

## Stewart Udall: Sonoran Desert National Park

Interviewed by Jack Loeffler\*

I grew up in the country, up on the Colorado Plateau. When you grow up in a small farming community and you raise your own food, you're living close to the land, close to animals. We worked with horses all the time. So when I practiced law in Tucson after World War II, I was attracted to the Sonoran Desert. I remember taking my boys when they were five and six onto Pusch Ridge just north of Tucson, and we had a very exciting time because we spooked a desert bighorn sheep, and he jumped down close in front of us. Then later, before I was a congressman, some friends and I did a hike up to Baboquivari. We did it from the Tohono O'odham side, and that was a wonderful experience. You couldn't live in Tucson then and live as we did, and not have a tremendous appreciation for this very wonderful desert.

I had friends in Tucson who were "classic" conservationists of the old school, and I used to do hikes with them. I remember going up to Mount Wrightson. Again I took my kids on these trips, and we talked on those walks about the conservation movement, the conservation tradition and of course its beginning, nearly a hundred years ago now, with the conservation movement of President Theodore Roosevelt, a president leading it, Gifford Pinchot and others, the Sierra Club and John Muir, and so on. We talked about those things, and of course I did a lot of reading, too. So, I came to the job of congressman and secretary of the interior with a pretty strong awareness of conservation values.

We had a tremendous run in the 1960s of expanding the National Park System - National Seashores, four new national parks, one in the Cascades, another at Canyonlands in Utah. It was a period when there was strong support in Congress, bipartisan support, for these park projects, and I was able, therefore, all during the 1960s, to not only entertain ideas from members of Congress but to originate things.

The idea of a Sonoran Desert National Park - I guess I have to claim some credit for that. In the last year that I was secretary, which was President Johnson's final year as it turned out, I proposed a series of national monuments that would be created by the president signing a proclamation. There were two or three huge ones in Alaska; I proposed the enlargement of two national monuments: Arches and Capitol Reef in Utah. Those I made with a recommendation that the president expanded Capitol Reef

boundaries into BLM land and make it four times larger. Simultaneously, I made a recommendation that Congress make it a national park, because only Congress can create national parks.

The final one that I put in I did because I thought it was a wonderful idea, but I also did it to show my bona fides that I wasn't picking on other states by asking the president to create monuments. This proposal would combine Oregon Pipe Cactus National Monument with the Cabeza Prieta, and it would give you something over a million acres [1.2 million] of a national park right on the international boundary, in what is the real heart of the Sonoran Desert.

There probably would have been some lively discussion. Friends of mine, who were wildlifers and who loved the Cabeza Prieta Wildlife Refuge, didn't like it, so it turned out later. But this idea didn't surface, that's the way national monument proposals are. We didn't broadcast it; it didn't receive a lot of publicity. I wondered afterwards whether Senator Hayden, then in his last term, would have been for it. But I didn't talk to people, and it didn't emerge as a big public dispute. I simply was proposing to the President of the United States that as he left office, as other presidents have done, that he sign national monument proclamations creating new national monuments in Alaska, Utah, and Arizona.

I had talked to the National Park people at high levels, and as I recall they brought in the superintendent from Oregon Pipe Cactus, and there were discussions; after all, international boundaries and state lines have no meaning when you are talking about huge national areas. They pointed out to me that the area where organ pipe cactus grew extended into Mexico. I know we talked about the Pinacate as a remarkable geographic area in Mexico. I think there were preliminary talks of an international park then, not so much with government officials but by conservationists in Sonora. But I have to say, in all honesty, the government of Mexico at that time didn't seem to have a very high priority of having national parks jointly with the United States on the border.

The international boundary is so artificial. This was to be a huge new national park, the Sonoran Desert Park, since the Sonoran Desert stretched off into Mexico, and there were some wonderful areas there. Of course it was arid, there were very few roads, and it was protected; that surely, as I recall, was part of our discussion. But the idea of an international park, the U.S. and Mexico, was kind of a dream at that point. We didn't get down to practical cases.

I did outdoor trips with Lady Bird Johnson, the president's wife, and we did a two-day float in the Big Bend, on the river. I don't recall whether Mexican officials joined us, but there was a lot of talk, at

that time, about that as another area that could be, in effect a joint national park. Well, we were already doing this in a couple of cases with Canada, where on the international border we had park lands that were jointly administered in a compatible way.

You have to remember the president didn't do what I had recommended. I thought of it later, and I was talking to someone a while back that it would have been done, but I couldn't get Lyndon Johnson, as president, to be Lyndon Johnson. He balked at this, and he balked at the ones in Alaska. He did the two in Utah, to his credit, but he was the one that opposed it. As far as I know, he didn't talk to Senator Hayden and he didn't talk to others. But he rejected the big proposals and did the small proposals. Of course, at that point the idea died. It got some publicity at that point, and the next I heard was in the late 1970s and 1980s when I moved back to Arizona, and there were people in Tucson and there were conservation groups that began studying and looking at this. But, now we had this new element, that there were people that they could talk to in the Mexican government and across the border. There were books published that were wonderful. One gave you this big picture of what a magnificent thing this would be to have a Sonoran Desert National Park that could have been over two million acres, stretching on both sides of the border about equally. I just thought that was a marvelous idea.

It's a very complicated story. Articles were written about it, and I could refer you to them. There's a professor that wrote a study, and she looked at my oral history – and the lawyer that worked for President Johnson – it's kind of a mystery. You know Johnson – he liked to think big, he liked to do things big – so I had the Park Service prepare a wonderful book with photographs, a huge one, and we presented it to him. Then, at the end, I wanted to show him that most of the presidents since Teddy Roosevelt had exercised the power under the Antiquities Act of creating national monuments. Well, not all of them had, but most of them had - and who was one of the ones that really wielded the pen and did big things in his last weeks? Herbert Hoover. Herbert Hoover did Death Valley national Monument in California and Glacier Bay in Alaska, a total of four million acres.

