FROM THE EDITOR:

In October 2015 historic torrential rains hit Death Valley. Three monsoon-like storms drenched the park, the last being a deluge, that in one area dumped nearly 3 inches of water in a five-hour period. The subsequent flooding caused considerable damage, destroying highways, burying much of the Scotty’s Castle facility in mud and even washing away archeological sites over 700-years-old. Damage to the park is in the tens of millions of dollars. Engineers design structures to withstand 100-year floods. This was a 1000-year event.

The deluge had a bright side, however. The rainwater soaked into the terrain and germinated the seeds of plants that often lay dormant for years in the hot and dry desert ground. The winter and spring of 2016 saw one of the greatest wildflower blooms in Death Valley to anyone’s recollection—equaling or surpassing the “super blooms” of 1998 and 2005. Alluvial fans were turned bright yellow from the millions of desert gold flowers. More than 20 species of wildflowers of all sizes and colors appeared.

The flood of October begot another flood in March, this one a flood of visitors to the park to witness the wildflowers. Josh Hoines of Death Valley National Park (DVNP) spoke recently at a Sierra Club Desert Committee meeting about park visitation this year; “This spring saw more visitors to the park than in anyone’s recollection, by far. The month of March 2016 over 209,000 recreational visitors came to the park—60% higher than any month in the park’s history.”

Throughout the spring the main road serving Death Valley, CA-190, often had a steady line of vehicles heading in or out of the park. There were times when Google Maps indicated “congested” traffic conditions in the valley. Visitor’s centers and trailhead parking lots were regularly filled beyond their limits and vehicles were parked all along the roads as visitors trekked into the bloom, taking countless photos and even bringing folding chairs to relax in the splendor. There was a festival atmosphere.

Finding a place to stay was often a problem. In a correspondence, Abby Wines DVNP Management Assistant wrote, “Sunset Campground and Stovepipe Wells Campground are huge, and almost never fill. Stovepipe Wells filled two weekends. Sunset Campground has 270 sites, plus a less clearly demarked area for overflow camping. The busiest night this spring, campers paid for 577 sites. We assume they were pairing up in sites.”

It wasn’t just the campgrounds that were full. The hotels in the park and in the gateway communities were also packed. On one weekend there were no rooms to be had in Pahrump, Ridgecrest, Beatty or Lone Pine. The closest hotels were in Las Vegas or Bishop.

Of course, a large increase in park visitors during a particularly vibrant flower bloom would be expected. The recent “super blooms” of 1998 and 2005 saw spikes in visits, however 2016 saw a mega spike with some 81,000 more visitors in March 2016 than March 2005. What gives?

“Social media”, according to Mr. Hoines. Word about the “super bloom” by individuals to their Facebook friends and Instagram followers created a buzz that spread more quickly and to more people than ever before. Ms. Wines tells, “For example, one woman contacted the park because the Facebook event she meant to only invite her friends to—‘I’m going to be in Death Valley on (XX date) to look at flowers, you’re welcome to join me’—ended up going viral with 2,500 people saying they were going to attend.” News of the wildflowers was covered by the news media, but not until after the word had gotten out through social media. Ms. Wines added, “There’s a timeliness to social media that’s particularly relevant to something like a ‘super bloom’. The mainstream media was still trying to schedule trips to cover the event several months after the bloom was over. Many of them missed the show.”

Is social media a good or bad thing for our wilderness lands? Clearly there is a problem with people posting the locations of sensitive archaeological and historic sites, thus giving directions to people who steal or vandalize the relics. The “jackass phenomenon” where people post videos of themselves in humorously violent, dangerous or vulgar situations can be at the expense of nature. Videos of people toppling rock formations, and recently the Canadian filmmakers who willfully stepped from a visitor’s boardwalk to prance about a sensitive hot springs in Yellowstone—all to make videos for YouTube—come to mind. Then again, if social media can bring people to Death Valley—especially young people who have never been to a national park before—then it is most assuredly a good thing. Desert Survivors believes that people who see the parks and experience nature will want to protect it.

For Mr. Hoines and Ms. Wines even though the 2016 “super bloom” brought stresses to the park and its staff, the season was a good one. According to Ms. Wines. “There seemed to be a lot of people in the park who had never been to any national park before. That was a bit of a challenge for us to manage. We were asked questions that were out of context such as, ‘Is there a food court at this exit?’ A lot of people drove off road. But it was also pretty awesome to think that some of those new park visitors might be inspired to care more about national parks and public lands through their exposure to their first national park during a “super bloom.”

Nicholas Blake

Cover photo: Somewhere in Baja California from the back of a pickup truck, during Cathy Luchetti’s backpacking/hitchhiking journey across the Mexican peninsula. Read more about it on Page 16. Photo by Cathy Luchetti.
Mark McClesky next to a wonderful bit of ancient rock art—two men firing arrows at one another—in Little Petroglyph Canyon - April 2016. According to the trip leader and archaeologicalist Barb Bane, “That image is the only portrayal of human to human violence in the Coso Mountains, and one of only a very few in North America—out of tens of thousands of elements! They (Indigenous Americans) may have occasionally whacked each other, but rarely ever glorified it.”
When I woke up in the morning, I had no idea I would be obsessing over wildlife trapped in cages by the end of the day. I was on the Desert Survivors’ Anza-Borrego Sampler car camp and people in the adjacent campsite were openly collecting plants and capturing animals. What to do?

Although it was early March it was already hot by 8:00 am with highs predicted in the 90’s later in the day. As the Desert Survivors gathered to hike to the Mountain Palm Oasis, we heard rumors of rattlesnake wranglers showing off their captives, apparently “rescued” from the road the night before. It all sounded a bit shady but I put it out of my mind as we set off in the morning heat to a palm oasis.

