

Land, Water and People

Elephants and Land Management

Once upon a time, six blind men lined up along the length of an elephant and touched the section of the pachyderm that was right in front of them. The six blind men shared their observations with each other, which then turned into an argument. Each blind man had developed an opinion of the elephant based on their very narrow observations.

A similar story could be written called, “The users and the watershed.” Think of all the different types of users of BLM and National Forest System lands, the businesses that benefit from these users, and the communities that depend on the resources that come from these lands. Each of these entities views the public lands through their own filters and have their own beliefs on how the land should be managed.

Responses to the recent news concerning the parcels of land proposed for the May 8th oil and gas lease sale is a good example of the diversity of values people hold in the San Luis Valley. Some people are fine with the possibility of having oil and natural gas wells in this area. After all, we all use fossil fuels and it has to come from somewhere. Others have little tolerance for oil and gas extraction in this area arguing that these are the headwaters of the Rio Grande and extraction of fossil fuels may lead to contamination of our water supply.

Employees that work at the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center (SLVPLC) find themselves in the middle of these types of disagreements every day. Sometimes the disagreements can get so heated that employees are insulted or even threatened. It’s on those days that we sometimes question our choice of professions.

Luckily, those days are rare. SLVPLC employees take pride in their efforts to manage your public lands for multiple uses. They take pride managing some areas for preservation and others for resource extraction. In areas where resource extraction is allowed, they take pride in minimizing both short and long-term impacts to the land while helping to provide the natural resources that we use every day. After all, SLV PLC employees also live in houses, drive to work, recreate on public lands... and breathe the air and drink the water.

There are currently many issues on lands managed by the SLVPLC. Some people like to ride ATVs on the trails, while others prefer to hike quietly; some believe resource extraction should be maximized, while others believe it should be minimized; some believe it is okay to sell isolated parcels of public land to developers, while others believe these lands should never be sold. The list goes on and on as does the list of special interest groups that take sides on each issue.

All these voices are important as they help guide the land management process—the extremes help build the bookends from which to find the middle. But I think it is even more important for individuals to take a step back and take a peek at the whole elephant. Doing so, helps break down the polarization, breeds civility towards fellow humans and leads to the development of real solutions that most everyone can live with.

Mike Blakeman is the acting public affairs officer for the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. When not working, he’s most often found scrambling around the mountains in the Upper Rio Grande Basin with a camera in his hand.