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# Taking the Utah Desert by Storm

## Was the Eco-Challenge an eco-disaster?

BY DANIEL GLICK • ROBERT HOUSER PHOTOGRAPHS

**I**N EARLY APRIL, TWO WEEKS BEFORE participating in the controversial Eco-Challenge, I went for a training run up Cottonwood Canyon in southwestern Utah with Scott Groene, staff attorney for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) and leading adversary of the race I was about to run. This 10-day, multi-sport endurance event had stirred up so much opposition that there were rumors of threats to participants and plans to eco-sabotage the course. Groene and I scrambled up the red rock canyon, talking about why he was trying to stop me and 249 others from crossing 370 miles of Utah's canyonlands country by horseback, foot, mountain bike, ropes, raft and canoe.

"Scott, you'd love this race," I joked, panting as I followed his sure-footed steps up the narrow canyon. "Why don't you like the idea?" We stopped and looked around. "I'm not against the idea," he replied. "It's just in the wrong damn place."

That "wrong damn place" included some of the country's wildest and most photogenic public lands, which is why the race promoters picked it and why its location raised such a ruckus. For 10 days in late April and early May, 50 five-person teams (including mine) participated in North America's first "multi-sport adventure race," modeled after the Raid Gaulouises, a French event which had been held in such far-flung locales as Madagascar, Borneo and Oman.

The concept is simple: teams travel across a prescribed route by different forms of human-powered transport until they drop from sleep deprivation, hypothermia, dehydration, bad knees or blisters. The race included a 30-mile horseback ride, a day spent navigating through wet, narrow canyons including swims through 50° water, more than 100 miles of hiking, a section ascending and rappelling up and down steep canyon walls using fixed ropes, running the Green and Colorado Rivers through Cataract Canyon in a 14-foot raft, and canoeing some 60 miles on Lake Powell. All five members had to complete every event, which made the Eco-Challenge a test not only of endurance and athletic prowess, but also of one's ability to cope with personality conflicts, medical problems and rapidly changing conditions. Teams paid a \$7,500 entry fee, and many spent three times that much in training, transportation and equipment costs—all for the promise of a \$10,000 first prize and the personal satisfaction of finishing what the organizers billed as "the world's toughest race." Only 21 teams finished intact.

Environmental groups like SUWA and The Wilderness Society raised a litany of concerns, and they were joined by a few local outfitters and the outdoor clothing manufacturer Patagonia in a legal appeal to halt the race. They argued that the desert is no place to invade, that it wasn't appropriate as some kind of outdoor stadium for bored triathletes and ultra-marathoners. Southeastern Utah is a stark, fragile land of little rain, towering sandstone buttes and stunning red rock formations carved by centuries of relentless winds and streaked with mystical mineral designs. It is a rare haven for humans seeking to remind themselves of the West's pre-Jeep-Cherokee past.

