

National Monuments – Future refuges for preserving Rockhound habitat?



by Lisbet Thoresen

Public Lands Representative for SDMG and PLAC—South Chair for CFMS

PUBLIC LANDS under a protective designation such as national monument and wilderness are not much appreciated by users, including Rockhounds, whose experience is that they impose barriers to access and uses previously enjoyed and perceived as a right. In all things, experience animates our expectations for the future. Experience – historical memory – also tends to hinder our agility at recognizing and adjusting to sea changes that bring dramatic transformation to a familiar landscape. Public lands management is undergoing a sea change. Some of it is good, much of it is not. How Rockhounds adjust to this sea change and leverage conditions in a dynamic state of flux may determine future prospects of hobby collecting as a recreational and educational activity.

DRECP is the sea change in land use management

As improbable as it may seem to some Rockhounds, federal lands under (some) protective designations may prove to be a last refuge for hobby collecting

on publicly accessible land. Why? In part, because protective designations ensure that they stay public while huge swaths of land are being designated Development Focus Areas (DFAs) or are convenient real estate that makes them targets for being swapped or leased for public-private development of utility scale energy projects or other economic development. Recreational users of public lands can look forward to more and more BLM-administered lands, including public-private DFAs, eventually becoming off-limits to them, probably sooner rather than later. In California, the overarching driving force guiding land use management is the Desert Renewable Conservation Plan (DRECP). How things worked before DRECP does not matter. That was then, this is now. It's all different now, we are living in a post-DRECP world. Rockhounds, take note.

Joe Sumner at the Top Notch Claim in the North Cady Mountains. He and partner Bill Depue staked the claim before the Mojave Trails National Monument was designated. Photo: Lisbet Thoresen, 28 May 2016.

The Desert Renewable Conservation Plan (DRECP) is the most ambitious land use amendment in California history. It is a programmatic guideline for administering 22.5 million acres of public and private lands in California's deserts (through 2040).

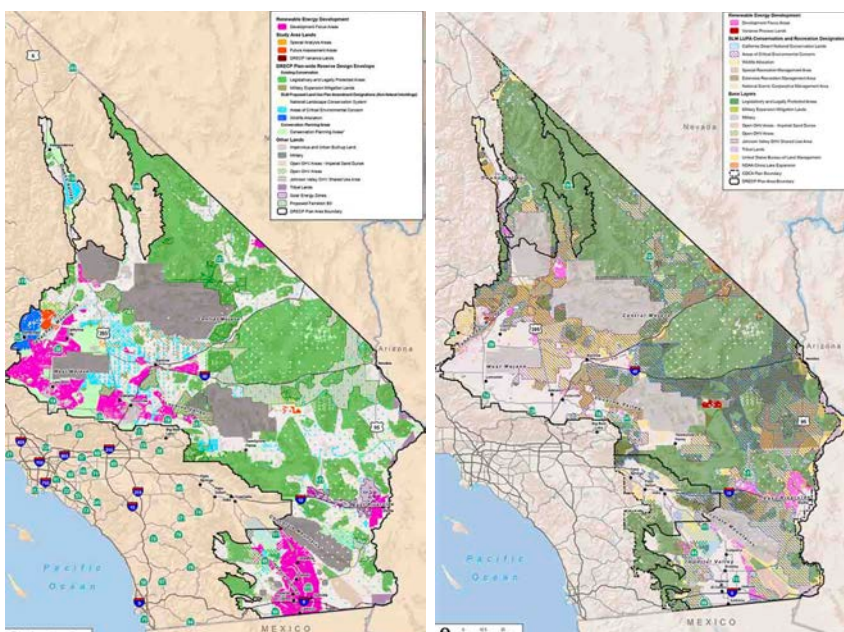
The Record of Decision for Phase I of the DRECP was signed on September 14, 2016. Its focus concentrated on conservation and recreational values of 10.8 million acres within DRECP's scope. The ROD paves the way to streamline the permitting process for as many renewable energy projects as quickly as possible in the Mojave Desert.

Make no mistake, public lands, especially deserts once deemed useless wastelands now have tremendous economic potential, and exploiting that potential is a top priority for industry and government agencies at federal, state, and municipal levels. Recreational values, including hobby collecting, are far, far down on the list of priorities where values conflict.