We were staying at the Bow Willow campground in the southern end of Anza Borrego State Park—the site of an old Kumeyaay Indian village. As we started our hike, the terrain was flat and we quickly started seeing a mesmerizing desert garden of desert lily, phacelia, primrose, cremaria, blooming cacti: barrel, fish-hook, beavertail and ocotillo. Teddy bear cholla reached out and tried to hitch a ride with its deceptive fuzzy fingers. For a resident of foggy climate (San Francisco), the day seemed excessively hot and after about 2 miles, I was glad to arrive at the shady oasis of Southwest Grove. As we Desert Survivors were snacking and lounging out on smooth rock, some young women hikers showed up asking for me by name. I was puzzled until one of the women produced my wallet that she found at the kiosk where I had paid our camping fee in the morning… before a caffeine fix (okay, maybe a senior moment).

A pleasant drowsiness gradually settled over the group after exploring the nearby terrain. We gave up on hiking to another oasis, finally content to walk over to an elephant tree on the opposite side of the canyon and gaze upon its wrinkled continence. The stress of packing for the trip, driving 12 hours, setting up camp and the daily hassles of life gradually dissipated. Quiet conversation faded and soon only the breeze in the palm fronds and some sleep breathing could be heard. A few hours in the shadows passed and we hiked back to camp to hang out under shade structure—some of us reading and working on plant identification.
At camp, we found a group of six young people, including two seen earlier with the snakes, who had moved into the site next to ours. They were in their late-teens to early-20’s. Their camp was only 40 feet away so we could easily listen in on much of what they were saying. It soon became clear these campers were in Anza-Borrego for the primary purpose of collecting plants and trapping animals. One guy showed off a barrel cactus that he had dug up from the knoll above our campsite. They excitedly spoke about heading out after dark to collect, snakes, scorpions and other desert residents. One fellow displayed a large net for the purpose of capturing bats.

We Desert Survivors were stunned. Taking wildlife and plants is poaching and is prohibited in California State Parks. All of us were wishing there was a ranger around to report this activity to. Short of that, we proceeded to document what we were hearing and seeing. We wrote down license plate numbers and took photos.

Other than they were stealing plants and animals from a public park, the group of young people were a likeable lot. They were cordial and polite to one another and to us. We all thought that it was nice that they were a group of different races—with white, African American and Latino individuals. Then again we kept hearing things like, “When this snake woke up in the morning, I bet he had no idea he’d be in a cage by the end of the day.”

As the sun was getting low on the horizon, our trip leader, Marissa, motivated us to drive to the Carrizo Badlands Overlook for Happy Hour sunset viewing. When we arrived, the winds were blowing so hard that many people didn’t want to leave their cars. A few intrepid DS’ers explored the options and found the wind was minimal (okay, less) if we walked down the steep slope of the canyon. By this time, the sweltering temperature drastically dwindled and we were putting on our long-sleeve garments. We took our camp chairs, booze and bites down the slope and precariously perching on an incline, partook the k of the posh daily specials. A sensational sunset took it to the next level and I can’t even remember if there was sand embedded in the cheesecake or not.

The next morning we carpooled in the sturdier vehicles to the bottom of Carrizo Gorge to explore Canyon Sin Nombre and for a hike up a narrow side canyon. We then drove to Arroyo Tapiado to a place the park doesn’t mention on its website or literature but Marissa knew about—a site of mud caves and slot canyons. We ran into some spelunkers who had mapped and studied the caves and enthusiastically informed us about the over 20 known...
caves and 9 slot canyons. We walked through a cave and a slot canyon that were easily accessible, enjoying time spent out of the sun in the cool. These are some of the most extensive mud cave systems in the world. What a delight!

Back at camp, a six-to-eight-course potluck meal gradually materialized complete with appetizers, soup, chicken, dessert and wine. Around the table, a few of us were trying to figure out what to do about our poacher neighbors. It was very disturbing to see our public lands and wild, protected creatures being collected. We had no cell reception and there was no official presence. Even if there was cell phone reception, there was very little information on where and whom to call.

In the morning of our last day, two of us saw one of our poaching neighbors, named Jake, wrangling a snake with a hooked stick. We walked over to his camp to check it out. He showed us sidewinder and a red diamond rattlesnake. We asked him if he had a permit to collect or was associated with a university. With a wink and a nod, he said he did have a permit and was receiving his education in the school of life. He also stated that they had the intention of releasing the snakes and that when they spotted the snakes, they were slithering beside the highway and that by capturing the reptiles they were “rescuing them.” Jake and his friends knew they were not supposed to collect. They didn’t think it was such a big deal or that they needed to hide their activities. One of the fellows had never been on a camping trip and was just along for the adventure, clearly unaware of the larger impact and wrongness of his actions.

Back at home, we were able to find a website for anonymous reporting of poaching incidents called “CalTip”. One of us had been able to track down the Facebook page of Jake from decals on one of their cars. Jake is clearly fascinated with reptiles and cars and has some association with a store that sells reptiles. There is no evidence that he is trafficking in snakes or scorpions, but there is no evidence that he wasn’t.

Through CalTip, we were contacted by Austin Smith, Game Warden from CA Department of Fish & Wildlife. We told him what we witnessed. A few weeks later I received a phone call from Mr. Smith. He said that he had visited Jake and “did a little investigation”. Jake told him that he had released the snakes the following day in Anza Borrego. Warden Smith confiscated a barrel cactus and did some education with Jake about collecting in a state park. He told me that theft of barrel cactus has become such a problem that in Palm Springs some people are micro chipping their cacti.
The Superintendent of Joshua Tree National Park, David Smith, in February 2016 ordered the temporary closure of two historic and culturally sensitive sites. They are Carey’s Castle in the Eagle Mountains and the El Sid (also called the Moser Mine) in the Coxcomb Mountains. According to the National Park Service (NPS) “Recent press articles and social media articles have led to increased traffic to both areas and the disappearance of historic artifacts.”

Once upon a time, even knowing that these sites existed was quite a feat. Although Carey’s Castle was shown on the relevant U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute quadrangle, getting there required good map and compass skills into a very remote region. In addition, why would anyone go there to start with? Well, Carey’s Castle is a native-American rock shelter with pictographs on the ceiling, a place that in the 1940’s was “converted” to a miner’s cabin. When Desert Survivors visited Carey’s Castle in 1998, the site was intact, without even any footprints leading to or from it. The pictographs were in good condition, there was a cast iron stove, furniture, and stacks of magazines from the 1940’s still in the corner. With the advent of GPS and the recent publication of this site in several guide books, it was, sadly, only a matter of time before the looting and vandalism started.

