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Moss understood art of compromise

By David. R. Keller

Late in 1975, when I was 13 years old, I wrote Utah Sen. Frank Moss to protest his support for raising the water level of Lake Powell to generate more electricity for Southern California. I said that my family enjoyed backpacking and that our plans to hike up Stevens Canyon from the Escalante River would be impossible if the plan were enacted.

Unexpectedly, the senator responded personally. He lamented that collectively, as a nation, we have not shown a willingness to conserve energy, thus making the use of more of our natural resources unavoidable: "We can't afford to be selfish now that it's our turn to contribute our resources to the greater good of the country." He continued, "If I had my way, we wouldn't allow any of Utah's great canyons and parks to be changed at all. But we need the energy, too, David, so we have to compromise."

Upon his recent death, I recalled the honor of receiving a letter from such a respected leader at such a young age. I reread the original and was struck by the balance of Sen. Moss's reasoning. What I found especially amazing was that, despite his willingness to compromise, he left Utah — and the United States — an unmatched legacy by protecting millions of acres of public lands.

In retrospect, Sen. Moss has clearly earned a place in the history of the American conservation movement. Conservationists argue that wild lands are an intrinsic part of the American identity. Wallace Stegner puts the point well: "We need wilderness preserved . . . because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed." Wild lands, then, have value above and beyond mere economic value.

Sen. Moss's commitment to this ideal is best understood within the context of conservation history. Although conservation has been primarily a twentieth-century phenomenon, Massachusetts native Henry David Thoreau argued for a wilderness ethic as early as 1851: "A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it than by the woods and swamps that surround it."

Sierra Club founder John Muir and Wilderness Society founder Bob Marshall believed that wilderness is a psychological necessity for citizens of mechanized civilization. According to Marshall, "It is only the possibility of convalescing in the wilderness which saves [people] from being destroyed by the terrible neural tension of modern existence."

Of course, our economic system is industrial, so preservation must be weighed against the prudent use of natural resources. Sen. Moss's letter evidences that he, like U.S. Forest Service chief Gifford Pinchot, understood that sound public policy involves compromise between the two

often incompatible needs.

Sadly for us, few politicians in positions of power have mastered the delicate balance between conservation and economic development in the manner Sen. Moss did. The Republican Party platform seems to dogmatically oppose any form of wilderness protection. Jim Hansen, for example, has actually argued for closing national parks on the thinking that "if you've been there once, you don't need to go again." Of course, if a wilderness is logged, drilled, mined, fenced, grazed and crosscut with roads and pipelines, young Americans have no opportunity to experience its wildness even once.

Sen. Moss recognized multiple values of the land — economic, historical, aesthetic, ecological, psychological — and in doing so stands next to Muir, Marshall and Pinchot as a wise leader with keen foresight and unwavering determination. Here in Utah, we owe our ability to enjoy the sublime beauty of much of the Colorado Plateau's redrock cliffs and narrow canyons to Sen. Moss. And this freedom is one of the greatest gifts that could be given to future generations.

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