Rockhound experience with protective designations

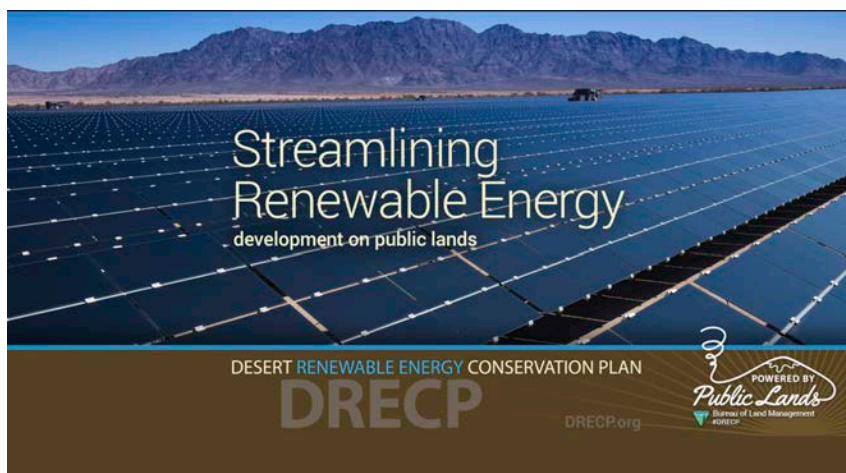
For decades, Rockhounds have seen access to public lands shrink at an alarming rate. The relationship with BLM and other Department of Interior (DOI) agencies has frayed as promised accommodations were forgotten or brushed aside. Friction among Stakeholders with divergent values too often have left Rockhounds feeling shut out, marginalized, or disparaged in the process.

In the last three administrations, Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, accelerated the designation of National Monuments under authority of the Antiquities Act



Figs. 1a, b (Left) DRECP map of the draft version of preferred alternative plan. Development Focus Areas (DFAs), where renewable energy projects may be permitted, are highlighted in magenta. (Right) DRECP map of the final plan. According to DRECP managers in Sacramento, some Development Focus Areas (DFAs) were scaled back where they intruded hobby collecting areas; the changes were made in response to numerous detailed letters received from Rockhounds.

Fig. 2 (Below) Promotional ad by BLM. Source (above and below): BLM.



of 1906, with 27 protective designations created by Obama alone. Exercising this executive prerogative so prodigiously has alternately alarmed and infuriated some Stakeholders, including more than a few Rockhounds. The designations appeared to throw into overdrive the longtime trend toward exclusion already felt so keenly and resented profoundly. Understandable. The boilerplate language of the proclamations disallows collecting.

Although the DOI agency charged with oversight of a monument has three years to publish a management plan for it and nothing prevents accommodations for hobby collecting being written into the

plan, such accommodations have seldom been codified. Thus, Rockhounds have had reason to be unhappy about the national monument designation insofar as it affected them.

For a community both proud and passionate about its values and traditions, hobby collecting is rooted in the customs and culture of California's deserts. Since the 1800s, when they were known as prospectors, Rockhounds have been finding beauty in desert views and in their unique geology and minerals. So, on the one hand, protective designations which are welcomed by some Stakeholder groups are perceived as existential threats to Rockhounds; on the other hand, industrial scale development of the desert obstructs hobby collecting with closed roads and locked gates and fences. It is far more consequential in the longterm, because some of the attendant harms are indelible, pernicious, and irreversible.

For many Rockhounds, the perceived barriers to hobby collecting, which are attributable to both of these two opposing forces, weighs more negatively against the prospect of collecting being accommodated on lands with protective designations than lands where development occurs. Perhaps that's because there is plenty of experience with protected designations and no history with DFAs, but exactly the opposite is true. Let's look at each in turn.

Industrialization of the desert, a done deal

In California, developing public lands to tap their resources for renewable energy and water projects is being pursued aggressively, perhaps more so than anywhere else in the country. It's not a tentative idea, it's not in beta phase – re-purposing the desert is in full implementation under DRECP.

A clear perspective on scope & scale matters:

DRECP is just one blueprint among many for the multi-trillion dollar mission to create an upgraded nationwide power grid based on renewable energy over the next 25 years. Re-purposing public lands is a key feature. If you're not a Stakeholder in renewables, your values on the use of public lands have been re-prioritized.



Fig. 3 Bill Depue (age 91) and Jonathan Davis (age 8) are lifelong Rockhounds; although, Bill has been doing it a little longer – he has been going out to the desert nearly every weekend since he was 15 years old. Jonathan got an early start – Bill took him out on his first rock collecting expedition when he was 17 months old. Asked what he looks for when he ventures out into the desert, Bill says, "I look for beauty." Photo: Lisbet Thoresen, 13 May 2017.

Fig. 4 (Below) Article by Juliet Williams in The Register-Guard, 11 Sept 2016.

