

# Deseret News

## Moab's dilemma: Can recreation coexist with energy?

By Amy Joi O'Donoghue , Deseret News  
Published: Saturday, April 12 2014 4:25 p.m. MDT



John Weisheit, conservation director of Living Rivers, stands outside Canyonlands National Park overlooking the Colorado River on March 26, 2014. He is worried that encroaching oil development and potash mining will harm the resources of the river and impair Grand County's scenic attractions.

(Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

MOAB — For more than a century the rich earth of the Moab area has been fertile ground for a harvest of opportunities.

Early settlers found a generous growing season for crops and fruit trees. In the 1950s, the earth relinquished her riches of uranium ore and with that, the northern fringes of Moab played host to the nation's second largest processing mill.

Now, people prospect for play and fun amid crimson spires and apricot-colored arches, or mine a sense of self in the solitude of the Colorado River and along the vistas and

back country of southeast Utah.

At the same time, oil deposits that proved elusive to capture for nearly 100 years have been cracked open with the advent of horizontal drilling, bringing opportunity for developers and new pump jacks next to sage brush and not far from national and state parks.

In this big sandbox of red dirt — one of the world's favorite outdoor playgrounds — conflict is erupting over whose vision for this land should prevail.

It is a paradox in a land aptly named Paradox Basin, with pressure that comes from many corners.

Outdoor sports enthusiasts revel in the hiking, biking, Jeeping, river-rafting, rock climbing, photo-taking, star-gazing,



Bicyclists ride a slickrock trail March 25, 2014, at Dead Horse State Park that was made with contributions from Intrepid Potash company. An extension of

horseback riding, and more.

the trail just happened, with money from Fidelity Oil. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

Moab is a key player in an outdoor recreation economy that in Utah generates \$856 million in state and local tax revenue, according to the Outdoor Industry Association. Well more than 70 percent of the jobs in Grand County — 2,440 as of 2012 — derive from tourism.

Beyond its role as a recreation mecca, the Moab area is home to the earthly riches of potash deposits, an active copper mine and the nation's largest producing oil well in the lower 48 states. The extraction industry supports just 2 percent of the jobs in Grand County, but they are good-paying jobs county officials predict will continue to grow as the economy diversifies.



A pipeline is under construction to capture the natural gas being flared from a surge in oil production in Grand County. The pipeline is outside Dead Horse State Park and Canyonlands National Park. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

"We ask a lot of the land, so the more we can minimize the footprint and the disturbance from any one of these demands, to lessen those cumulative impacts, we should," said Lisa Bryant, assistant field manager in the Moab field office for the Bureau of Land Management.

"We need to do what we can so we can still have this in perpetuity."

"This" is Arches National Park, the Canyonlands National Park, Dead Horse State Park, the Colorado River and the land that surrounds it, generating \$1.8 million in

2013 in visitor spending for Grand County and drawing more than 2.5 million visitors a year.

"Moab is inviting all of these people to come here and visit because it is our livelihood," said Kent Green, owner of Cowboy Country Offroad Adventures. "And now that they're here, we've got agencies and people who want to restrict what they can do."

Green, a retired sergeant with the Grand County Sheriff's Office who ran search and rescue, said he's seen the changes come over the years, and with them the demands that are rising.

Sooner or later, he warns, something will give.

"I don't know if I will see it in my lifetime, but there is going to be a day when you will not be able to go into the back country unless you have a professional guide with you," he said. "We are going to have to be micro-managed and it saddens me."

### Energy and tourism

Industry and recreation coexisted in the Moab area for decades, but the new oil find and resulting development — along with renewed interest in potash mining — are putting a strain on an already stressed and uneasy relationship.



The view off Dead Horse Point overlooking the ponds of Intrepid Potash. Intrepid has been mining potash in the scenic area of the Grand County for decades. Renewed interest in mining other potash resources in the area has environmental groups concerned. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)



The view of Intrepid Potash ponds off Dead Horse State Park overlook on March 25, 2014. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

"Multi-use does not mean every use," said Marc Roberts with the Sierra Club, which proudly decries "dirty oil" and embraces an all or nothing approach when it comes to land.

"I don't think there is a place for industry here. This is no place for oil and this is no place for potash."

Roberts, from Chicago, retired at 55 and sought this place to live after a visit. At the sprawling expanse of Canyonlands National Park, as he points to purple-hued buttes

catching a spray of sun, he becomes animated, and his words start to tumble one after another.

"I've talked to other people and they all tell the same story. This place crossed their radar and once they got here, they couldn't believe what they saw and what they experienced and it knocked them over," he said.

"It made them change horses in midstream, set a different course. I am just afraid the magical experience that brought us here will not be available to those who are coming after us."

