

The campaign to create Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument: A case study

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**Abstract**

In 2014 a previously little-known, but archaeologically rich, area outside of the neon city of Las Vegas, Nevada was designated by Congress as the Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument (TUSK). This case study will show how well-coordinated voluntary action was largely responsible for the creation of this national monument. There are three primary objectives for this research project; first, to provide a sequential overview of how a group of women (and later a larger group of community members) went from a loosely connected group to a functioning nonprofit, formally recognized by the IRS and the greater community. Second, to highlight how cause-oriented activism can be latent within a group of people but, when activated, can result in long-lasting change and third, to briefly highlight how this national monument was created largely because of the incredible commitment and work of local activists and voluntary action.

*Key words:* volunteers, environmental issues, voluntary action, national monuments

## **Introduction**

Home to a geologic record of thousands of fossils of Ice Age mammoths, bison, American Lions, dire wolves and more, the Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument (hereafter denoted as TUSK, the National Park Service designation) stands as a testament to both those fossils and to the community of civically minded people who advocated for its creation. With priorities of conservation, protection, and interpretation, a previously unconnected group of people became fierce community advocates, working with political representatives, community leadership and various nonprofit groups on the monument creation. Collectively, they committed to years of meetings, tours, educational campaigns, active volunteer management and community engagement on behalf of public land.

This case study will show how well-coordinated voluntary action created a legacy of land preservation for future generations in under a decade. Unknowingly at first, the original five members committed to learning the ropes of the non-profit world as they went from a loose coalition of people committed to a goal, to a coalition under the umbrella of another non-profit, and finally to the creation of their own nonprofit. A nonprofit complete with by-laws, Executive and various committees, formal documentation and auditing procedures, and the myriad of responsibilities that are required of non-profits. This eclectic group of volunteers then further engaged their community in a long-term intensive campaign to create the monument.

## **Background**

There are currently 129 national monuments within the United States, run by different federal agencies and created in different ways. While national monuments are found all over the nation, the majority of monuments are found in the Western United States (Rothman, 1989). One state in particular, Nevada, has had three monument designations within the past 3 years

including TUSK. Nevada, while known for catering to vice and to exploiting natural resource, is also home to residents who care deeply about the preservation of public lands, often dedicating thousands of collective hours (as discussed later) in pursuit of preservation.

A brief overview of the state of Nevada is helpful to put this project and the significance of its voluntary action into context. According to Ren (2011), author of the 2010 American community survey brief on lifetime mobility in the U.S., Nevada had 24.3% of current residents born in Nevada residing within the state (the average US rate is 58%). This speaks to the highly transient nature of the state's residents. In addition, Nevada ranks 50th in number of non-profits (Word, Lim, Servino & Lange, 2014) also ranking 49th in community volunteerism with only 20.3% of residents volunteering (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013).

Previous research has shown that a third of volunteers who are active one year do not participate in voluntary action the next (Corporation, 2007). Yet despite those somewhat dismal numbers in the state of Nevada, five individuals estimated they invested over 21,580 hours in service to the creation of this national monument between 2006-2014. This number does not include the number of volunteer hours from those 100+ involved who weren't interviewed, or those 100+ individuals who participated in the Site Stewardship program, a program that trains and uses community volunteers to monitor the fossil sites.

### **Case Study Methodology**

To better understand the contributions of volunteers in the creation of this unique national monument I developed a holistic, single-case study (Yin, 2014) of the Protectors of Tule Springs (POTS). Case studies are empirical inquiries where researchers investigate "a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-world context" using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). POTS members (with emphasis on the founding members) and several

very involved community members were the unit of analysis within the local, state, and national context of volunteer-led efforts to transform this site into a national monument. POTS' involvement serves as the "case" in this instance as they had the longest involvement with the site, and it is bounded to those who were actively involved in the creation of the national monument (with one exception noted below).

The time-period under study includes activities before (eventual) POTS members knew each other, through site preservation and community engagement, all the way through to the passage of the legislation in support of the monument. I reviewed archival documents including newspaper articles, Congressional bills, public documents from nonprofit and local, state, and federal sources, as well as local and national media coverage. Although much of the data collected relates to actions before the creation of the monument, part of the analysis also includes a contemporary contextual element that allows for a deeper understanding of the long-term effect of voluntary action.

