FROM THE EDITOR:

This February for the first time, I attended a Sierra Club Desert Committee meeting. The Desert Committee is an organization within the Sierra Club that focuses on desert conservation issues for California and Nevada. It meets four times a year and welcomes organizations with desert interests and those people who live there. During the two-day event I heard presentations on a wide-range of topics: from the super bloom in Death Valley, to legislation in Nevada that end utility company purchases of solar-rooftop generated electricity, to the work of students in the Desert Restoration Corps. About 60 people attended the event including a good turnout of Desert Survivors.

It was a particularly happy gathering too. The day before, President Obama signed an executive order creating three new national monuments in the California deserts, protecting over a million acres of land. There was also a tremendous sense of relief in the room because earlier in the week, the illegal-grazing rancher Clive Bundy was arrested and the armed takeover at a nature preserve in Oregon, led by Bundy’s sons, came to an end. During the potluck dinner on Saturday night a toast was given to President Obama. It was a banner week for those who love the desert.

Of course not all things go our way. In the last edition of The Survivor I announced the good news that the approval of a plan to drill 20 exploratory holes in Last Chance Canyon had been overturned by the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) California director Jim McKenna. This ruling was most likely influenced by the strong criticism of the plan made by the Center for Biological Diversity (the Center) and its allied groups, including Desert Survivors. While we applauded the ruling that halted this potential ecological disaster in its embryotic stage, the reasons for rejecting the plan were relatively trivial. McKenna felt that Glacial Minerals (the company behind the drilling proposal) had inadequately estimated the costs of backfilling in the core holes and restoring the nearby terrain.

In the months since I wrote that column Glacial Mines submitted an amended drilling plan, that addressed the deficiencies of the first proposal. This one got quick approval from the all tiers of the BLM—over new arguments of the Center for Biological Diversity. I recently spoke to Ileene Anderson of the Center, She told me that Glacial Minerals had commenced drilling in Last Chance Canyon. According to Ms. Anderson, “We are at a point where we have to wait and see if they (Glacial Minerals) find enough gold in the samples to want to move forward. Of course we are hoping they do not find anything and this will all just go away.”

If Glacial Minerals wants to move forward the next step would probably be a much more extensive and systematic core sampling over the entire 947-acre mining claim. they will have to submit a proposal for this activity. The Center along with fellow petitioners (The Sierra Club, Public Employees for Responsibility and Desert Survivors) promises to be steadfast in opposition to this open-pit, cyanide-leaching abomination. If this mine ever comes on line it will forever destroy Last Chance Canyon.

From Ms. Anderson I also learned a bit of news that I had been utterly unaware of. An issue that I thought was long-ago decided, and we had lost, is still being contested—the Algodones Dunes.

The Algodones Dunes, in Imperial County is the country’s largest dune system at about 200,000 acres. From November to May every weekend, thousands of off-road vehicle (ORV) users and their machines converge on the dunes to run roughshod over the sand. This is also a special wilderness. It is the home to plants and animals unique to the Algodones, whose welfare and existence are threatened by vehicle mayhem. Conservationists have worked to restrict ORV’s from parts of the dunes in order to protect these living things and the natural sand dune terrain. In 2000 an agreement between environmental groups and off-road-vehicle users set aside 75,000 acres of the Algodones Dunes for protection as wilderness, leaving the other 125,000 acres open to dune buggies. While most of us who champion wilderness are against off-road driving anywhere in the desert, this seemed to be a reasonable compromise and it worked out well in practice.

Flash forward to 2013. The BLM issues a new Recreational Area Management Plan that expunged dunes preservation and opens 40,000 acres of the protect lands to off-road vehicle use! The Center for Biological Diversity along with other conservation groups including Desert Survivors sued the BLM on a number of issues—including that it did not develop a recovery plan for the endangered Pierson’s Milk-vetch (a plant), it did not make scientific studies required by law, and it failed to comply with the Clean Air Act.

The case went to court in a San Francisco in February 2014 with the judge ruling entirely in favor of the BLM. A few weeks later the El Centro BLM Facebook page featured photos of joyous off-road-vehicle drivers removing the wilderness boundary markers from the dunes. This was a tough sight for many of us.

This was the last I heard of the issue until the February 2016 Desert Committee Meeting. Ms. Anderson told the group that the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals is hearing the Center’s case over the Algodones Dunes in April 2016 in San Francisco. I could not believe my ears! A Revenant! Okay that may be a stretch, but it gives me a bit of hope that this special place in the California desert might still have a chance. Stay tuned.

Nicholas Blake

Cover photo: A scene from one of the Mojave Trails, Historic Route 66 in Amboy, CA. This road was once America’s premiere highway and roadside stops like Roy’s served travelers during the long haul across the Mojave. In the 1960’s Interstate 40 opened and nearly all traffic bypassed the town. Today Amboy’s abandoned buildings are historic fixtures in our newest national monument. Photo by N. Blake.
The place we cherish.

On lands harsh and barren, we find grace and meaning.
At a place where most see nothing, we realize everything.
Not too little water, but just the right amount.
Where there is room enough and time enough.

The desert is the greatest place on earth. Help us on our mission to explore and protect these precious lands by renewing your Desert Survivors membership today.

APRIL IS OUR MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL MONTH

Please go to our website: desert-survivors.org and click on the Join/Renew button to pay by credit card. The cost is just $30. If you prefer regular mail, fill in the sign-up form on the back cover and send your check to: Desert Survivors, PO Box 20991, Oakland, CA 94620.

It is not always easy being a Desert Survivor. Clambering over a locked gate at the Indians Ranch during our Annual General Meeting weekend at Mission San Antonio de Padua.
People who love the desert got an early valentine this year. On February 12, 2016, President Obama signed an executive order creating three new national monuments in the California deserts. The newly protected lands are the Sand to Snow National Monument (154,000 acres), the Castle Mountains National Monument (20,920 acres), and the Mojave Trails National Monument (1.6 million acres). The three new monuments will fill the gaps between existing protected lands creating a biological zone running from just outside Palm Springs to the Nevada border.

