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Faiths call for Utah wilderness protection

Religion » Interfaith group delivers letters to Hatch and Bennett.

By Patty Henetz
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Jesus fasted 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness. Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. Muhammad went to the mountain to thank God for showing mercy. Even Joseph Smith ventured into a Sacred Grove.

Some of history's most revered spiritual leaders found peace, inspiration and guidance by retreating to the solace of wild places.

That's why representatives of 10 Utah faith groups -- Christian, Jewish and Muslim -- on Tuesday took their call for more wilderness protection to Sens. Orrin Hatch and Bob Bennett.

"The astounding beauty, utter vastness and enveloping silence of wild places awaken our sense of awe and connect us to something larger than ourselves -- God, Allah, the Divine, spirit, the un-nameable mystery of life," said the group's statement, delivered outside the Wallace F. Bennett Federal Building in downtown Salt Lake City. "We call on the leaders of our community to join us in recognizing the spiritual importance of Utah's wild landscapes and to act now to help ensure their protection."

The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance got involved with the project when religious people showed up for the environmental organization's "wildland dialogues" and suggested it would be a good project for the faith community, said SUWA's grass-roots outreach director Deeda Seed.

The interfaith group took letters to the offices of Hatch and Bennett and urged the two Utah senators to craft more legislative protection for the state's wilderness heritage.

Brigham Young University humanities professor George Handley praised Bennett's role in the recently passed omnibus lands bill, which sets aside hundreds of thousands of acres in Washington County and could serve as a template for future preservation planning.

During a meeting with Hatch aide Sharon Garn, Handley recalled the GOP senator helped save Samoan rain forests in 1988.

"It's always challenging," Handley said, "to translate religious belief into political action."

The Rev. Diana Johnson of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral said her church believes taking care of the Earth is a moral responsibility and added that it was enlightening to get together with others to talk about what that actually means.

The word "wilderness" has been demonized, Stephen Trimble of the Chavurah B'Yachad Jewish Reconstructionist congregation, told Garn. "This is a really powerful way to bring us back to common ground."

Call for the wild

Since last spring, more than 230 members of 10 faith communities in Utah -- in conjunction with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance -- have considered the value of wilderness and stewardship for their religions. Each of the congregations prepared a "harvest" report.

The participants were from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; the Chavurah B'Yachad, Congregation Kol Ami and Temple Har Shalom Jewish denominations; Holladay United Church of Christ; St. Mark's Episcopal Congregation; Salt Lake Quakers; Utah Catholic Diocese Peace and Justice Commission; Community of Grace Presbyterian Church; Christ United Methodist Church; Islamic and Turkish members of the Multicultural Arch Foundation; and First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City.

The collective statement and individual reports are posted on www.suwa.org/faithandtheland

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