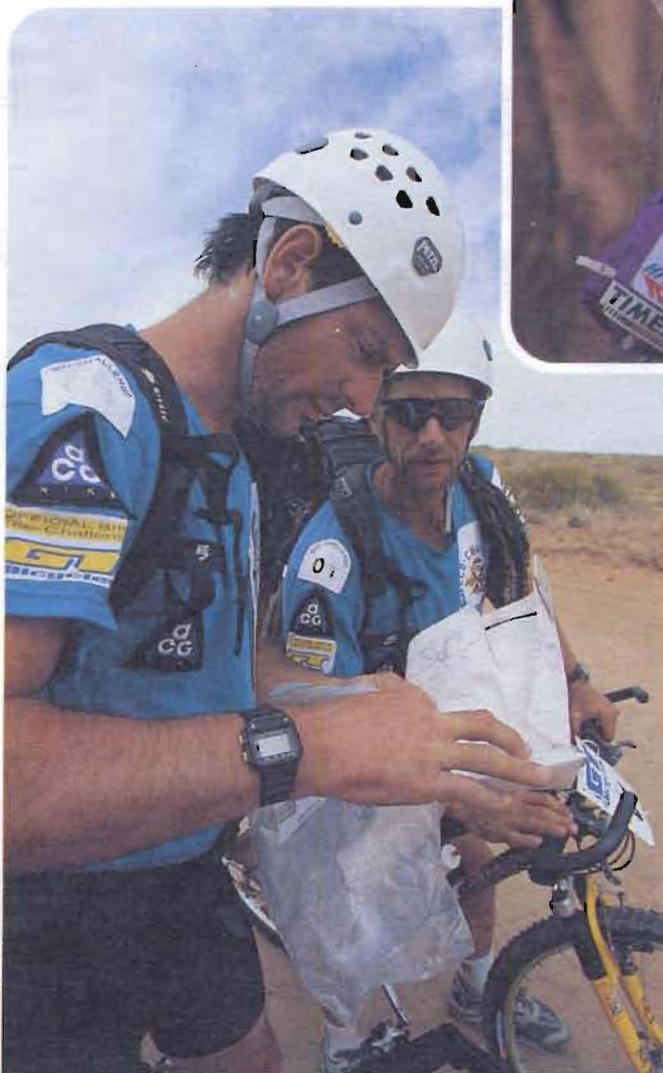
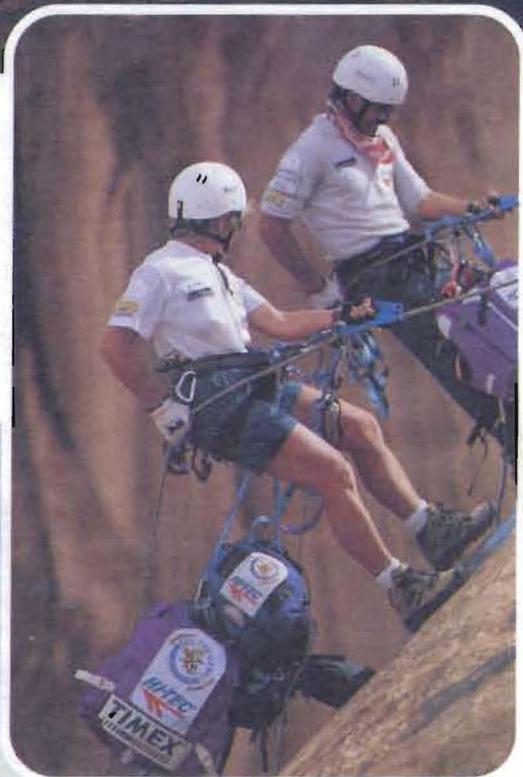
The soil in many places is literally alive and extremely vulnerable to intrusion. These so-called "cryptobiotic" soils, crisscrossed by a living web of lichens and moss, are literally the glue that holds the desert together. Biologists have been warning for years that trampling these soils, whether by cows or backpackers, could seriously reduce the desert's capacity to support life. The image of lost, tired racers traipsing across the desert's living crust had biologists and environmentalists cringing.



Critics' biggest concerns centered on parts of the course which crossed three Bureau of Land Management Wilderness Study Areas being considered for permanent Congressional wilderness protection. The race also passed near endangered peregrine falcon eyeries and ran through desert bighorn sheep habitat during the critical lambing season. Then there was the eco-circus factor. Since MTV would be filming the event, environmentalists worried about what message would be sent when Beavis and Butt-head met John Wesley Powell on cable television. All the mountain-bike mad region needed was more sprocketheads and fun hogs, they said. Some environmentalists clearly put Eco-Challengers in the same category of evils as drunken four-wheelers and cattle ranchers who overgraze on public lands.

There's actually good reason for that. With a boom in recreational use of public lands over the past decade, land managers and some environmentalists are beginning to realize that in certain areas, mountain bikers and off-road vehicle users have been causing as much damage to the backcountry as cows or oil and gas drillers. Southern Utah happens to be one such area. In one famous mountain bike trail near Moab, only 300 riders used it a decade ago. This year, the number might surpass 100,000. Southeastern Utah is already home to the Jeep Safari, the Fat Tire Festival, helicopter-aided mountain bike tours, and a mind-boggling array of other recreational uses including a proposed 24-hour mountain bike endurance race. "We're the problem now," acknowledges Groene, a multi-sport outdoorsman himself. "Cause we're going where the cows can't go."

As a member of a five-person team of journalists who would compete in the Eco-Challenge, I looked forward to some participatory watchdogging of this controversial event. The race was a departure for me: though I am a life-long backcountry traveler and avid outdoor sports lover, my competitive career ended 25 years ago in 10th grade when I was kicked off the track team