Using a grounded theoretical approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I conducted retrospective semi-structured interviews with the original five members of POTS and additional stakeholders to gather information about their personal experience as volunteers and members of the community that worked to create the monument. The interviewees consisted of the original five women involved in creating POTS, a Park Ranger who became involved after the creation of the National Park but with whom I collected institutional data regarding the monument-making process, a supportive legislator active during the course of the monument's creation, a faculty member from the local university, and select members of the Tule Springs Coalition (created by the National Parks Conservation Association). There were multiple other individuals and

organizations who worked on this monument, but this case study is bounded to the POTS organization.

### **Protectors of Tule Springs (POTS)**

Though in the area since the Pleistocene era, the value of the Tule Springs area wasn't well known to residents in the development that abuts the site of the monument. In 2006, as required for most environmental projects, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) requested citizen input regarding potential upcoming private development. One such meeting culminated in the creation of a group that would remain dedicated to the preservation of TUSK. Helen Mortensen, a long-time advocate for causes within the state of Nevada, was present, hoping to find others who would work on behalf of this project. Mortensen's involvement in the Las Vegas Valley had spanned decades and she would provide immeasurable guidance regarding the potential monument.

Jill DeStefano attended the meeting and though she had never been politically active before, quickly exhibited many of the characteristics of a social entrepreneur (Frumkin, 2005). She would count this as the beginning of the campaign to preserve Tule Springs. As she stated, she "was hooked" and set out to ensure protection of this unique site that was virtually in her backyard (personal communication, 2015). DeStefano stated, "when I first became aware of the BLM Environmental Impact Study and at the same time was informed of the enormous number of fossils found on the surface of the area, I knew I had to organize a group of citizens [sic] to protect this historical and cultural treasure, so Protectors of Tule Springs (POTS) was created" (POTS, 2015). Sandy Croteau, a member of the POTS five stated it was the "perfect storm of the right women" (2015).

The group began to work without a formal strategic plan, which is common with many nonprofits, particularly smaller ones (Stone, Bigelow & Crittendon, 1999). This is also where they started to consider various stakeholders for resource development and potential collaborations (Brown & Iverson, 2004). There is evidence of strategy formulation as the group began to “develop plans to achieve the organization’s goals and objectives consistent with its mission and philosophy” (Stone et al., 1999, pg. 380, Shortell et al., 1985). While nonprofits can be characterized as having multiple and conflicting goals (Stone, et al.1999), this group had one overarching goal to guide them, that of preservation of this space as a national monument. Having one relatively non-controversial goal was cited by interviewees as being one of the primary reasons for the incredible support of the community and eventual creation of the monument. The volunteer group mobilized immediately in partnership with BLM, taking fifty residents out to view the mammoth site in October of 2006 (POTS, 2015). They also started to become a visible presence and voice in community meetings, with many becoming involved in the Site Stewardship program through the National Park System.

Volunteering wasn’t without its struggles though, as highlighted by one incident. While attending a BLM stakeholder meeting, a consultant for the developers instructed DeStefano to “stay home and play bridge, we are building on all of this land” (DeStefano, 2015). Fortunately, the group didn’t stay home and play bridge, but continued to seek new opportunities and relationships. In 2007, the Friends group held their first public meeting with 48 people in attendance and it was here the members adopted the name “Protectors of Tule Springs” (POTS, 2015). Throughout the year, they continued to meet with various stakeholders including Senators, local tribal leaders, representatives from the nearby cities, various nonprofits and military leadership from the nearby Nellis Air Force Base.

