

The Biological Value of Utah Wilderness

The Scientists' Consensus

In 1995, a group of 31 botanists, zoologists, and ecologists presented to Utah's Governor a series of biological guidelines for designating Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness areas in the state. Their Utah-based *Committee for Biological Commentary on Utah Wilderness Issues* argues that the conservation of biological diversity—the variety of life in a given area—is the most important goal of wilderness preservation. The scientists' recommended conservation strategy, later published in *The Great Basin Naturalist*, advocates the protection of large contiguous wilderness areas to preserve Utah's plant and wildlife species in their native habitats. According to the committee, "Large areas with minimal human intrusion and natural processes reasonably intact are critical elements of an in situ conservation strategy; they provide protection for fragile habitats, like easily eroded soils, and preserve habitat for reclusive species. Moreover, wilderness areas offer natural ecosystems some protection from the biological invasions that have devastated many communities, especially plant communities, across Utah."

What's at Stake

The lands proposed for wilderness in Utah are home to at least two dozen endangered or sensitive wildlife species that require specialized desert habitats. These include the Gila monster, chuckwalla, and desert tortoise in the hot southwestern corner of Utah, and the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and endangered native fishes of the Colorado and Green Rivers. An unusually large number of endemic species (those found nowhere else) also occur throughout Utah. This is due to the region's great diversity of habitats which range from rivers, rocky cliffs, and isolated mesas to sand dunes, upland forests, and alpine tundra. Utah's Great Basin mountains, isolated by salt flats and ancient glacial lakes, are home to numerous endemic species including the Bonneville cutthroat trout.

Wilderness designation helps protect these "at risk" species as well as animals that are sensitive to human disturbance. Many bird and mammal species found in wilderness are intolerant of excessive human intrusion, especially during nesting, birthing, and denning times. Wilderness provides a safe haven for large mammals such as the bighorn sheep, elk, bison, mountain lion, and antelope, all of which are found on Utah's BLM lands.

Scientists estimate that 180 of Utah's plant species are currently classified by federal or state agencies as endangered, threatened, or sensitive. A majority of these "definitely or probably" occur on BLM lands and many are narrow endemics. Livestock grazing and irresponsible off-road vehicle use can have especially devastating effects on plant communities. Although wilderness designation does not reduce existing levels of livestock grazing, the restrictions it places on road construction, mining, forest chaining, and off-road vehicle use provide critical protection to Utah's native flora.

The Big Picture

In recent decades, global habitat loss and species extinctions have accelerated at an alarming rate. Here in Utah, we still have a chance to preserve one of the most visually spectacular and biologically important regions in the United States. Federal protection of Utah's remaining BLM wilderness can play a crucial role in safeguarding sensitive species and preserving Utah's unique biological heritage.