The Obama order is a major milestone in Senator Diane Feinstein’s decades-long effort to protect the California deserts. Senator Feinstein was the author of the 1994 California Desert Protection Act, which established Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks, and created the Mojave National Preserve and 69 wilderness areas.

While the 1994 legislation was a triumph for conservation there were still important swaths of desert that remained at risk. The biggest hurdle for protecting these lands were the odd squares of privately held acreage, surrounded by Federal land within and south of the Mojave National Preserve. These lands, originally granted to the railroads during the 19th century, were owned by Catellus Corporation. With support from private citizens, 45 million dollars raised by the Wildlands Conservancy and federal Land and Water Conservation dollars, approximately 600,000 acres of Catellus lands were acquired or donated to the federal government between 1999 and 2004 with the intention of establishing the Mojave Trails National Monument.

In 2009 Senator Feinstein introduced the California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act—a bill to establish the National Trails National Monument, the Sand To Snow National Monument and other desert land additions and use changes. This new bill was introduced to a congress that was much different from the one of 1994. Since that time the Republicans had become much more ideologically-driven with many members who opposed the very notion of public lands. The bill died in congress. Elections in 2010 gave Republicans control of the House of Representatives and in 2014 the U.S. Senate—creating a congress that today opposes anything proposed by Obama and the Democrats, and works to roll back virtually all of the progressive reforms of the past 120 years.

In February 2015 Senator Feinstein introduced the bill once again. By this time, she and her staff had held hundreds of meetings on the legislation with a wide range of stakeholders—local and state government officials, environmental groups, off-road vehicle groups, tribes, cattle ranchers, mining interests, hunters, local business groups, the Department of Defense and many others. The bill, carefully crafted with numerous compromises, had a remarkable consensus of support. Its list of supporters was 22 pages long.

Even with this wide-spread backing, it was no surprise that when Senator Feinstein reintroduced the California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act (S. 414) in February 2015 the Republican controlled senate delayed action on it. Its first committee meeting did not occur until October 2015. In the meantime Congressman Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley, introduced a bill fashioned to poison Feinstein’s legislation titled the "Cali
While criticism from Republicans and right-wing pundits to these newly created monuments was expected to be fierce, it turned out to be somewhat subdued. Much of the criticism has been factually wrong. The Riverside Press Enterprise quoted an off-road vehicle enthusiast Randy Banis who claimed that regions of the national monuments currently accessible by vehicles will be off limits, "All those little dead-end spurs that people venture down in order to disperse and find solitude, those are the ones that will all be closed," he said. This is not true. All existing roads will remain open for vehicle travel in the monument. Another critic, Amy Grant, managing director for the California Off-Road Vehicle Association, erroneously citing closed roads, argued that the new monuments will discriminate against handicapped people who currently explore the area in vehicles. Another critic San Bernardino supervisor Republican James Ramos complained that monument status might interfere with the reopening of the gold mine in the Castle Mountains—that could provide 300 jobs. The new monument specifically excludes the mine, which closed in 2001 and still has a permit to reopen.

The Antiquities Act has been a favorite target of radical conservatives. Congressman Rob Bishop (R-Utah) has been waging a legislative campaign against the Antiquities Act for years. In July 2015 after Obama designated three new national monuments in the west, Bishop reacted with this criticism, "This surreptitious land grab reveals that the Obama administration will stop at nothing to lock up more and more land, with the stroke of a pen. I condemn this shameful power move, which makes states and citizens fearful that the federal government can invade at any time to seize more lands like bandits in the night." Senator Mike Lee, another Utah Republican, tried to attach a rider to a proposed energy bill that would have dramatically reduced the president's authority under the act. The measure failed in a tight 47-to-48 vote.

The Antiquities Act allows only for the designation of monuments. Many important aspects of the bill S.414 remain unrealized. On February 23, 2016 Senator Feinstein introduced a revised S. 414, with provisions from the original bill not part of Obama’s monuments designation. This includes four new Wild and Scenic Rivers, the transfer of federal land to Anza-Borrego State Park, the creation of new wilderness study areas, the addition of 65,500 acres to Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks and the Mojave National Preserve, and the establishment of an Alabama Hills National Scenic Area near Lone Pine. The most controversial part of the bill for conservationists would be its designation of five BLM Off-Highway Vehicle areas, covering 142,000 acres of California desert as permanently protected by the federal government for OHV use. This last component of the bill is not supported by many environmental groups including the Sierra Club.

**Mojave Trails National Monument**

The Mojave Trails National Monument is by far the biggest of the new monuments. It protects an ancient foot trail across the desert used by Native Americans, then later by Europeans and Americans. It also protects the longest remaining section of historic highway Route 66. It creates a critical wildlife corridor between the Mojave National Preserve and Joshua Tree National Park. It incorporates the acreage of the Trilobite, Clipper Mountains, Pluté Mountains, Bigelow Cholla Garden and Sheepole Valley wildernesses. The wilderness designation of these lands will not change because of the new monument.

**Sand to Snow National Monument**

The Sand to Snow National Monument encompasses a tract of land between Joshua Tree National Park and the San Bernardino National Forest that stretches from the Sonoran Desert floor to Southern California’s tallest alpine peak, Mount San Gorgonio. It is home to the headwaters of the Santa Ana River—Southern California’s longest river. An estimate 1700 petroglyphs can be found here.

**Castle Mountains National Monument**

The Castle Mountain National Monument was left out the 1994 California Desert Protection Act due to an active gold mine. The mine ceased operations in 2001. The new monument surrounds the mine, which still has a permit that would allow it to reopen. The land has unique geology, highly scenic vistas, and grasslands formed by volcanic and granitic mountains. It includes many rock art sites and relics of the early-20th Century mining camp Hart, CA.
For Lynne and myself, the adventure actually started two days earlier. We arrived in the late evening at Pisgah Crater, just west of Ludlow, and tentatively followed a cinder road to a level bench midway up the gloomy cone. We camped beside a mysterious circle of concrete pads that may have been a UFO landing pad, or perhaps a sundial for an eight-hour day. The following day we drove along rough roads into the Cady Mountains, explored the prospects of the Old Dominion Mine where copper and gold was once found, and returned to Ludlow across the playa of dry Broadwell Lake.

