

## Searching for the Soul of America

By Luther Propst

*"This is one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."* -- Neil Armstrong, 1969

The American experience is rich with stories of frontier exploration. From the extraordinary journey of Lewis and Clark in search of the Northwest Passage to the legendary adventures of John Wesley Powell in his quest to conquer the mysteries of the Colorado River – the country and especially the West have been defined by frontier adventures.

July, 2009 marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of another major milestone in America's quest to push boundaries and explore new frontiers -- the Apollo moon landing. The television images of Neil Armstrong descending the ladder onto the moon's surface captivated the attention of the world, rekindling the exploration spirit that lies within us.

The Apollo landing and the Corps of Discovery journey, events separated by almost 165 years, have achieved almost mythical status in American folklore. Both were defining moments of bravery and exploration underscoring the need for humans to set out into the wild unknown. Wallace Stegner captures the essence of this idea perfectly:

*"We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope."*

Where is that "wild country" today? Where will our children go to nurture their souls in the future? I have traveled the West extensively and there are still places to wander alone in the canyons, deserts, or mountains — but they are fast disappearing, and many are threatened. In fact, a new Sonoran Institute report explores this very issue.

### **Landscapes that Define America are Threatened**

The report, *Western Landscapes in the Crossfire: Urban Growth and the National Landscape Conservation System*, concludes that many of the West's most wild and scenic public lands are being rapidly degraded by a combination of growth and development, vandalism, illegal and unmanaged off-road vehicle use, inadequate staffing, and lack of funds to provide management.

The report focuses on specific lands within the National Landscape Conservation System, which encompasses about 27 million acres in 11 western states with more than 800 protected areas designated as national monuments, national conservation areas, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness areas, and national trails. Managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Conservation System achieved new stature this year with formal protections provided by the Omnibus Land Management Act of 2009. President Barack Obama signed this landmark legislation into law on March 30.

Despite the protections offered by the new law, substantial challenges remain. "The Conservation System took a major step forward this year when Congress and the President recognized its importance

as the first major new land conservation system in nearly 50 years,” says the Sonoran Institute’s John Shepard. “The great promise of the Conservation System, however, remains unfulfilled. Despite public enthusiasm for visiting and protecting these ‘crown jewel’ lands, most are underfunded and understaffed, making them highly vulnerable to vandalism, illegal off-highway driving, and resource destruction.”

### **Funding and Staffing Must Increase**

The report indicates that – on average -- there is only one BLM ranger assigned for every 200,000 acres of land, and that total funding in 2007 for all Conservation System units amounted to only \$2 per acre. “When you consider that almost 22 million people in the West live within 25 miles of BLM lands today,” said Shepard, “it underscores how woefully inadequate current staffing and funding plans are to truly protect these amazing landscapes and culturally rich areas.”

The report focuses on eight iconic Conservation System units in Arizona and Nevada, including Arizona’s Agua Fria, Sonoran Desert, Ironwood Forest and Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monuments, and the Las Cienegas, San Pedro Riparian, Red Rock Canyon and Sloan Canyon National Conservation Areas.

“The Conservation System is home to some of the most archeological and culturally significant areas in the West, and includes vast wild and scenic landscapes that truly define this part of the country,” said Sarah Bates, a co-author of the report. “If we are unable to dramatically increase federal funding to protect these lands and their historical significance, it is possible that their unique cultural, ecological and scientific values may disappear altogether in our lifetime.”

Sarah’s prediction is both chilling and sobering. The “frontier” today for Americans in many ways lies within the lands of the Conservation System. These lands are a vital part of America’s soul. Working with our elected officials, we have a responsibility to work together to ensure that these lands are protected and properly conserved for generations to come. I urge you to read our report and join our efforts. The *Western Landscapes in the Crossfire* report can be found on the Sonoran Institute’s website at [www.sonoraninstitute.org](http://www.sonoraninstitute.org).

*Luther Propst is the Executive Director of the Sonoran Institute, a nonprofit Westwide conservation group founded in 1990.*