make it out alive. As we started on the trailhead I scanned the comments left by those on their way out in the trail register. "Amazing!, Great Ruins!" and even "It changed my life." That trip would change our lives. We survived. There is something I can't describe about being on your own. Leaving all the modern noise behind and living in the open and surviving. However on that trip I had new boots and my feet were pretty beat up so I wrote in the register, "changed my feet."

Since then we have been to many areas proposed for wilderness designation in America's Red Rock Wilderness act: Dark Canyon; the San Juan River, which includes Lime Creek and Valley of the Gods; the Dirty Devil River (I have included a picture of this area with my testimony); Upper Horseshoe Canyon; Mexican Mountain; Death Hollow; Labyrinth Canyon; Little Wild Horse Canyon; Muddy Creek; Devil's Canyon (picture included at the end of my testimony); North Escalante Canyon, Paria-Hackberry Canyon; Parunuweap Canyon (also pictured); Orderville Canyon; Notch Peak; the Wah Wah Mountains; and the White River. I have also been to Canaan Mountain, Goose Creek, and Kolob Creek, which are places in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act that are now protected thanks to the efforts of Utah's Senator Bennett and Representative Matheson. And not to leave out Representative Bishop, my family has greatly appreciated the Cedar Mountains Wilderness Area—an area formerly included in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act—that he worked to protect.

Parunuweap Canyon

Parunuweap Canyon is a great example of the incomparable redrock lands that we have in Utah. I have returned many times to show it to friends and family. Eventually flowing into Zion National Park, Parunuweap—a Piute word meaning whitewater or roaring water canyon—was formed by the East Fork of the Virgin River. Parunuweap was visited by the explorer John Wesley Powell. We pass the plaque erected to him on the canyon wall when we leave the canyon.

I have even explored it with my whole family. My daughter, Mary, was carried by her oldest brother and shared a sleeping bag with her older sister. My then five-year-old, Sam, carried a backpack with an extra change of clothes and some snacks. His older brothers carried his sleeping bag and food.

Parunuweap is a beautiful oasis ringed by a rugged, dry landscape. The stream that runs through it is clear and cool. Everywhere there are cottonwood trees and other species. Above this crystal clear stream rise the cliffs of the canyon. As you travel farther downstream the walls become higher, straighter, and closer together until they are only a few yards apart. I have spent many nights looking up at the river of stars created by these sheer cliffs. The canyon is full of freshwater springs where we loved to refill our water bottles and eat watercress growing nearby.

As a side note, a former Representative from Utah once proposed a wilderness bill that would have designated Parunuweap Canyon as wilderness but would have allowed for the construction of a reservoir, transmission lines, and a road in this area. (See Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995, H.R. 1745, 104th Cong. § 9(1)(C) (1995)).

On my first visit to Parunuweap I did notice one faint pair of off-road vehicle, or ORV, tracks in the middle of the canyon in the stream bed that would disappear and reappear as we hiked along. There was certainly no route or road in the canyon bottom. As I have returned over the years those ORV tracks have increased, creating definite impacts. It was shocking to see the damage done in the riparian stream bottom, a rare gem in the middle of the desert. Now, I understand, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has designated this as a permissible route for ORVs. I am a witness of something that has gone from non-existent to permitted within a few short years. If this use is allowed to continue there is a real danger the canyon, and all of those species that depend on it, will be substantially harmed.

White River

The White River is located in northeastern Utah. It is a remarkable deep canyon that sits as an island in a sea of oil and gas development. It is an easy place to visit and an easy river to run. We canoed it. If we could do it, anybody can do it. I did it with my young boys and another family and we knew nothing about how to paddle a canoe but we wanted to see that part of the country. I only learned about this area because it was part of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act and my son had read about it in *Wilderness at the Edge* (the Utah Wilderness Coalition's detailed description of its earlier wilderness proposal).

In the canyon and on the river we enjoyed the scenery and the solitude. I remember the sweeping bends and the beautiful placid water that reflected the rugged cliffs looming above us. As we approached the river and as we left we saw one gas well after another. We understand that those wells are important to Utah's economy. However, the White River's deep canyon is so spectacular that surely a small inconvenience to unfettered development is worth the price. It will offer a welcome relief, a refuge, to all who paddle down its placid waters from the development around it. With thought and clear boundaries this area can easily be preserved. To that end, I understand that supporters of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act were able to reach an agreement with Anadarko Petroleum Corporation (the federal lessee in parts of this area) which clearly defined acceptable areas for natural gas development while protecting much of the northern half of the proposed White River wilderness.

Unfortunately, the remainder of the White River is still threatened. With no planning it will clearly be lost.

Labyrinth Canyon

The Green River is a singular river that flows through a good part of the state. It has many varied phases in the miles it covers. As it approaches Canyonlands National Park from the north it becomes calm and tranquil. It is the perfect place to take families for a great time on a remarkable river in the middle of redrock country. It would also be a perfect place to take the infirm or those with disabilities who might not be able to access the rugged heart of wilderness on foot. There are no rapids in Labyrinth Canyon, any novice could float it.

