

November 4, 2019 St George News

Letter to the Editor: Save Washington County's scenic beauty: Say no to Northern Corridor highway

**OPINION** — The 43rd St. George Marathon took place this October on a course cradled by stunning public lands. At mile 16, runners entered Snow Canyon State Park ensconced within the larger Red Cliffs National Conservation Area. Their dreams of beating a personal record or qualifying for Boston found space to take shape between the cliffs and peaks of Snow Canyon and Red Mountain in the west and the basalt mesas and coral sandstone of Red Cliffs in the east.

Debbie Zockoll holds the world record marathon streak for women and completed her 43rd St. George Marathon this year. She grew up with Red Cliffs as her playground, and today it has become her office and refuge. She trains on the 130-mile trail system protected in the NCA and believes these trails improve balance by encouraging runners to slow down and watch where they place their feet on the red earth. After the race, it's become tradition for Zockoll to celebrate at Chuckwalla with family and friends.

The scenic beauty of our public lands in Washington County is world-renowned and drives our economy, providing thousands of jobs in hospitality and tourism. Red cliffs circle our community and support our transition to a future grounded in tourism and outdoor recreation, an industry that provided 110,000 direct jobs and \$3.9 billion in wages in the state of Utah [in 2017](#).

As a conservationist working for a small nonprofit dedicated to safeguarding public lands in Washington County, I am often asked to make dollars and cents arguments for why the land I love should remain protected. Like the Mojave Desert tortoise who collects the most vibrant, eye-catching flowers to eat in spring, I collect numbers like these:

The St. George Area Sports Commission calculated that in 2017, 42 major athletic events brought more than 62,000 participants and over 116,000 out of town visitors to the area resulting in [\\$78 million](#) in direct economic impact. Iron Man 70.3 brought in [\\$7 million](#) in 2017. In 2018, the Huntsman World Senior Games had an estimated [\\$17 million economic impact](#). In 2017, the St. George Marathon brought in [\\$3.2 million](#) from athletes and their entourages spending [\\$175 per day](#) in our community. Touted as one of four marathons to build a vacation around, and one of the [ten most](#)

[scenic](#), the money spent by folks who linger post-race in Red Cliffs really stacks up, like cross-bedded layers in the colorful Navajo Sandstone that surrounds us.

Major sporting events like the St. George Marathon advertise using images of the red rock country we have been wise enough to protect. Iron Man “sizzler” videos show runners and bikers traveling through Red Cliffs NCA praising its basalt flows and beautiful sandstone, saying that the scenery gives them [goosebumps](#).

Goosebumps made possible because Washington County residents wanted the open space surrounding them protected. In 2006, over 3,000 people decided on 10 [Vision Dixie](#) principles to guide growth. “Guard signature, scenic landscapes,” and “Provide rich, connected natural recreation and open space” are two that will enable St. George to host the Full Iron Man in our beautiful backyard in 2021.

A major part of Washington County’s allure is the 45,000-acre Red Cliffs NCA, designated by Congress in 2009 to protect nine values, including exquisite scenery. Caught between the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau, the land is a study in transition, bold color and dramatic contrasts, a “highly scenic area that, for most visitors, typifies the [rugged and beautiful American Southwest](#).”

By protecting scenic land, plants and animals that depend on it for their survival also benefit. On one of her visits to Chuckwalla, Zockoll remembers her grandson exclaiming, “Grandma, look at that rock, it’s moving!” It was a threatened Mojave Desert Tortoise, one of 20 threatened, endangered and sensitive species like the Gila monster, kit fox and burrowing owl who are protected in the Red Cliffs NCA.

When Zockoll taught first grade in St. George, she wanted her students to have respect for wildlife and nature. She took them outdoors, encouraged them to look at lizards and insects, but told them, “don’t put anything in a jar because it has a family, just like you.” This ethic of reciprocity, treating others the way you wish to be treated, applies to wildlife and beautiful land, too. Adopting the “golden rule” on visits to Red Cliffs would reduce the number of dog off-leash, litter, off-trail travel and wildlife harassment incidents.

On a bigger scale, applying the ethic of reciprocity to growth and transportation planning would reduce support for projects like the Northern Corridor Highway that would devastate the sensitive ecology and economy of our region. Note that the root of both these words is “ecos,” from the Greek “oikos,” or house. How we care for our home, our wealth and our family members — human and non-human — matters.

Our scenic heritage is fundamentally important to the continuation of our individual and collective well-being, to economic prosperity, to a healthy and sustainable environment and to the quality of everyday life. Yet, we are starting to lose the precious beauty of this place, and we must do better by not building the Northern Corridor Highway through pristine landscape that was supposed to be protected by legislation. Conservation of our scenic beauty will keep our desirability and appeal over the long-term to attract new residents, businesses and tourists to our area. It's up to us to ensure that public lands in Washington County continue nourishing our bodies, spirits and economy. To protect your beautiful backyard, please consider [getting involved](#) in the upcoming public comment period on the proposed Northern Corridor Highway. Zockoll says it best: "In my mind, it makes me think I'm alive if I'm out there soaking up the red rocks."

Submitted by SARAH THOMAS, Land Program Manager at Conserve Southwest Utah.