

*The Grand Compromise*

# Wilderness Society Sells Out, Again

by ALEXANDER REID ROSS 4/6/15 <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/04/06/wilderness-society-sells-out/>

The Wilderness Society is celebrating with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance over striking a deal with the conservative elements in the state. Trading away half a million acres of land to the energy industry for 1.5 million acres of wilderness seems good on paper, after all. And after the Bundy Ranch fiasco in Nevada, rapprochement between the greens and the far right seems like exactly what the country needs.

But not everybody is happy.

Local groups Utah Tar Sands Resistance and Peaceful Uprising are crying foul. “This is very much a sell out,” organizer Raphael Cordry told me over the phone. “It’s very disappointing. They’re trading the lives of the people of Utah and their health and wellbeing for some wilderness area, and the area that they’re trading is the place we’ve actually been protecting.”

“They’ve been calling it a sacrifice zone, and we knew this, so it’s not a surprise,” Cordry told me.

The Wilderness Society is shy about discussing the impacts of what the Wall Street Journal is calling “the Grand Bargain.” To Wilderness Society spokesperson Paul Spitler, “It’s pretty refreshing to see a new approach.”

Plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose.

“We have seen for the past twenty years that the Bureau of Land Management and School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration have been strategically swapping parcels of land that was originally checker boarded, so they trade off and make that a contiguous stretch of land.”

This spate of parcels is located in northeastern Utah at the Book Cliffs. With fir trees, bears, turkeys, elk, and deer, the land is by no means an empty wasteland. But that’s precisely what the energy industry intends to make it into with a tar sands operation that has been in the works for more than twenty years.

Even Jimmy Carter invested in oil shale at the end of his term, but the tar sands have been kept at bay through a mixture of timing, lawsuits, and activist engagement

amounting to direct action. The high oil prices of recent years led to increased initiative to exploit the oil shale and tar sands in the region.

The region is located at the headwaters of the Colorado River. Lying eight thousand feet elevation, where the Green River and White River feed into the Colorado, the land forms a crucial watershed locale for the 30 million people who rely on the Colorado River for their drinking water downstream.

As the drought-stricken states in the West, particularly Colorado and California, have begun to clash over access to water, problems of pollution are growing increasingly menacing.

In Alberta, where the 97,000 square kilometers of boreal forest ecosystem has been leased to active tar sands mining, the people who live downstream from the Athabasca River are getting cancer at extremely high rates, along with the animals who rely on the fresh water systems being destroyed by the extensive bitumen mining. Much of the vital freshwater ecosystem has been reduced to what looks like a mixture of a vast industrial mountaintop removal site and a molten parking lot.

In nearby Vernal, Utah, increased infant mortality rates have already been documented in the region. The oil and gas drilling is leaking methane, such that now the air pollution in the rural area is equivalent to living in Los Angeles.

The light, noise, and water pollution next door to the sacrifice zone is also already intense in the tar sands region of Utah, before the main mining has even commenced.

“The wilderness areas will not be valuable if all the streams contain carcinogens.” Cordray told me. “When you’re out in the middle of nowhere you can hear every machine.”

### **Illegal Permission**

The land in the sacrifice zone on the Book Cliffs is the land of the Ute people, and mining on their land is regulated by the EPA. The corporations involved in the tar sands are moving forward with strip mining the Ute’s land without the EPA’s proper permission. Instead, Utah is illegally allowing the corporations to allow strip mining on Native lands.

The Governor of Utah, an ultra-right climate denier, appoints the Utah Department of Water Quality and the Department of Environmental Quality. The Department of Water Quality issued a permit for strip mining the Ute’s lands without so much as a water

discharge, claiming there is no water on the land at all, despite an abundance of evidenced spring water.

The legislature of Utah is also stacked with climate deniers, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) hosted their convention in the state in 2013 to improve efforts to transfer federal lands to private businesses.

US Oil Sands, the Canadian company doing the tar sands mining, is connected not only to ALEC, but to the euphemistically-named Institute for Clean and Secure Energy (ICSE), which operate in the University of Utah. The ICSE spends the money it gets from Chevron, among other energy sources, in the laboratory to make it cheaper to turn oil shale into gasoline.

Last year, Utah Tar Sands Resistance interrupted an annual confab at the University with the BLM head at the podium, revealing the extent of collusion occurring at the highest-level institutions in the region.

“The people involved will grind up every inch of the earth,” Cordray told me. “They don’t care.”

## **Party Politics**

Salt Lake City is among the top cities with the worst air quality in the US today, with Kennecott copper mine, among other industrial players, choking the environment. State lands in Utah contain recently uncovered leaking wells leading to health problems, and the regulators have a tendency to look the other way.

“This is a party, and they don’t want it to get spoiled. They want to provide energy, and they ignore the health impacts.”

It’s not only the energy and mining industries chomping at the bit to pass the Grand Bargain. The ultra-conservative ranchers, who along with rejecting evolution also likely believe their cattle can chew on bitumen like the cud of the earth, are ecstatic—a surprise, given the amount of caterwauling they have made over the smallest partitions of wilderness in the past (Moab in 1979 comes immediately to mind).

Among these wealthier landowners boosting the Grand Bargain is San Juan County Commissioner, Phil Lyman, who obtained recent celebrity status after leading an ATV ride through protected Native archeological/traditional lands in the aftermath of the Bundy standoff.

## **Against the Violent Enemies of Democracy**

Lyman is from the old guard that includes Bundy and the late Dick Carver, former County Commissioner of Nevada's Nye County and staunch Christian Identity believer who became famous for bulldozing an unpermitted mining road through a national forest with an armed posse calling itself the "Fourth of July Vigilantes" back in '94 at the dawning of the militia movement.

This crew is connected not only to the patriot, and militia movements, but the old John Birch Society and County Rights groups that came together with Wise Use (and, incidentally, the Posse Comitatus and Klan groups that converged with the Aryan Nations and Christian Identity groups) to terrorize environmentalists and conservationists throughout the late-1980s and 1990s.

According to David Helvarg in his important book, *War Against the Greens*, the Wise Use movement, astroturfed by big industry, helped boost the stature of white supremacist groups: "while they may have felt they were controlling the agenda, by legitimizing and lending credibility to the Far Right these industries helped create and expand political space for the violent enemies of democracy."

Right now, a terrible battle is brewing over the fate of the West, with a good amount of people funded and fueled by the Koch hatoraide wanting to transfer all federal lands to state hands. The goal of the right-wing populists of the Sagebrush Rebellion and Wise Use, whose legacy the current astroturfed movement inherits, is ultimately full privatization. Transferring federal lands to either oil-and-gas leases or directly into state lands is remarkably close, if not a kind of recasting of that goal.

With the oil prices low right now, "the Grand Bargain" looks like a real estate investment for oil companies speculating on prices. In other words, it's a land grab, which is why the old guard of the Wise Use movement and Sagebrush Rebellion is so excited to push the deal through Congress, where it is likely to be presented later this spring.

But Cordry is optimistic. "Since 2005, Peaceful Uprising and Utah Tar Sands Resistance and groups like them have staved off the tar sands," Cordray tells me. "Now that the prices have dropped, we're hoping to push US Oil Sands into bankruptcy."

Utah Tar Sands Resistance will be holding a peaceful vigil to observe what they are doing from May to October. Last year, 27 people were arrested in the area as hundreds converged to hold a vigil. Go to <http://www.tarsandsresist.org/> to find out more about how you can get involved in the struggle to protect the land, air, and water for future generations.