I spent three days on this trip. It was in March. The air was crisp and the sun bright. We traveled through the wide canyon with beautiful redrock walls. As we lazily paddled, the most amazing scenery floated by us. It is not just the scenery that makes Labyrinth Canyon special but as each mile goes by the hustle and stress of another world seems to fade. Nothing was threatening; the water was easy, we saw huge herons and cranes, we basked in the silence and stillness of this gentle place. The river reflected the canyon walls. When we were hungry we snacked as we paddled or found a sunny spot and pulled our canoes over, maybe napping for a moment or two after lunch.

Labyrinth Canyon is part of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. Unfortunately, the BLM has not recognized, nor afforded this entire spectacular, tranquil canyon the wilderness-like management and respect it deserves.

On the second day of my trip through Labyrinth Canyon the remarkable silence of the area was shattered by the noise and dust of two very loud motorcycles. I was shocked to learn that the BLM was allowing motorcycles to travel down Labyrinth Canyon and along the Green River. This seemed ill advised; no place in Utah was better suited for making a true wilderness experience accessible to all walks of life. That day, when the stillness of the canyon was shattered by the roaring of the bikes, was a stark reminder of the fleeting and sensitive nature of wilderness. It was as if the city had been plopped into the middle of wilderness. It was out of place and made no sense in that setting.

Devil's Canyon

Devil's Canyon was a hard hike through a fantastic part of America's Red Rock Wilderness Act. Not only was it a spectacular, narrow redrock canyon but it was easy to access. It runs right next to I-70. When we first started the hike we could even hear the cars traveling on the freeway but that soon faded. It was challenging but unlike other places I have been. There was no running water. We had to drink from an alkali spring full of hair from cows. I did not know you could drink such bad tasting water and live. We did just fine.

The day we climbed out of the canyon to start the long hike back to our car I was amazed. As we made our way from the bottom of the canyon to the desert above the route we took seemed like a spiral staircase circling round and round with fantastical rock formations on the canyon wall. I have never forgotten it.

On all our trips we are very careful where we walk. The floor of the desert is so fragile. It is often kept from eroding by small organisms living on top of the soil. One step in the wrong place can destroy these sensitive organisms and may mean erosion and lost soil.

On our Devil's Canyon trip we spent three days carefully watching where we stepped and walked. However, not everyone shared our caution. On exiting the canyon we heard the high-pitched whine of motorcycles. We shortly came upon their tracks and were angered to see all of the damage that they had wrecked from a few moments of joy riding in an area miles away from any roads. In the sensitive desert, where even an errant footstep can have noticeable impacts you can understand what kind of unnecessary havoc the churning, spinning, careening tire of a motorcycle will cause. We were all very sad to see such destruction.

Wilderness Is Important

I have been a few places throughout the world. Utah is an amazing place; unique in all the world with its beautiful and wild scenery that can be enjoyed in rare solitude. It is accessible and healing to all walks of life. Now, it is facing daily threats and only Congress can stop them. But it must act now or we may lose this amazing resource. We are just beginning to see the economic value of all this to our state and country. Our current federal wilderness areas such as the High Uintas are highly prized by both those in the state and those that come to visit. No one would want to turn back the clock on the High Uintas and prevent it from being designated wilderness.

I have heard and read comments from people to the effect of "no Utahn likes this bill." Do these people mean that no Utahn likes wilderness? That is ridiculous. People in Utah are no different than anywhere else. Those who have had experience with wilderness love it. They are uplifted by it and do not want to see it disappear. Most people in Utah have had experience wilderness. As well as hiking in it, they drive by it, they see pictures of it, they camp in it, and they hunt and fish in it. Every person in the Salt Lake, Utah, and Cache valleys can see federally-protected wilderness areas as they face east and look at the Wasatch Mountains. Likewise, those people living in Tooele, Nephi, Brigham City, and Washington County can easily glimpse protected wilderness from their homes. It seems that two-thirds of our entire state may have a view of a federal wilderness area from some window in their house.

Elected officials and promoters for the state realize what we have. When they market their counties to others the first thing they pitch is usually the beautiful natural areas of Utah, including wilderness areas.

I have heard others argue that “9 million acres are too much.” To simply dismiss the bill based on that reason is a disservice to Utahns and Americans. It does not make sense. You must look at each area we are trying to protect and talk about the specific issues. America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act was not just put on the map arbitrarily or fashioned by people juggling acreage numbers to see what sounded good. It was formed by countless volunteers and professionals spending thousands of hours on the ground identifying and mapping these areas.

How much land should be protected is a valid point of discussion. There are many questions that could and should be asked. “What is it you would like to take out of this proposal? What is it that you think should not be protected? What do you think should be protected?” These are good questions that deserve responses from both sides of the issue. I do not think there is anyone that has been to Utah, that has seen these lands, and that is interested in future generations that would say that nothing should be preserved. So for an elected official to dismiss the bill just because it sounds like too much to some vocal minority does his constituents, future generations, and all Americans a disservice.

Conclusion

As a former legislator I have been in your position. You must take a complicated issue and understand it and decide what is best. You do this day in and day out. I have great respect for the issues and challenges you face continually. I hope that you will give this issue the time and attention that it deserves.

I have gone into Utah’s wilderness with my young children. They love it. It is a part of them. For the millions of young Americans that want a chance to experience the beauty of wilderness I ask you to support America’s Red Rock Wilderness Act. If you do not act Utahns will lose out, Americans will lose out, and, worst of all, future generations will lose out.