



## A wilderness sliced in two

BY UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

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The golden eagle and mountain lion don't know or care where Riverside County ends and San Diego County begins. Neither do plenty of humans who want to preserve and enjoy the wilderness of Agua Tibia and Beauty Mountain, now bisected by an arbitrary line on the map.

Where northeastern San Diego County converges with Riverside and Imperial counties, where the mountains create rivers on the west and vast desert to the east, is a beautiful and unscarred territory that now lies in a curious dichotomy.

North of the San Diego County line, thousands of acres of federally owned land were designated as wilderness after a three-year effort by Rep. Mary Bono Mack, R-Palm Springs. That's not the case south of the line as separate legislation by Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, did not pass. Commendably, the congressman is now trying again to preserve 21,000 acres.

The legislation is not a major cost item. The land already is owned by the federal government and managed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Neither is this a rope-the-land-off-and-keep-humans-out proposition. Issa's bill calls for developing an equestrian staging campground on the margin and for continued use of a county road to a popular campground in the interior. Designation as wilderness would permit human visits but block uses that disrupt the stillness or mar the natural beauty.

This is land appreciated by more than the fauna and flora that call it home, including some 55 at-risk species. Consider the diverse assortment of humans pounding the table to keep this land in its natural state. There are environmental groups, to be sure: California Wilderness Coalition, Friends of the River, Pew Campaign for America's Wilderness, Sierra Club Santa Margarita Group and The Wilderness Society. There are recreational associations, too: Adventure 16, Off-Road Business Association and Warner Springs Ranchowners Association. Don't forget business interests taking a stand for nature: Oceanside and Vista Chambers of Commerce, prAna, Hawk Watch Winery and Stone Brewing Co.

Conservationists say the territory is a crucial corridor for migrating species, a bridge between the coastal sage habitat of the coast range on the west and the harsher ecology of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park on the east.

Humans who visit for hiking, camping, rock climbing or horseback riding find incredible rock formations and twisted river canyons descending from mountains that exceed 5,000 feet. Manzanita that has grown as high as 20 feet gradually yields with elevation to fir, pine and oak. Challenging climbs to mountain peaks yield prized views for the mind's eye or the camera's.

Not familiar with the area? Geoffrey Smith, in cooperation with Wilderness4All and Friends of the River, occasionally

leads day hikes to introduce visitors to a new world.

It's a world that well deserves a wilderness designation.

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