*(Far left) Competitors rest during Day One at Transition Area 1. (Top) In the last leg of the last race, canoeists still have the stamina to power toward the finish. (Above) Teammates begin the first rappel. (Left) Members of Team Benincasa/ Nike/ACG examine their map.*

for refusing to cut my hair. Six years of covering environmental issues for *Newsweek* made me acutely aware of the maelstrom that erupts with any debate about how Western public lands should be used. After I had read the legal briefs challenging the race, talked with organizers, bureaucrats and fellow participants, I grew ever more confused about the appropriateness of the event and its venue. Having visited red rock country on numerous occasions, I had already seen the growing envi-

mesas and canyons under BLM control, since no new roads, buildings or motorized access are allowed on wilderness lands. Environmental groups say there are 5.7 million acres of wilderness; Utah county commissioners think the number is closer to one million. The conservative Utah Congressional delegation has promised to introduce a wilderness bill this session that will almost assuredly call for a low-end number. For Burnett to have been ignorant of these circumstances is akin to flying

than a spread-out stream of racers walking on jeep trails. Litter was nowhere to be found on the course. Racers I talked to seemed genuinely concerned about their impact and were awed by the enormity and majesty of the desert. After the race, BLM officials concurred that the damage was minimal, thanks in part to some unusually bad weather that brought high winds and rain, wiping out many of the participants' tracks. No one will be able to say for sure if the peregrines and bighorn were disturbed, but any open-minded observer had to admit that the impact was less than had been feared.

## *Clearly, the four-wheelers and cows that have roamed the same terrain for decades had far more impact on the land than a spread-out stream of racers walking on jeep trails.*

ronmental threat from recreational use and agreed with Groene about the sacredness of the landscape. "This is a place to treat with reverence and respect," he said. "It is not a place to go nuts." But if contestants couldn't pass through the public lands on foot, albeit in great numbers, then what uses of the land would people like Groene approve of? As Brian Terkelson, one of the event's organizers put it, "You're doing what people are supposed to do here. You're walking across the land."

Maybe so. But the Eco-Challenge appeared just as Canyonlands National Park was instituting a backcountry management plan which reduced the size of backpacking groups to seven people and required stricter permitting for all backcountry travel. My ambivalence increased when I realized that Eco-Challenge founder Mark Burnett probably didn't know a Wilderness Study Area from a Roadside Rest Area when he planned the event. Burnett could have saved himself a lot of grief had he done some homework first. For 15 years, politicians and environmentalists have squabbled over how much of Utah's magnificent red rock country should be designated as wilderness. That designation would afford the highest level of federal protection to the swells, washes,

into Sarajevo these days expecting a tranquil ski vacation.

As race day grew closer, the fight intensified. Sponsors like Hi-Tec, JanSport, Timex and GT were lobbied by SUWA members to eliminate their support. Mitsubishi, already under environmental fire for its role in deforesting southeast Asia, quietly reduced its presence at the event to reduce their public relations problems. The BLM, never known as the country's greenest government agency, came under so much pressure that it forced organizers to alter the course several times before approving the permits. By race time, the event took place almost entirely on jeep roads, established trails or along river bottoms subject to the cleansing qualities of flash floods. Helicopter access for filming was restricted, monitoring was increased, contestants would practice "low-impact" camping including packing out all solid waste, and the route was so well marked that contestants complained that the orienteering sections were too easy.

How did all these safeguards work? For the most part, I found myself looking for environmental damage and finding very little of it. Clearly, the four-wheelers and cows that have roamed the same terrain for decades had far more impact on the land

That said, it's just as clear that the desert would have fared just fine if the Eco-Challenge had never come to town. For starters, not everybody stayed on track. Teams got lost and wandered miles off course. Others deliberately flaunted the rules and cut cross-country. Photographers and cameramen tromped off trail to get their shots. On a more delicate front, carrying out solid human waste wasn't a simple proposition. The problem was—how to say this?—there wasn't much solid waste being produced. Days of iodized water and exertion had altered most racers' intestinal throughways. Imagine 200 racers with the runs. Not exactly minimum-impact.

Ultimately, the reason this race inspired such strong emotions was because it cut to the core of the endless debate about what America's public lands are for. Environmentalists say that some places, like the Wilderness Study Areas traversed by the course, should be sanctuaries for animals, plants, and humans seeking solitude. Other public lands may be more appropriate for such events, but even then critics are troubled by this question: Who should profit from lands that belong to all Americans? Surely the competitors found the event challenging and inspiring. The state of Utah, which counts their \$3.3 billion tourism industry as one of the top three sectors in its economy (along with agriculture and government), received an undetermined amount of revenue from competitors staying in hotels, buying gear and eating in restaurants before and after the race. Organizers reportedly spent more than \$2.5 million pulling off the event—including tens of thousands on lawyers fees

and an \$80,000 (refundable) bond with the BLM as insurance to pay for environmental restoration if necessary.

But it was the organizers and sponsors who presumably fared the best, and the appropriateness of this commercialization of wilderness is perhaps the most nagging question raised by the Eco-Challenge. With competitors wading through the ice-cold waters of the Black Box canyons looking like human billboards from sponsors' logos, the race seemed at times like one mega-advertisement for outdoor gear manufacturers. Even one of the main sponsors confided to me that he thought the logo monster had gotten out of control.