What I was proposing to President Johnson was seven million acres; that would have been a record, in terms of acreage, and I just said it right out for him, "Mr. President, if four million acres was just about right for Herbert Hoover, seven million is right for Lyndon Johnson." But he didn't ... he balked, and I don't know exactly why. He was having his lawyers and other people talked to me. There

were some other things that were underway. We had a break, a very sharp break, the last month that I was in office. We'd gotten along very well, and he, for reasons that I'll never understand, he didn't do it. And he waited until ten o'clock in the morning of his last day in office, two hours before he went to the inauguration of Richard Nixon, that's when he finally made his decisions, and it was a strange thing. I'll have to write about it sometime. President Johnson did these two wonderful things in Utah, but they were probably about 400,000 acres, not seven million. He rejected the big ones.

Was there any resistance to the Sonoran Desert National Park plan from military people with regard to this plan? We're talking about twenty-eight years ago, the answer is "no" because, number one, this didn't receive a lot of publicity and, number two, I was not proposing that we take that military gunnery range or bombing range associated with Luke Field. They named it after Senator Goldwater, I don't know if he wanted it or not. But that is part of the Sonoran Desert. Ultimately, when they no longer use it, that too could be part of this international park. They might have opposed it if they knew about it, but I don't think they knew because it didn't get all that much publicity. This fight between President Johnson that was going on behind the veil as it were ... but if I had been proposing to take part of the gunnery range, I would have had to have gone to the secretary of defense and I'm sure they would have opposed it.

I have been encouraged from all that I have heard that there are discussions on both sides and that there are Mexican officials and citizens who see this as a wonderful thing to do together. I think the United States and Mexico are on a track now, with the new trade agreement and everything, of merging our societies and our values and so on. I think to have the kind of relationship we ought to want to have in the future, we ought to have the Mexican border be like the Canadian border, where it's not a matter of contention, but where we work on joint things with mutual respect. I think for that reason having an international park concept pushed forward could be a bond between the two countries, showing that we share the same values.

The environmental-ecological movement has grown and it has gained international adherence, especially with the biosphere reserve idea sponsored through the United Nations. These arbitrary international boundaries that are drawn all over the world are not related to ecological values or conservation values. I think the nations of the world see a common interest in preserving parts of the biosphere as parks, or preserving the biosphere as a whole, with regard to global warming, for

example. I think this is a whole new change that has come about in the last twenty years, and I think it is very welcome. This Sonoran Desert Park could be an example that other nations could imitate, doing on a large scale, not something small but on a large scale, where you have a geographic area that is a common desert that two nations own.

If you proposed something of this scale today and it was in effect put out for public comments, I'm sure that in Arizona I don't know about Mexico, there would be very lively discussions – there might be heated opposition. Now, fortunately, the Cabeza Prieta is a wildlife refuge – there are no cattle there, no other intruding interests – and so the opposition I would think would not be too heavy or too large. But as the nation saw last September, President Clinton created the Escalante–Grand Staircase National Monument in Utah, 1.7 million acres, larger than the Arizona one President Johnson turned down that I proposed to him. If you recall, this didn't get into the press until two three weeks before it was done, and this is a great power that presidents have. They don't have to hold public hearings, maybe they should. In that case it was quietly proposed to the president; he took some soundings, but the public didn't know about three weeks before it was done that it was being considered. That's one of the peculiarities of the power given to the president under Antiquities Act of 1906, and of course President Teddy Roosevelt used it to preserve the Grand Canyon itself.

The Sonoran Desert National Park was like President Clinton did in 1995 in Utah. I didn't put the idea out publicly; therefore, I didn't have to muster support. I had to convince the President of the United States to use the power that he had, and of course that power extends only over publicly owned land. Oregon Pipe was public – it had been created – and the Cabeza Prieta was a National Wildlife Refuge, so the president has the power to do it. I wasn't in a situation where I had to get the Audubon Society or other groups pushing and making a lot of noise. In fact, I was a bit fearful that if we had too much publicity, the president might decline, because, say, "It sounds like the people in Arizona or the people in the Southwest don't want this. Why are you proposing it, Mr. Udall?"

When it comes to land policies, conservation policies, urban livability, a lot of communities have a lot more to say about their future, and are saying it. I think Santa Fe in 1997 is a very good example, where you have a mountain ordinance to protect and stop development in the mountains and things of that kind. There are different kinds of communities though, and it's hard to get action in Phoenix and Los Angeles or such huge communities now. In smaller communities, a will to preserve or conserve

can be developed, and if a little money is needed, it can be appropriated, and this is now being done in many places. Then we have some of the most wonderful work I know of today done by the Nature Conservancy in Arizona. What they, a private organization, have done in the last twenty-five years is a wonderful thing. We are seeing the same thing here in Santa Fe with our little Santa Fe Conservancy.

I think we are building good relations with our neighboring countries, with which we share immense, long borders. There has been a lot of connection with Mexico, but I'm delighted to see a lot of it dying down. There's still a lot of problems. Some of them are environmental, but I think the sooner the two nations agree on conservation practices and agree on joint projects, the faster it will move along. The Canadians used to tell me that in terms of conservation concepts, "we lag behind you twenty years," and I see signs that Mexico, too, is catching up, and that encourages me.

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\*From a taped interview with Jack Loeffler in Santa Fe, New Mexico, May 3, 1997. Transcribed by Luke Evans; coordinated by Gary Paul Nabhan. The full interview will be archived with Udall's other papers at the Special Collections Library at the University of Arizona. For more information about Journal of the Southwest/Southwest Center Publications call #520-621-2484