

Understand Utah's National Parks

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The Parks Today

These cathedrals of sand and stone are a living hallmark to the vast open space and wide-open views that define the American West and its independent people. With five national parks and millions more acres of protected wilderness, the Colorado Plateau is one of the last great stands of virgin wilderness in America. This desolate promised land has given rise to middle-of-America political sensibilities, a wholesome serving of religious zeal and just enough old-school new-agers and lifestyle escapists to keep things real.

Best on Film

Thelma and Louise (1991) This road-trip story of the enduring female spirit was shot in Arches and Monument Valley.

127 (2010) This James Franco film recounts the gruesome real-life story of Aron Ralston's ordeal in the Utah backcountry, where he was trapped by a boulder for 127 hours, eventually cutting off his own arm to save his life.

Big Love (2006–11) Starring Bill Paxton, this HBO drama examines the true romance and intimate humanity of Utah's polygamists.

The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) The sermon on the Mount was filmed in Canyonlands in this epic bible tale.

Best in Print

Desert Solitaire (Edward Abbey, 1968) Provocative and hilariously cranky, this tale chronicles the author's experience as a ranger at Arches.

Under the Banner of Heaven (Jon Krakauer, 2003) Perhaps the most high-profile book ever written on Utah. It's a compelling exposé of extremist polygamist groups and a provocative look at the state's oft-troubled history.

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place (Terry Tempest Williams, 2001) This story explores the intimate and sensual landscapes of Utah's land and people.

Land Use

Over 60% of Utah's land is controlled by the federal government under the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service and the Department of Defense – no wonder land use and stewardship are contentious issues. Open a newspaper or listen to the chatter at the local diner and you'll see that this is the singular thread that dominates the political and environmental debates seen across the state – and across much of the Inner-Mountain West.

The current debate looks beyond the pie-in-the-sky protections the Red Rock Wilderness Act (p235) would afford, focusing instead on states' rights. In 2012, Utah passed the Utah Transfer of Public Lands Act, calling for the feds to hand over control of around 31 million acres of public lands, arguing that Utahans were better placed to manage their own resources, and should benefit from the taxes and development rights that would come with it.

The protections for the national parks were not threatened by this move, but the purportedly energy-rich terrain of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument would be transferred into state hands. Opponents called foul, saying the law was unconstitutional and cooked up to bypass environmental protections, adding that there's no way Utah could foot the bill to manage such large swaths of land. The law gave the feds a deadline of December 31, 2014, to hand over the lands. That date came and went, with no handover. But cost-benefit studies have been undertaken (showing that with aggressive resource extraction, Utah could make it work financially). Litigation and grand compromises are possible as the state continues its fight to assert control over its lands – perhaps setting precedents for land-use and maintenance in neighbouring states.

What will happen in the waning days of the Obama presidency also weighs heavily on local minds in this steadfastly 'red' state, which largely espouses conservative values. Some environmentalists are speculating that