

“California Desert Protection Act turns 10”

By Jim Dodson

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Ten years ago on Oct. 31, 1994, a small group of Californians gathered in the Oval Office as President Bill Clinton signed into law the California Desert Protection Act, the largest land bill passed in that decade. Like most such events, this represented the culmination of years of effort by hundreds of people. On this anniversary, it is worthwhile to look briefly on how it all came together.

Perhaps it all began 25 years earlier when another small group of environmentalists and desert rats decided to explore the California desert and educate the larger environmental community about its values. A series of desert study trips over the next few years produced several dozen informed and vigorous desert activists. Media contacts grew to help waken the broader public to its beauties--and its problems. When the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) required the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to write a California Desert Plan, we were ready. Over the next four years activist numbers soared as there was an open public debate on resources and uses: mining, grazing, utilities, recreation, and wilderness. Volunteers checked hundreds of miles of wilderness study area boundaries and submitted thousands of comments. Finally, painful agreements emerged on a balanced document that was approved at the end of the Carter administration.

The Reagan-Watt team brought a change of direction much like that we are experiencing now. In 1982 Secretary Watt approved a series of amendments that gutted much of the Desert Plan, including wilderness recommendations. Realizing that the administrative gains once offered by BLM were nothing certain, desert environmentalists began to look for legislative solutions. Over the next two years, they used the expertise they had built up over the previous decade to research and develop an expansive legislative proposal using the established land management tools of wilderness and parks to guarantee lasting protection. In doing so, they chose the bold course of identifying lands based on their intrinsic natural qualifications, not political considerations, to establish a baseline map for future generations.

Senator Alan Cranston introduced the California Desert Protection Act (CDPA) in 1986 and became a vigorous champion for it. Representatives Rick Lehman and Mel Levine stepped up to do the same in the House. A massive campaign started to build support for the bill both in communities across California and in key states and districts across the country. Teams of supporters adopted their favorite wilderness areas. Grassroots activists worked with a coalition of all the major state and national environmental organizations under the umbrella of the California Desert Protection League formed for this single purpose.

Senator Cranston and then Senator Dianne Feinstein introduced new (and improved) versions of the CDPA from 1987 to 1993 with each new Congress. New information led to boundary adjustments both up and down with each iteration, resolving many site specific concerns of resource users--primarily grazers and small miners. Constituent pressures on many key committee leaders across the country drove efforts to counter them with local desert support groups in places as distant as South Carolina and Kentucky. Student groups held dorm storms to overwhelm Congressional offices with calls at key points. In some cases purely political compromises had to be made, but only in the endgame. As expected, the loudest opposition to the CDPA came from off-road groups. Their strategy was essentially just say no. Convinced that they could defeat all measures, they never sought or gained any significant compromises. This led to a series of raucous public hearings (the environmentalists wore yellow shirts and ribbons) and a lot of aggressive letter writing and mailings.

This all came to a head with a window of opportunity in the 103rd Congress when the election of Clinton and a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress meant both supportive administrative agencies and committee chairs. A final round of hearings happened, and the bills

moved to the floor in the final days of the Congress. Despite delaying tactics by opponents, the Senate stayed in session one extra day on Oct. 8; the CDPA got the magic 60th vote to pass at the absolutely last possible minute; and over seven million acres of new wilderness and parks gained protection. (This story is told in detail in Frank Wheat's *California Desert Miracle*, available in good bookstores and libraries.)

In the decade following the dramatic victory of 1994, the story has continued to unfold in a long series of implementation actions. BLM and the Park Service are just now finishing official boundary maps and legal descriptions. Enforcement of wilderness boundaries remains weak, and vehicle trespass continues in many places. In another separate story worth telling, thousands of acres of problematic in-holdings have been brought into public ownership.

But, beyond that, many of the management gains made and then lost 20 years ago remain to be resolved. Off-road vehicles run rampant, cattle overgraze fragile arid lands, and endangered plants and animals are still at risk. The task of continuing the wilderness designation fight remains with several Congressional Wilderness Study Areas and new areas now possible because of land ownership changes. Each cycle of environmental action builds on the achievements of those before. A few desert rats and then an army of legislative lobbyists have built a high platform to support our future achievements.

Jim Dodson is a leading desert activist, leader in passage of the California Desert Protection Act, and recipient of the Sierra Club's highest award, the John Muir Award.

[Source: Sierra Club, Angeles Chapter]

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