Initial preservation efforts focused on ensuring the land was not turned over to private developers. In 2008, the group collected 10,000 signatures to stop development of the land, and handed the petition over to then Senator Harry Reid (D-NV). Eventually, the group received a break from impending development from an unlikely source; the 2008 recession. The Las Vegas Valley was hit very hard, stopping investment in the area and making the possibility of diversifying an economy heavily dependent on gaming and extractive industry attractive. The group and community recognized and grasped the value of this opportunity as it related to the monument; highlighting the fact that volunteer administrators must be cognizant of their environmental and social contexts so they may seize opportunities

In 2010, POTS, (active since 2006), local and state governments, the Metro Chamber, Outside Las Vegas Foundation, The Audubon Society, Sierra Club, and various other political, conservation oriented and neighborhood groups joined the Tule Springs Coalition, a coalition created by the National Park Conservation Association (NPCA). This coalition reached across different organizational priorities, objectives (both in general and as they related to public land uses), and diverse viewpoints about the ownership of public land within the state. Here is where initial strategic planning occurred as the group met to establish boundaries for the proposed national monument (even though it may not have been called as such). During this time, the groups were told that “legislation is imminent” (POTS, 2015) and though legislation didn’t pass during the next two legislative sessions, the group kept their momentum up, still offering guided tours, educating the community and meeting with various stakeholders. In February 2013 POTS’ evolution into a full-fledge nonprofit was complete as they incorporated as a formal 501©3 nonprofit, under their previous name “Friends of Tule Springs Wash”.



Final designation of TUSK occurred in 2014, when it was included as part of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). A state senator at the time supported the bill and stated in the interview that the inclusion of this preservation piece in a defense bill was ideal; that the monument designation process should be completed through the legislative process, with executive orders pursued after legislative efforts had failed. The bill included zero funding, though this is common for national monument designations (Clarke & Angersbach, 2006).

The work is far from over though, as community activists must stay engaged as there remains a need for long term involvement to create a visitor's center, to secure funding, hiking trails, and put an end to vandalism of the area.

### **Discussion**

This study revealed several important lessons of interest for volunteer program administrators, particularly those working in communities with low social cohesion. While statistically, volunteer numbers are low and mobility is high within the state of Nevada, residents are indeed making significant changes on both local and national levels. The steps involved in the process for POTS (outlined in Figure 1) included initial awareness, coalition and resource building, policy and coalition building, legislative action and then maintaining continued support for the national monument.