As far as the El Sid mine, it is not even named on any maps, although the relevant U.S.G.S. quadrangle does show in a remote area of the Coxcombs several structures, roads, and shafts that I always wanted to investigate, but never got around to. Although the NPS would not identify specific items taken through the years, I understand that among them was an extremely heavy ore cart (unfortunately, this site, unlike Carey’s Castle, is accessible by 4-wheel-drive vehicles, although that requires crossing a clearly-marked wilderness boundary). This site includes three miner’s cabins, an old car, a stamp mill, open shafts and tunnels containing old dynamite and, as I understand it, jars of cyanide. Perhaps not the safest place to visit!

Superintendent Smith says, “We will look to reopen both sites when we’re confident that we have the tools in place to effectively monitor the areas and prevent further losses.”

All photos © Guy Starbuck. Check out more pictures of Western U.S. backcountry at Mr. Starbuck’s website: http://starbuck.org/exploring/
Book review by Stacy Goss

You may be wondering: Why a book review on a 105-year old novel? Because this best-selling 1911 novel is still a fascinating read. Written as a Western romance, this story is based on actual events that occurred in Southern California’s Imperial Valley in the first decade of the 20th century. It is a fictionalized account of how Imperial Valley was turned from a desert “wasteland” into a fertile agricultural Eden by diverting Colorado River water into irrigation canals. And given that the issues surrounding the Salton Sea are finally, after too many years of neglect, coming to the forefront and being addressed by California representatives, it is also timely. Now is a good time to remind ourselves of the history of Imperial Valley and the Salton Sea, both by fact and fiction.

A first-edition copy of this book had sat on the bookcase that I share with my husband Gerry for 20 years. Every now and then, when looking for a book to read, I would ask Gerry, “What is this book about?” He would say “It’s a classic, you should read it.” But I’m not much into Western novels, and I always found something else to read. Finally, last year, I took it off the bookshelf. I was hooked from the first few pages.

The story creates well-defined fictional stereotypes, as most Westerns do, and sets them in the Imperial Valley in the early 20th century: home to what would eventually be the Salton Sea. The story occurs during this time period and describes the activities that led to the eventual flooding of the region.

GEOLOGIC HISTORY

But first, a geologic primer of the area. The Salton Sink region formed the northern tip of the Gulf of California until about 4.4 million years ago, during the Pliocene epoch. The Salton Sink, a north-south rift valley (278 feet below sea level) was formed by plate tectonics and the action of numerous fault lines including the San Andreas Fault. The Colorado River emptied into the east side of the sink. Eventually the tons of silt carried by the Colorado River, in its quest to meet the ocean, created an alluvial plain that built up across the area, cutting off the northern end of the gulf and separating the Salton Sink region from the ocean. This created a freshwater lake in what had been the northern end of the Gulf of California.

Over millennia the route of the Colorado River changed course, sometimes flowing south of the alluvial plain and straight into the Gulf of California, sometimes flowing north and replenishing the Salton Sink with fresh water. Over the centuries several lakes have occupied the basin where the current Salton Sea lies. Of these, the shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla—formed around 700 AD—is still visible on the rocks surrounding the Salton Sea and was much larger than the current sea. Lake Cahuilla existed until about 300 years ago. Over the past several hundred years, the Colorado River has circumvented the area and left the Salton Sink dry. That is where our novel begins.

BOOK REVIEW

The book begins by introducing us to four male characters travelling from the California coast (San Diego) to the southeastern part of the state. They are in the driest and most rugged part of their journey. They first come across a lone horse wearing a broken bridle, then an unknown woman dead from thirst, and finally her crying infant girl. One of the characters, banker Jefferson Worth, eventually adopts the girl. The novel then fast forwards 15 years to when this girl has become a young woman. But throughout the novel we are always left to wonder: who did this little girl belong to, what is her heritage?

Surprisingly for a Western, the main character of the novel is a woman – Barbara Worth. She is admired by everyone throughout the region, both for her skills and for her charm. She is equally comfortable at racing her horse alone out in the desert as she is nursing an injured friend. And while the men feel they need to protect her, she will only tolerate it for so long before she informs them of what the real plan of action will be.
One of the ongoing themes in *The Winning of Barbara Worth* is the difference between East and West and the superiority of the later over the former. Whereas Easterners are portrayed as tender-footed aristocrats who rely on their diplomas from prestigious universities, and look down upon anyone without an equivalent heritage, Westerners are interested in the skills and talents of an individual, not about their pedigree. The descriptions provided in the novel are not the least bit subtle.

The novel has often attributed with the subtitle, *The Ministry of Capital*, as it is also a look at capitalism. The novel’s author believes that capitalism strictly for the sake of making money is wrong, but that if it can be done ethically, benefitting the community and the workers, it can be good. Barbara is influential in changing her adopted father from a money-hungry capitalist to one with moral values. This theme of capitalism is as relevant today as it was back then.

And of course there has to be romance – it is a Western novel, after all. Barbara Worth must choose between two young men who seek her affection; one an Easterner, the other a Westerner. The choice should be easy. But what if the Easterner matures, learning the language of the West and the desert in such a way that he eventually, in the climax of the story, displays the ethics of a good Westerner and becomes the hero of the community?

All of this is wrapped around the background of man’s attempt to subjugate the Colorado River, turning Imperial Valley (called King’s Basin in the novel) from a vast, dry, desert into an irrigated paradise, just waiting for the endless stream of farmers to come and settle the land. This would allow capitalistic Easterners to become even more wealthy, with no sweat equity and almost no financial risk. The desert needs to be “reclaimed” and put to better use. The Eastern capitalists make the least amount of investment possible that will reap them the greatest rewards, and the price is eventually paid. Although the Western engineers had been warning of the risks involved, the Eastern investment company would not provide the money to strengthen the intake to the Colorado and the gates eventually failed, causing the river to flood the basin, including several towns, farms, and sections of railroad. The intake and the channel were not secured for almost two years, and not a minute too soon. They were racing against the clock; within a short time, the effects of erosion would have made the river impossible to secure and the Colorado would have permanently drained into the Salton Sink. In the quest between man and nature, man was narrowly the winner. The Westerners seized the day, driving the Easterners back to the place they came from.