When the race ended, though, I had to wonder if there weren't more pressing issues for these environmental groups to spend their resources on. Given the number of threats to the wild nature of the Colorado Plateau from more boom-and-bust development proposals, why didn't they tap into the energy and publicity from the event to make

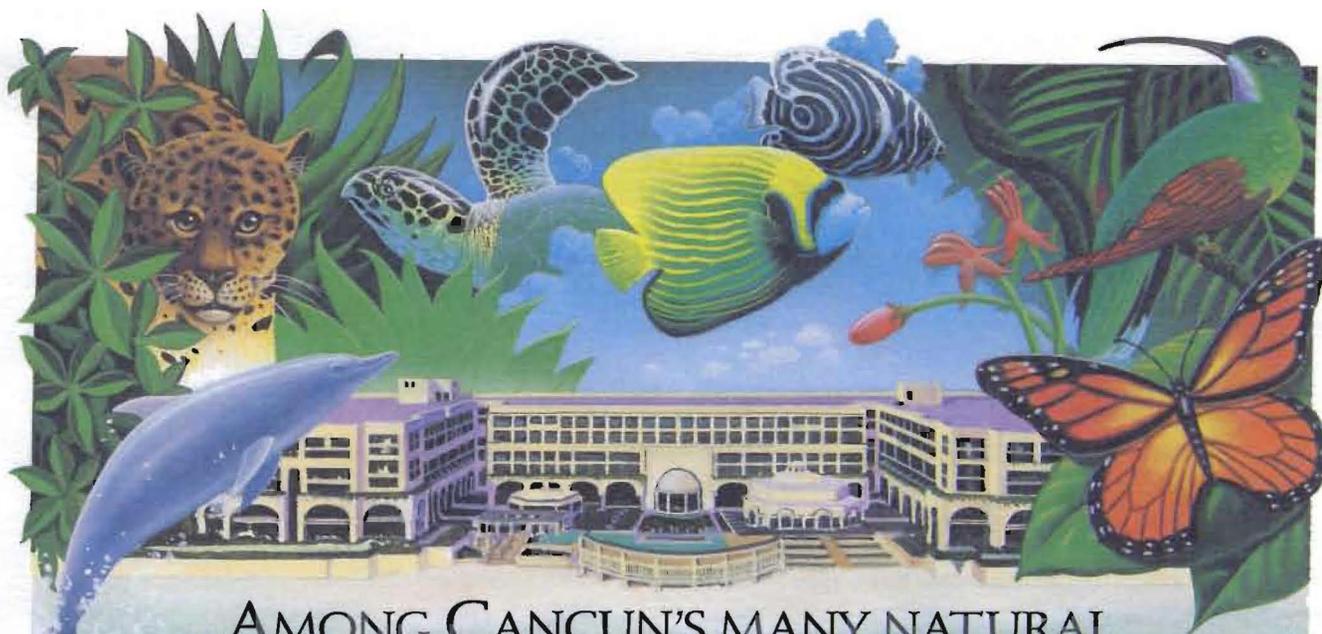
people aware of the real, long-term threats to the region: from multinational companies seeking to mine coal on the Kaiparowits plateau; from oil and gas exploration that would suck every last drop of energy from the ground no matter the cost to the ecosystem; from real estate developers who build subdivisions with lawns first and worry about finding water later?

To the environmentalists' credit, their opposition increased the care and attention that the BLM and the organizers paid to the course design, and raised the stakes if they didn't perform as promised. There's no question the course was more environmentally benign as a result of their pressure, agrees Kate Kitchell, the BLM Moab District Manager. "Their close attention caused us to be more thoughtful and thorough in our work," she told me after the race. For better or worse, race organizers say they'll never come back to Utah, and have announced plans to bring the event to British Columbia next year. At least as far

as accommodating eco-challengers is concerned, clearly the boreal forest is more forgiving than the basin and range desert.

With the Eco-Challenge out of their backyard, groups like SUWA can resume their fight to protect the wild lands of Utah from shortsighted development plans. The real threat to southern Utah isn't events like the Eco-Challenge, but the prevalent Manifest Destiny attitude that would provide unfettered access to this magical region to everybody, everywhere, for every purpose at all times. Saving the few remaining places where you can still bare your soul to the stars is something worth fighting over. That could have been an important message of this Eco-Challenge. Unfortunately, it's an opportunity that both sides missed. ▼

*Colorado writer Daniel Glick has recovered from his bout with competitive sport, and promises his wife not to do anything like it anytime soon.*



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