The official destination for the Desert Survivors was Bonanza Springs, a little-known seep in the Clipper Mountains Wilderness Area to our east. But we had some sightseeing to do along the way. Our first stop was Amboy Crater, a cinder cone reachable by a short hike. We skirted its corrugated slopes and found an entry into its central cavity at a low point in the otherwise perfectly circular rim. Scrambling to the high edge of the rim, we admired the contemporary spiral nautilus that someone had constructed with rocks inside the pit. Far in the distance, two trains move eastward—from my view looking like caterpillars inching along, one multi-colored, one all black.
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A stack of cylindrical core samples and coils of black pipe.

After lunch half of our group decided to head back to camp via a pass just north of Peak 869T. The rest of us ventured around an island of small peaks and back to the pass following an abbreviated section of the original “short route.” What the topo map didn’t reveal was the series of deep gullies that we had to transect on our way up to the pass! Once we attained it however, the way down was easy, and we found our companions back at camp just as the sun slipped below the horizon.

The next day Bob proposed a brief jaunt up the double peak. It looked easy, but soon we found ourselves scrambling on increasingly loose footings with hands clutching for solid holds. On top of 859T, we remarked on how we could now spy even more tiny trains off to the East. While the group descended via easier ridges, Palmore and I hustled along a narrow connecting ridge to bag the adjacent Peak 669T. All too soon, we were back at camp and it was time to leave this lonely corner of the Mojave. Motoring west on 66, these lyrics rang in my head, “Kingman, Barstow, San Bernadino…”

Rounding up our last wandering shutterbug, we caravanned on past Road Runner’s Retreat, another 60’s-era derelict. The dirt road leading to Bonanza Springs was short but rugged, and we shuffled up a few folks whose citified vehicles weren’t up to it. Our camp was on an alluvial rib that sloped gradually down to the Fenner Valley. Behind us were two adjacent peaks simply named 859T and 869T. At the foot of the nearer one, the spring fed an arroyo choked with creosote, desert holly, rabbitbrush and willow trees in their fall colors. As we settled around a fire in the gloaming, we could just make out the almost imperceptible and silent movement of distant trains.

At our late start the following morning, our leader Bob Lyon offered us two cross-country hike options through the Clipper Mountains: a short loop of five miles or a longer one of eight miles. Just thirty minutes later, our group was scattered across the terrain and struggling to reunite. It became apparent that either option might be a bit ambitious given the rugged territory and our slow pace. A mile to our north, the Tom Reed Mine beckoned as an interesting destination, so we headed there and paused for lunch outside a prospect shaft. Inside the warm and humid tunnel, two furry bats flew over a

We crossed the tracks to Amboy itself and Roy’s Motel Café. The giant red arrow sign, and the raked roof and plate glass windows of the lobby to which it pointed, demanded to be photographed. Andy, the cinematographer in our party, was unable to command the sign to move this way or that, and had to content himself with snapping it from every angle. A row of tiny white motel cabins stood with open doors, occupied by a strange art installation that seemed undecipherable to one casual observer.

Left: Trip-leader Bob Lyon finds this derelict Lazy-Boy “to his liking amidst the grafitti and clutter of an abandoned service station.”

No longer open to serve you: Roy’s Café.

A rock spiral left by a contemporary artist in Amboy Crater.

A happy peak bagger.

The hikers enjoy a lunch break atop Amboy Crater.

A 1960’s postcard.
In the spring of 2015 the National Park Service (NPS) initiated a study to return 28,000 acres of what is now mostly U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, and some state and private lands, to Joshua Tree National Park. These lands are in the Eagle Mountains at the southeast corner of the Park. They have been the destination of a number of Desert Survivor trips and the center of attention for a small band of dedicated desert activists for over 30 years. To understand the significance of the Park Service’s recent action, it is useful to understand the history of these lands and why they are still at risk.

When these lands were first set aside by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1936, the entire Eagle Mountain range was part of Joshua Tree National Monument. However, in 1950 the boundaries of the monument were altered by an act of Congress, removing 265,340 acres from protection to allow iron ore mining. The industrial giant Kaiser subsequently developed and operated a huge 5,500-acre mine in the eastern half of the Eagle Mountains. Over the next thirty years the Eagle Mountain Mine produced iron ore for the production of steel in Fontana, CA. At its peak 4000 people lived in the “camp” adjacent to the mine. There were 400 homes, trailer spaces and dormitories to house the workers as well as schools, churches, and recreation facilities. The mine had its own zip code.

In 1983, commercial iron ore mining at Eagle Mountain ceased. As with any operation of this sort the landscape of the site had changed considerably. Besides enormous piles of tailings and all sorts of industrial junk covering the site, Kaiser had excavated three huge open pits. These pits are located largely on private lands patented by Kaiser to support its mining operations.

Rather than reclaiming and restoring the land, as is normally required by law upon cessation of mining activities, in 1989 Kaiser proposed a project whereby two of the three open pits and a number of pristine canyons on adjacent public lands would be filled with garbage brought-in by railroad from Los Angeles. Two things stood in the way of this plan: First, to facilitate development and operation of a garbage dump, Kaiser would have to acquire substantial public lands surrounding its own private holdings; and second, the BLM would have to bypass the 1952 Congressional act that granted Kaiser a railroad right-of-way across public lands for the sole purpose of operating the mine. Originally authorized to haul iron ore out, in the new plan the tracks would be used to haul garbage in. Congress had also granted Kaiser 460 acres of public land for the sole purpose of building a campsite or mill site to support mining operations. In the new scheme these 460 acres of land would now be needed to operate the dump.

