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On the cover:

From Red Rock Canyon, where ego-driven graffiti mars once-lovely sandstone cliffs, to the cool canyons of the Spring Mountains where Forest Service signs barely last a year, it's clear that some Las Vegas don't know how to be good neighbors.

Stewards of the land

Local groups work to cultivate ethic of loving the land

By Heidi Walters



BLM volunteer coordinator Ed O'Sullivan, with a magnetful of spent shotgun shells, says his crews picked up 13,000 pounds of metal in just two weeks from this one shooting and illegal dump site in the southern end of the valley.

"Barring love and war, few enterprises are undertaken with such abandon, or by such diverse individuals, or with so paradoxical a mixture of appetite and altruism, as that group of avocations known as outdoor recreation."

—Aldo Leopold,
A Sand County Almanac

One day, some friends and I were driving up a beautiful dirt road through the desert, on our way to some climbing boulders. Suddenly Joe, who was driving, stopped the car and leaped out cursing. He grabbed a machete from under the seat and ran up a rough new track scraped messily through the vegetation. Stuck midway up the steep, illegally made ruts was a truck, spinning in the sand.

When Joe reached the truck, we held our breath. Would he be violent? Would they be violent? He stood there, machete dangling at his side, talking for a long time

to the driver. Then he walked back down the hill. The driver, he said, was surprised and apologetic. They'd had a civil chat.

I called Joe the other day and asked him if he'd ever do such a thing again, running madman up a hill with a sharp weapon, now that he's 10 years older and a father and—

"I'd do it again today!" he said. "There's always a risk in defending what you love. When I first moved there, it was unscarred. This place was an escape for me. It's got plants and animals, it smells good, and it's mostly away from human influence. But some people don't see that beauty. And when you start running SUVs and motorcycles and ATVs all over it, it isn't the same place anymore. This is an area I'd spent years coming to to seek quiet. It's very special, and it was being destroyed. The sagebrush there is 50 to 100 years old, and this truck was running over it as if it didn't care. It's like someone

slugging your wife—you want to hit back."

...

"The idea of wilderness needs no defense, it only needs more defenders."

—Edward Abbey,
The Journey Home

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Machetes aside, we could use more of my friend Joe's passion here in Southern Nevada. We have a city of 1.4 million that's been plunked down amid all this wild land, seemingly overnight, and towns like Mesquite and Pahrump growing up in adjacent valleys.

There are roads here that run from the metropolis into the fragile desert bajadas that are littered with plastic bottles and shotgun shells and old couches and washers and dryers and dead tires. The Forest

Service's "Be a good neighbor" signs are all shot up and whole mountainsides have been burned by carelessly left campfires. Entire hills are scraped bald by repetitive all-terrain vehicles, who go up and down and around and over until all is dead and dusty.

Deep in canyons, where hidden waterfalls drip and grow ferns and mosses and wildflowers, rocks are covered in graffiti. Aspen trees along the Bristlecone Trail high in the Spring Mountains are so carved with initials that their bark's fallen off and they've died.

Next to the River Mountains, southeast of Henderson, behind a neighborhood whose garages overflow with ATVs and gun-racked pickups, piles of dead turf and clipped palm fronds clog the flood channel. There's an old car battery in the wash, and once there was even a big old broken boat. Awhile back, a group of volunteers—maybe the neighbors—came through and

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ASSEMBLY NATURAL RES., AGRICULTURE & MINING
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Recreational target shooter Richard Carpenter says he picks up after less conscientious shooters and those who illegally dump construction waste so that the BLM doesn't close this site to all shooters.

scoured the wash clean of the junk. But more has been tossed there since. It accumulates fast like a desert flood.

Just on the boundary of protected Red Rock Canyon, there's a place called Little Red Rock on Howard Hughes' Summerlin land—a jumble of red and gold rocks so filled with petroglyphs, and so destroyed by off-roaders and spray-paint idiots, it makes you cry in wonder and disgust.

There's a renegade mountain bike trail in Cottonwood Valley, south of Red Rock, that sliced ever deeper into a muddy and fragile spring zone before the Bureau of Land Management closed off the wet section and rerouted the trail over dry ground. Bicyclists should be pleased: The trail is longer and more challenging now, and no longer hurts a fragile area.

