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# Loving it to death: land use conflict, outdoor recreation and the contradictions of wilderness in Southeast Utah, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Different cultural valuations of landscapes often underlie land use conflict. How do place-based experiences inform cultural values regarding landscapes? Further, how do such values shape conflicts over land use and land management? This paper draws from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with recreational land users (primarily rock climbers), land managers, ranchers, and others in the Indian Creek area of Bears Ears National Monument in Southeast Utah to address these questions. The findings presented center on the following paradox: recreational users value the landscape as a vestige of wilderness values while simultaneously experiencing and contributing to socio-ecological dynamics that either impinge upon or unravel the basis of these values. We argue that discourses of sacredness, stewardship, authenticity, and 'local ethics' relieve some friction, but nonetheless build a common narrative that the landscape is being 'loved to death.' Two conclusions follow. First, land use conflicts can be generally understood as having cultural roots developed through embodied engagement with landscapes. Second, as land managers regulate outdoor recreation in multi-use settings, policies should engage the contradictory social pressures (namely wilderness ethics vs. high-impact consumption) that define outdoor recreation culture.

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## Introduction

Conflict over land use and management has long shaped the relationship between society and landscape in the U.S. West. In recent decades, federal land management has re-entered the realm of contentious politics. High-profile events like the 2016 armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, political movements to transfer title of federal lands to states, and actions of the former Trump Administration to loosen federal land protections together demonstrate that public land management in the United States remains contested and unclear.

Given this context, it is worth considering anew: what makes landscapes valuable? Although alignment between political and economic interests often drives land use regimes (Wolters and Steel 2020; Frymer 2017; Ruple 2018; Robbins 2019), cultural values that render landscapes meaningful for various actors also play a role and are therefore worth exploring amid land conflicts. Existing research demonstrates that the processes by which places are made valuable shape how areas are allowed to be exploited (and by whom), contaminated as 'sacrifice zones,' or granted special protections as 'wilderness' (Lerner 2010; Hooks and Smith 2004; Cronon 1996; Wilderness Act of 1964; Martinez-Alier 2002).

In the deserts of Southeast Utah, USA, a variety of competing interests and values have led to fraught relationships between county, tribal, state and federal governance, including legacies of colonization, settlement, ranching, extractive industries, followed by the formal protection of public lands as wilderness, recreational, and multi-use areas by federal mandate (Robinson 2018; Utah Wilderness Coalition 1990; McPherson 2011; McBrayer and Roberts-Cady 2018). Recent and ongoing controversy surrounding the Bears Ears National Monument (henceforth BENM) in Southeast Utah is representative of this contention. It is thus an important site for understanding the formation of cultural values and interests regarding landscapes.

In this article, we focus on recreational land users (in this case, rock climbers) in BENM, although we situate this group within a constellation of ranchers, land managers, Native American tribes, and commercial industries. This focus is strategic. The rise of outdoor recreation, specifically on public lands in Southeast Utah where BENM is located, marks a relatively recent development in the contention over Western landscapes. Although overall trends in outdoor recreation are mixed (Outdoor Industry Association 2020), visitation of public land in southeast Utah has risen dramatically in recent decades (NPS 2021). Recreational users have growing political

and economic influence in the region (Schwinning et al. 2008). Growth of the recreational sector is reflected in regional shifts of land management agency priorities toward managing recreational use alongside mineral and grazing leases. Rock climbers and associated organizations have likewise become politically active by supporting the establishment of BENM, conducting advocacy and social media campaigns, filing lawsuits, and shaping management plans. Even so, many recognize that rapid growth in recreational use entails environmental costs and a new set of claims for access and protections that challenge existing land management (BLM 2020; Access Fund 2019b). Buttressed by an increasingly mainstream climbing subculture and a growing recreational-commercial industry, recreational climbing is clearly reconfiguring the physical and cultural landscape of Indian Creek, a popular climbing area within BENM and our primary research site.

Indian Creek/BENM provides a test case for addressing the following research questions: What meaning do land users bring to and derive from their experiences on the landscape? How do place-based experiences inform the value people place on the landscape? Further, how does the cultural valuation process relate to political contestation over land use and management? Answering these questions contributes to work in political ecology and sociology by conceptualizing and tracing the formation of some of the most potent categories in conflicts over protected areas – rights, sacredness, stewardship, identity and attachment.

We approach these questions inductively and through immersion, drawing from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews to understand how actors construct meanings about the landscape of Indian Creek. The results presented in this article find the following paradox: recreational users value the landscape as a vestige of wilderness values while simultaneously experiencing and contributing to socio-ecological dynamics that either impinge upon or unravel the basis of these values. Particularly significant to this paradox, our analysis shows, is how cultural valuation of the desert landscape among land users involves the following trends: a persistent value attached to wilderness and/or a sacred landscape; environmental disturbance caused by recreational use; the mainstreaming and commodification of ‘climbing culture’ through the outdoor recreation industry; and the trajectory of land development in the area. As analyzed below, these trends have resulted in a common narrative that the landscape may be getting ‘loved to death.’ Discourse of love and dying speaks to the antinomies at the center of ‘wilderness,’ situated as it is between a mythology of pristine land, the rapid

expansion of ‘outdoor’ culture and industries, clear environmental impact of recreation, and conflict featuring alternative values and land use interests.

The article proceeds as follows. We initially situate the study in literature from political ecology and sociology. We then provide some background on BENM and Indian Creek. Next, we discuss our data collection and analytic approach. The presentation of results follows in four subsections respectively about wilderness, environmental disruption, climbing culture, and land/infrastructural development. The paper concludes by drawing lessons from the case of Indian Creek for two audiences: first, scholars seeking to understand the social bases of landscape valuation and land use conflicts, and second, land managers tasked with managing trends, behaviors and impacts associated with recreational use in multi-use and protected areas, particularly those that feature political and regulatory contention.

## Literature review and background

### *Land, narratives, and cultural valuation*

Work in political ecology and sociology help to frame the social bases upon which land use and associated struggles may proceed. Political ecology emphasizes how contradictions between structural, political-economic forces and grounded experiences shape ecological and social outcomes, especially who wins and loses (Robbins 2019). Some political ecologists have thereby shown how landscapes get constructed through practices on the land and through accompanying cultural narratives that give meaning to land and natural resources. The interplay of land use, values, and narratives thus shapes whose interests are prioritized and protected in land management regimes (Neumann 2011; Davis 2016; Robbins and Sharp 2003). For example, Davis (2016) shows how historical colonial narratives about ‘desert’ landscapes in North Africa have since shaped policies including land enclosures and conservation strategies, which supplanted pastoralists’ perspectives and livelihood strategies. As another example, poststructuralist problematizations of forests (Braun 2002; Vandergeest and Lee Peluso 2015) demonstrate that ‘the forest’ as an object of politics, knowledge, use or experience is contingent on both the discrete interests attached to forest use and by discourses, representations, and meaningful experiences that constitute peoples’ identities, which in turn may be activated in land use conflicts. The meaning and value of a given landscape, this literature shows, is always plural and often overlaid with conflicts (Leach and Mearns 1996; Martin et al. 2019; Walker and Fortmann 2003).

Political ecology thus provides a way to situate outdoor recreation and wilderness. Following Cronon (1996), scholars have identified what Watt (2016) calls the ‘paradox of preservation,’ in which attempts to preserve ‘pristine’ nature generate a highly artificial situation. Watt (2016), analyzing the case of Point Reyes National Seashore in California, traces how park management policies in protected areas construct a mythologized nature that selectively erases historical land uses to align the landscape with recreationalists’ aesthetic expectations of what a wilderness should look and feel like. Braun (2002), using the case of Clayoquot Sound, British Columbia, likewise demonstrates how policies to establish wilderness can perpetuate a colonial discourse through which Indigenous ‘culture’ and a pure, ‘natural’ coastal rainforest are discursively construed in a manner that erases Indigenous livelihood and land use while building new identities around tourism and wilderness values. The paradox, then, is that the resulting ‘pure nature,’ in these and other cases, is constitutively social and political – what Castree and Braun (2001) term ‘social nature.’