The fly-in-the-ointment for Kaiser’s plan was this: In its mandate, Congress explicitly stated that the railroad right-of-way and mill site, “shall revert...to the United States in the event that said property is not used for a continuous period of seven years as a camp site or mill site or for other incidental purposes in connection with mining operations...” In other words, beginning in 1983, Kaiser should have spent the next seven years reclaiming its mines before the land reverted back to the United States in 1990. However, this sequence of events did not happen.

In proposing to restore the open pits with garbage (yes, the BLM actually characterized the dump as a restoration project!), BLM and Kaiser embarked on a process whereby the BLM, in exchange for other nearby Kaiser lands and $20,100, conveyed to Kaiser 3,481 acres of public land, including pristine canyons that, along with the pits, were to be filled with garbage. Then, after a century or so, once the dump was full, Kaiser would “return” the land to Joshua Tree.
To make a very, very long and convoluted story short, due in large part to the efforts of desert activist Donna Charpied, in 2013 Kaiser abandoned the garbage dump idea. Yet, perversely, the BLM continued to support the land exchange! Finally, in December of 2014, a federal court ruled that there was no public interest served by the land exchange, taking things back to where they were before. The dump idea was truly dead, but the land has not been restored or returned to Joshua Tree.

Following the demise of the dump, the bankrupt Kaiser pension fund—-that had been the beneficial owner of the Kaiser Eagle Mine—-sold land to Eagle Crest Energy for a reported $20M for the purpose of using the abandoned mine pits as water basins for an electricity generating scheme. This plan would entail pumping billions of gallons of water from the local, fragile desert aquifer into the lowest elevation pit turning it into a giant reservoir. Then, during times when local solar facilities were generating excess electrical energy, that power would be used to pump the water from the lower pit into one of the upper pits. After nightfall the water in the upper pit would be released back to the lower pit through turbine generators, thus generating “solar electricity” in the dark. This pumped storage project is currently working its way through the regulatory approval process.

You may be asking yourself how it is that Kaiser was able to sell land that apparently should have reverted to the United States in 1990? Clearly Eagle Crest is not going to be operating a mine, which was the sole purpose under which Kaiser was granted title. At one point this matter was litigated, and the courts ruled that the BLM had sole discretion to determine when iron ore mining had ceased. Since Kaiser, at the time, continued to maintain a presence at the site, the BLM was unwilling to demand return of the lands. However, now that Eagle Crest is the owner, and clearly not mining, the matter will likely be again litigated.

So, the story continues. Joshua Tree, originally a National Monument under the National Park Service when set aside back in 1936, became a national park in 1994. However, the lands that had been removed by Congress in 1950, including the area surrounding the Eagle Mountain Mine, remained under the auspices of the BLM. It now seems as though the NPS is taking matters into its own hands by starting a study for returning the Eagle Mountain lands to Joshua Tree. Such a transfer would include not only the 22,500 acres of BLM land, but ideally, an additional 5,500 acres of mostly private land and some state lands.

NPS’s actions are significant, as the BLM acreage, as documented by Desert Survivors back in the 1990’s, are wilderness-quality lands. The NPS proposes to release a draft study for public comment sometime in the first quarter of 2016, with a final study due to be adopted and released in the summer. Desert Survivors will keep you posted as the efforts to return this part of the Eagle Mountains to Joshua Tree continue.
The weather was cooperative and the colors were vibrant. The wind was down, the sun was up and the water was hot. What more is there to a good trip? We went to some fine sites within a short drive of Benton. That made everybody happy because it is some of the finest work in the region. And there are layers of work laid down in the stone, some abstract and some geometric and some representational. Some deeply carved in the rock, some lightly pecked into the patina. Bear paws!

On the second day we headed down Hwy 6 toward Bishop and entered the Volcanic Tablelands to experience a few petroglyph sites. It had been a few years since my last visit so it was exciting to renew my acquaintanceship. There is one site on the slanted face of a large bolder that cannot be seen from the ground. You have to know just where to look but is it worth it? This one panel is about 12’x8’ and cannot be photographed easily in its entirety from one angle. (Note to self: bring selfie stick next time, you idiot!) The photo (below left on this page) is my attempt to assemble the photos I could take with some hand sketching of the areas that have to be photographed from side angles. It is a little rough but it helps to illustrate just how intricate and elaborate this panel is.

Then we went on a treasure hunt for some petroglyphs that are described in a couple of resource books I have but although we had a nice walk, the group came up empty handed. The good news is that we will have something to do on a future trip. We saw a few other sites that same day but, as in museum going, one eventually reaches a mental saturation point and it is time to head back for a soak, another trip at its end.

**Benton Trip 3 — hot springs & petroglyphs**

What more could you want?

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by Chuck McGinn

The Volcanic Tablelands Car Camp, or the Benton Trip III in shorthand, was a repeat of a 2009 trip where we had the luxury of staying at Benton Hot Springs with its glorious hot water. The petroglyph sites we visited are scattered across the Volcanic Table Lands that stretch between Benton and Bishop. Many of these sites are in the public sphere and can be located without a lot of effort. Still, it is a tradition to be circumspect about the location of these places. We don’t really know if these are sites of sacred worship or antiquarian party sites but they are federally protected cultural resources and we should respect them. I don’t even like to name them in print. So it is a little hard to reconcile a trip description with an intentional lack of specifics. Oh, well.

The author was only able to photograph about half of this petroglyph, so he sketched the part the camera did not get.

Desert Survivors descending from the table. The tablelands were formed 760,000 years ago when a violent eruption of the Long Valley caldera spewed a pyroclastic flow of rock—400 ft. thick and covering 850 sq. miles—over the floor of the Owens Valley.

The trip participants gather in the morning.

Benton photo: Wikimedia Commons. All other pictures: Chuck McGinn.
Do we Desert Survivors sleep like Hunter-Gatherers?

