



Editorials

Save 'Surprise'

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Environmentalists and off-road enthusiasts agree that Surprise Canyon is a gem of the Mojave Desert. Preserving such beauty is precisely why the state and federal government should keep the canyon road closed to off-roaders.

Public officials should place the preservation of unique desert species above restoring access to a ghost town. A group of off-road enthusiasts in 2001 bought parcels of a crumbling 19th-century mining camp at the far end of the canyon called Panamint City. The landowners sued the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in August for road access to their property. A victory would mean reopening a large area of protected habitat to off-road recreation.

But the rugged canyon road, which boasts cascading waterfalls and a rushing stream, is much better off without vehicle traffic. The California Desert Preservation Act of 1994 gave federal regulators leeway to restrict access to sensitive desert habitat. Before the federal Bureau of Land Management closed the road in 2001, motorbikes and Jeeps fouled the canyon stream with oil, gas and antifreeze. Now endangered species such as the bighorn sheep and the Panamint daisy are starting to flourish there again.

Still, off-roaders push to reopen the road. But the legal case for doing so is weak. The off-roaders are relying on a Civil War-era federal law that Congress repealed 30 years ago. The law, known as RS 2477, allowed counties and states to lay routes over federal land. The off-roaders say the mining road to Panamint City falls under a grandfather clause of the old law, and they want the state and San Bernardino County to intervene. Neither should do so.

There is no shortage of Inland terrain open to off-road enthusiasts. Yes, the once-bustling mining town in Panamint Valley is decaying. Nature is slowly erasing evidence of man's presence there. So be it. Surprise Canyon is simply better suited for habitat preservation than for off-road recreation.
