

A Plan for a Park In the Desert Sparks An Explosive Debate

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Military Cites Local Ordnance
And Blasts the Proposal;
Boom Time for Pronghorn?

By LISA BANNON

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

SONORAN DESERT, Ariz. — Surveying the vast desert landscape stretching out before him, Air Force Col. David White squints up at the big Arizona sky.

In the distance, the Sand Tank Mountains stand guard over three million acres of desert wilderness, home of 600 plant species, ancient archaeological sites and exotic wildlife, including several endangered species. Local environmentalists call it the most biologically diverse desert in the world. They have proposed making it the centerpiece of a new national park that would be called the Sonoran Desert National Park and Preserve.

But Col. White feels strongly about this land for other reasons. "When you come out here and see this your adrenaline starts pumping," he says, gazing out beyond the creosote and giant saguaro cactus. "You just want to drop some bombs."

Target Practice

Here along the Mexican border in Southern Arizona, one man's desert sanctuary is another man's bombing range. Since 1941, this area has been a primary aerial-warfare training site for the U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps. Every year, the Air Force conducts 68,000 sorties here, dropping a daily array of inert and live bombs and peppering the back country with machine-gun fire.

Yet the daily explosions aren't enough to dissuade environmentalists from their campaign to create the first national park and preserve featuring a live bombing and gunnery range. "We don't see a conflict there," explains Bill Broyles, a retired high-school English teacher who is leading the park crusade.

Under the environmentalists' proposal, three adjacent sites—the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range, the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument—would be combined into a park and preserve covering three million acres, 1.6 million of them from the bombing range. As big as Connecticut and Rhode Island combined, the area would be managed by the National Park Service. The military would continue bombing in restricted areas, just as it does today.

Scary? The Air Force certainly thinks so. But environmentalists insist the damage will be worse without a park. They're worried that the military has become the inappropriate steward of endangered species and wilderness lands here and in other parts of the West, as cities encroach on the last open spaces. In the Sonoran Desert, the Air Force has exploded targets right over the remains of ancient villages, the environmentalists say. Rock art has been blasted. And what about the effects of sonic booms on the endangered Sonoran pronghorn? "Their mission is to wage war, not to protect the pronghorn," says Bill Snape, legal director for Defenders of Wildlife.

The park plan's backers, who include former Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, say their proposal would correct all that. It would require an act of Congress, and proponents haven't yet found a legislative sponsor, but Arizona Sen. John McCain has pledged to include funding for a study of the park project in the defense-budget bill later this summer.

The intrepid travelers who visit the Goldwater Range—about 5,800 made it here last year—must first apply for a permit at the local Air Force office. "The Goldwater Range is probably unlike any back country wildlands that you are likely to visit," an introductory brochure explains. A video details the perils of looking into the laser beams of airplane targeting systems (permanent eye damage). And visitors must sign a release acknowledging the

danger of "painful, disabling, and disfiguring injury or death due to high explosive detonations from falling objects such as aircraft, aerial targets, live ammunition, missiles, bombs, etc."

Those brave enough to continue forth are likely to see some unusual sights. Some areas contain high-energy radar transmitters surrounded by razor wire. There are missile emplacements and vehicle targets. And although the Air Force tries to clean up its expended munitions, it warns that there are still unexploded bombs, flares and rockets lying around from as long ago as World War II.

Park proponents are undaunted. "If you can teach kids to not pick up rattlesnakes and scorpions, you can probably teach them to not pick up blue things that look like bombs," Mr. Broyles says.

The Air Force fears that a national park would attract hordes of visitors to a dangerous area. "When you hear the word park, what do you think of?" asks Col. White, director of range management. "We don't go around bombing parks."

As it is, accidents happen. The Air Force and other area officials say there have been no reported injuries to tourists from military ordnance. But in April, a pilot dropped a 2,000-pound bomb four miles away from a target area; it exploded near the junction of two roads. Last year, a bat researcher's camper was strafed after a pilot mistook the light in the back for a target. The researcher emerged unscathed, but the whole fighter squadron was grounded and the pilot was reprimanded.