**HOW MUCH OF THIS WESTERN NOVEL IS TRUE?**

The book, written in 1911, was written just a few years after the actual failure of an irrigation gate and channel system. In 1901, the California Development Company actually did cut an opening in the west bank of the Colorado River, across from Yuma, Arizona, and installed gates and diversion channels to irrigate the Imperial Valley. And in 1905 heavy flood waters actually did wash out the gates, diverting the entire Colorado River from its course to the Gulf of Mexico to the Salton Sink, forming the Salton Sea. And it really did require 18 months of heroic efforts, using funds appropriated by the Federal Government at the request of Congress and President Theodore Roosevelt, to close the breach. Had this not happened, most of Imperial County would be under water today.

**FAST FORWARD TO THE 21ST CENTURY**

An engineering mistake created the Salton Sea, currently the largest lake in California, encompassing 378 square miles. I say “currently,” because the future of the Sea is uncertain.

After the gates were rebuilt and the Colorado River was returned to its channel in 1907, water ceased flowing into the Salton Sea. So what has happened over the past 100 years? As other bodies of water dried up or were di-
verted for human use, waterfowl found this massive body of water a good replacement and it is now a significant stopover on the Pacific flyway. It became a popular sport and commercial fishing area. It became a destination spot for Hollywood movie stars, a place with fancy resorts and waterskiing and other boating opportunities. But without man’s intervention, the water in the sea would have eventually evaporated. This is the California desert, after all; it rains less than 3 inches a year and the evaporation rate is astronomical. Beginning in the 1920s, executive and legislative orders designated the land surrounding the Salton Sea as a drainage reservoir for wastes from irrigated lands in Imperial Valley. But while the basin got the water, it also got the nitrate compounds that farmers used to fertilize their crops. Because the Salton Sea is in a valley below sea level and has no outlet, minerals that flow into the area become more concentrated due to evaporation. Although Salton Sea Wildlife Refuge was established in 1930 and Salton Sea State Park was established in 1955, conservation efforts sputtered. By the 1980s, the water and the fish had become so contaminated it was recommended that the public limit the number of fish eaten due to high selenium levels. By the 1990s, there were major die-offs of fish and wildlife: 150,000 eared grebes in 1992, another 20,000 eared grebes in 1994, thousands of white and brown pelicans died from avian botulism in 1996, 7.7 million tilapia and croakers died due to lack of oxygen in 1999. All the signs were there, yet no on-the-ground action was being taken.

In 2003, something called the Quantification Settlement Agreement was signed that required California to live within its allocated 4.4 million acre-feet of water from the Colorado River. Additionally, it required a significant transfer of agricultural water to urban areas, primarily San Diego, and that a specific amount of water be diverted to the Salton Sea until the end of 2017. The influx of water will end next year. Without a continued flow of water or some other fix, the Salton Sea will become a chemical cesspool, a fraction of its former self. The implications of this are huge: 100 years of nitrates flowing into this basin as agricultural runoff and wastewater will now be exposed to wind and will be carried throughout the region, exposing hundreds of thousands of people to toxic particulate matter. This evaporation of a lake has been seen before; think Owens Dry Lake in the Owens Valley and the major dust storms that are kicked up, as well as the millions of dollars in legal and mitigation efforts that have gone into fixing it. On a smaller scale, think Ketetion Reservoir in the San Joaquin Valley in the 1980’s. This much smaller man-made lake was also used as a reservoir for agricultural runoff and was also used by birds that eventually died from ingesting large quantities of selenium and other toxins in the form of fish.

2016 has been a year of more plans and more meetings, but this time around the California legislature has allocated 80 million dollars toward projects designed to mitigate the problems. Will we see results over the next several years or is it too little too late?

If effective restoration plans are not implemented soon, the Salton Sea region will become a wasteland. Is 80 million dollars enough of a commitment to save the area and the residents of Imperial County, one of the poorest counties in California? Will the legislatures make decisions based on the interests and needs of the local residents or will outside influences take precedence? In this real-life story, the failure of this area will not be linked to capitalism, but to State government.
Friday: A group of 5 Desert Survivors met at Indian Wells Brewery off Hwy 395. Next stop: Pearsonville, CA—the Hubcap Capitol of the World—for a visit to the Giant Hubcap Woman (a sculpture). Her origins are unknown, but she keeps watch over stranded motorists at the Pearsonville garage, rakishly attired in 1970’s fashions.

Continuing on to our campsite at Sand Canyon, north of Pearsonville, we turned off the highway and passed under the massive LA aqueduct pipeline bridging the mouth of the canyon. The small community and work camp at Sand Canyon was destroyed in a catastrophic flood in 1913 when the aqueduct failed on its initial water transmission. In a hurry to deliver Owens Valley water to thirsty LA, engineers failed to sufficiently test the pipeline or pressure tunnels at the lowest point of the 1400 foot-tall Sand Canyon Siphon. Under massive head pressure, the tunnel leaked, the pipeline blew out, and a wall of water rearranged the canyon. Fortunately, no one was injured and the pipeline was successfully rebuilt on the canyon wall’s surface rather than beneath it. We checked the massive concrete thrust blocks scattered by the flood around the canyon bottom, now covered by lush vegetation.

After setting up basecamp along a stream under the cottonwood trees, several of the group opted for an afternoon visit to Trona Pinnacles, east of Ridgecrest. The weird tufa formations were created underwater in pluvial Lake Searles thousands of years ago, but now sit high and dry in the desert next to the mineral flats of dry Searles Lake. Strong winds kept our hike short, but the compensation was a tour of the nearby town of Trona: not the end of the world, but close.

The same high winds that night collapsed some of the tents and blew large limbs off the cottonwood trees in Sand Canyon. Fortunately we had shifted the camping location away from the trees, anticipating that possibility. We were joined that night by two additional Desert Survivors members from Sacramento.