There's an ancient Paiute ceremonial ground called the Rabbit Dance site in Pahrump that, in the last Terrible Herbst off-road race through that valley, came close to being obliterated.

There are hot springs in nearby Colorado River canyons where people camp and break bottles and shit where there is no place to shit. Poop tubes, people, think poop tubes and baggies.

There's poor Mary Jane Falls trail in the Spring Mountains, its switchbacks so cut by hikers that there is no plant life on the slopes in between and the Forest Service has bandaged it all in black netting to give plants a chance to recover. Still people cut the switchbacks, grabbing the netting and scarring the earth. One time I yelled at a trailrunner who was running straight up slope and ignoring the trail, and told him the netting was there because of people doing what he was doing. He shouted

back, "I like the steep hills." I shouted back, "It's all about you, isn't it?" And he shouted back, "Yes!" and kept running.

So, there's both ignorance and arrogance to contend with.

And there's that aggressive ad campaign by the Nevada Commission on Tourism. In magazines such as *Backpacker*, *Outside* and *Cerca*, and on the Internet, the commission's ads lure hikers and bikers and other recreationists, and even promise off-roaders that their "trail has yet to be blazed" in Nevada. The anything-goes ad does provide a link on the Internet to the national "Tread Lightly" campaign. But so do most outdoor recreation websites these days. On the Vegas Valley 4-Wheelers site, for example, you can switch between viewing photos of jeeps driving all over the red sandstone in Little Red Rock or engaged in BLM-sanctioned "Hump & Bumps" where they blaze new trails up untrod rock-strewn washes, then view photos of a 4-Wheelers litter-pickup outing, and then read its rules on responsible stewardship and treading lightly. It is, indeed, a "paradoxical...mixture of appetite and altruism."

One thing is certain: With Southern Nevada's population and popularity on the rise, things are only going to get more hectic for the land that's just beyond all the houses.

Who, here, is leaping to defend it?

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There are the wilderness advocacy folks. They've already made huge inroads into the legislative process, cultivating senators and congresspeople, taking them on hikes

trail building and take pressure off the congested east side's Kyle and Lee canyons. "If you don't do anything [in emerging heavy-use areas], people end up making their own trails and you get spiderwebbing," he says.

There also needs to be more enforcement.

"But the bigger step," says Garncarz, "is stewardship, tying people to the land, whether it's cleaning up, or adopting a wilderness to monitor. The main thing we're faced with here is most of the people are not from here, and they don't know yet that the desert is beautiful and amazing. And when you learn about conservation issues, you begin to see that it isn't 'about me,' but 'about the area.'"

Tom DeRusha, with the Nevada Wilderness Project, says there "needs to be a mentality shift in how people think." He praises programs such as that at Red Rock that encourages kids to guess when the visitor center's resident tortoise, Mojave Max, will emerge from his burrow in the spring.

Garncarz adds that Las Vegas' setting is unique in two ways. One, it draws largely urban people. And, two, "there's no other metropolitan area the size of Vegas" that is surrounded by so many natural play and conservation areas. There's Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, the Spring Mountains and its Mount Charleston Wilderness and two more new wildernesses, Valley of Fire State Park, Lake Mead National Recreation Area, the Desert National Wildlife Refuge system with its high numbers of endemic species in desert pools, Death Valley National Park, the just-dedicated Sloan Canyon National Conservation Area in the lovely dark-rocked McCullough Mountains, and much more beyond that is wild and largely untrammeled.

Most of this land, points out Garncarz, is federally managed public land. And so we must look to the agencies for solutions.

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Kyle McKelvey, a recreation technician in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National

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Graffiti leads to graffiti, so Friends of Red Rock volunteer Janet Jackson is flipping this marred railing at Lost Creek Trail.

BILLY LOGAN



HEIDI WALTERS

In a Spring Mountains canyon, malicious idiots shot this Ponderosa pine—see the bullet?—until it broke in half.

LAND

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Forest's Spring Mountains west of Las Vegas, drives up Carpenter Canyon on the west side one snowy February day, and points out the trouble. It starts down below, in someone else's jurisdiction—the Bureau of Land Management's. He's not pointing fingers, but there it is: loads of old rusty trash from decades of Pahrump folks partying in the hills. And there's new trash, like that big old white washing machine that wasn't there last week, McKelvey says. But he says at least the BLM land provides a buffer for the Forest Service land, which starts where the vegetation turns from predominantly Joshua trees, yuccas and shrubs to predominantly piñon and juniper.

