

Writers on the Range: Let's blow the whistle on public-land abusers

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Dozens of TVs, refrigerators, stoves, washers, dryers and abandoned cars had either been gunshot, torched or both.

This place of destruction was what some locals called “Carnage Canyon,” roughly 30 acres off Lefthand Canyon in Boulder County, Colorado.

It was a shocking sight, but was it unique? Think about your own nearby public lands.

This canyon’s history began with mountain biking. Sometime in early 2000, a mountain biker discovered the canyon and developed a trail through it. Then, more bikers came in droves and “motocrossers” also loved it, particularly because nobody was around making rules or telling them what to do.

Nobody complained to the Forest Service, the managing federal agency.

After them came people in Jeeps who liked to plow through mud, crawl over big rocks and climb up the sides of the canyon. They also widened the trail into a one-lane, eroded dirt road.

Still other folks figured the canyon was a great place to dispose of junk cars and appliances until the place began to resemble an open landfill. Target practice came next. Still, no one complained.

What else happened to this much-abused canyon? A murder and manhunt followed by a homeless people whose encampments were not healthy for what was left of the woods. Yet none of this was the cause for restoring the canyon to its original state.

Hey, there were no complaints!

But here's how erosion changed things. It brought water carrying large amounts of silt down past the canyon's mouth and into Lefthand Creek. After the silt killed all the aquatic insects, the trout left. It was people who liked fishing for trout who demanded that the stream be fixed, and that meant the canyon had to be restored.

The Forest Service invited two nonprofit groups — Wild Lands Restoration Volunteers and Trail Ridge Road Runners — and Walsh Environmental Services to restore the canyon.

Over seven years, bullet-ridden debris was hauled away and the squatters discouraged. But it took hundreds of volunteers to dam the erosion channels — one 20 feet deep — and replant grass, shrubs and trees in the trashed roads and open areas.

Some areas had eroded so steeply that a person could stand upright, reach out and touch the ground. Hay bales used to mulch grass seeds would tumble down the slope like bison stampeding over a cliff.

But one problem remained and it was a big one: target shooting. A number of “near misses” made many shooters uneasy. There were also five documented shootings involving Forest Service employees and 10 complaints from area residents about flying bullets too close for comfort.

When the Forest Service erected signs closing the area to recreational shooting, their signs became targets riddled with bullet holes. But after the canyon was damaged by flooding in 2013, motorized access became blocked and target shooting was phased out.

These days, the canyon no longer looks lunar, fish are finally back and silt traps at the bottom of the canyon are almost empty. Mountain bikers are welcome on designated trails.

Locals liked to blame tourists, newcomers and outsiders for the illegal dumping, vandalism and unregulated shooting in the mountains. But Carnage Canyon's problem areas were not tourist destinations, and most of the broken appliances and shot-out signs were problems well before the surge of newcomers.

The truth is that when damage occurs over the decades, it is usually done by people who live in the area. We have to put the blame where it belongs, and that's on us. We are the yahoos who do this, not Californians or Texans.

It's also true that no government agency will act unless we complain. So when there's an opportunity to participate in planning for what the agency calls "travel management," we need to get involved.

I was one of the volunteers who worked several summers to help restore the battered landscape once called Carnage Canyon. The work was rewarding, as all improvements were better than what was there, but volunteers shouldn't have to be called in to clean everything up.

Federal agencies need to be better protectors of the public lands they manage for us. And when we see rampant abuse, we need to blow the whistle to protect the lands we all own.

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