Political ecology further provides a lens for exploring valuation conflicts, including conflicts over landscapes that are valued as sacred by Indigenous Peoples and which also hold value for outdoor recreation. This lens is particularly relevant for BENM (see BEITC 2016; Zeppel 2010). For example, in the case of Mato Tipila/Devils Tower, a rock climbing destination and sacred site to various Native American tribes in the northern Plains, some recreational climbers have drawn an equivalence among Indigenous Peoples’ and recreational land users’ evaluations of the landscape as ‘sacred’. This supposed equivalence led to conflict, if ultimately an uneasy peace through voluntary restrictions meant to balance Indigenous cultural uses and access to recreational climbing (Taylor and Geffen 2004). This is an example of what Temper and Martinez-Alier (2013) label ‘valuation conflicts’ resulting from actors attempting to reconcile ‘incommensurable’ valuations of land and natural resources (see Martinez-Alier 2002). Whether or not alternative valuations are necessarily ‘incommensurable,’ and on what basis they may be made so, is an empirical matter that we take up.

Parallel to work in political ecology, sociologists problematize ‘valuation,’ drawing analytic focus towards how value is created and negotiated (Lamont 2012). Economic sociologists have demonstrated how social processes, rather than objects or resources themselves, establish value or worth given to an item, place, or experience (Fourcade 2011; Zelizer 1978). This literature anticipates that multiple, alternative valuations of a given place structure the identities, practices, and meanings

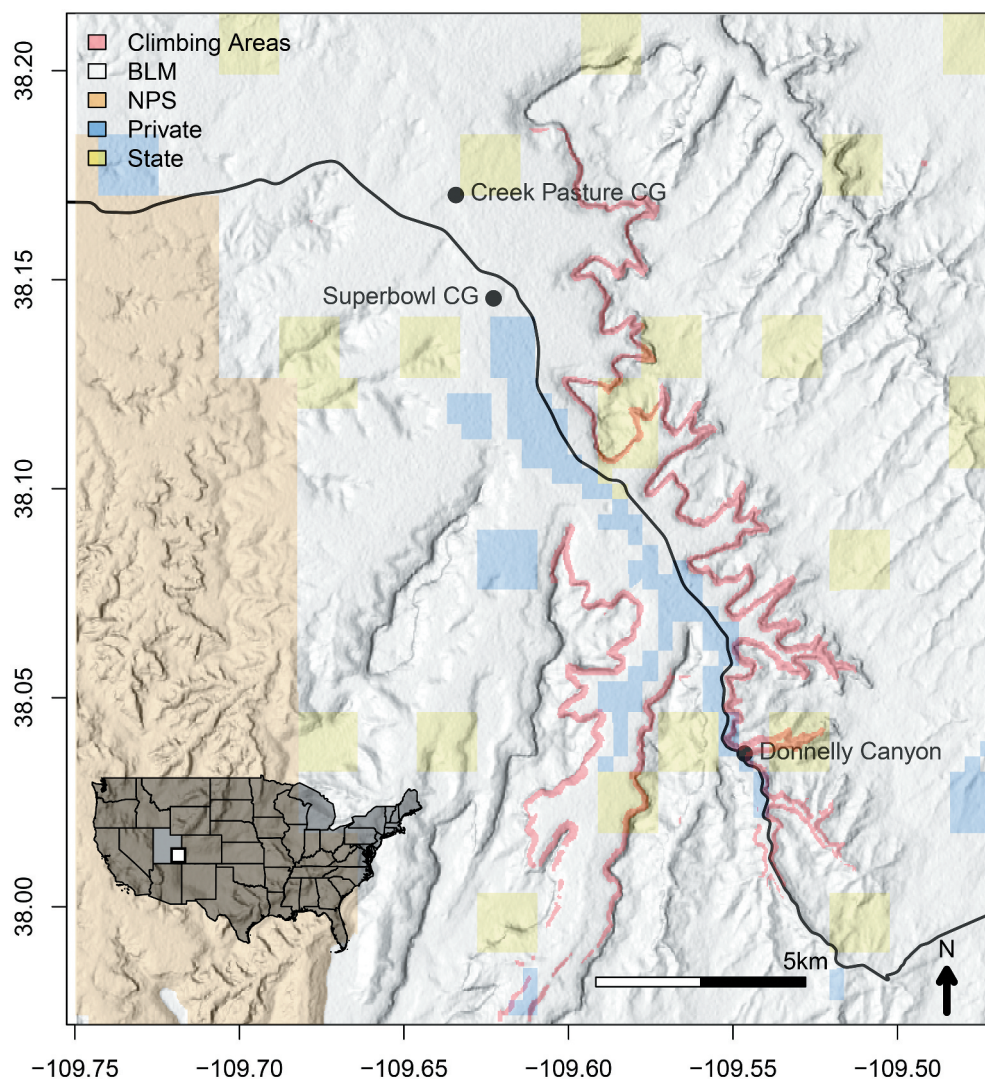
that people bring to their engagement with landscapes (McIntyre, Moore, and Yuan 2008; Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Stedman 2013; Angelo 2013). In periods of social or ecological change, moreover, the valuation process may depend upon how actors position themselves with respect to an uncertain or threatened future (Brace and Geoghegan 2010).

Literatures on socio-ecological contradictions and landscape valuation thus problematize how experiences shape values that may inform competing visions for using or protecting a given landscape. We extend this line of theory by accounting for place-based experiences and values *as they develop* in situ. Reducing land conflicts to pre-defined stakeholder interests – especially in binary terms, such as commercial exploitation vs. access to wilderness, and Marxian terms of ‘exchange’ and ‘use’ value – may amount to what Robbins (2019, 201) labels ‘stock characters and standard scripts,’ and thus fail to account for the social nature actively reproduced and negotiated on the ground. Scholarship in political ecology and on valuation can especially advance in this direction through studying cases of multi-use landscapes (such as Indian Creek), which are managed by distributing rights and protections across user groups. In such contexts, competing values and interests are more open to analysis. Likewise, highly contentious contexts provide an opportunity to analyze the relationship between embodied experience, cultural values, and politics insofar as values and interests are often more explicitly manifest under such circumstances. Again, Indian Creek/BENM is instructive here, and contributes to literature that finds identities and political subjectivities are constructed through place-based experiences in protected areas and through outdoor recreation (Rickly and Vidon 2017; Watt 2016; Stoddart 2013). Moreover, the volatile political context, as outlined below, paired with the dramatic rise of a predominant land user group (in this case, rock climbers), permits unique access to how values are formed with reference to landscape and how they come to matter for land management politics.

### *Indian creek and bears ears in political context*

Indian Creek is located in remote San Juan County, Utah, approximately 60 km south of Moab (See Figure 1, below). The landscape consists of open grass and shrub-covered structural benches and alluvial plains bordered by towering 100 m pink-colored wingate sandstone cliffs. The burnished sandstone surfaces are marked extensively with petroglyphs, granaries, and other archaeological evidence of Indigenous Peoples, who variously inhabited the area starting approximately two thousand years ago (Burrillo 2017). Although traversed by early European





**Figure 1.** Map of study area: Indian Creek, Southeast Utah, USA.

explorers, white settlers began to permanently settle Indian Creek and its neighboring valleys as a site for winter forage for cattle ranching by the mid-nineteenth century. Current land ownership in Indian Creek is a patchwork of public and private land. Public land is predominantly administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and to a lesser extent the State of Utah Institutional Land Trust Administration (SITLA). The private land is primarily owned and managed by local ranchers and The Nature Conservancy.