Saturday: After a brief orientation at the Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake Main Gate, we headed out early for the 1½-hour drive into the Coso Mountains to Little Petroglyph Canyon. We were guided by Thom Boggs of the Maturango Museum. We reached the site, then proceeded to hike down the canyon all the way to the pour-off point, about 1.5 miles away. We moved slowly, trying to catch the thousands of petroglyphs on both sides of the canyon as we walked. These Coso-Style ‘glyphs are part of the largest concentration of rock art in North America, spreading across a number of canyons on the naval base. Due to security reasons, only Little Pet’ Canyon is available for public tours, but there was more than enough rock art to keep us marveling all day. We returned to Ridgecrest late in the afternoon and adjourned to Sand Canyon again for a pot luck dinner.

The Coso Mountains contain the largest concentration of ancient rock art in North America. It is difficult to visit because much of it is located where the Navy tests its weapons, but its sights are wonderful and well worth any inconvenience of getting there. The Maturango Museum in Ridgecrest gives tours to Little Petroglyph Canyon twice a year. For more info, go to their website: [http://maturango.org/](http://maturango.org/)

The artists here were crazy about bighorn sheep.
Don’t Look Now, But We Are in Bears Ears.

by Neal Cassidy

“That pair of buttes off to the north look like bears’ ears to me. That must be them!”

“Naw, that can’t be them; Bears Ears is supposed to be in the middle of Cedar Mesa.”

This exchange between my traveling companion and myself was repeated a few times during the week in early May that we spent leading a trip in Utah’s Cedar Mesa area. We were eager to locate this landmark because the Bears Ears have lent their name to a significant new proposed wilderness designation area currently before President Obama, which would grant greater protection to the places we were visiting.

In 1996, I went on a Desert Survivors trip called “Surfing the San Rafael Swell,” led by the dear, departed Dave Holten. It was spectacular! Why it took me 20 years to get back to the canyon country of southeastern Utah, I don’t know. I finally returned this last May to co-lead two trips with Stacy Goss to a few of the places that Dave loved to explore. Stacy and I each chose a destination and planed a weeklong trip. We were assisted in planning by the boxes of maps and books that Dave left as a legacy to DS. Stacy designed a week of day hikes and a short backpacking trip in Cedar Mesa, and I opted for a weeklong backpacking trip in the Dirty Devil River area. (This trip will be covered in the next issue of the Survivor.)

The Visitors Center in Blanding, UT—where the trip participants rendezvoused—was closed on Sundays, but the friendly caretaker opened it for us to make impulse purchases of maps and books. On our first day we hoped to visit a number of ancient Native American dwellings and art sites in Comb Ridge, a prominent monocline that stretches 80 miles from the Abajo Mountains into Arizona, and which the Navajo call “The Backbone of the World.”
Sometime around 800 years ago, native peoples constructed dwellings, ceremonial kivas, and granaries within the clefts of Comb Ridge and the nearby canyons. We drove southward to our first stop at Fishmouth Cave. The cave is an enormous alcove near the top of the ridge and visible from the road, where we parked our cars. On our hike up, we encountered our first set of ruins. We marveled that so much of the skilled rock and mud construction has lasted hundreds of years. We continued up sandstone slabs and over talus rubble that had fallen from the roof of the alcove, and into the mouth of the cave. Disappointingly, there were only a few small intact ruins left. All over the walls, there were recently painted names and other graffiti. This was disappointing, but the view across Butler Wash was lovely.

Our next destination was Procession Panel, a group of petroglyphs high on Comb Ridge. Using printed descriptions and a GPS map, we located the proper side road (there are many) and drove into and along a wash. On foot we followed undulating waves of white stone towards a red wall near the ridge top. An amazing sight awaited us. A long row of small human figures marched across twenty feet of rock face, ending at a circle where they were joined by other processions. Below the parade were two large antlered animals and other symbols. There were images of spears and atlatls (a throwing device used to propel a spear), and one of the animals appeared to be wounded by a spear. What did it mean? Did it depict an actual hunt, or was it a dream or prayer for good hunting? Part of our enjoyment lay in not knowing.

Having come this far, we scrambled to the top of Comb Ridge, where we were rewarded by an astounding panorama. To the north were the Abajo Mountains, to the east lay Colorado, and to the south we could just make out the towers of Monument Valley. Below us to the west, the steep side of the ridge fell hundreds of feet to Comb Wash, and beyond it arose the slopes of Cedar Mesa, penetrated by the canyons that we would explore in the coming days.

Our last stop of the day was the well-known and easily accessible Wolfman Panel. This group of petroglyphs has only a few figures and designs but the boldness and precision of the carving is breathtaking. There is a large bird, elaborate headdresses and staffs, two womb-shaped objects, and in the center, a fantastic anthropomorph with earrings, a top-knot and exaggeratedly oversize hands and feet. There were smaller figures including a couple who appeared to be dancing!

That night we camped in Comb Wash. The next morning we drove to the Kane Gulch BLM office, a lonely outpost in the middle of Cedar Mesa. Our destination for the day was the Moonhouse—the only native ruin that requires permits to visit. To qualify for the permit we had to view a short video that depicted life among the ancient inhabitants of the area, and educated us on how to respect this heritage site.

I observed that the official signage at Native American sites is very comprehensive and reflective of new anthropological and archaeological understandings about the original inhabitants. I noted that the term “Anasazi” has been replaced with
“Ancestral Pueblos.” According to author Greg Child, Navajo Indians who moved into this area about five hundred years ago coined the name Anasazi in reference to the earlier occupants. “Anasazi” means “enemy ancestors” and is not accepted by the Hopi, Zuni, Pueblo and other tribes who can trace their lineage to the so-called “ancient ones.”

We asked a BLM ranger about the graffiti that we had seen at Fishmouth Cave. He attributed the vandalism to locals, primarily from Blanding, who he accused of having little respect for native sites and artifacts. He said that local resentment of the Federal Government and employees is so virulent that BLM employees do not wear uniforms when in town!