The Register-Guard

WEST

Jerry Brown pushes plan for a Western power grid

California's governor has been working with Oregon and other states to broaden the grid



California Gov. Jerry Brown speaks at the California Independent System Operator stakeholders' symposium. (Rich Pedroncelli/The Associated Press)

BY JULIET WILLIAMS
The Associated Press

SEPT. 11, 2016



SACRAMENTO — Gov. Jerry Brown said last week that he remains committed to expanding California's power grid to include other Western states, despite a delay announced this summer when it appeared the state Legislature was unprepared to grant the broader approval needed to advance the project this year.

To meet demand, especially in population centers where the need is greatest, utility-scale renewable energy projects are proliferating rapidly in the desert. BLM is eager to enter into public-private ventures, municipalities are eager to have the revenue and the promise of jobs, and public servants are eager to get re-elected. To date, the track record is not encouraging. The Palen solar project near Desert Center in Riverside County, for example, has been administered by three different companies after successive bankruptcies. Palen's history is hardly unique.

Water harvesting proposals previously rejected because they risked depleting desert aquifers to unsustainable levels are being revived.[1]

All these projects will be fenced and all will need transmission corridors to be built to connect them with the power grid.

***File under:
you just can't make this stuff up***

Using the desert as a dumping ground is a solution to urban waste management considered every now and again, and lately it's getting serious re-appraisal, this time targeting a remote area in Cadiz Valley, which happens to be in Mojave Trails National Monument (also in the vicinity of nine wilderness areas). The plan is to dispose of 1,800 tons of toxic nuclear waste from the decommissioned San Onofre nuclear generating station.[2] The choice of sites should be extremely disturbing, especially to the NIMBYs in coastal communities who want the radioactive waste out of their backyard. In a separate plan which is poised to proceed, Cadiz Inc. proposes to tap the aquifer under the dump site and export it to consumers in coastal communities (see fig. 6). The unintended consequence of course, is that the water may not be safe for human consumption, with the possibility of toxic exposure from San Onofre's waste coming right back to (or near) where it originated.

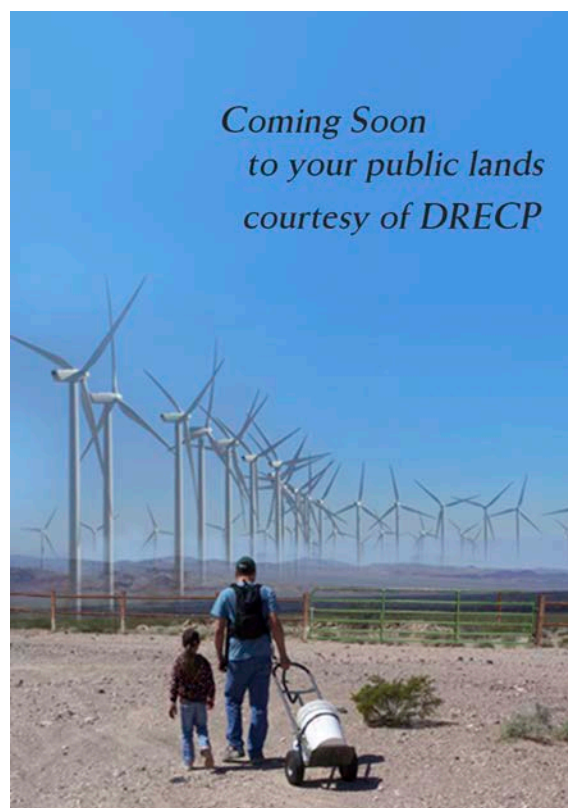


Fig. 5 Composite photo by L. Thoresen; Lavic Siding by Kris Rowe; wind turbines by Wiki user Z22.

Distributed energy generation such as rooftop solar, micro-grids, load-shifting technologies, and local battery storage are among the alternatives that do not require destruction of the desert to achieve energy goals (or create jobs). Despite, copious critical comments from other federal agencies and public opprobrium on the draft plan, the final plan for DRECP did not take into account any distributed energy alternatives, and California's energy calculator for the state's projected needs excludes their actual output and their prospective output. Unless this changes, every available piece of desert real estate could be vulnerable to utility-scale development. Mordor in California.