The threat for Roberts and Living Rivers' John Weisheit are the extraction industries — companies they say have no place in a recreation economy.

"They don't belong here," Weisheit said bluntly. "It threatens this entire area."

But as rich as southeast Utah may be for recreation, it also boasts a bounty of natural resources that can be tapped for fertilizer and fuel.



A water truck travels on state Route 313 outside of Canyonlands National Park and Dead Horse State Park. Environmental groups worry that increased oil extraction in the area will compromise the environment and put in jeopardy the recreational economy of southeast Utah. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

"It was mining that put Moab on the map," Green said. "That is what defined Moab, the uranium, the minerals that are here."

The Bureau of Land Management's Moab master leasing plan, still in the crafting stage, encompasses 946,469 acres in Grand and San Juan counties — an area estimated to contain 145 billion cubic feet of natural gas and 32.5 million barrels of oil.



Environmental groups, such as Living Rivers and the Sierra Club, fear that more oil development in the Canyonlands area of Utah threatens the resources of the Colorado River. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

During the past 30 years, 66 wells have been drilled in the leasing area, with 45 that turned out to be dry holes. Although the oil and gas industry has been active in southeast Utah since 1925, it has only been in the past few years that horizontal drilling has enabled industry to hit significant, and sustainable, production numbers.

### The wells

Fidelity Exploration & Production Co., operates 17 wells in what's called the Cane Creek unit and hopes to drill 12 to 14 more

in 2014 at an investment of \$170 million. It bought the leases in 2006 from another company and began operations less than a year later.

As state Route 313 winds southwest toward Dead Horse State Park and Canyonlands National Park, a careful visitor can spy the green pump jacks and collection of tank batteries off in the distance.

Semi trucks hauling water for oil production share the highway with tourists, bicyclists and campers.

This new growth in the Big Flat area has Roberts and other environmental groups bristling, but it engenders little reaction from some visitors.

Karen Ludwig from Pocatello, Idaho, noticed the trucks on the road and said she'd read about the increased oil activity online before she took her boys to Moab for a vacation at both Arches and Canyonlands national parks.



The Colorado River "gooseneck" depicted in a view from the Canyonlands National Park area on March 26, 2014. Environmentalists are worried the river's resources are in jeopardy because of oil and potash development. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

"I read that it spoiled the landscape and that there would be trucks all over," she said, adding that she was apprehensive about what she'd see. "I was pleasantly surprised. I did see a couple of the trucks."

Her son, Scott Lucas, 19, said the oil production equipment he noticed was "somewhat understated and blended in."



The ground adjacent to state Route 313 shows scarring where a portion of a natural gas pipeline has been buried. The \$70 million pipeline, which remains in the installation phase, is the result of increased oil production activity in the area. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

Betty Jones drove in from Pueblo County, Colo., with her husband to visit for the day at Canyonlands.

"I noticed some of the rigs, but I didn't see very many of them. I've seen a whole lot more where we're from."

Fidelity spokesman Tim Rasmussen said the company tried to locate wells with consideration for the viewshed and other resources. The company has to also adhere to spacing requirements set down by state and federal regulators.

"We understand that this is a pristine seasonal tourist area and we respect that," he said. "We were very, very particular in where we set the well locations."

Rather than the traditional "horse head" that nods up and down, Rasmussen said the company chose vertical, hydraulic pumps to be less obtrusive for visitors and those enjoying recreation.

But for Roberts and other oil critics, it doesn't matter.

"Every time I see one of these it pains my heart," said Deb Walter, a Park City transplant and retired school teacher.

Walter and her husband, Dick, are avid equestrians who trek the vast open spaces across BLM land in endurance rides that span 25 or 50 or even more miles across the Big Flat area.



A pump jack and tank battery sit outside Dead Horse State Park and is the result of a new surge in oil production in southeast Utah. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

A new pipeline being in put in by Fidelity crosses that same land, and this evidence of modern-day man is not what they want to see.

"Part of the beauty of this land is to be able to look and not see anything," said Dick Walter.

Roberts gestures to a hill in the distance.



The panoramic views of the Canyonlands National Park area draw millions of visitors a year to southeast Utah. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

"Wouldn't you rather see a group of horseback riders crest the top or would you rather see a water truck?"

The pipeline is being built to capture the natural gas that is being flared from the wells in Big Flat. One well spits flame so high it has earned the nickname "Dragon Breath."

Last year, an estimated 456 million cubic feet of natural gas was lost due to flaring in Big Flat, enough to supply 236,000 homes.

The state stepped in and said that the natural gas, once it reached that volume, had to be captured, said Dustin Doucet, a petroleum engineer with the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining.

"Waste of that resource is a big issue, obviously, as is the impact to air quality," he said.

