

Opinion: Consequences of Air Force expansion in Nev.

By Tay Wiles, High Country News

One morning in January, I accompanied a group of environmental advocates to the northern tip of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge, 100 miles north of Las Vegas. A short hike brought us to a boulder with a petroglyph of bighorn sheep, eroded after thousands of years of exposure. A more recent traveler left a mark nearby as well, etching the letters "U" and "S." "I wonder who did the 'US,'" said Christian Gerlach, the Sierra Club's Nevada organizer. "Was it the Air Force or one of the cavalrymen?" By cavalrymen, he meant federal troops encountering bands of Paiute in this region in the 19th century. By Air Force, he meant the entity trying to gain control of this land today.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt first protected the area in 1936, as a game range for bighorn sheep. But just four years later, the U.S. War Department began using part of it as a bombing and gunnery range. Since then, the Air Force has gained a total of 2.9 million acres for its Nevada Test and Training Range.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service co-manages 846,000 of those acres as part of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge – the largest federal wildlife refuge in the Lower 48. Now, the Air Force hopes to gain sole jurisdiction and expand its range to include another 300,000 federal acres, most of it refuge land, leaving the refuge with less than 500,000 acres.

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