- 1.) For a summary with references, see: L. Thoresen. May 2017. The Rime of the Mojave Mariner. The Pegmatite, bulletin of the San Diego Mineral & Gem Society, Inc., pp. 12–13. Available online at: <http://www.sdmg.org/peg-online/sdmg-pegmatite-2017-may.pdf#page=12>; see also: <http://www.desertsun.com/story/opinion/contributors/valley-voice/2017/04/23/valley-voice-making-case-stringent-review-mojave-groundwater-harvesting-project/305798001/> or short URL: <https://goo.gl/0dnW7f>
- 2.) C. Clarke. 31 May 2017. Desert National Monument Suggested as Nuclear Waste Disposal Site. Available online at: <https://www.kcet.org/shows/earth-focus/desert-national-monument-suggested-as-nuclear-waste-disposal-site> or short URL: <https://goo.gl/sNX54z>

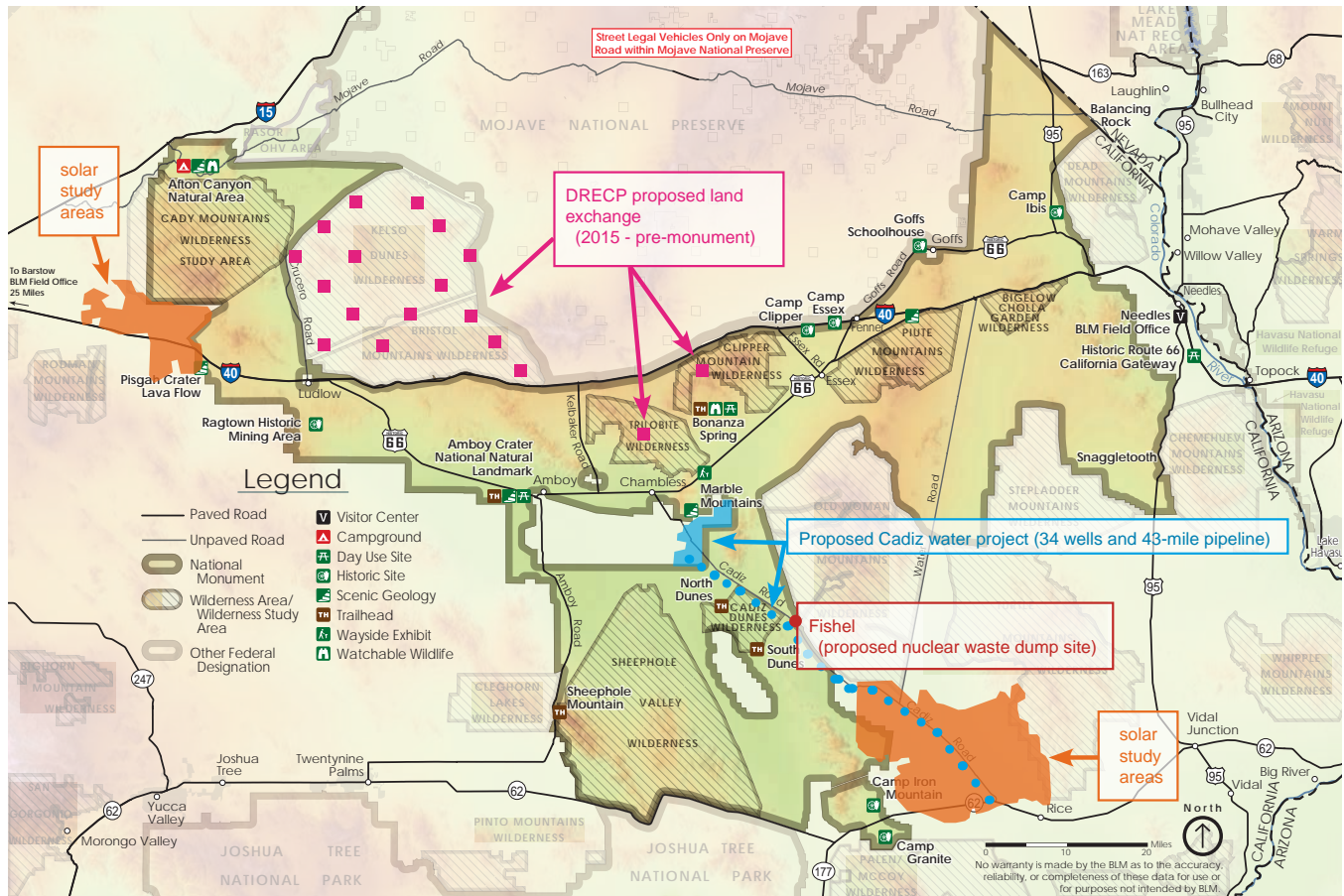


Fig. 6 Mojave Trails National Monument is surrounded by wilderness areas, with the Mojave National Preserve to the north, the Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps base and Joshua Tree National Park to the south (west and east, respectively). The monument provides a buffer in the region, protecting surrounding wildlands and unique geological and culturally significant landscapes within its boundaries. Together, they provide contiguous natural viewscapes and habitat for threatened and endangered species. The area that is now a monument was (and still is) targeted for a variety of projects that would irrevocably change this unique, largely unspoiled region. Some of the proposed uses are overlayed on the monument map above. Source: BLM; annotations: L. Thoresen.