Once upon a time, the story goes, “we humans went to sleep at sun-down, slept through the night and woke at dawn. Now, with artificial light (and television and smart phones), midnight is no longer the middle of the night, which is close to bedtime for many. Also, pre-industrial people slept more hours than we do.” Sorry, it ain’t necessarily so.

When going camping, we make the change from civilization to “primitive” (wo)man in a few hours. Many of us do not go to sleep at dusk, but stay awake for a couple of hours, chatting, yarning (and drinking) when we “should” go to sleep. This nice story—early to bed (Wiki says: Industrialization and artificial light have substantially altered human sleep habits in the last 100 years)—has been upended by studies of three pre-industrial peoples from Tanzania (Hadza), Namibia (Ju’hoansi San) and Bolivia (Tsimane), which have large similarities. Genetics also shows that the San are the oldest people known. The African groups were, until recently, hunter-gatherers; the Bolivians are hunter-horticulturalists.

The good way of seeing if someone is asleep is to attach many wires to them, and then measure several things, alas hard to do outside the laboratory. A surrogate is to measure wrist motion where no motion implies sleep. The idea has been well correlated with the laboratory methods. So people were given special watches (Actiwatch) which record motion. Also coin-sized thermometers were attached to the Namibian’s skin, and in nearby shade. “Nighttime activities included preparing food, eating dinner, making arrows and planning for the next day”—almost like back-packers.

The results include: The pre-industrial people sleep 6-7 hours a night; they do not sleep more than industrial people. They do begin sleep some hours after sunset, and wake before sunup. A major controller of sleep—timing and duration—seems to be temperature, unlike our artificial climates. At noon, they found shade. They did nap, but less than 10% of winter days, and less than 20% of summer days. They report little insomnia, and neither the Namibian nor Bolivian groups has a word for it.

A thought: Why do we sleep anyway? Recent persuasive work shows that sleep is linked to the brain’s clearing waste products. It’s very hard to do research on sleep.

So, by staying awake after sundown, you may indeed be closer to our original nature.

May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest...

Leonard Finegold
Media, Pennsylvania

Further reading:
This trip was another effort to make a backpack loop trip on Trampas Wash and Red Rock Wash in the Chemehuevi Wilderness. Recently we found a route from the mouth of Trampas Wash to Red Rock Wash. This required avoiding the rugged terrain of the Topock Gorge where previous attempts had been thwarted. The current trip was to see if there would be a way to get from the Colorado River to the mouth of Red Rock Wash so that water could be obtained on future hikes.

The day we were scheduled to embark the trip was canceled because of small craft warnings due to high winds. We altered the sequence of the trip by making a day hike to Mopah Spring in the Turtle Mountain Wilderness. We went as far as Vidal Valley. We reached Mopah Spring at noon. The water level was low with about a gallon of clear water in the pool. The palms appeared robust.

The next day six of us traversed the Topock Gorge by canoe. The evening before we were to embark, the canoes were delivered to our campsite with life jackets and paddles. We were prepared to start on the canoe trip early the next day but found that one of our three canoes had a leak. Once a replacement canoe was obtained we started on our trip.

The river water was a clear blue green with a current of three miles an hour and we had a brisk tail wind. As a result the paddling was easy. There were many coots, cranes, and ducks. We were told that bighorn sheep come to the water early in the morning. We were rather late and did not see them. The Chemehuevi Wilderness along the river has a large population of burros that get water from the river; none were seen on this trip.

The walls of the Gorge are steep and the bays where the washes reach the river have steep sidewalls. These bays are choked with beds of reeds and dense brush. This makes getting from inland to the river water impassable for hikers. We explored several places that might let us get into Red Rock Wash. We found them all impassable for a backpacking group, either because of the difficult topography or the dense reeds and brush.

A huge sand dune reaches the river edge on the Arizona side. Across the river from Trampas Wash Lagoon is a beach landing with a trail that leads to a knoll that has a view of Picture Rock -- a massive rock wall with too many petroglyphs to count. Trampas Wash Lagoon is where we have obtained water on previous backpack trips. By going into the Lagoon we were able to find the beach where we had been.

We found our way around a sand bar. After an open stretch of water we found the opening in a reed-encircled lagoon where we beached the canoes and met our shuttle that took us back to our campsite. Some of us spent the night there, had French toast in the morning, and left early for home.  

Bob Davis

Trip photos: Bob Davis

It is too bad this photo of Topock Gorge is not in color.
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Esperanza, Marisa and Mopah.

Barb Bane at Mopah spring.

The water’s turquoise blue, the cliff a brilliant red-brown.

A first practice run in the canoe.

Beaching the boats at Trampas Lagoon.

A possible route to Red Rock Wash.

A traditional Chemehuevi Indian shelter.

Paddling alongside complex layers of lava rock.

Trip photos: Bob Davis - riskingtoofar.com
Prehistoric, historic, and modern; the evidence and impacts by all could be found on our trip to the Gold Butte area last September. Gold Butte is a keyhole piece of landscape located between Lake Mead National Recreation Area on the west and Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument on the east. The first occupants of the land inhabited this area in two phases, the first until 1150 AD; the second from 1800 - 1850. Next came the ranchers, miners, and farmers who occupied the region between 1860 and 1940. Our modern day development of the area began in 1940 and continues to the present. We came here to get a sense of it all. Our trip to Gold Butte actually started at the Lost City museum in Overton, NV. This small, local museum was built specifically to house the artifacts discovered along the Muddy River during the excavation process due to the construction of Hoover Dam, the creation of Lake Mead, and the flooding that would eventually occur in the area. Although Native Americans lived in this region off and on beginning more than 11,000 years ago, they were eventually forced out of the area when the Mormon’s began their settlement and established the town of St. Thomas around 1850. Then in the 1930s, St. Thomas was condemned by the federal government and abandoned; it was in the way of progress—Lake Mead. The town was eventually submerged and disappeared from sight for the rest of the century. But the reason the Anasazi abandoned the area around 1150 AD – drought, is now repeating itself. For the past 15 years the Colorado River region has been in persistent drought. Lake Mead is now at 38% capacity and the “town” of St. Thomas has reemerged. What remains of the town is really just foundsations and walls, but a short walk out to the ruins was an interesting time to contemplate the effects that water, both too much and too little, plays on civilizations. It has impacted Native Americans, ranchers and farmers, and our current population. The large Overton boat launch into Lake Mead has been closed for years and the large building and facilities sit vacant high up on the shoreline.