Still, the Forest Service has its trouble. This canyon is popular—in fact, the west side of the Spring Mountains is more popular than you might imagine. In 2001, according to a Forest Service road count survey, 1.2 million visitors traipsed through the concentrated-use areas of the east side's Kyle and Lee canyons—though many, no doubt, stayed in their cars. Over here on the more primitive west side, where there are no developed trails or campgrounds, a whopping 430,000 came through, says McKelvey.

He arrives at a primitive campsite where the Forest Service has placed panels that explain clean-camp regulations and fire

restrictions. The creek is low because of the drought, and inexplicably there's a recently killed Lahontan trout draped over a rock on dry ground. Someone has shot up the panels and signs, and hacked down many of the trees and shot others so full of bullets that they've snapped in two.

"I'm not known as a tree hugger," says McKelvey, "but useless, malicious acts I have zero tolerance for."

He points out a fire pit that could have torched the whole forest. "Last January, a fire crept out of this pit, circled around, crept up a tree—see the scorch marks—then snow or rain probably put it out," he says.

More than half of all the fires in the Spring Mountains are human-caused, many by abandoned campfires, McKelvey says.

It starts to snow, streaking white against the tall gray cliffs and dark trees, and McKelvey wanders along the creek to another fire pit. It's overflowing with ashes and charred beer cans and melted plastic. Two ponderosas have been shot down here, and a huge mountain mahogany has been hacked through to its orange skin. A few unburst paintballs lie on the ground.

Alongside the creek, McKelvey follows a rough trail that skitters and slides along the slope. It's an unplanned trail, made by visitors unaware of how to build a trail that can withstand erosion, he says.

Back in front of the panels, where there's another fire pit a few yards away, McKelvey tells a story. "One Wednesday I drove up here, and there was a cop and a firefighter sitting there with a fire. There's the sign with the fire restrictions in place



HEIDI WALTERS

This bucket of shotgun shells, from a site near Sloan Canyon, is but a drop in the megabucket of junk that people dump onto local wild lands.

saying the conditions are extreme. I talked to them, and they knew the fire danger, but they refused to put it out. The cop showed me his badge, and I said, 'You can put that up.' I cited them. There's a range of 3 to 5 percent who know they're doing wrong and still do it."

For that lot, there are citations: up to \$5,000 and six months in jail, or sometimes—say, if you start a forest fire, up to \$10,000, jail, plus recovery costs. McKelvey says there are meth labs in the Spring Mountains, and ATVs driving over ancient charcoal pits, and graffiti beginning to appear on sacred petroglyph sites. There are damages, even, to things we can't see, such as to ancient Paiute "song maps" that follow the rocks and trees and

hills.

"A lot of our problems are that nobody's been present for education and protection," McKelvey says. "We haven't had a lot of signage."

But that's changing. He's installed more than 200 directional signs lately. And two weeks ago, the Forest Service hired five new "rec techs" to handle the growing number of visitors to the entire range. It's an unusual quantity of concurrent new hires for a national forest.

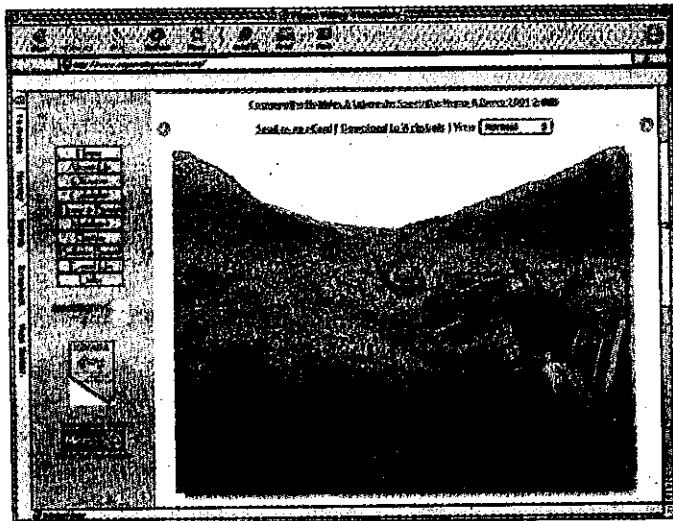
"The most important thing is education," McKelvey says.