"We aren't perfect," Col. White says.

The military leases the Goldwater Range from the Interior Department, and the lease expires in 2001. Park proponents aren't the only ones who have designs on the land. A tribe of Native Americans called the Tohono O'odham also wants a share, claiming that the range, which is adjacent to its reservation, is part of its sacred lands. "We think we're best suited to protect these lands," says Edward Manuel, chairman of the Tohono O'odham.

To fight off such claims and ensure it can continue training exercises, the Air Force is lobbying to renew the lease early. The Department of Defense wants to manage the range on its own, stressing that its own environmental efforts are already adequate, and that problems with pronghorn protection and artifacts damage have been

corrected.

Mr. Broyles, for one, doesn't buy it. In his time, he has walked 350 miles through this desert. He met his wife, a state wildlife department specialist, at the junction of two roads in the Cabeza Prieta. He once sat for five days observing wildlife patterns around a watering hole.

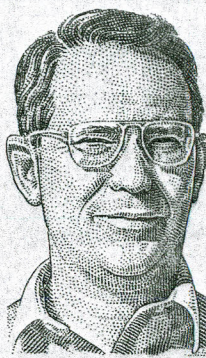
One afternoon, with the temperature an "unseasonably cool" 103 degrees, he rumbles past the dry creosote in his '74 Chevy Suburban, stopping to describe some of the harder species surviving in the desert, including rattlesnakes, scorpions and tarantulas. "The best two weeks of my life I spent perched right up there," he says, pointing to a craggy granite ledge. "I watched bighorn sheep all day. It was great."

He grinds on along a scorched dirt track known as the Camino del Diablo, or Devil's Road, pointing out crosses and graves of some of the many who have succumbed to thirst and heat prostration way out here over the years. "What I like about the desert is how it pushes you to test your limits," he says. Later, he stumbles upon a shiny silver tube glistening in the sand—a spent flare can, dropped from a fighter jet. It's not explosive, but Mr. Broyles acknowledges that there are plenty of hidden munitions that are.

"You always have that problem," he says.

After sundown, the stars slowly brighten the desert sky until they twinkle bright as Christmas-tree lights. As a warm breeze laps the campsite, Mr. Broyles munches raw broccoli and revels in the solitude. Looking up, he spots the Big Dipper. To the west there's Orion. And that bright light to the south, is it Mercury?

Mr. Broyles gazes up intently, then grimaces. "Nope, it's a flare," he says. "They must be bombing over there again tonight."



Bill Broyles

WSJ

Letter to the Editor
re article in 7/9/99 paper.

Magnificent Desert Is Being Ravaged

Your July 9 article about the proposed Sonoran Desert National Park and Preserve hinted at the wonders of the desert and mentioned that the military may be an inappropriate steward of this land, but also made some woefully inaccurate statements. It suggested that if the Goldwater Air Force Range is part of the national preserve, visitors will be getting in the way of the military and possibly tripping over live ordnance and hurting themselves. Absolutely untrue. The Goldwater Range is a very big place (as large as Connecticut and Rhode Island combined), less than 15% is used by the military, and most of the remainder is open to the public at present.

The problem: No one is minding the store in the mountain ranges, dune fields, playas and water holes that are publicly accessible. Saguaro cacti have been knocked over, thousands of off-road vehicle tracks have destroyed vegetation, and the gravelly desert surface is being turned into "moondust" when the tiny plants that protect the soil are squashed. Archaeological sites have and continue to be vandalized out of existence.

This magnificent expanse of the Sonoran Desert deserves better than ongoing degradation. Surely we can find a way for the military's use of 15% or the Goldwater Range to coexist with the public's use of 85%. Management by our best "people manager," the National Park Service, would be a step in the right direction.

GAYLE HARTMANN

Tucson, Ariz.