

People of the Book Cliffs

The Book Cliffs rise as if startled out of the Mancos Shale desert. This bright edge stretches east-west, two hundred miles between Grand Junction, Colorado and Price, Utah, stair-stepping four thousand feet up from the desert to a summit that's cloaked in aspen, fir, and spruce. Erosion has dissected the cliffs into isolated canyons, carved by intermittent streams that all flow south toward the Colorado River. Even so, the cliffs and canyons are considered part of the Uinta Basin because their rock layers, like the Green River Formation, are tilted north.

Pockets of true wilderness still exist within the Book Cliffs. Black bear, bighorn, mule deer, and cougars are at home in these canyons. People have lived in and moved through this country for thousands of years—the Utes most recently, the Fremont before them, and the enigmatic Barrier Canyon people with their alien pictographs staring at us as if from outer space.

Wolf Bennett and his daughters came here from Colorado to see the pictographs and to clamber around the rocks of Sego Canyon. Wolf's spent his life as a guide and values what these canyons offer his family—opportunities to discover, a diversion from cityscapes, a sense of wonder.

A mile down canyon, Bob Holloway and his two adopted children were watering fruit trees at the ranch he'd recently bought. The roof needed work. Bob and his wife wanted to get out of the rat race in Green River. That town's population of 900 might swell if a proposed oil refinery and nuclear power plant are built. Bob contemplated oil sand developments beyond the Book Cliffs that might affect his secluded home. PR Springs is thirty-five miles away as the raven flies.

I don't think it will affect me. It's far enough away that I really don't have a problem with it. It should bring some jobs to the area. No I feel pretty secure here. I'm not really worried about the tar sands. What are tar sands, Dad? That's sands they extract oil from to make gasoline. Gasoline? Um-huh. Somebody let the cows out.

Matt Boone trailered his horses twenty tough miles to the top of the Sego Canyon Road. He's been coming here for ten years, hunting first for elk, now for bear.

There's some bear tracks, fairly good sized bear. They were heading just right this way, towards the trailhead. It's a little bit early; the bears are just now starting to come out.

Asked if nearby mining at PR Spring might disrupt his yearly hunt, Matt replied:

Obviously you don't want to see things change, but at the same time progression and energy's needed, so I can see both sides, I guess. Obviously I wouldn't want to affect my hunting, but I also want to be able to drive my car. So some of it's necessary.

Matt seemed like a pragmatic man, one who trusted Utah's ability to regulate development within its boundaries.

You know, mining, the gas, all the stuff that we're extracting from the earth, is all necessary; it's stuff that we are using. It's pretty well regulated from everything I've read and understand; there's regulation that they have to meet and do, so....I'm for mining and drilling and those kind of things.

Casey Phillips was sitting in his ATV near the top of the East Canyon Road, six miles from the PR Spring oil sands mine. Casey represents the third generation in his family to hunt in these Book Cliff highlands. I asked if mining in this part of the state would change his experience of this country. He held my gaze and shook his head. "Utah," he said, "it's a state of opportunity.

Lee Elmgreen has lived on Westwater Creek for fifteen years. His ranch is at the foot of the Book Cliffs, not far from the Colorado line. He raised cattle but got out of the business after the creek had flashed one too many times, again blowing out his upstream water diversion. He relies on well water now for the remaining horses, chickens, and his home. Lee is convinced that drilling by US Oil Sands at PR Spring in 2012 sapped his well.

We had another person who was lost, and he came up and wanted to know how you got up on top because they were going to start putting in some water wells at the PR Springs site to see what kind of water they could get. And I gave 'em directions up to where he wanted to be, and they brought some drilling rigs in and they started to do some exploratory wells for water. Right after the water rigs started drilling up there I noticed that my water changed. I found a significant drop in water. All of a sudden I was down to 29 gallons a minute and the static had dropped from 56 feet down to 62 feet and the water was coming in right at the intake level of the pump.

It's hard to explain Lee's sudden loss of well water. Given the regional tilt of strata in the Book Cliffs, it seems likely that ground water moves slowly north from PR Spring, not south toward the Elmgreen ranch. It's easier to understand his concern about a proposed road that would connect the Uinta Basin with Interstate 70.

When I first moved out here, I could count the number of trucks I would see in a week's time on one hand, on this road. Now there's a constant flow of heavy equipment going up and down, you will see them on a daily basis. Other days you'll have 9 or 10 semis hauling stuff up to a new pad, or a new gas well, or somewhere where they're starting a project. It's not fun, and the road system won't handle it. The county roads out here are designed for pickup trucks and four wheelers and maybe some dirt bikes. They're not designed for heavy equipment.

Uintah County has paved the road that leads south from Vernal and the tiny community of Ouray. So far Grand County has resisted extending that pavement south across the Book Cliffs.

When you have heavy construction traffic, my horses suffer. Dust. They get sick... You'll hear 'em coughing, you'll hear them wheezing, because the air will stay thick with a dust that just sort of hangs.