He says the user groups in Southern Nevada are, actually, among the best stewards he's encountered in the nation. "It's not the groups that negatively impact an area—they're self-policing," he says. "The Vegas Valley 4-Wheelers, they do great work. They cleaned up 22 tons of trash from Nellis Dunes recently. The ATV groups—every time I've seen them, they've been good. The problem is the smaller groups, the family groups, and mom and dad not educating the kids. And I say that with a lot of guilt, because the Forest Service can't keep up with all the needed signage. "Ninety-six percent of the people I run into honestly don't know rights from wrongs—that's where education can go a long way."

There isn't much time for that, however. Las Vegas is huge, and Pahrump has expanded, and the tourists are coming.

"The impacts will be heavy if we don't head 'em off at the pass now," says McKelvey.

What that means is that perhaps there could be more management over here on



The Vegas Valley 4-Wheelers' website includes photos of events such as this BLM-sanctioned "hump & bump" dry wash run.

the west side—well-built trails that don't erode, more dispersed but still primitive campsites away from the creek, more directional signs and more vigilant rec techs ready to alert the gun-toting rangers. And it means more people need to become citizen stewards of the land.

"Come on in. The earth, like the sun, like the air, belongs to everyone—and to no one."

—Edward Abbey,
The Journey Home

What makes one person skid a dead-end spur track straight up a hill, and another person chase after him in anger?

What makes three people stop to admire a flood-fresh pattern of ripples in sand on the edge of a slope out in the Valley of Fire, and another person come along in front of them, plant his big foot in the ripples, then take a picture of the print?

What makes "Davey the Desert Tortoise" (a.k.a. "DDT"), on the Off-Road.com website, hatefully spew, "I don't Tread Lightly. I trample. From tree huggers to their totalitarian signage that follows" and proclaim, "the only place I know of that is free of dirt bikes is in hell," and blacklist environmentalists and post their home numbers?

Patrick Chicas, president of Off-Road.com, refused to talk about it. "I really don't like your newspaper," he said. "I don't want to have anything to do with the *Las Vegas Mercury*." Well, can you at least reveal who writes Davey's pieces? "I'm not going to tell you that," Chicas said.

What makes one person recognize beauty, and another one seek to destroy it?

My friend Joe says different people value different things. One person may grow up to see the desert as a beautiful garden, and love it for what it is. Another person may grow up to cherish the power of the machine in his garage, and to enjoy its beautiful adeptness. The trick is for one

man's beautiful machine to not run over another man's beautiful garden.

On another day, inside the Red Rock Canyon scenic loop, several Friends of Red Rock Canyon volunteers are repairing a bridge over a sensitive meadow area along the Lost Creek Children's Discovery Trail. Why do they spend their Saturday hammering nails, hauling rocks, lugging rails to block off stray trails?

Janet Jackson, attaching a rail to a post, says she's always loved nature: "Nature is life. It gives you life—without nature our planet would be dead. What would we do without clean air?"

Mel Andry, sawing a new board for a railing to replace one someone kicked out, says, "This ain't work."

"This is just beautiful," he says, looking around at the creek, the scrub oak, the manzanita, the horsetails, the grasses. There's a waterfall here, in the grotto, and a once-lovely sandstone wall made ugly by people inking and carving their names. What were they thinking?

"They're not thinking," says Andry. "They have no sense of ownership. They forget that they own the national parks."

Chuck Williams, president of the 400-member Friends of Red Rock, says once you get to know a place and spend time in it, enjoying it, monitoring it, fixing its wounds, you care more about it.

"Most of the trails here have been adopted by a group," he says. "They monitor it, walk the trail, pick up trash."

But sometimes, trouble can happen quickly, when no one's watching. In Ice Box Canyon, a bit further along the loop, someone has climbed halfway into the deep cool hallway of rock and water and, stopping briefly, sawed off the slender long bough of a redbud tree—that rare desert surprise with its magenta blossoms in the spring. The sawdust is fresh and light on the rock where the limb now rests.

