



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

Access or Protection? Contested Lands in the American West

Mehmet Soyer, Utah State University

Open lands foster a sense of community. You gather memories as you hike, hunt, climb, picnic, or drive a truck to work each day, but what happens if, all of a sudden, the federal government decides to expand or restrict the public lands where you live without asking your opinion?

For rural workers in the American West, the phrase “wilderness protection” usually means less “access” – their own key word – to trails for off-road vehicles, less freedom to graze cattle and hunt wild game, and fewer jobs in the energy industry. On the other side of the divide, environmental activists call for government protections of non-motorized trails, water and air quality, and wildlife habitats. Though people in both groups resent development in open spaces, especially as wealthy second-home owners move in ([Bowlin, 2021](#)), the fight over how public lands can be enjoyed is often bitter. As Indigenous tribes push back against oil and gas leases and over-tourism, after several centuries of profound loss, the picture becomes even more complex.