

Preservation group wants more people of faith to think about nature

Cody Clark - Daily Herald | Posted: Saturday, April 10, 2010 12:20 am

Among many other reasons that people enjoy exploring a remote canyon, or climbing to the summit of a rugged mountain peak, is the sense of becoming connected to something vaster, deeper and more significant than themselves. It's partly because of that engagement with a larger reality that there are national parks and monuments in the United States.

The eminent naturalist John Muir, a key figure in the establishment of the national parks system, was a tireless advocate of the spiritually transformative power of wild places. In his book "Travels in Alaska," Muir writes, "Every particle of rock or water or air has God by its side leading it the way it should go; the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness."

It's that kind of thinking about man and nature that sparked the creation of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance's Faith and the Land project, an ongoing effort begun last year to get people of faith in Utah talking about the spiritual importance of wilderness.

In the past year, religious congregations across Utah have had dialogues about the relationship between wilderness and spirituality. And in February, participants in the Faith and the Land project visited the state capitol to air their views about wilderness preservation during the recently concluded legislative session.

Terri Martin, SUWA's Western Regional Organizer, has worked on Faith and the Land since becoming involved in the sometimes polarizing wilderness advocacy group, a nonprofit organization founded in 1983. Martin said that wilderness advocates in general are often seen in Utah as being outsiders and extremists, a perception that complicates their already difficult goal of expanding wilderness protection in the Beehive State.

The Utah Shared Access Alliance (www.usaall.org), a Utah group that resists large-scale wilderness designation of public lands in Utah, states on its Web site that it was formed in 1999 to resist the "forces of radical environmental and anti-access groups." That kind of language is frequently applied to groups like SUWA.

"We began to say to people, 'How can we change this?' " Martin said. "People told us, 'You should talk to communities of faith.' "

At the time, Martin said, SUWA officials had gotten to know key people in the public affairs department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The two parties discussed over lunch SUWA's desire to connect with churches in Utah, with the result that LDS officials offered to host a small conference at the Joseph Smith Memorial Building in Salt Lake City in June of 2008.

At that initial meeting of some 30 people, representing a diversity of faiths, SUWA invited participants to talk about their personal spiritual connection to Utah's wild lands, and the seeds of Faith and the Land were sown.

Talking to churches

For Martin, 57, who was raised in the Roman Catholic faith but hasn't participated in any organized religion since high school, her spiritual investment in Utah began more than 30 years ago. "I discovered Utah and the canyon country of southern Utah in 1973," she said, after taking a job as a lifeguard at Lake Powell while in college.

"I fell in love with the canyon country," Martin said. "At the core, it was a spiritual relationship. It was a very powerful feeling of coming home to a place I'd never been."

While participating in the meeting at the Joseph Smith Memorial Building, Martin said, SUWA realized how many people of faith have had similarly formative experiences. It also became clear that there was value in discussing what is typically a politically charged subject in Utah in a non-political setting.

Too often, Martin said, the only place that wilderness is discussed is in settings that are typically combative: courtrooms, public hearings, editorial opinion pages. Instead of creating another forum for debate, she said, SUWA realized it could be productive to encourage people to simply share their feelings: "What does the land mean to you, what's your personal experience with it, what do you hope your children will find there?"

After the success and warm atmosphere of the first meeting, it seemed clear that Utah's churches would be the place to hold that discussion.

Judith Adolphson and her husband, Don, a public management professor for Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Business, found out about Faith in the Land through their membership in SUWA, which Judith Adolphson said that couple has belonged to since the mid-1990s. The Adolphsons liked the idea, she said, of encouraging fellow Latter-day Saints to think more deeply about the value of wilderness conservation.

Growing up on a farm in Wisconsin, Adolphson said, she formed a strong attachment to the forests and lakes near her home. For Adolphson, 64, natural beauty is a reflection of godliness. "I think nature's systems are perfectly designed," she said. Human beings do a pretty good job of creating some things, she said, but nothing compares to what you find when you look at all of the interconnection in a natural ecosystem.

Natural systems, she said, are "harmonious and perfectly obedient to the laws of God and the universe."

What does wilderness mean to you?

It isn't just people in Utah who are invested in Utah wilderness. SUWA regional organizer Clayton Daughenbaugh, who lives in Illinois, and grew up "a United Methodist preacher's kid," said that he had a spiritual awakening about the importance of wilderness about 20 years ago while hiking in Guadalupe Mountains National Park in western Texas.

Since then, he said, "I just feel a presence when I'm out in wilderness." When Daughenbaugh reads the scripturally famous John 3:16 in the New Testament -- "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" -- he thinks of God's love as encompassing the Earth as fiercely as its inhabitants.

Not long after experiencing his conversion to wilderness in Texas, Daughenbaugh, 52, was in Negro Bill Canyon, near Utah's Arches National Park, on a hot July day with his wife and 11-month-old son. "I took the carrier off and took Luke out and put him on the ground," Daughenbaugh said. "He took his first steps right there in the sand."

That's the kind of emotional bond that Martin thinks people will discover if encouraged to talk about what their wilderness means to them. It's valuable to have the discussion, she said, even if, for some people, that's

as far as it goes. If all that comes out of Faith and the Land is a deeper appreciation for wilderness, then its purpose will have been served.

On the other hand, Martin said, one thing she's noticed in talking with church groups is that they have a tendency to want to do something about things they believe in. And there is a level of urgency to do something about wilderness in Utah.

Martin said that Utah has 23 million acres of federally administered public lands. Groups that inventory that land, she said, have found that slightly less than 10 million acres still qualify for the federal, legal definition of wilderness: roadless lands where signs of man are diminished. "What happened to the other 10 million acres?" she said. "They're not wild anymore."

Adolphson recently organized a wilderness conservation fireside in her LDS ward, or congregation, in Salt Lake City. "We can impact, but we cannot re-create, the ecosystems that the Savior created," she said. "The Earth is not here without a purpose and it behooves us to keep some of it in a natural state."