

Discoverers, Developers and Merchants How “old west” gold mining and modern landuse are similar

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The old prospector no longer gave a hoot about all the talk of getting rich during the 1849 gold rush. No matter how he looked at it, it was dang hot and ugly mean in the western desert, and he'd not had a decent drink of water or a good meal in days. He was hot and tired; his mule was dragging; and his supplies were about gone. He was having about as much fun as a jack rabbit at a coyote picnic.

With no gold in his pockets, he gave up for the day and settled in next to a ledge of rocks that provided some shade. He tipped back his sweaty worn-out hat and began to collect a few rocks to make a small fire ring. The last of his hard-tack would taste mighty fine about now and he still had one can of beans to heat up. Then it struck him like a mule kick in the butt! His fire ring of rocks was the best gold ore he'd ever seen. He was suddenly going to be a rich man living the life of luxury.

The old prospector was a “discoverer.” Discoverers are those that find the ore or the strike, but usually don't have the capital to develop a gold (or silver) mine. Sometimes in the 1800's it was common to have to sink a shaft 200 – 300 feet or more to get the “good stuff.” So the discoverer would sell out to the developer, who did have the money, manpower and backing to fully develop the mine.

Of course, all this while the merchants -- the business men who brought the shovels, beans, bullets and other supplies that miners needed -- were establishing the long-term trade and supply routes to build this country while supporting the mining development. It all came together, the discoverers, the developers and the merchants. Today, landuse is not much different.

In short, the discoverers in landuse are the local folks who are “prospecting” their way through the maze of government, just trying to recreate and enjoy the great outdoors with their toys. Discoverers find problems (bad government decisions, unnecessary road closures, unwarranted gates, etc.), then bring in the developers (larger landuse organizations) to help out. Merchants are the off-road businesses of today who support the developers. It all comes together -- just like in the mining days of the “old west.”

Allow me to break this down for you a bit more. Let's take the example of a “local Joe,” just a lone-ranger kind of recreationist, who finds that his favorite trail is being closed up tighter than a tick on a hound dog. He makes a few phone calls; writes a couple letters; and gets the typical run-around. So then he moves it up a notch and finds a local club to engage in the fight. “Local Joe” is our prospector who gets things started with his local knowledge, expertise and passion -- he's the discoverer.

Soon it becomes evident that professional help and perhaps even legal advice might be crucial in saving this trail, so the locals reach up to the bigger organizations at the state, regional and national levels -- the developers with the money (hopefully everyone has been joining and supporting these bigger organizations so they do have some strength). Naturally, the merchants -- the off-road businesses -- are in the game as well by supporting the big orgs and clubs out there prospecting and developing to help keep the gold mine (the sport) alive and well.

It all comes together, just like in the old mining days of the American west. Well, that is to say, if we're all working together, making the system work, and finding unity in our voices.

If **you** read my writing very often, you know I love metaphors and analogies. This piece is no different. Here you go. Our freedom to explore is a treasure in this great country of ours. Our recreation is a gold mine, if you will. Be a "discoverer" who works to prospect for new ways to keep our sports alive and our trails open. Join and support the "developers" who are the big orgs helping to support you and your local trails. Finally, buy from "merchants" who support our local, state and national efforts, as we all prospect for a brighter, gold-filled future. 😊

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The BlueRibbon Coalition is a national recreation group that champions responsible use of public lands and waters, and encourages individual environmental stewardship. It represents over 10,000 individual members and 1,200 organization and business members, for a combined total of over 600,000 recreationists nationwide. 1-800-258-3742. <http://www.sharetrails.org>. CA4WDC is the state 4WD Association for California at <http://www.cal4wheel.com>

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