

# Ravaging a Treasure

By Tom Kenworthy  
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The decision by the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) this month to open most of [Colorado's](#) Roan Plateau to massive natural gas development removes any lingering doubts that the Bush administration has converted the agency into a wholly owned subsidiary of the oil and gas industry.

The Roan Plateau is a little-known Western treasure. Like most of the land administered by the BLM -- roughly 260 million federal acres -- it has local and state advocates but no substantial national constituency.

Every day, thousands of motorists get a cursory glimpse of the Roan's stark white shale cliffs, which tower more than 3,000 feet above Interstate 70 as it follows the [Colorado River](#) west of [Glenwood Springs](#). From that vantage point, it doesn't look like much compared with the glories of the central Rockies -- just another hardscrabble mesa surrounded at its base by gas wells, compressor stations and drill roads.

Atop the plateau is another world entirely, one of the four most biologically diverse areas in western Colorado. It's a largely hidden place of meadows, forests, lush canyons, spectacular waterfalls, deer, elk and Colorado River cutthroat trout. [Garfield County](#) residents know its riches well; they've been hunting, hiking, guiding and riding horses in this spectacular landscape for generations.

Many of them would like to keep the Roan Plateau as it is, a largely unspoiled attraction in a region where recreation, tourism and retirees offer a more sustainable economic future than the boom-and-bust pattern of energy development. People in Garfield County have unpleasant memories of May 2, 1982, known locally as Black Sunday -- the day when [Exxon](#) dropped its planned Colony oil shale project like a bad date and the local economy was left in a deep hole for years.

Garfield County has done more than its share for domestic energy production amid the boom of the past few years. Only one other Colorado county has more oil and gas wells, and many local governments have petitioned the BLM to keep drilling rigs away from the top of the Roan Plateau.

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Three years ago, when I questioned local hunting guide Keith Goddard about drilling atop the Roan, he asked in return how much the people of Garfield County would have to sacrifice to satisfy the national demand for natural gas.

Quite a bit more, answers the BLM as it plays the role of monkey for organ grinders in the administration and the energy industry. The agency's decision will allow 1,570 gas wells across nearly 51,000 acres of the plateau's top and sides. A decision on drilling an additional 22,000 acres will come later this year. That green light to turn the Roan into an industrial zone came despite calls from Colorado's governor and several members of its congressional delegation for further study before a drilling plan was adopted.

I hope that by thumbing its nose at those moderate and conservative elected officials whose views reflect majority sentiment in western Colorado, the BLM will trigger a legislative backlash. That could come as early as today, when the House is expected to take up an amendment to the Interior appropriations bill by Colorado Reps. [John Salazar](#) (D) and [Mark Udall](#) (D) to block spending on leasing the plateau.

Efforts to protect the Roan Plateau are part of a broader movement across the West against the relentless "drill everywhere, no matter what the cost" attitude in Washington. Intent on leasing even some of the West's most treasured public lands, the Bush administration has helped unite sportsmen and conservationists to protect places such as the Wyoming Range and Red Desert, the Valle Vidal and Otero Mesa in [New Mexico](#), and the Roan and Grand Mesa in Colorado.

With the administration pushing to lease even the municipal watershed for the city of Grand Junction, Colo., it has become clear that appeals to reason are fruitless. It's time for Congress, under its new leadership, to step in and use the power of the purse to stop the worst abuses.

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