Various groups, including Indigenous Peoples, non-Indigenous residents, ranchers, and extractive industries, along with federal, state, and county government entities, hold different interests in the land management governance of Southeast Utah. To redress land management disparities across eight counties in Eastern Utah, Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT) formed the Public Lands Initiative (PLI) in 2013 to integrate stakeholder concerns and form the basis of a comprehensive Congressional bill. However, engagement between San Juan County's disproportionately

powerful non-Native residents, the area's tribes, industry and environmental stakeholders unraveled. For example, in May 2014, County Commissioner Phil Lyman was hailed a champion of the anti-government Sagebrush Rebellion cause when he organized a protest ATV ride through Recapture Canyon, which had been recently closed to protect natural and archaeological resources.

Organizing efforts among Native Americans to advance recognition of the significance of the land (Keeler 2017) led to the creation of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition (BEITC) in July 2015. Coordinated by the *Ute Dine Bikeyah*, the BEITC included the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, the Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe. The Coalition aimed to establish and co-manage public land in Southeast Utah (BEITC 2015a; Robinson 2018; Trimble 2017). Although the Coalition initially worked with the PLI, leaders later turned to the Obama Administration whereupon local and state interests circumvented Tribal involvement (Utah State Legislature 2015 H.B. 393; BEITC 2015a, 2015b). In December 2016, President

Barack Obama signed a Proclamation that established BENM under the 1906 Antiquities Act, which provides protections for public land (Harmon 2006). In December 2017, President Trump reduced the area of BENM by 85%, a decision that resulted from coordination between the Trump Administration, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), extractive industries, and their supporters (Lipton and Friedman 2018). Lawsuits followed. The Trump Administration was sued by numerous parties, including the tribes comprising the BEITC (Hopi Tribe v. Trump 2017<sup>1</sup>), environmental organizations, and outdoor recreation companies (Natural Resources Defense Council v. Trump 2017<sup>2</sup>). Indian Creek remained within the reduced Monument. In October 2021, the Biden Administration restored the larger Monument, angering those that had pressed for a legislative solution.

The BLM approved a Monument Management Plan (MMP) for BENM in February 2020. Changes to prior policy included restrictions on mineral, oil and gas development, minor restrictions on recreational activities, and a provision to allow further recreational infrastructure development.<sup>3</sup> The MMP was criticized by pro-Monument groups for providing insufficient protections, including for rock climbers (Access Fund 2019a). The Plan also deferred development of a cultural resource plan by two years and a recreation management plan by five years. Land management struggle in the case of BENM is thus ongoing.

Our analysis of outdoor recreation and rock climbing in Indian Creek is informed by existing cultural analyses that show how climbing is a 'conflicted site for symbolic configurations of human interaction with the environment,' through which people express both the conquering of nature and transcendent connection to place (McCarthy 2002, 179; Bayer 2003; Robinson 2008; Dilley and Janet Scraton 2010). Beyond symbolism however, rock climbing and institutions that support it shape the landscape, creating immediate friction with wilderness and related values (Carter et al. 2020; Mendoza 2018).

For context, American rock climbing developed since the mid-twentieth century through local practices in iconic landscapes, principally California's Yosemite Valley (Taylor 2010). Climbing in Indian Creek developed in the late 1970's, facilitated by the invention of spring-loaded camming devices ('cams') for fall protection. Cams allow users to protect ascents of vertical 'splitter' cracks. Through the development of 'crack climbing' as a unique set of techniques augmented by special gear, an entire ethic and identity has since formed around what it means to be a 'Creek climber,' colloquially called being a 'Creek freak' (Kelley 2018). Indian Creek is an international destination and widely recognized as 'home to the best crack climbing in the world' (Access Fund 2021).

## Methods and data

For this study, the authors conducted 48 interviews, supplemented by fieldwork during two periods of peak visitation (November 2018 and April 2019). All interviews were conducted in-person, primarily one-on-one and on-site in Indian Creek. Most interviews were conducted at Donnelley Canyon (at the base of popular crags and climbing routes), Creek Pasture Campground, and Superbowl Campground (depicted on Figure 1). Interviews were otherwise conducted at ranches, offices, public spaces, or homes in the area. This study was reviewed, governed by, and granted exempt status by the University of California-Davis IRB (#1299852-1).

Interviews were semi-structured, using an interview guide (see Supplemental File A). Interviews centered on individuals' experiences, narratives, and personal evaluations and included discussion about environmental impacts, land use, and land management decisions in the area. A driving goal through interviews was to access participants' discursive categories through which their activities and the landscape are made meaningful. These categories helped to inform language utilized as interviews proceeded and in subsequent interviews. Participation in campground gatherings, meals, volunteer work with a trail-building team, and rock climbing provided deeper entry into the social world of Indian Creek. Observational data collection also involved long periods of watching, listening and otherwise observing settings that featured social interaction. Observations were informed by ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in public settings (Anderson 2011; Lofland et al. 2015), and involved taking preliminary, jotted fieldnotes in parking areas, at trailheads, around campgrounds, and at the base of cliffs near groups of climbers.

All interview audio files and fieldnotes were transcribed by the authors and a student research team. Following transcription, the authors coded interview transcripts, supported by Dedoose (2020), a data analysis program. Interviews conducted in 2018 were initially analyzed prior to research conducted in 2019, allowing us to test, follow-up and deepen our analysis. An initial round of coding helped to establish broad 'parent' codes. A second round of coding allowed us to isolate sub-topical 'child' codes. The final, nested codebook and code counts are available in the Supplemental materials (Supplemental File B). Analysis of interviews through coding and memo writing were guided by the methodology provided by Emerson et al. (2011). Integrative memos (Emerson et al. 2011, 193) and iterative coding ultimately allowed us to meaningfully interpret robust themes that bridge existing literature and theory on the one hand, with research participants' discursive categories on the

other. We have organized these themes into the Results section below. Regarding interview notation: all names are pseudonyms, italics strictly represent speakers' emphases, ellipses represent a break in the excerpt, and brackets represent the authors' clarification of the speaker's clear intended meaning.

## Results

Analysis of interviews and field data revealed several emergent themes regarding how users interpret and value Indian Creek, discussed in the following subsections. First, we identify cultural values of wilderness among recreational users and compare it to a broader, flexible discourse of a 'sacred' landscape that must be protected through stewardship. Second, we explore interpretations of environmental disruption caused by recreational land use, noting that salient concepts of 'degradation' and 'pollution' dialectically follow from 'sacredness.' Third, we investigate how user groups understand the drivers of this perceived degradation. We especially reconstruct how recreational users, land managers, and ranchers resent the mainstreaming of 'climbing culture' and the commodification of 'authentic' experience. Fourth, we identify how actors' visions of a degraded or commercialized future landscape inform conflicting views of land management in BENM.

### 'Hallowed ground': cultural values of wilderness, sacredness, and stewardship

The draw to mountainous and arid lands, as places representative of 'waste' and the 'sublime,' has long marked Euro-American culture (Nicolson 1997[1959]; Hollis 2019; McGinn 1994). The Southwestern U.S. is exemplary (Teague 1997; Davis 2016). Encapsulated in the work of Edward Abbey (1968), the cultural trope of the 'desert rat' that combines individual autonomy with a transcendental wilderness aesthetic persists especially in Southeast Utah.

Rock climbers embody the cultural value of wilderness in these terms, inflected as it is through the special nature of Indian Creek. Indian Creek is first valued for the special nature of the rock, which climbers recognize as 'world class' for its cracks to climb. Climbers likewise value the expansive desert landscape. Many noted a comparison between the open and 'wild' feeling they experience in Indian Creek. Kris expressed a sentiment common among climbers:

It was pretty empty when we came here [for the first time] ... It felt relatively remote in comparison to other places I've climbed, like Yosemite or Squamish, where it feels like you're inside of a city [chuckles] with cell phone service and a lot of people everywhere. [Here] I was drawn to, like, the *vastness* of the desert.