Leaving the ghost town of St. Thomas, we drove on to Gold Butte. Just before the bridge that crosses the Virgin River were two large flagpoles that had been erected since I last visited the area a couple of years ago. “We The People” was inscribed at the top of the poles. The attached flags, from top to bottom, were the Clark County flag, the State of Nevada flag, and finally, Old Glory at the bottom. Although correct flag protocol states that the US flag should always be the top flag on the flagpole, these flagpoles were erected during the Cliven Bundy standoff with BLM. This is where the armed extremists aimed their weapons at BLM while putting the women and children in front as protective shields. To them, the county flag tops the US flag. The debacle over Bundy’s cows continues. Although it has taken almost 2 years, Cliven Bundy is now being held in jail without bail, and his two sons, who took over a Wildlife Refuge in Oregon are also in jail. The cows however, continue to wander in the area.
of a barren desert that needs to be investigated by some intrepid Survivors.

The temperatures were expected to be in the high 90’s for the next several days so we got an early 6:30 AM start for our day of rock art exploration. The Virgin, Black, and Muddy Mountains dominated the area. We found the Falling Man site and for the next several hours explored the area, finding all that we came to see. There were numerous sites, reminding us of the prehistoric presence and significance of this area. No one else wanted to venture out in this heat so we had the place to ourselves.

Mid-day it was back to camp for a few cold beers and a short siesta while we once again waited for the sun to relent. In the early evening we made a short drive out to an abandoned ranch and investigated what was left: old vehicles, outhouses, and stock tanks.

With another 6:30 AM start the next day, we made a short stop at Devil’s Throat, a geologic curiosity. This huge limestone sinkhole in the middle of the desert makes it dramatically clear what the geologic history is of the area; we were on the edge of an ancient sea. However, our primary goal for the day was Little Finland. This area was named not for the country, but for the amazing red sandstone formations that we wandered through for several hours. Weathering has carved these ancient sand dunes into narrow slits, honeycombs, arches, windows, and yes, fins. Our imaginations went wild seeing images in the rocks as if they were clouds; gargoyles, shoes, faces. As we continued on the loop of the Gold Butte Byway during the hottest part of the day, we were thankful to be seeing Lime Ridge from the comfort of our air-conditioned vehicles. Our destination for the evening; Lime Canyon Wilderness Area. We found shade in the high walls of the canyon and were thankful that the car gauge went from 102 degrees in the sun as we were driving, to a relatively pleasant 91 degrees in the shade where we made camp.

Our final day was a fun hike down Lime Canyon. It was a terrific canyon that alternated between broad washes and narrow canyons. Cacti, catclaw, and creosote were found throughout the canyon and evidence of burros and deer was abundant. It culminated, at least for our group, in some beautiful unexpected sandstone and mudstone formations and a 15-foot dryfall. Seven Mylar balloons were also found and collected on the hike; a new record for me.

Back our vehicles, we continued driving along the scenic Gold Butte Byway, making a stop at the old townsie of Gold Butte, where mining for copper, gold, lead, and zinc occurred beginning in 1908. In addition to old equipment and cement foundations, there are the graves of two miners who continued to live and work the area until their deaths in the late 1950s. After another hour we were back at Whitney Pockets and our trip had come to a close.

Evidence of man is found throughout this area; impressions on the rocks, discarded mining and cattle equipment, and most recently, illegally placed flag poles. It is also an area rich in colorful geologic fascinations. Evidence of man’s dependence on water can also be found throughout the region. Since 2000, countless hours have been spent trying to provide more protection for this area, but so far, nothing tangible has come of the efforts. Last year, legislation was introduced to make the area a National Conservation Area with Wilderness. With today’s political environment, it was not surprising that the legislation went nowhere. However, efforts will continue in an attempt to protect this culturally and geologically unique area.
Barb Bane and I met up the day before the Desert Survivors trip to visit the Movie Museum in Lone Pine. As it turned out we are both Randolph Scott fans. Dinner was at the Mt. Whitney Restaurant and just as we arrived, a group of at least 50 Harley Davidson motorcycles roared out of the parking lot. Everyone was wearing matching outfits of grey leather jackets with red trim and piping—obviously custom made and vaguely military. The somewhat frazzled staff told us that the group was from Poland and they had all come over to buy Harleys and tour the States. The motorcyclists ate up most of the food in the restaurant so we had salads. Hwy 395 is always such a hoot.

Barb is a new Desert Survivors trip leader. Until recently she was an archeologist with the Park Service and is just so knowledgeable about the desert. She now works in Ridge Crest at the Naval Weapons Station. As the great fates would have it we both attended Rice University in the 1970’s. This was her first co-lead and I am so encouraged by her preparation and leadership. She will make a fine trip leader.

The weather that night was ominous with heavy, roiling clouds. Really looked like a downpour was coming. In the end, nothing but a little drizzle and great atmospherics in the morning that made the Inyos look like Asgard.

The group met at the Interagency Visitors Center south of Lone Pine. We made introductions and quickly got underway. We carpooled to a campsite in the middle of Lee Flat and headed up to Blackrock Well Canyon. Sometimes I think of it as “Ubehebe Canyon” because of the cowboy inscription. The canyon sports some spectacular glyphs both at the floor level and higher up the wall in a gallery.

On Saturday, we hiked up to the rim of the Saline Valley for a spectacular view. We could see Saline Hot Springs and the Racetrack off in the far distance. This was a wonderful hike with a great group and a good time was had by all. The hike was accompanied by a little drizzle on the way back and by the time we returned to camp we were treated to a spectacular rainbow.