The trail to the Moonhouse was advertised as precarious, but the only tricky part was a long step off of a sandstone ledge, where a fixed rope offered assistance. We descended into McCloyd Canyon, passed under a huge fallen boulder, and scrambled up in the shadow of an enormous balanced hoodoo rock. Nestled into a long crevice in the canyon wall was the astonishingly well-preserved Moonhouse. Hauling ourselves up through a small doorway, we found ourselves in a long hallway, backed by a row of small rooms. “Ruin” is a misnomer; after 800 years of abandonment, the dwellings looked like they needed nothing more than a sweeping out before moving in! The cobble and wattle walls were remarkably intact, and where pieces of the mud plaster had fallen away, we could admire the careful weaving of the planks and branches that provided their backbone. A whitewashed “snake” and a row of dots crawled around the walls of one tiny room and part of the outer hallway. Inside one room were scattered tiny corncobs, the remains of meals eaten centuries ago.

Stacy’s plan for the next days hike was more ambitious – hiking seven miles down Road Canyon between two ruin sites. We left shuttle cars at our exit point down canyon and headed first to spectacular Fallen Roof Ruin. A group of intact rooms were nestled deep under an overhanging ledge, but water seeping through the roof of the recess was causing it to fall away in sheets, spelling the eventual demise of the structures. We then made our way down the sinuous canyon, sometimes detouring high on ledges to escape brushy tangles. Downstream, we came to the Seven Kivas Ruin, which is notable for a couple of the kivas still having intact roofs. But despite efforts by the BLM to protect the remaining structures, it is clear that time and visitation will inevitably take their toll.

The next day we decided to visit The Citadel, which we had heard about from other hikers. This was a great tip! The Citadel is one of the most spectacular sites I have ever visited. Until a few years ago, it was considered a “secret” site, its location guarded by the BLM. Now the word is out, and there is a well-beaten path to it. Following the canyon rim, we came to a prominent land bridge that projected out into the canyon, terminating in a rocky promontory. As we crossed the isthmus we passed the ruins of two collapsed defensive walls, and then we clambered up to a walled compound tucked under an overhang. Next to it stood an enormous balanced boulder that had the profile of a human face. This was apparently a defensive watchtower from which the ancient ones, in a time of conflict over diminishing resources, could survey the canyon and the mesa. Our reverie here was disturbed by...
shouts from below and soon a clutch of yellow helmets appeared. Junior adventurers from Colorado and their adult teachers had found their way up a gully from a camp in the canyon.

This high point was a fitting end to our day trips. The next morning we began a three-day backpacking trip on the Owl and Fish Canyon Loop. The BLM began promoting this hike as an alternative to the overcrowded Grand Gulch route, but we found it only lightly used. We began with a steep descent over slabs and talus to verdant Owl Canyon that meandered past a number of gorgeous waterfalls and pools (off-limits to swimming unfortunately), and through a garden of fantastic rock towers including Nevill’s Arch. We made camp at the wide and sandy confluence of Fish Canyon, where we were fortunate to find standing water pools. Kim and Stacy went downstream in search of yet more ruins. It took a second reconnaissance in the morning by Kim and myself to locate them, but it was debatable whether it was worth the trouble we encountered fighting through dense brush by a beaver dam. We headed up Fish Canyon where we were again rewarded by towering rock formations, and made camp on flat rocks by the river. We broke camp early in the morning, eager to conquer the 600’ steep climb to the canyon rim before it got too hot. A twenty five foot exit climb was easily mastered by passing packs up hand over hand, and we were soon back at the cars.

We reluctantly went our separate ways. As Stacy and I drove north towards the Natural Bridges National Monument, we looked at the map and finally ascertained that the buttes across Highway 95 were in fact the Bears Ears. We decided to take a look at the new proposed wilderness area named for them, so we drove up the steep road that wends its way between the ears. The views of canyons to the south were indeed spectacular, but the old corrals and fences in the alpine meadows behind the ears didn’t suggest wilderness to us. We departed a bit confused.

It was only after I returned home and looked at a map of the proposed wilderness area that I realized we had been in it all week! Bears Ears is a vast area of nearly 3,000 square miles that would stretch from Canyonlands National Park and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area on the north and west, to the Navajo Nation on the south. It would include Cedar Mesa, Comb Ridge, Natural Bridges National Monument, The Valley of the Gods, Dark Canyon and many other landmarks. Over 100,000 sensitive archaeological sites are encompassed. We saw for ourselves how exposed and vulnerable these sites are, and how few rangers are on the ground to monitor and guard them.

The proposal has generated controversy within Utah, but little news outside the state. It is backed by an inter-tribal coalition of 26 native tribes, and polls indicate that the majority of Utahans are in favor. But there is extensive local opposition, rooted in hostility towards federal control of public lands, and the Utah Congressional delegation is also on record as opposing a unilateral wilderness designation. In July, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell listened to contending views in Bluff. For more information on the Bears Ears and how to support the proposal, look here: http://www.bearsearscoalition.org/proposal-overview/
Boulder fields rise like ghosts around us, a jumbled mass in the dark. A candle flickers in an alcove shrine, guiding us to the bunkroom where ten pesos buys us a bed at Casa de Inez. We have arrived late and after dark to the tiny Baja California town of Catavina. Tomorrow morning four of us—Pov, Bo, Alan and I—will set off on a 40-mile journey past the mission Santa Maria de los Angeles, otherwise known as “Mission Impossible” because of its inaccessibility, on a 3-day long backpack to the Sea of Cortez and the pinprick burg of Rancho Grande. The remainder of the trip depends on hitchhiking back to Catavina… which I’ll think about later.

Morning dawns over the boulder field as Inez, the casa hostess, serves up plates of Huevos Rancheros. Other guests join us at the table, as Pov charms everyone with her bag of dehydrated ants. Recently returned from her native Cambodia, where the ants are an edible treat, she offers to share. About half of the diners took an ant or two while Pov, characteristically, ate the rest.

Meanwhile we bargain with Oscar, a friend of Inez, for a ride to our trailhead atop a nearby mesa. He names a price so ridiculous—$1500 pesos—that we’re speechless. It’s only a twenty-minute drive, can’t he understand? I try and talk to him, Bo talks to him, but Oscar turns wooden and stares over us. We soon realize that Inez and her husband had cooked up an expensive ride for us that went up and down, all around, and would end up at the mission. We wanted to hike to the mission. Ultimately Bo found a local who was willing to give us a the short-distance lift for a reasonable price. We pile into the back of his truck. We’re ready to go.