The open landscape, featuring few amenities and regulations, provides for climbers a sense of freedom: As Kai, a travelling climber, put it: 'A big part of it is just the *freedom*, [without] rangers policing everything – that would completely ruin it for me. It's having the freedom to be *out* here, having fun ... in this wide-open desert, you know?' One long-time Indian Creek climber, Brenden, addressed how the landscape became so important to climbers. As he explained: 'As the classic Old West, just the mesas [and] the little spires when you're driving out, it's kind of the *quintessential* desert landscape.' Over time, Brenden described, it became 'an iconic place' and retains its 'mystique.' As he evaluated, 'it's kind of a special feeling when you're down there.' He stated that the 'special desert quality' is brought out by climbing, insofar as '[other] folks didn't necessarily see the area [Indian Creek] as anything but a scenic *backdrop*.'

Others situate themselves, and the 'sacred' value of the land, with respect to a narrative of climbing history that features exploration. James put it this way:

This place is like a sacred, hallowed ground for people, and for climbers too ... People migrated out West here. All the big guys, Warren Harding, were out there in Yosemite, and these guys came over here and started picking off the towers. I'd always heard [the] legends ... [That] is one of the biggest things that draws me out here ... everybody is coming here to climb.

One retired land manager, Janice, echoed this perspective based on her career encountering recreational users. As she characterized, 'You have this "*I'm a big explorer*" kind of thing going on.' Wilderness experience and climbing culture are indeed marked by a logic of 'discovery.' For example, among climbers, performing a 'first ascent' of a climbing route is the clearest token of status, representing the charting of new territory through the privilege of naming the route and establishing its 'grade' of difficulty.

Many climbers consider Indian Creek a special site of meaningful transformation, consistent with wilderness values (Nash 1967; Fletcher 2014; Taylor and Geffen 2004). As one climber, Seth, discussed:

We all have a hard time talking about why we love coming here ... Something about this place just brings a certain type of person ... When I come here I feel different ... And my friends, they're like in town doing their thing and [then] they come out and you see the *real* them, and they are just *psyched* ... They are like different animals.

The landscape, Seth addresses, brings out a 'different,' but more 'real,' self. Discovery of the rock breeds discovery of the self. In turn, climbers value Indian Creek as a place that counters the degradation of themselves and a society confined to controlled, urban or private spaces. As Gustavo, a climber from Texas discussed, 'the average American kid spends *18 minutes* [daily]



playing outside right now. *That's* a problem!' He cited decreasing access to public land as a primary barrier to accessing the benefits of wilderness.

If climbers attach sacred meaning to the landscape based on wilderness experience and the special nature of climbing, how does this compare to local ranchers, who run their cattle through bottomlands and terraces, placing different value on the spectacular 'splitter' cracks that are the centerpiece of a climber's gaze? Ranchers, we found, also attach sacred meaning to the landscape. However, they do so by embracing values associated with occupying a 'working landscape' (Brunson and Huntsinger 2008). Reflecting on her early experiences, one rancher recounted: 'I got to experience working in a landscape and came [to] understand the systems that it takes to live out here.' As she later explained, 'experiencing the Western landscape on horseback was ... pivotal to the way I view the world. My *cosmology* changed.' Given this 'cosmology,' this rancher considered the act of climbing the cliffs as anathema to (rather than defining) the value of the place.

Andy, another rancher, reflected on the specialness of Indian Creek landscape in spiritual terms: 'The desert country out here and the rock formations are so unique and beautiful and significant – in a spiritual way.' Clarifying, Andy indicated he does not interpret his experiences 'in a religious sense,' but rather in an embodied sense: 'there's a general spiritual feeling to the desert [pause] ... If you spend enough out there staring out at it, then you *feel* it.' He connected this feeling to his work as a rancher:

The geologic and ecological aesthetic make it special and attractive to everybody, and to *me* ... The term, overused maybe, is a sense of *place*: knowing this place basically for my life and all the subtle variations you get over time [by] being out working in it. To me and other people, a working relationship with the landscape [brings] connection through a dependence on that landscape for livelihood ... and *also* a sense of responsibility and stewardship.

The place attachment that Andy displays is distinct from recreational users, insofar as a 'sense of place' is connected to seasonal rhythms and variations while 'dependence' is tied to livelihood.

Yet, specialness serves to introduce a common but flexible ethic marked by 'stewardship,' a term that ranchers, land managers and climbing organizations have variously used to name their respective activities. Across these groups, discourse of stewardship ties together the value of the landscape with a recognition that it's specialness, not unlike cattle, needs tending to survive. As one land manager described: 'I have been impressed with how ... all [land users] *love* Indian Creek, right? So, the main grazers ... you couldn't ask for people that love

that land more than [those] folks. They are *phenomenally* good stewards and care a lot about the landscape.'

Stewardship may tend wilderness or a working landscape, but it faces complications under conditions of increased use. One land manager addressed what she labelled a 'renter's mentality' pronounced among recreational users: 'It's a renter's mentality ... They don't live here. They come here to use it. They don't care how they leave it.' Thus, the ideal of stewardship may face limits among visitors more akin to tourists than caretakers. As a rancher described: 'I don't have a lot of hope that people are going to manage themselves well ... The quiet, sacred place feels like it's been cracked open.' The perspective that Indian Creek has been 'cracked open' was common to many. The next section further considers how land users evaluate environmental disturbance, a kind of desecration phenomenon that forms a discursive counterpart to sacredness.

### **Remaking the land: recreational use and evaluations of disturbance**

Evident, widespread human disturbance to the environment undermines efforts to embody wilderness ideals and maintain them through stewardship. Long-time land users intimately know and interact with the Indian Creek landscape. Therefore, they deeply acknowledge human environmental impacts. Although the history of intensive grazing is important to both the political and physical ecology of Indian Creek (Neff et al. 2005), in this subsection we focus on recreational impacts.

First, the rock itself can be degraded. Because sandstone absorbs water and can break when wet, one informal but widely understood moral prohibition concerns climbing after rain events. Many climbers detailed their grave concerns over non-local users degrading the rock. For example, one climber narrated an encounter which she stated was typical of interactions with travelling climbers that she believed routinely fail to stay off the rock despite efforts to informally enforce local ethics: 'I [said], I know for a *fact* that rock's not dry, don't do it! And they were like, "oh, blah." They had their reasons. It's like, if they paid thousands of dollars to come here for a two-week trip and it rains ... are they *actually* gonna stay off the rock?'

A further problem caused by generally unregulated recreational use is human waste, which cannot easily biodegrade in the arid environment. Climbers and BLM employees recognize that many climbers do not adhere to 'leave no trace' ethics regarding human waste. One BLM manager who has worked on recreation maintenance projects recollected her interactions with someone during their first season working in Indian Creek:



So he came back and said 'you know what I learned today? *Never* turn over a rock!' [laughs] Every single place he went to stop to cut brush there was human waste under every rock. And we have toilets out there. We spend fifty thousand dollars a year pumping them and it's *still* dangerous to turn over a rock.

Another major impact of recreational use concerns disruption of sensitive soils. Cryptobiotic soils form a protective layer across soil surfaces in plant inter-spaces throughout Indian Creek. These 'biocrusts' reduce erosion, are vulnerable to trampling by humans, and may take years to regrow (Belnap and Lange 2003). Users familiar with the sensitive environment know not to 'bust the crust' by walking or camping on biocrust. However, increased visitation has led to expansion of dispersed camping activities, and many experienced individuals expressed concern about new visitors unaware of their potential impacts. One local guide related finding someone 'on their boulder pad, in their sleeping bag right on the side of the road in a patch of crypto. I [was] like "A, that's not a campsite and B, you're in a patch of mature cryptobiotic soil." And they're like "*what?*" [bewildered tone].'

