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## ***The Perils of Eco-Tourism: Time to Challenge the Myth that More Use Equals More Care***

The Montana Wilderness Association and other self-declared “conservation” groups regularly tout efforts to get more and more people into the back country and on the rivers, claiming that doing so will result in more people caring about and preserving Montana’s irreplaceable natural treasures. But recent “on the land” experiences indicate that not only is there no verifiable basis for such a belief, but that quite the opposite is happening on our public lands — more use is leading to more abuse and degradation, not more care and conservation.

The stunning and disturbing examples contained in Brian Maffly’s article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* last week paint a harsh picture of what really happens when hordes of tourists overwhelm the ability of state and federal management agencies to protect the exquisite resources that draw the visitors.

They say “a picture is worth a thousand words” and Maffly’s article, “[Thanks to social media, crowds keep discovering Utah’s ‘undiscovered’ scenic gems — and they’re laying waste to their beauty](#),” is replete with heartbreaking photos of Utah’s red rock canyons ravaged by gang-style graffiti, endless lines of tourists trying to hike through narrow slot canyons, vandalized trail signs, and aspens disfigured by initials and symbols carved into their bark.

While the article highlights the ongoing degradation of Utah’s canyon country, it could just as easily have been written about Yellowstone or Glacier national parks, our hammered blue-ribbon trout streams or the destruction occurring in our national forests.

Yet, driven by some bizarre and baseless compulsion to commercialize every possible natural resource, these supposed defenders of wild lands and waters routinely point to Montana's \$7.2 billion recreation economy. They do so without concurrent assessment of what level of use and abuse our public resources can sustain before they, like Utah's, become permanently degraded or lost completely.

The proof of exceeding the carrying capacity of our recreational resource base is readily evident. Catching a Missouri River trout with hand prints in the fungus on its body might just give one pause as to how many times a fish can be caught, held and photographed for Facebook or Instagram before that fish dies.

Or how about campsite fire pits filled with broken glass and cans, trees cut down to allow for huge RVs, and garbage just tossed in the bushes for others to carry out? Or the illegal ATV and mountain bike trails cut through public lands and deep into what were once secure hiding areas for elk? Or the latrines used as garbage cans by those too clueless to pack out their trash?

Anyone who spends time out in Montana knows these are true and ongoing abuses. Equally without doubt, the abuses are getting worse while the endless marketing continues to ramp up, led by dollar signs dancing in the eyes of those who would commercialize our outdoor resources without considering the degradation that comes with ever more visitors, many of whom have no idea of how to treat these precious and irreplaceable assets.

If these promoters were correct in their unsupported theory that more use equals more care for our recreational assets, then every Montana Wilderness Study Area should be headed for wilderness designation. But just the opposite is happening as our congressional delegation seeks to end protection for Montana's existing Wilderness Study Areas.

Endless tourism promotion will continue to degrade Montana's recreational assets unless balanced with real, not theoretical, assessments of the carrying capacity of our precious recreational resources. And the consequences of not doing so are very real — just ask Utah.