In the Spring 2016 edition of The Survivor Cathy Luchetti wrote about her trip in October 2015 with fellow Desert Survivor Pov to the Coachella Valley where they toured Salvation Mountain, Slab City and the Salton Sea. The excursion was to continue with a backpack in Baja California, however Cathy burned her leg while viewing geothermal vents and Pov got food poisoning causing both women to be hospitalized. The Mexican part of the trip had to be called off.

In February 2016 the two women picked up where they left off and journeyed 200 miles south to the center of the Baja Peninsula. Joined by Desert Survivor Alan and an aqautaince who knew the area, and was to be their guide, named Bo, this party of four headed out for an adventure in one of the most stark, desolate and beautiful deserts on the planet. —The Editor
Mission Santa Maria de Los Angeles was the last one established by the Jesuits in Baja, founded in 1767. Other sites in the area were more accessible from the sea, but this “arroyo of crags,” or Cabujakaamung, as it was called by the Chimi Indians, featured palm trees that dropped lush dates into deep water, attracting the mountain sheep, some settlers and the priests. Yet it maintained its mission-hood only briefly. King Carlos III, in efforts to reduce Papal influence in Spain and to rein-in an activist, monastic order that was practicing its own foreign relations at the fringes of the empire, decreed that every Jesuit be arrested and removed from the realm.

With the King’s signature, “Yo El Rey,” the Jesuits left in 1768, taking only their prayer books and clothes, to exile in Italy. Santa Maria was taken over by the Franciscans, where it became a lesser station, or visita. It was finally abandoned in 1818. By the time we arrive, nearly two-centuries later, its adobe walls melt like anthills and gold seekers have kicked and dug at the crumbling foundation.

The mission divides our trek. Now the terrain along our route narrows and rocks grow into huge crazy shapes that recall words from Lewis Carroll’s The Hunting of the Snark—“thingmmbob,” “jubjub”, and “bandersnatch”. From this poem also comes the word boojum, so used for a local tree, the cirio, or candle. It is pure Dr. Seuss, tall as a telephone pole, shaped like an inverted carrot and whiskered in greenery as silly as anything yet seen in nature, when blessed with rain, the boojum sprouts a garland of yellow flowers at the crown. Carroll—probably unaware of Baja and its tipsy trees—wrote:

But if ever I meet with a Boojum, that day...
I shall softly and suddenly vanish away...

Vanish we nearly did—right down the slick sides of a two-story boulder pile that guards a turquoise swimming hole. On a perfect day we would have lowered our packs down the flanks and found a way through the cracks to swim through. But nighttime beckons. We have to get around the boulders before it gets dark.
After several attempts to climb down, we climbed straight up instead, carefully picking a route around cat claw, sliding ravines, crumbling rock and vertical drops. We camp on huddled in a granite hole with a fingernail of a beach. Water gurgles at our feet and stars gaze down.

In the pre-dawn Bo suddenly leaves our group. He hikes ahead and we never see him again until near dusk. That day Pov, Alan and I hiked 14 miles down a long, sandy wash, as Alan noted, “Breaking every rule of wildcraft”—no GPS, no guide, very little water, minimum food, a map that did not include our destination or most of the route leading to it. But, really, who could miss the Sea of Cortez. Not us, and after a hard day of hiking through giant cardon (the world’s largest cactus, some nearly sixty-feet tall), through barrel cacti, organ pipe, prickly pear and cholla, through blooming yucca, spiky agaves and dancing ocotillo, we rejoin Bo along the highway and walked into the tiny fishing village of Rancho Grande, imagining ceviche and beer, or at least a plate of eggs.

But no cooked food to be had. Only market snacks, and well appreciated at that. This popular fishing spot hosts many winter travelers, but most had left by now, their rickety wooden houses like empty shells along a beach that lies a hundred miles south of San Felipe. Clams sucked sand bubbles underfoot and the bay glimmered, beautiful and lonely. We retreated to the local market to decide where to sleep. It had to be private, away from inquiry and thus safe. Why not a culvert? Bo led us along the highway to a wind-picked, clean, concrete underpass, our first genuine sleep-in-a-culvert night. The wind raged through at warp speed, finally sucking my Z-pack poncho into space. I expected to find it plastered on cat claw at the entrance, but it had gained loft and vanished out over the sea. Or somewhere.

This ended the walking part of our journey. We would now hitchhike some 73 highway-miles back to our vehicles in Catavina.

Morning brought our first ride of the day, two young road engineers who went out of their way to drop us 27-miles south at Coco’s Corners. We sensed our arrival there by the tinkling of a thousand tin cans
Baja is about roads—the lack of them, the building of them, the passage on them. The ecoregion of the desert itself covers 30,000 miles, and to traverse any distance demands a vehicle, either rented, owned, or hitchhiked. Second, it’s about water. Despite being hugged by two bodies of water, the Baja desert demands both xeric (drought tolerant) plants and people. To be caught in this desert without water demands the most extreme survival methods—carving into cactus to drain its contents, sucking a stone, and wandering until no longer possible. Fortunately, we fell in with generous people, including a road crew of brothers who picked us up along Highway 1 and carried us to Catavina—going out of their way.

“Why do you do this?” the driver asked me.

“Adventure,” I said.

“I’ll tell you about a real adventure!” He tried to cross illegally into the US for work, wandered alone in the desert without compass or GPS, without water or food, nearly dying of thirst and exhaustion only to be picked up by the Border Patrol and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). “Never fall into the hands of the DEA,” he advised. But the Border Patrol was OK. “From now on I stay home with my family. That was too much adventure for me.”