On Sunday the trip broke up. On the drive home I decided to take a detour to the Racetrack in Death Valley National Park. I walked out on the dry lake under cloudy skies and a light breeze so incredibly quiet. It seemed like there were fewer stones maneuvering around the playa than the last time. Maybe they are all going somewhere and once they arrive, they’re gone.

As I was leaving, I was met by a group of German tourists in a big tour bus being escorted by muscle cars, fore and aft. This was an appropriate bookend to the Polish “Easy Rider” group from the beginning of the trip. Later, at Ubehebe Crater I watched a couple of Japanese tourists, cameras clicking, get so close to the edge that I had to turn away. Desert America is still a place of dreams of immortality for many people.

In conclusion, the take aways for this trip are that we have a new trip leader, Barb Bane; we had a memorable and safe trip at Lee Flat; and I, Chuck McGinn, am beginning to enjoy some of the extra time that comes with retirement. Happy trails!
The trip began with a hopscotch flight on Sea Port Airlines, a 10-seater craft that flies cheaply and at very low altitude down the spine of California, landing at Visalia and Burbank before reaching El Centro, my entree to the desert and the place where I would meet up with travel companions Bo and Pov. Our plan was to drive out to Slab City and then San Felipe, Baja. Ahead lay adventure, only I never imagined what kind.

Salvation Mountain

When a wiry New Englander pulled his truck into a barren stretch of the Imperial Valley, he felt called to the desert. The land stretches out in vast pale ripples. It bumps up close to Baja and lurks east of the Salton Sea—a lonely stretch that ignites the imagination and pulls at the soul, and causes people to stop there and live, sometime forever.

Leonard Knight loved the Lord. His Christian faith burned hot and he did what so many others had done throughout time. He obeyed the idea that “Work is Love made visible” and in the 1980’s he began to build a mountain. “Love Jesus and keep it simple” he said, living in the back of his truck for 30 years while the 3-story adobe mountain took shape. The mountain is terraced enough to walk up, following a bright yellow path that winds to the base of a huge cross.

The mountain exudes bible quotations. The bright colors shout out, but often must be reapplied to keep the inside stuffing--adobe and straw--from leaking out. Rain makes a river of paint, but the dedicated folks who have caught his vision paint it right back up again. Knight estimated that he's used 500,000 gallons of paint, mostly “supplied by God.” As an ex-welder, handyman, painter and body-and-fender man, he never had the capital to create this folklore monument. But the gifts came, one after another, and continue even after his death.

His thirty-year effort announces, “God is Love” to hoards of desert visitors. We met a Dutch couple who had read about it and traveled there just to see Salvation Mountain. The message and inspiration of this self-described hobo has reached thousands. The cross on top looks out as far as the eye can see.

Continued on the following page.
Infernos tend to repel rather than attract, especially when they sizzle at 120-degrees in the shade and there is no shade. But come Fall the temperature drops and the inferno attracts growing numbers to itself—thus the population boom at Slab City, a squatters camp near the Salton Sea that takes its name from remnant cement slabs from a WWII military base. The slabs, along with junk metal and scrap wood, form a slapdash community free of rent, electricity, running water and the law. In fact, it calls itself the “Last Free Place in America” although it is not free of color, vivacity, folk art, eccentricity, some danger, theft, story telling and steampunk couture to rival Burning Man.

There’s a curious innocence, a feeling of play, particularly in the theme park “East Jesus,” where an amazingly clean carpet threads through a sculpture garden of prehistoric animals, lopsided chalets, staggering metal robots, junked cars, iron work and brutalized dress dummies. Plastic arms reach out, styrofoam heads bristle. It’s as if a hundred children were unleashed in the schoolyard with nails, glue and junk and told not to come home but instead, go and make their own world.

That’s what Jack did. He’s a tall, svelte man in dreadlocks who greets us warmly and shows us around his warren of colorful rooms. Inside, someone reads Dave Baldacci’s “Memory Man,” checked out of the Slab City library down the road. Jack is not unaware of irony as he tells us that in his old life he was a property manager in San Francisco. Well-spoken and outgoing, he says he might go back, get his resume out, but really, he is living his childhood dream: to find a secret place, build a fort, then live in it.

Slab City is filled with grown up children living in secret forts. It is also home to the “unwashed kids” who are actually in their twenties, have arrived from somewhere, and opted to live among the tanned and grizzled seniors who comprise most of the population.

Like any wild west enclave, Slab City grew to have security fences, its own rules, an enforcer called “The Alpha” who got his skills in Special Forces, a mayor who charms like an elf and has a fenced in encampment, a builder, an internet guy who pays $75 a months of his own money to make sure people can get online, an airbnb site, a man named George who has the tidiest encampment and rents out a room, as well as a host of minor characters who spend their days either running out of beer, gas or battery power.
Like any community, events turn quickly into myth, such as the 6-ft. concrete decoratively carved totem pole that is a stolen geocache marker, the absence of which probably has anxious geocachers circling around the desert, Garmins aloft. Then, improbably, the Marines from the nearby base—where they simulate war games and build mock Afghan villages, bombing at night and strafing endlessly with machine guns—left 500 MRE’s neatly stacked for the Slab residents.

“You ever taste an MRE?” Ben, a resident, dispels any thought of dry noodles with the reality of over 20 different ethnic meal choices, all tasty, well balanced, tucked tight with excess food, accompanied by 3 kinds of frosted cakes, and residing in a plastic self-heating plastic container. “Just pull the string, and it’s hot as an oven!”

The military lives grudgingly with its on-site desert fellows. If they wanted to get rid of the meth heads, bikers, and outliers squatting in the desert, they actually couldn’t. The state tried to sell the land only to find out that it’s owned by the California Teacher’s Union, the two became polarized, and meanwhile, Slab City continues along in limbo.