A further documented impact includes disturbances to local archaeology and Native American artifacts. Past routine looting and recent, organized smuggling of artifacts has given way to what observers document as unregulated looting and disturbance, likely a function of increased visitation (US Department of the Interior 2009; Partlow 2021). Climbers plainly encounter the archaeology of the area. As one climber described, 'You've got petroglyphs, some pictogram panels, [and] tons of ruins as you follow Indian Creek down through the cliffs.' Climbers have been among those disturbing archaeological sites and petroglyphs in the region, and managers have documented the establishment of climbing routes on and near sites (Boster 2021).

A rancher provided a perspective on the increased chances of archaeological disturbance: 'With the climbing community it's kind of like, "whoa, this is a really big place; this is *endless*" ... But do we *want* to have climbs all around the petroglyphs?' One land manager provides a similar perspective: 'A lot of the damage that I see to cultural resources has to do with an attitude of, "what does it matter, anyway? It was neat to look at, now I'm going home." As she evaluated, "that attitude is *not* doing any favors for the natural resources that people come here to enjoy." The preservation of archeological-cultural heritage appears to confront some climbers' understanding of wilderness. Indeed, many climbers expressed neither interest in nor connection to the area's history. The 'empty' time of pristine wilderness (Denevan 1992) along with the immediacy of climbing experiences can make history

irrelevant. As one climber and blogger described in 2009, 'I was resting up and getting psyched for my main goal of the day, an on-sight [climb] of Ruins Crack.' A climbing route, 'Ruins Crack' features a stacked-rock ancient granary at its base).<sup>4</sup>

Climbers do not regularly report connecting to the ongoing Native American significance of Indian Creek and surrounding areas, which may explain instances of disturbance. As one climber, Brent, demonstrates, recreational climbers are primarily centered around the rock:

I wouldn't say it enhances or increases the enticement to a place ... Indian Creek isn't necessarily a place that ... has brought a lot of regional tribal folks there for whatever purposes that they might have ... *Climbing* is definitely the thing ... on a climber's mind, right? You aren't necessarily drawn to the cultural aspect of a location.

Brent described 'the recreational mindset that climbers typically have,' such that 'the legacy and artifacts and whatnot' are insignificant to the Indian Creek experience. By contrast, some climbers incorporated Indigenous history into their experiences. One climber, Sandy, exemplifies this position: 'at first, I was very disconnected' from the history of the area, she described. However, Sandy gradually learned to appreciate the cultural history and discussed drawing meaning from climbing in a landscape long marked by human culture: 'It's just *crazy* to think about someone being there and wanting to let us future generations know, like, 'hey we were *here*; we *did* these things.'" She discussed her experiences as 'feeling more connected' over time, insofar as she has witnessed ancient sites that relate to her own climbing: 'There's Moki Steps and Moonflower Chimney [routes] ... that's *super* cool; we're climbing what *you* climbed ... We use [gear], but some ancient civilization probably just scampered up it daily [laughs]. So, I *definitely* feel very connected.'

Respect and connectedness – to a pristine wilderness, sacred areas, or cultural history – is open to ruin. As Mary Douglas (1966) demonstrated, sacredness dialectically entails pollution, a dynamic that can entail strong moral considerations of behavior. In this case, dissonance emerges among land users based on how they experience and interpret degradation. Climbers differentiate themselves on an axis of conscientiousness about the disturbances outlined above. Thus, roles, identities and hierarchy emerge. As some climbers addressed, 'there is that self-enforcement within the climbing world,' through which local users educate, reprimand, or otherwise 'self-police' (a commonly used term among interviewees) one another (see Carter et al. 2020). One first-time climber at Indian Creek narrated:

I told people in Boulder I was coming out here. Everybody's first reaction is, 'take good care of that place!' Like, everybody had opinions about where I should poop and camp. I'm not new to climbing ethics, but I know a lot of people are starting to come here ... It's really special that *that's* what people start with—passing down how to take care of this place.

As in this example, many climbers measure themselves and their local climbing community with reference to adherence to local 'ethics,' which include respect for sensitive environments.

As another example, a climber, Jonnie, outlines the moral performances associated with climbing. First, he acknowledged, 'you get a lot of ego and intimidation' among climbers. Yet, he stated, 'One thing that people do is the *humble brag*,' which he defined with reference to how people subtly indicate their respect for local ethics. Jonnie believed these performances and interactions are important given the inflection point arising from increased impacts:

That is *our land* ... if we [expletive] it up, then [BLM rangers] are going to look at us, like 'Oh those freaking climbers, we'll just give it to somebody who's actually going to take *care* of it, right?'

Perspectives vary on the capacity for land users to prevent degradation through 'self-policing' one another. Some proclaim that 'people have been pretty good at managing themselves here, especially having your outspoken veteran Creek climbers here all the time' reprimanding others – 'I think that's what keeps the place in check,' as one climber evaluated. Such 'outspoken' individuals are variously labelled by interviewees as 'crusaders,' 'self-proclaimed stewards,' or those that are 'always on education mode at the crack.' Despite the stewardship ethics that structure land user interactions, identities and behavior, most people recognize that increased land use continues to generate negative impacts. Brent, introduced above, thus challenged what he believed was a mistaken assumption regarding outdoor recreation: 'I wouldn't say they are environmentalists,' he concluded. As another climber affirmed, 'climbers have the goal, first and foremost, to climb rocks.'

Even if climbers are primarily rock-centered in their valuation of the landscape, many nevertheless indicate a sense of obligation to act as stewards, particularly in the face of increasingly evident disturbances. Yet some drivers of recreational land use, namely the mainstreaming and commodification of climbing culture, are transforming the Indian Creek landscape in ways irreducible to individuals' localized behaviors. The next section addresses these drivers, which complicate values of wilderness and stewardship while driving a wedge between the ideals and practices of 'authentic' experience on the landscape.

### *Authenticity and the commercialization of climbing culture*

Climbing has become a relatively mainstream sport in recent decades, and many aspects of climbing culture have thereby been thoroughly commodified. This trend holds implications for the growth of climbers' impacts to landscapes and resources, while also providing novel circumstances for how climbers form identities, take on cultural values, and relate to one another. Climbers typically view themselves as part of 'the climbing community,' although subcultures are deeply place-specific and typically hierarchical based on authenticity and adherence to local 'ethics.' Rickly and Vidon (2017), comparing rock climbers and hikers in two areas, find that 'authenticity' is a rhetorical practice constructed through embodied social experiences that give way to place-based ethical authority and social distinction among recreationalists (see also Vidon, Rickly, and Knudsen 2018). In line with this definition, we find that an authentic 'Creek' climber identifies with, or is recognized by others as maintaining, the following: relatively long-term physical experience struggling with the rock; local knowledge of the area's crags, routes, and required climbing techniques and gear; and performances that adhere to local ethics, which includes a range of climbing, behavioral, and environmental norms. As addressed below, commercial and environmental pressures create dissonance about the ethical basis of authentic practices.

Kai, a climber who regularly lives in his van at Indian Creek for weeks at a time, exemplifies the initial step toward authentic practice through investment: 'The more I've come here, the more people I've [met] who are involved, [the] more I'm *invested* in the place.' Such investment takes time and work. One must learn places and route names, establish friends with whom to climb and share gear, and learn challenging, area-specific climbing techniques. Climbers' place-based identities are embodied through physical struggle (Lewis 2000), in this case by learning to climb Indian Creek's notoriously difficult crack features. For example, one climber, Antonio, reflected on the pain, grit, training, and risk that characterized his entry into crack climbing. He used this experience to differentiate the 'one in twenty' who succeed in becoming an authentic Creek climber: the rock 'will *always* filter out a breed of person,' he concluded.