Like Odysseus, we all have a mythic journey, conceived in need or caprice or even madness, and carried out despite all obstacles. It can be the journey of the creeping devil, a cactus native to the peninsula that practices clonal propagation as its green spiny stems creep up to 60 centimeters a year as the back end dies off and a front end grows. Or that of Bay Area deserters blundering across Baja.
ACUTE MOUNTAIN SICKNESS

During the summer months the temperatures in most of California deserts are far too hot for exploration. It is the season that Desert Survivors head to high-elevations for its excursions. The cool, high-country air makes for comfortable camping and hiking, however it can expose one to conditions for altitude sickness. Desert Survivors trip leader and M.D., Bob Davis gives us a primer on this malady—including the symptoms to look for and its simple remedies.

Altitude illnesses result mostly from swelling from leaky capillaries caused by low oxygen levels. These symptoms develop while sleeping at night. The usual symptoms are a dull headache and mild insomnia. It comes on during the first to third day at altitude and goes away in about three days. Infrequently it can persist and progress to Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). The early symptoms are a feeling of fatigue and irritability then headache, malaise, anorexia and even nausea and vomiting. These symptoms are like flu or a hangover. Exertion will make the symptoms worse. If acute AMS does not progress further it is not life threatening and can be treated without descending to a lower altitude.

Swelling of the face and hands can occur independent of the previous symptoms. Infrequently there is periodically interrupted breathing, sleep apnea, which can awaken one's camp mates and sometimes cause awaking of the patient with anxiety or vivid nightmares. These symptoms do not progress to life threatening levels.

AMS can progress to lung swelling, high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE), or brain swelling, high altitude cerebral edema (HACE). Both of these are rare but can be life threatening if the patient is not immediately moved to lower altitude.
AMS is capricious. It can occur to someone who has traveled to altitude previously without symptoms, but there are those who routinely have symptoms at altitude. AMS can occur from accents of 5000’ and above. It is more likely with rapid accents. Some symptoms would be expected with a rapid accent to 10,000’. Someone with severe AMS should not ascend further until the symptoms go away. Even though full acclimatization can take weeks, sleeping at altitude for a night or two before going higher can be beneficial. Previous time spent at altitude, even weeks before a trip, can be helpful.

Treatment includes taking in enough water and salt to produce an increase in urine output to clear and copious every four hours. Take aspirin, ibuprofen, or acetaminophen to treat early onset of a headache. High altitude medical experts do not recommend sleeping medication. Experienced mountaineers, however, have found that Ambien is safe and effective. Benadryl 50 to 100 mg is very safe and can be effective for some people. Benadryl does not require a prescription. Drugs labeled Benadryl sometime have stimulants added. The active ingredient should be diphenhydramine only. Avoiding a heavy evening meal might help. High levels of physical fitness have no effect on AMS.

Diamox (Acetazolamide), a diuretic, is recommended for going to 10,000’ from sea level in one day. Starting at 250 mg, one pill, twice a day two days before the trip is recommended. Take the first pill of the day early in the morning and the second in the late afternoon to minimize nighttime urination. Diamox will increase urine output and therefore requires an increase in water and electrolytes (salts) intake. This drug often produces an unsettled feeling, numbness and tingling of the hands, toes, or lips, and lost of taste for carbonated beverages. These symptoms usually occur after a day or two. This is evidence that drug is effective. When these symptoms occur the dose should be reduced by half, 125 mg, by breaking the pills in half. Diamox causes increased breathing, particularly at night and thereby speeds up part of the acclimatization process helping to relieve symptoms. Some mountaineer rescue workers who know they will develop AMS symptoms start taking the drug on the first travel day. The drug can be discontinued on descent.

Although Diamox is generally a safe drug, anyone who decides to take it should check with their doctor as well as read about the reasons that certain people should not take this drug. Diamox and Ambien are prescription drugs and no one should take these drugs without approval by their physician.

High altitude regions are some of the most wonderful places on earth. Understanding Acute Mountain Sickness—its causes, symptoms and remedies—is a great benefit for anyone trekking into this terrain. Enjoy the high country and return home healthy and safe.

–Bob Davis→

Bob Lyon using chop sticks he fashioned from twigs, at Anza-Borrego.

He brought his fishing pole but did not even get a nibble, on the Up Guano Creek trip.

Right photo: Ingrid and Emily look for rare plants using binoculars at Artist’s Pallet, in Death Valley, February 2016.

Stacy’s campfire delicacy: pineapple upside down cake.

Kevin Pope and Martina Konietzny with our table at the Berkeley Bay Fair, April 2016.

When Cactus Attack: Ron bushwacked by a cholla in Fish Canyon, UT.

Desert Survivors summer picnic at the Marta’s family ranch, June 2016.
Photos From Our Trips & Events

Backpaker’s trying to get comfortable in the blowing sand in Bears Ears.

Below photo: He found this long rock splinter protruding from the side of a wash in Bears Ears.

Hold on to your hats! A blustery day at the Trona Pinnacles.

Catching up on his desert reading in Anza-Borrego.

Where the antelope play: As seen on the Up Guano Creek car camp, Oregon, July 2016.

Above photo: Trip leader Barb Bane in Little Petroglyph Canyon.

Above photo: Sierra Club Desert Committee meeting, May 2016.

Above photo: Happy hour in the desert, Anza-Borrego March 2016.

Photo: N. Blake

Photo: David Oline

Photo: Barb Bane

Photo: Neal Cassidy

Photo: Lynne Buckner

Photo: Courtesy of Barb Bane
Desert Survivors Membership Form

Membership dues are just $30/year, although additional donations are welcome. You can renew your membership by filling out this form and mailing it in with a check to the address shown below.

Name (req’d) _____________________________________________________________

Street Address (req’d) _____________________________________________________

City, State, Zip Code (req’d)________________________________________________

Phone number: ___________________________________________________________

E-mail address: _____________________________________________________________

(Desert Survivors strives to prevent unsolicited use of members’ e-mail addresses, and contact details, and will not knowingly allow misuse. Our email-list servers guard email confidentiality.)

I want to renew at the following rate (make check payable to “Desert Survivors”):

_____ $30 - Tortoise (basic rate) _____ $50 - Roadrunner _____ $100 - Coyote

_____ $500 - Bristlecone _____ $1000 - Bighorn

A ocotillo at sunset with contrails overhead.

Photo: Lynne Buckner