Protective designations: a barrier to rampant development, not Rockhounding

National Monument designations and other protective designations may be the only way to protect public lands from being bulldozed for utility scale projects under sweeping planning efforts like DRECP. That appears to have been Senator Dianne Feinstein's (CA-D) motivation for asking President Obama to designate three national monuments in Southern California: Castle Mountains, Sand to Snow, and Mojave Trails. He obliged on February 12, 2016. Feinstein made the request after her signature bill, the California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act, failed to garner enough support in the House and Senate to succeed.



Fig. 7 Stripping the desert to make way for a power link corridor. Source: BLM.

The net effect of Mojave Trails National Monument (MTNM) having been created is to safeguard pristine wildlands from development. Rockhounds benefit, too. On May 12, 2016, Feinstein wrote a letter to then DOI Secretary Sally Jewell expressing full-throated support of Rockhounds. Not only did she portray Rockhound values and activities positively, she asked for accommodations to be considered in management plans for national monuments, in general, not only in the plans for the three monuments designated on February 12th.

***Mojave Trails – a BLM case study
for trying to get a National Monument
management plan right for Stakeholders***

As I reported in the April bulletin on the Desert District Advisory Council's (DAC) winter business meeting,[3] BLM, which had administered the public lands that were brought into the monument was not the only agency that could have been tasked with responsibility for managing Mojave Trails. The National Park Service was a logical administrator, given its proximity to Joshua Tree. However, the southern California BLM offices in Barstow and Needles were well aware of the disparate special interests invested in Mojave Trails. Among the agencies of the Department of Interior, the Bureau of Land Management is chartered to accommodate land use in myriad ways, while the National Park Service, as all Rockhounds know, is the least accommodating.

BLM was not wrong about the howl and cry that would erupt from Stakeholders, if they were deprived of their customary activities – ranching and prospecting date backs to the 19th century, and tribal values for sacred land date back much earlier.

Fortunately, for Rockhounds, BLM was charged with oversight of Mojave Trails. Now it has to show DOI that the management plan can be a model of harmonious uses within a National Monument. This should be a welcome development for Rockhounds whose past experiences with BLM have been frustrating or worse. Did you ever wonder why the southern California BLM field offices plan field tours to complement the quarterly DAC meetings or why they arranged three

“Envisioning Sessions” last summer to invite public participation in the management planning process for Mojave Trails? Were you at the DAC meeting in February when council members admonished the DRECP manager about the importance of transparency and accountability to the public, cautioning him that excluding public involvement from the very beginning of any planning process would foment distrust and deep discontentment?[4] (BTW, BLM renewed the Hauser Geode Beds MOU last year.)

Whatever apprehensions or even cynical suspicions you may have acquired by personal experience, DAC and southern California BLM field offices are trying hard to be responsive to the Rockhound community, and they appear to be making a good faith effort to produce a management plan for Mojave Trails that will accommodate hobby collecting.

Consider the alternatives. Reverting to the old days when Rockhounds could be left alone to go where they please in the desert is not the remotest possibility. Municipalities, counties, or the state will sell away your patrimony for pecuniary gain, the promise of jobs, and votes from their constituents, not enough of whom are Rockhounds. Industry will gobble up whatever isn't shielded from them by a protective designation. To them it's just cheap real estate, to Rockhounds and other Stakeholders, it's a whole lot more.

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Six national monuments in California, including Mojave Trails, are currently under federal review and could lose their protective designations. The comment period is now open to entertain input from the public and from Stakeholders. Your engagement can determine the fate of Mojave Trails and the other national monuments under review. Please support Mojave Trails and other recently designated monuments for the sake of preserving wildlands and hobby collecting.

**The comment period deadline is July 10, 2017**

To submit a comment & for more information, see:

[www.federalregister.gov](http://www.federalregister.gov) Search: **DOI-2017-0002**

**If you would like to sign onto a letter,**

email [editor@sdmg.org](mailto:editor@sdmg.org)

3.) L. Thoresen. April 2017. The Rime of the Mojave Mariner. The Pegmatite, bulletin of the San Diego Mineral & Gem Society, Inc., pp. 11–14. Available online at: <http://www.sdmg.org/peg-online/sdmg-pegmatite-2017-apr.pdf#page=11>.

4.) See note 3; Chair Randy Banis, former Chair Leslie Barrett, and new member Frazier Haney all spoke up on behalf of the public and Rockhounds, specifically.