

Recapture Canyon Background Information

Recapture Canyon is a remote canyon in southeastern Utah that has become a symbol of the conflict between the federal government, environmental groups, and local residents. The canyon was the home of Ancestral Pueblo farmers about 800 years ago, and their cliff dwellings, artifacts, and graves are located along the canyon walls and in the canyon floor. American settlers moved into the area in the late 1800s following trails that passed through the canyon. In more recent years, ranchers have used the canyon to raise cattle and miners have accessed their claims using primitive roads that run through it. Historically, residents of nearby Blanding and others have used the canyon for recreation, riding all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), hunting, and other activities.

Recapture Canyon is located on federally owned land and is under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). One of the main concerns in managing this land has been the protection of the ancient cliff dwellings, rock art, and artifacts found there. In 2005, ATV riders were reported to have damaged some sites. In 2007, the BLM closed the 12-mile road through the canyon to vehicular traffic. Many local residents were given the impression that the closure would be temporary, while studies were conducted on the preservation of the artifacts, after which travel along some of the trails would resume. After years of closure, they were frustrated that “outsiders” had unduly influenced the BLM’s decision, and that the closures might permanently end travel along the trails built by their ancestors over a hundred years earlier.

Those who wanted to protect the canyon’s resources and artifacts were equally frustrated by the abuse of the canyon by those who used it for recreation. They celebrated the closure of the canyon, claiming that new illegal trails had been made, some of which damaged fragile archeological sites. They were pleased that original closures, thought by some to be temporary, continued for over a decade with no indication that they would ever open again.

On May 10, 2014, about 200 demonstrators showed up with their ATVs, American flags, weapons, cameras, and families to protest the BLM’s closure of Recapture Canyon. Locals were joined by members of the Bundy family, a group on the forefront of confrontations between the federal government and ranchers, having recently had a showdown over rangeland in Nevada. After a pre-ride rally, led by county commissioner, Phil Lyman, the demonstrators loaded onto their ATVs and rode into the canyon. Officials from the BLM and environmental groups observed and photographed the trail-ride, documenting the individuals who participated.

In December, 2015, Phil Lyman, still county commissioner of San Juan County, and protest promoter, Monte Wells, were convicted of trespassing and sentenced to 10-day and 5-day jail terms, respectively. They were ordered to pay \$96,000 in restitution for the damage caused by the protest they had organized. They were placed on three years of probation, with the charge to promote respect for the law. On November 6, 2018, Phil Lyman, was elected to the Utah House of Representatives by the voters of San Juan County. He ran unopposed.

In April 2017, the BLM and the Secretary of Interior, Ryan Zinke, announced that they would reopen 7 miles of the Recapture Canyon trail. The trail through the bottom of the canyon would remain closed, though the trail along the rim of the canyon would be open to vehicular travel. The issue continues to be divisive, as environmental groups lament the recent reopening of rimside trails and as ATV enthusiasts and county officials seek greater control of the trail through the canyon floor.