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Supreme Court decision is a big win for motorized recreation

Rainer Huck

The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that public land management was the rightful province of federal administrative agencies and not the courts. In so doing, it put the brakes on litigious "environmental" organizations that aim to lock away all of our scenic recreational lands in wilderness designation. This was a tremendous victory, not only for lawsuit-weary land managers, but for everyone who rides vehicles on public land.

The media generally characterized this as another battle in the war between those awful "off-roaders," who relish the destruction of all that is pristine and beautiful, and the sainted environmentalists, whose righteous crusade seeks nothing more than to save these natural treasures for our children, grandchildren, etc.

This misconception causes the endless acrimony and divisiveness that have blocked any resolution of the wilderness debate and hobbled effective land management to the general detriment of our public lands.

Vehicle Assisted Recreation and Access, or VARA, has been the object of a highly funded and focused attack program for many years. The propaganda developed by environmentalist organizations is uncritically dispensed to the public by the same media that are hypersensitive to issues like diversity, civil rights, and minority rights.

They would never dream of pursuing stories that impugn individuals in these circumstances yet regularly dehumanize those who choose to experience our public lands on vehicles.

In its June 16 editorial on the Supreme Court decision, The Salt Lake Tribune refers to the "loud and destructive toys known as off-road vehicles" and to "the ear-splitting **Utah Shared Access Alliance**." The Los Angeles Times story of June 15 cites "an onslaught of off-road vehicles" and laments about "converting formerly pristine features like streambeds to ORV raceways." Let's not forget the predictable cartoons by The Tribune's Pat Bagley depicting VARA people as sub-humans bent on devastation.

At the Supreme Court I heard Justice Sandra Day O'Connor express concern about pictures of VARA tracks in the Factory Butte area. This reaction was not unexpected because judges, most of whom have no personal experience with VARA, draw their conclusions from information designed to portray this recreational endeavor in the most negative light possible.

What Justice O'Connor didn't understand, until U.S. attorney Edwin Kneedler provided clarification, is that the Factory Butte area, which is devoid of vegetation and animal life, is not a Wilderness Study Area. It has always been open to unconfined vehicle recreation. The environmentalists did not advise Justice O'Connor that the action of wind and water would render the tracks almost invisible in a short time. If this were not the case, how could they claim these lands retain wilderness characteristics after more than 40 years of unrestricted vehicle recreation?

Fortunately, the U.S. District Court and the Supreme Court were not swayed by all this specious sound and fury.

VARA folks come from all walks of life and share with their environmentalist brothers a love of our public lands and a desire to experience and enjoy them. There is plenty of room for everyone, so long as we discard the elitist doctrine that some people are more politically correct and thus endowed with superior rights than others.

We need to focus on cooperation and understanding so that our public lands can be managed for the benefit of all. I think that the Supreme Court has moved us in the right direction. Environmentalists and the media need to follow this lead and pursue public-land policies that serve the interests of all the people who use and love them.

Rainer Huck is president of the **Utah Shared Access Alliance**, an intervenor in the SUWA vs. Norton case decided by the Supreme Court.

Caption: Rainer Huck

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