The authentic climber who learns through struggle with the rock itself is not primarily distinguishable by the 'grade' at which they climb (to do so can compromise the 'humble brag' identity, addressed above). A more salient axis of comparison is against those whose entry into climbing is marked by highly commercialized means, particularly indoor climbing gyms. Such means have led to a quantitative growth in climbers and expanded the local Indian Creek 'scene' (as

some call it) but have also generated new patterns of hierarchy and differentiation among climbers. One climber reflects on the 'wave' of a new kind of climbing culture he sees as becoming more prominent among Indian Creek visitors, but which contrasts sharply with his own entry into climbing culture: 'I learned to lead trad from my buddy ... but there's this whole new school gym climber wave. They seem to be all about paying like 200 dollars for a 2-hour course at a gym.' Another climber contrasted apprenticeship-based entry into climbing with the 'wave' of commercialized climbing culture. As Jonnie evaluated, 'Everyone needs a mentor ... My mentor, Shay – I learned *a world* from him. We kind of congregated [around] Shay and learned.' Commercialization, in his perspective, limits how 'a world' can be passed on.

The growth of indoor, urban commercial gyms has frustrated efforts to transmit place-based climbing ethics regarding safety, environmental impact, and acceptable climbing behavior. The following excerpt expresses such frustration:

People that start climbing exclusively in gyms don't learn how to come out in a natural environment and deal with some basic hazards and how [to] come into nature and be humbled, instead of being in a controlled environment where everything is man-made and it's all competitive, [which] takes a lot of the focus off what's going on around you.

As clarified here, values of wilderness and stewardship require place-specific practices that mainstream climbing culture is not designed to provide. Common to relatively veteran climbers, Antonio resents how mainstream climbing, centered in gyms and tourism, has changed how people interact with landscape:

Climbing has definitely changed in the [eighteen] years I have done it. [It] has become so much more popular ... Now we are very instant gratification here in America ... People [now] complain about the hike, how cold [or] hot it is, and I'm like 'do you realize you have the *luxury* to be out here?'

As Antonio suggests, consumer lifestyles have degraded values in climbing. Even those in the climbing community who embrace commercial opportunities, for example by working as climbing guides, similarly recognize the difficulties navigating the new mainstream culture of climbing. One climbing guide, Sam, discussed 'two paths' among his clients:

I see strange, negative and annoying ego tendencies. Or you can take the path where [climbing] helps you see through those things and see that the landscape affects you. I try to teach our guests: 'don't get too stoked on yourself. Don't ... use climbing and the landscape as a vehicle to bolster yourself. Come, be affected.'

As this excerpt indicates, the mainstreaming of climbing culture generates dissonance between individual performance ('stoke') and the other dimensions of authentic practice. Although tied to wilderness values ('come, be affected'), treatment of the landscape as a 'vehicle' for oneself undermines values of wilderness, stewardship, and authenticity.

Mainstream climbing culture has been commodified in two important ways, each serving as drivers of participation in outdoor recreation and associated friction between wilderness values, increased visitation, environmental disturbance, authentic experience, and economic interests in a burgeoning recreational culture. On the one hand are outdoor-focused firms. On the other hand is social media. Let us briefly address them in turn.

Despite exemplary cases of supply chain sustainability, corporate interests have generally represented and cultivated a wilderness aesthetic attainable through consumption (Nagle and Vidon 2021; Buckley 2003; Vidon, Rickly, and Knudsen 2018). Economic investment in adventure tourism is a major driver in the reordering of landscapes and socio-economic relations to facilitate 'outdoor' experiences (Mendoza 2018; Fletcher 2014; Highfill and Franks 2019). At Indian Creek, recreational users acknowledge the contradictory ways in which outdoor industries construct a 'natural' aesthetic through commercialization of experience and the landscape. One climber addressed his frustration about a lack of environmental responsibility in the outdoor industry: 'I think that they all have culpability. It's like, you manufacture a product. You can't then say you're not responsible for its use.' As Conrad, another climber, discussed:

The only reason why we can go climbing today, is because we have this giant economic *machine* [that] has been powering the world for 200 years, which produces stretchy nylon climbing ropes and all this stuff ... We're [just] skimming off the top, but if climbers really care about long-term conservation, there's going to have to be this point ... where we accept less.

Many climbers similarly uphold that commercialization has generated a consumer-based climbing culture while increasing environmental pressures. For example, Bryan presents a critical narrative about recent trends. He first acknowledged a 'human need to explore and promote.' However, he discussed, commercialization of the landscape and of climbing activities has led to a situation in which 'there's *no restraint whatsoever*' on such needs:

All those products, all that consumerism, and all that marketing is going toward people getting outside and doing that thing they're marketing toward ... So it feels like [a] *headlong rush* to exploit what's left of our outdoors—the untrampled landscape that we have out here, [but without] building the infrastructure to contain the people that *they're* sending here.

Climbers discuss feeling the weight of participating in this 'rush.'

Even so, most evaluate climbing as a unique source of value outside the commodification process. Franklin, in a group interview, discussed what he viewed as a fundamental link between wilderness preservation and the climbing community, guided by what he called 'very much a [John] Muir-inspired ethos.' He outlined this 'ethos' as including 'a sense of inherent value and worth to wild places' that provide 'some version of a simple life, even if it's just for recreational purposes.' Because recreation entails 'using [the land] in non-consumptive ways,' Franklin assessed that outdoor recreation stood against commodification. Although acknowledging the gap between the 'ethos' and reality, Franklin and others in the group agreed that 'the community' stood apart from commercial interests: 'we're leaving tons of traces, but we're not necessarily extracting resources for commercial goods. I think that ethos really drives the spirit of saving Bears Ears.' In the final statement, Franklin connects climbing, wilderness preservation, and a position common among recreational users that situates land management politics with reference to wilderness values – the commercialization of those values notwithstanding.

The advent of social media makes decoupling outdoor recreation from a commercial logic untenable. Marketing by outdoor companies and through 'influencers' on Instagram draw upon the unique aesthetic qualities of Indian Creek to link products and experiences to the wilderness landscape and the special quality of the place. Analysis of the hashtag '#IndianCreek' demonstrates that themes of wildness, adventure, toughness, and fun seamlessly connect to monetized content and product endorsements.

Although many climbers contribute to social media and report that it helps to build their identities, the following excerpt exemplifies how others view social media-driven, lifestyle-based consumption as a problem:

Now, with the social media revolution [there is] the attraction of the *lifestyle* of climbing ... a fad people try to replicate. So, I would say there is a little bit of the *soul* of climbing that is being sacrificed to the masses so they can have the *image* they want.

Drew (excerpted above) further draws upon his experiences guiding visiting climbers to suggest that the image of the 'dirtbag' desert climber, who is nomadic, poor, and truly committed to climbing, is falsely stylized via social media. Broadcasting participation in climbing culture in a (mediated) wilderness thus provides an additional avenue for practicing what Thorstein Veblen (1899) termed 'conspicuous leisure.'