To wander down the rows of huts is to get immediately lost. With no visual markers—no mountains, windmills or billboards—the gaggle of dwellings begins to feel like a trip through Mexico. As Pov and I wandered, lost, we finally located the Internet cafe where an elaborately gowned and jeweled woman threw open her arms, giving huge hugs and face kisses. A man crouched over a laptop greeted us warily, asking if we’d “come to stare at him.” When he heard we were lost, he brimmed with hospitality. Trust established through need is demonstrated daily here. Tiny rooms opened one onto the other, each made of wood from shipping pallets, the building material of choice. Someone directed us to the place where we’d left our friend Bo, who was jump starting a sunken old Dodge with the battery run down from an all-night radio playing binge.

We wondered about sanitation and heard the solutions. Baths take place a mile out of town at a pool-sized hot spring, so boiling hot in the middle that only the edges are safe. We sat one night beneath the stars, sliding off rocks and planting toes in the deep mud, listening to night crickets and watching clouds swirl through the moonlight. People splash in the cold running canals during the hot days, and the old-timers have dug sanitary pits that, when full, the contents are hauled out to dry in the sun and then ignited. Nightly, trash fires burn. Then the kit fox, rattler and coyote tease and taunt the resident dogs, and they all end up howling at the moon.

Continued on the following page.
Geothermal Pain

After Slab City and Salvation Mountain, we go to investigate the mud castles hidden off Shrimp! Road at the bend of two dirt roads between Highway 111 and the southeastern edge of the Salton Sea. Usually inaccessible due to deep mud and high clearance, today the roads are dry enough. The mud pots, called gryphons, explode with geothermal frenzy, screaming hot steam out of cracked vents at the end of the San Andreas fault. A nearby geothermal energy company hoists rigs, turbines and generators over another parcel of steam vents that shoot out of the cracked southern end of the San Andreas fault. Our own vents lie just off a beach lined with seaward gazing pelicans, thousands of them studiously ignoring us as they face the waveless sea. About 50 yards inland lies an erupted area of green and red brineey water and heaped, molten mud pits, each volcanic gryphon bubbling with excess C02, each bubble heaving up like the back of a giant tortoise then whistling and popping in a different key that fills the air with an eerie mud symphony.

We’re here with Ron, an 87-year old living in his truck on the edge of the marsh. A rangy, youthful man who barely looks his age, his steely blue eyes stare hard at us, evaluating. He finally relaxes into a friendly mode and offers to show us the gryphons. He emerges in rubber boots to the knees. Around him, the gryphons build upwards like termite hills, giving a final thrust skyward, then crumbling in a blast of black bubbles and 160-degree splashes, each bubble shiny as a whale’s eye. I turn to leave but my foot sinks suddenly into the crust, plunging knee-high into thick, roiling, burning, scorching, sizzling mud. My other foot, my trusty right foot, finds traction and jumps me out. The pain sears deeper and deeper. There’s no water to wash it off, and by the time Ron’s ATV drives us to the Salton Sea, it is a pain delirium. I dangle my leg in the dirty sea, ducks splashing nearby and silt eddying around the throbbing, burning, seared limb. Baked in bacteria... now what?

We sleep in a desert clearing about 5 miles south of Slab City. At night a kit fox patters by. The fox is delicate as a mouse, its ears big as semaphores. The night howls around us with winds of 60 mph, pushing huge Army helicopters overhead in coveys of three, terrifyingly close. The blades mutter ominously and I turn on my headlamp, in case of practice bombing. On the horizon, huge blasts of bright light explode, some lightning, some machine gun fire, some—since this is a bombing raid—bombs. The actual lightning is low and flat, the bombs low and explosive. The slap of choppers is ominous at a deep level, the roar and mutter raising goose bumps. The wind whips and inflates the tent, slapping Pov, who is sick from food poisoning and huddles outside.

By morning we’ve had enough. We leave Bo a message and head for the closest hospital. My leg looks leprous, with huge boils and blisters, the skin red and shredding. Pov needs medical rehydrating. We finish our tour of the Imperial Valley in a Kaiser ER, unhappily missing the hike in Baja.
Driving thru Desert

I am saddened
driving alone along lonely roads
when passing the carcass
of a deserted building

Whose weathered parts are scattered
like sun-bleached bones on barren ground
whose paint-peeled sign marks an empty store

Or leaning mailbox a derelict home
like gritty tombstones
scoured by wind-blown sand

An abandoned building
means abandoned hope,
the grave of someone’s dream

— Sam Moorman
Desert Survivors touring Mission San Antonio de Padua.

Desert Survivors at the Sierra Club Desert Committee Meeting, Shoshone, CA - February 2016.

At Desert Survivors’ 2015 Annual General Meeting we elected a new president—Deirdre Cerkanowicz. Yay! She is diligent and works hard for our mission to experience, share and protect the desert. Congratulations Dierdre!

The camera loves Cathy!

Relaxing with a book after a long day in the bush.

Sand Canyon’s diminutive sentry.

Photo above: These two ditched their car and traveled to the Wagon Wheel Rocks hike on this vintage Honda trail 90.

Photo above: Looking as comfortable out here as any creatures of the desert.

Photo right: From our 2016 Groundhog Day party.
Photos From Our Trips & Events

Photo right: Elena and Neal high on the mountain (and high on each other) in the Wovoka Wilderness, NV - August 2015.

Photo left: Up on a top rock at the Wagon Wheel caves, Los Padres National Forest - October 2015.

Loretta and others feeding the donations can at our holiday party, December 2015.

Morning coffee in the Mojave.

Hiker’s lunch at Lee Flat - May 2015.

Figuring out their location on the Mojave Trails map.

Vernon at the Little Finland rocks.

Wildflower enthusiasts in Death Valley - February 2016

Death Valley in the midsts of a super-bloom - February 2016.

Desert Survivors backpackers in the Chemehuevi - November 2015.
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

Photo: A. H. Cominos

Trip leader Dave Oline pointing out an important sight, however not everyone is paying attention. In the Wovoka Wilderness - August 2015