## Potash prospecting

Beyond oil, environmental critics see the potash extraction industry as another use of the land that is incompatible with the recreation value of the area.

Outside of Moab, just north of the Colorado River, Intrepid has been mining potash for more than 50 years. Its azure ponds can be seen from the vantage of Dead Horse State Park, its role entrenched in the view shed for decades.



The Canyonlands area in southeast Utah is a popular place for photography, rock climbing, river rafting, biking, hiking and a host of other recreational activities. Its remote nature and panoramic views combine for a unique visitor experience that groups worry will be compromised by oil activity and potash mining. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

More recently, when potash prices spiked from \$200 a ton to \$900 a ton, the BLM was hit with a flurry of potash prospecting permits — going from an annual submission of just 10 to a couple hundred for the 420,000 acres available for potash exploration.

Until the Moab master leasing plan is complete, the BLM has put the brakes on any new potash mines. It has, however, allowed a company to put in four exploratory drilling holes.

Grand County Council chairman Lynn Jackson, a former geologist with the BLM and one-time potash consultant, said he believes Grand County's 2.4 million acres can accommodate an 1,100-acre footprint for another potash mine should one happen.

He also defends the philosophical position that it is possible for Grand County to have both recreation and a vibrant extraction industry without cost to either.

"We are a national and internationally recognized area," he said. "We are not going to do anything to destroy that."

Industry critics have protested in front of BLM offices and criticized elected leaders at Grand County Council meetings in recent months.



Sections of a pipeline to collect natural gas sit outside Dead Horse State Park near Moab, where oil development is creating conflict with environmentalists. (Michael O'Donoghue, For the Deseret News)

"It is a war of ideology is what it is," he said. "They want it stopped. I mean, they flat want it stopped and want us to just rely on recreation only."

But energy jobs can provide wages that support families.

"You can't move to Moab unless you have already made your money somewhere else or you are savvy enough and have whatever capital to set up a business," Jackson said. "If you are a young person with a family from Salt Lake City with no particular skill set and you want to move to Moab, forget it."

The success of industry also helps pay the bills for county needs in a significant way, he said.

The first slate of wells that began producing for Fidelity jumped mineral revenues in Grand County from \$429,000 a year to \$1.2 million in the next fiscal year.

For 2014, Grand County is projected to receive \$2.6 million and within a few years, that figure could be as high as \$5 million or \$6 million. Grand County's operating budget is \$12 million a year, he said

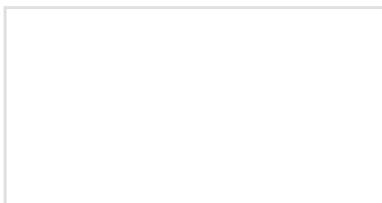
"It is easy to be an idealist unless you are in a job like this and you have to make the proverbial rubber hit the road. You got to make it work for people."



Lynn Jackson, chair of the Grand County Council, believes the county, state and federal government appropriately balance oil and potash development with Grand County's strong recreation economy. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

Jackson said the revenue helped keep the county's 36-bed nursing home from shuttering its door and in Moab City, mineral lease money over the past 15 years has built about \$25 million worth of public buildings.

"When people say there is no benefit to the community, that is not true," said Moab City Manager Donna Metzler.



Metzler's city has been hit with a barrage of criticism for selling 7 million gallons of treated water for Fidelity's operations.



John Weisheit, conservation director of Living Rivers, is one of the most ardent critics of oil development and potash mining in southeast Utah. He worries that mineral extraction threatens the resources of the Colorado River. Here, he points to rock art on what is called "Wall Street" along the river outside of Moab. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)

She said the water is sold at a rate four times higher than what residential customers pay and selling water to industry or the state is a practice that has happened for decades. And while Moab may be in the desert southwest, the city is literally awash in water — using just 40 percent of its available supply each year that comes from springs and groundwater fed from the nearby La Sal Mountains.

Weisheit said it does not matter.

"It's a gift. Just because they have the gift doesn't mean they should squander it," he said. "The Colorado River is a gift. It is why we exist. If you break it, you break the back of civilization."

Leaders say they believe they can find that balance without compromising too much.

"I am willing to say that every place is sacred to someone," Metzler said. "It's a real balance. We have some visual and other resources that you can't find anywhere so we need to be careful to preserve those. I think it is possible."

Email: [amyjoi@deseretnews.com](mailto:amyjoi@deseretnews.com), Twitter: [amyjoi16](https://twitter.com/amyjoi16)

Copyright 2014, Deseret News Publishing Company



Justin Sjong enjoys an early spring day March 25, 2014, on the Intrepid slickrock trail at Dead Horse Point State Park. Renewed interest in oil production and potash mining has environmentalists worried that the area's recreation economy is in jeopardy. (Amy Joi O'Donoghue, Deseret News)