Social media supports place-based authenticity beyond conspicuous leisure by providing avenues for communicating local ethics, even as such platforms amplify stylized media and advertising themes of adventure, wilderness, consumption, and 'stoke' (Wheaton and Beal 2003; Wetmore 2021). Because adherence to stewardship ethics is part of being an authentic 'Creek' climber, many who participate in climbing culture via social media were easily activated in social media campaigns by non-profit and outdoor firms like REI and Patagonia, specifically regarding BENM (through the hashtag #ProtectBearsEars). Discourse of 'Protecting Bears Ears' took on a particular meaning. All of those who had an opinion on BENM supported the Monument designation, although their evaluations of the situation primarily considered issues of access to recreation, rather than issues of Indigenous rights and preservation of cultural resources. Testimony from Linda, a new climber who stated she was 'nerdy' about BENM, demonstrates the common pattern. First, she addresses knowledge about land management issues she has gained through social media and interaction among climbers: 'There's been a ton of fundraising [and] efforts to raise awareness ... It's kind of all that anybody talks about anymore, which is cool. Like every day ... on Facebook, like, 'oh, this could be happening, we still need public comments.'" When asked about local perspectives on BENM, however, Linda indicated that her perspective did not involve local or non-recreational users, for example Native American tribes and the BEITC: 'I don't even really know who would be considered local down here. Local, you mean *Boulder* [laughs]?' By jokingly signifying 'Boulder' (a 700 km drive from Indian Creek) as 'local,' Linda, like others, registers Indian Creek as a destination that conforms to the set-apart wilderness and itinerant recreational values that generally mark climbing culture.

The ultimate irony of the corporate and social media-based activism in the case of BENM was that the increased attention it generated towards Indian Creek reportedly led to its surging popularity, and hence greater vulnerability to impacts. An analysis of economic indicators and geotagged social media posts found that visitation to San Juan County increased 105.1% in the three years following the monument designation, nearly double the rate of growth in the three years before the monument (Smith, Wilkins, and Miller 2021). Local climbers and land managers we interviewed affirmed this trend. Such exposure has continued to complicate the basis of authentic practices by increasing visibility, visitation and, in turn, generating environmental disturbance.

Analysis of climber's participation in and interpretation of mainstream climbing culture show that commercialization of outdoor recreation upholds wilderness values, an ethic of stewardship,



and moral considerations of environmental impact. It can even help organize recreationalists as a stakeholder bloc in land management politics. Although advancing stylized ideals regarding authenticity, commercialization nevertheless competes with underlying ethics and values. As the next section shows, this contradictory situation is manifest in deep concern regarding the future of Indian Creek, which faces being 'loved to death' and transformed into the very kinds of exploited, managed, or manicured spaces that nearly all present land users would like to avoid.

### **Future visions and apprehension regarding land development**

One way to evaluate how cultural values and place-based experiences shape interests in land management conflicts is to understand how land users consider present trends in light of future possibilities. For many respondents in our study, the future is uncertain but headed toward a breaking point. Land managers, climbers, ranchers and Native American tribal nations in the Bears Ears region fear a land management scenario in which increased visitation among recreational land users fails to preserve their groups' access to the landscape and the resources and experiences that make it valuable to them. Thus, even political gains for recreational users (evidenced by the inclusion of Indian Creek in the Trump-era reduced National Monument and the designation of rock climbing as a protected use in the BENM management plans) represent among climbers a double-edged sword: their interest in accessing and preserving the place faces the paradox that this very access may result in a high-visitation, high-development, and high-impact scenario that will degrade the experiences they seek.

Respondents drew upon historical narratives and comparison to other areas to inform such pessimistic or declensionist perspectives. Industries, whether industrial or recreational, wax and wane, creating challenges for land managers who must respond to new land use pressures that may or may not match existing management practices, infrastructure, or regulations. For context, in Southeast Utah, the uranium industry had been the primary commercial sector in the 1950s and again in the 1970s, along with fossil fuel and other mineral extractions, grazing, and timber production. The government supported economic development on federal lands, resulting in a regional political economy with clear priorities, ecological impacts, winners and losers (Ringholz 2002; Voyles 2015; Walls, Lee, and Ashenfarb 2020). Each industry has undergone

clear periods of boom and relative decline or bust. Given this context, Janice, a retired archeologist and former land manager with the US Forest Service, considered the challenges that new outdoor recreational industry trends pose to land managers. Janice highlights a major shift in federal agencies towards facilitating recreation and the kinds of consumption it entails: 'They [land managers] have gone from a resource conservation perspective to a resource consumption perspective.' Alice, another federal land manager, confirmed the challenges posed by the rapid rise in unsustainable recreational use while acknowledging a common thread among all land users: 'They don't want to hear "no".' They want to do what their families have done for generations. They want to do it for free, unencumbered by seasons or permits ... They see government as the oppressor – the person that says 'no' instead of 'yes'.' Although compromise or cultural change may support all users in respecting the place, Alice reasoned, a more likely future involves recreational visitors coming 'in such great numbers [that] it gets loved to death.'

As a result of land use pressures, most managers and users believe that infrastructural development and intensive regulation will commence, but not necessarily in a way that supports the values presently characterizing land use. One climber envisioned a future of recreational development by explicitly comparing oil extraction platforms to parking lots built to alleviate existing, congested roadsides. In 20 years, she imagined the following: 'everybody wanting to be as close to the base of the cliffs as possible. It [will] look from the air like an oilfield, just *roads and pads*, only in this case it'll be roads and camping areas or parking lots.' A local rancher drew a similar, but more historicized, comparison:

The recreation industry is the newest player in the Manifest Destiny story, and that story is: whoever can capitalize the public lands the most gets *carte blanche*. They are just the latest one ... Like Silicon Valley tech companies, they like to think they're the good guys, and *clean*, but in my opinion they're the *greatest threat* to these unique landscapes—not energy or other industries.

One former leader of a national climbing organization, interviewed in Moab, was less pessimistic but expressed a widespread sentiment that the future is deeply threatened: 'everybody loves the undeveloped character of the Creek, *right*? They don't *want* to see it turn into Yosemite,' (a typical comparison drawn by interviewees to represent an over-developed land management scenario). 'But on the other hand,' he continued, '*something* has got to change ... so the place can be protected.'

Two climbers interviewed together, Jacob and Jackie, reflect a view among many recreational users that believes intensive infrastructural or industrial development would destroy the landscape and experiences they seek. As the sun set over Creek Pasture, Jacob reflected: 'This place is *amazing*.' Like others, they are willing to accept minimal regulations (for example, more parking and paid campsites). Yet development and regulation signify a problematic trajectory that would fundamentally alter the meaning of the place. When asked how increased energy or mineral extraction activities would change their experiences, Jacob responded quickly: '*Ruin* it!' Jackie, in agreement, added: 'It would make it feel less magical and natural,' a sentiment that others expressed regarding increased recreational infrastructural development. Such anxiety over 'ruin', either from people or the infrastructure built to support them, highlights a core tension in the way recreational users value the landscape on one hand and impactfully participate in it on the other.

## Conclusions

Through ethnographic and interview-based research in a contentious landscape, Indian Creek/BENM, Utah, with a focus on rock climbers, this study demonstrates that recreational users value the landscape as a site for experiencing, expressing, and building wilderness values, authenticity, and a corresponding set of identities, practices, and 'ethics.' Even so, such values have clear economic drivers, including the commercialization of outdoor recreation and its expression in government priorities to support recreation industry, which have resulted in increasingly evident ecological impacts that render the ethical bases of authenticity and wilderness paradoxical. This paradox is centrally shaping the social nature of the Indian Creek landscape, including new types of environmental disturbance, social identities and axes of stratification among land users, new views of the landscape's meaning, and narratives regarding how its 'sacredness' may be preserved or desecrated in the future. The resulting cultural valuations of the landscape have clearly been activated in the politics of land management in the region, particularly with respect to the establishment of BENM. However, the social process through which cultural values took shape and are being played out bely a conceptual or political designation of clear stakeholder groups espousing direct interests in the exploitation, use, or protection of the landscape.