Somebody, later, suggests it was an act of machismo.



Peppe Sotomayor, a Red Rock volunteer, carries trail-repair supplies up the Lost Creek Trail to a bridge that protects a small meadow.

The dirt road that leaves south Las Vegas Boulevard and heads toward Sloan Canyon is a model of I-don't-give-a-shit. It's all glitter-glass and colored-plastic and metal-heap, like a melted playground crossed with a laundromat that's been all shot up. This is where construction companies send their workers to illegally unload used concrete, plastic pipe, toxic liquids and super-sized soda cups—no sense paying that dump fee. Target shooters drag out more junk to shoot up and leave behind.

Some target shooters, that is. This misty Saturday, a couple of shooters who say they don't belong to any official gun group have joined several BLM rangers to clean up the mess. They seem as disgusted as any decent person ought to be.

"We don't leave trash," says Richard Carpenter, hefting a full plastic bag. "We're picking up after other people."

Shooter Kevin Tuttle says the problem is "people bring stuff up—there's a big-screen TV right there—and shoot it and leave it. I was in the Army for 22 years, and we were trained, what we brought up, we brought out. Last weekend we brought up

24 cans of soda—you shake it up, shoot it, and it explodes; it's fun—and I brought out 24 cans. But," he looks around at the mess, "a lot of this is commercial waste. We found four barrels of toxic waste here two weeks ago. We found tar, from one roofing company."

This road alone yields massive quantities of trash. Ed O'Sullivan, who coordinates volunteers for the BLM, is wandering around this Saturday with a magnet picking up the metal bits that'll stick. He picks up the brass by hand. And he recycles all this metal. Twice a week, volunteers comb this road, and during the last two weeks alone, he says, they gathered and recycled 13,000 pounds of metal from here.

I can understand why the BLM does this sort of work—it's the agency's job to take care of the land. But why do these shooters care?

"Shooting is our sport," says Carpenter. "We're cleaning this up so we can continue to shoot here, so they don't close it." But that's not his only motivation. "Since I was 4, my dad was taking me out camping. And the most important lesson I learned was in college from an astronomy professor, who drew a huge circle on the

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chalkboard and said, "Picture this as the earth to scale. See the thickness of the chalk? That's the earth's atmosphere."

So, he recognizes the vulnerability of the earth? "Actually," says Carpenter, "I'm more amazed at the resiliency of the earth."

...

The BLM's Mark Rekshtynskyj, Red Rock's visitor center interpretive specialist, says there's a growing front of stewardship groups. In addition to the established Friends of Red Rock, there's a fledgling Friends of Gold Butte inspired by the success of the Friends of Sloan Canyon, and there's an archaeological site stewardship program being promoted in a bill by Assemblyman Harry Mortenson at the Nevada Legislature. There's also the public-private Clark County Regional Trails Partnership, which advocates for better-managed recreation on the front ranges of the valley, and out in Logandale there's Partners in Conservation. Also, Outside Las Vegas, a nonprofit foundation that helps coordinate private groups with the federal and local governmental agencies, has formed a subcommittee on environmental education. It has big plans, including putting to use a floating "science

barge" on Lake Mead for school groups, starting a science school in Red Rock, and gaining momentum for its major litter-cleanup campaign.

Roxanne Dey, public affairs officer for Lake Mead National Recreation Area, says her agency has a program that reaches 10,000 schoolchildren a year.

The BLM also does educational outreach. "We reach over 15,000 students a year" with classroom programs, says Rekshtynskyj. "That's where I'm doing my best, to get the youth involved, so they understand this is a precious resource. The target groups I like to reach are the pre-teens, who are on the cusp of rebellion. That's where we try to teach respect."

...

Respect. Garncarz says two major obstacles stand in the way of widespread, conservation-minded respect of the land: education and time.

"We need to educate people, and that takes a long time," he says. "And the question is, do these places have the time?"

Well, compared to other places, like some in southern Utah that got overrun before protections could be in place, he says Nevada at least has been somewhat "visionary."

"I think we're being visionary, in the wilderness community," he says. "And I think Nevada's legislators are being visionary. And I'm an optimist—I think a majority of our society wants to see these places protected."

Call to Arms

By F. Andrew Taylor



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