What we find instead is a bundle of contradictions. First, those participating in a commercialized and mainstreamed climbing culture adopt the discourse of 'sacredness' to defend access to

a 'wilderness' they are actively disturbing. Second, people who putatively comprise a group with the same interests (e.g., rock climbers, and likely also ranchers) are rather *incoherent* insofar as they are marked by internal social divisions. Finally, because of such divisions – for example regarding adherence to 'local ethics,' divergent social means of entry into climbing culture, and different levels engagement with 'stewardship' – a path toward land management solutions to the problems of environmental disturbance, infrastructural 'over'-development, and increasing, poorly regulated visitation remains elusive. Notwithstanding an effective coalition to 'Protect Bears Ears' in recent years, a development which tempts a clear distinction between settled 'winners' and 'losers', underlying divisions among land users remain. The associated drivers show no signs of ceasing.

These findings holds implications for political ecology and economic-sociological perspectives of valuation, with special reference to studies of protected areas and multi-use landscapes featuring political contestation. In particular, this case demonstrates how conflict could be more generally approached with reference to cultural roots developed through embodied engagement with the landscape. As our analysis shows, in the heart of what many view as a political-economic struggle over the future of public land in the United States lay deeply seated and competing cultural valuations of landscapes constructed through active experience with the land. The case of Indian Creek/BENM thus suggests three points about land conflicts. First, and contrary to dominant perspectives in political ecology (see Robbins 2019, Ch. 10), land conflicts are hardly reducible to political and economic interests, because, as sociological accounts of 'valuation' anticipates, the value of landscapes, like 'nature' generally, is culturally flexible and negotiated (Fourcade 2011; Martinez-Alier 2002; McIntyre, Moore, and Yuan 2008). Second, conflicts over land use and management do not stem from clear delineations between use-value for some and exchange-value for others. 'Revitalizing political ecology in the West,' as Martin et al. (2019, 227) call for, therefore entails continuing to problematize the relationship between political-economic interests and evolving social processes of landscape valuation. Third, the dynamics of conflict are only partly legible in the formation of stakeholder groups party to political contestation. Intra-group social differentiation may be as important to understanding land conflict as presumably homogeneous and opposed stakeholder groups.

Returning to our case, underneath the political process of establishing 'common ground' (Robinson 2018) remain profoundly open questions about how the trajectory of outdoor recreation will intersect the values and vision that shaped the BEITC's political formation: 'Our people revere

the Bears Ears area ... where we can be among our ancestors and their songs and wisdom, where the traumas of the past can be alleviated, where we can connect with the land and our deepest values and heal' (BEITC 2015b). Although climbers believe the struggle over public lands is largely taking place to protect their own valuation of the landscape, other cases (for example Cave Rock near Lake Tahoe, California) suggest that recreational climbing and the interests of Native American tribes may lead to direct confrontation (Makley and Makley 2010; Taylor and Geffen 2004). Indeed, some climbers in this study speculated that if Native Americans maintained land management rights, then climbing would not be allowed (a position refuted by the BENM Management Plan). Ranching provides an interesting parallel. It remains to be seen how valuations of a working landscape might shape land conflict moving forward. Ranching on public land in the U.S. West is in decline, a pattern marked by management 'transitions' towards recreation, but which may also inspire new coalitions or contestation that, in turn, remakes the social nature of landscapes based on values perceived to be under threat (Swette and Lambin 2020). More generally, then, scholars should question discourse of stakeholder categories, rigid interests, and 'common ground' (even when politically achieved) and pay attention to the dynamics of cultural values as they are formed and play out on landscapes.

A sociology sensitive to the cultural valuation of landscapes holds implications for land management, particularly in multi-use settings featuring recreational users. Multi-use landscapes are marked by different visions and goals, which land managers must balance, often with limited resources and management capacity (Behan 1990; Gorte 1999; Hobbs et al. 2014). Working within this context, land managers should recognize a widening contradiction between cultural values of wilderness and sacredness on the one hand, and social pressures driving environmental disturbance, consumption-based participation in recreational culture, and the commercialization of outdoor experience on the other. To the extent land management plans seek to manage outdoor recreation in multi-use settings, policies and development plans must account for this tension, even if it counters common narratives of shared values among stakeholders (e.g., Access Fund 2021). One possibility involves increased advocacy and enforcement of cultural 'ethics' among recreational users. As a veteran climber involved in regional climbing organizations put it, if the place is being 'loved to death' by land users, climbers themselves might need to play more of a direct role as 'gatekeepers' who, 'as advocates for these places, have to make the leap' and protect 'how we want the landscape to look.' Indeed, the American Alpine Club and Access Fund recently hired two seasonal 'climbing stewards' stationed in Indian Creek to formalize such roles. Yet this will not likely absolve the

basic tension between the ideals of 'wilderness' and the economic and social pressures resulting from the mainstreaming and commercialization of outdoor recreation culture, which is evident in various settings (Mendoza 2018; Fletcher 2014)

Much less do appeals to self-enforcement deal with the visions and interests of diverse land users, who, our analysis shows, hold to sacredness, stewardship, or land value in different terms. Valuations of land denoted by sacredness may form a 'boundary object' (Star and Griesemer 1989) between different groups, facilitating collaboration between the Inter-tribal Coalition and a range of stakeholders involved in management decisions and plans. The political-economic context, in this case, made for a coalition that ultimately successfully campaigned to establish BENM regardless of underlying value conflicts and, in part, because of the flexibility offered by discourse about sacredness (see Robinson 2018; Access Fund 2021). Based on heritage, culture and traditional use (not wilderness), sacredness became a basis of claims to Native sovereignty and management rights. On the other hand, discourse of sacredness served as a way for environmentalists and recreationalists to make claims for preserving a sensitive ecology and 'world class' outdoor opportunities. For ranchers, place attachment and spiritual meaning have advanced claims for the preservation of ranching on public land, rooted in the value of a working landscape. In situations where such differences are apparent, our research suggests managers should strive to identify and preserve qualities of the landscape which make it 'sacred' or personally transformative, given the importance of this concept among user groups (though expressed and understood in different ways).

Even so, consistent with political ecological consideration of 'valuation conflicts' (Martinez-Alier 2002), our analysis does not suggest that land management can be rid of conflict. As Indigenous writer Keeler (2017, 2) has argued in the case of Bears Ears, for local Indigenous Peoples, 'There is no way our traditional culture and worldview can persist without being permitted actual space in the physical world to live out these ideas' that attribute central livelihood and spiritual significance to the landscape. Across the U.S. West, efforts to redress colonial dispossession, like efforts to increase fossil fuel and mineral extraction or permit unregulated grazing, are likely to persist in a manner that is only tenuously related to recreational ideals of wilderness and stewardship. Furthermore, it is likely that wilderness will continue to be challenged by a recreational culture and industry, advancing the 'paradox of preservation' through which wilderness is either 'loved to death' or managed in a way that ruins some cultural and economic values land users hold dear (Watt 2016). Whether or not those who deeply value special areas, like Indian Creek, based on their

deep, physical interactions with rock or other features can reasonably reconcile multiple land uses is an open question, the terms of which will undoubtedly change over time. Even so, the multiple ways through which people make landscapes meaningful and valuable, including the contradictory ways the valuation process unfolds, should be deliberately addressed in accounts of land use conflict.

## Notes

1. Hopi Tribe v. Donald J. Trump, 17-cv-2590 (D.D.C. 2017).
2. Natural Resources Defense Council v. Trump, 17-cv-02606 (D.C.C. 2017).
3. Plans, preparatory documents, record of consultation, and formal deliberation regarding BENM from 2017 to 2020 can be obtained at <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/94460/570>.
4. Source: <https://dreaminvertical.wordpress.com/tag/indian-creek/>. To 'on-sight' a climbing route is to climb it unrehearsed and without falling. It is a marker of status among climbers and an element of 'traditional' (or 'trad') climbing ethics.

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