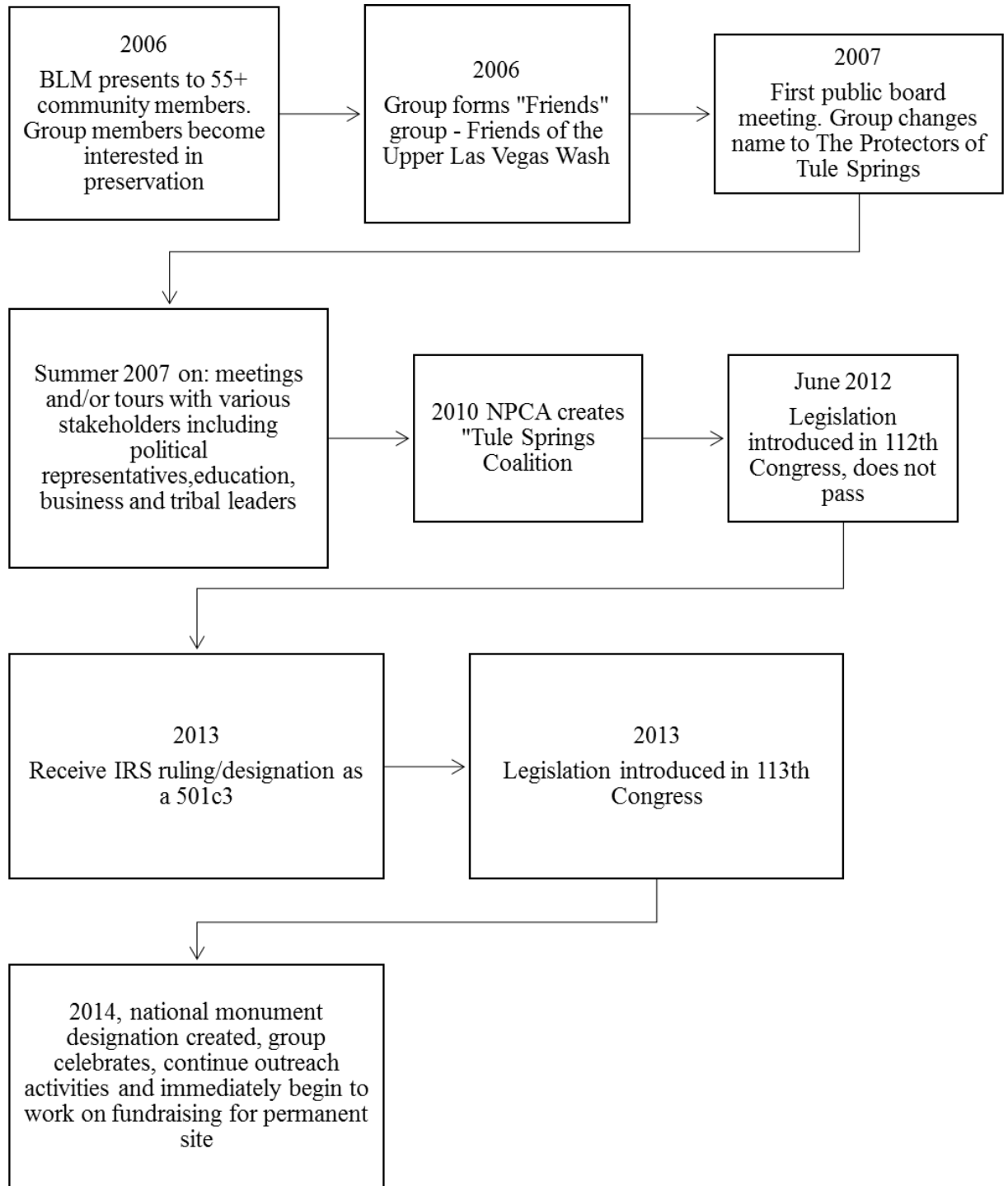


Figure 1. Sequence of events

In their research regarding improving the relationship between stewardship programs and volunteers, Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese (2001) provided several recommendations for success;

consider volunteer motivations, provide learning opportunities, highlight volunteer successes, provide time for reflection and social activities, and utilize volunteer time and abilities effectively. Each of the recommendations was referenced to some degree during interviews, with the following themes arising out of this case:

- Cause-oriented activism; clear and well-articulated goals for the movement
- Collaboration and meaningful involvement of a variety of stakeholders
- Volunteer involvement and guidance; allowing volunteers to choose roles and activities that interested them and were consistent with their values
- Consistent communication and relationship building with diverse groups

Interviews with DeStefano and several of the interviewees revealed lack of activism in their past, but when met with the reality of increased development and destruction of archeological treasures, they became passionate “believers”, with strong commitments to the cause (Frumkin, 2005, pg. 133). The existence of a clear goal was cited by several interviewees as a significant reason for their success.

Additionally, when asked how they leveraged lean resources and an eclectic group of volunteers, interviewees discussed how POTS leadership placed volunteers in positions based on their skills, needs and motivations (as recommended by Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001). This allowed volunteers, as Frumkin notes, to “express their values and commitment through work, volunteer activities, and donations” (2002, pg. 23), ensuring that volunteers who were invested in preserving the fossil beds, were also invested in their role within the organization. Some led tours out on the site, others created brochures and others worked with other stakeholders on creating support for the monument.

These volunteers met with local and national representatives, led tours and meetings, raised funds, and educated the community on the value of this area that could have been the site of another home development. This provides volunteer administrators with an understanding of a successful campaign led by deeply committed volunteers.

### **National monuments and voluntary action**

Projects with long-term effects on local land use consistently meet with criticism from local communities, unless active community organizing and relationship cultivation has taken place to include local voices. Policy-makers find that it is critical to gain stakeholder involvement to make informed management decisions (Stave, 2002). POTS, through consistent education campaigns, cultivation of community partnerships and dogged determination, did not encounter large scale opposition, and because TUSK was created through Congressional action, Tule Springs is not under review by Executive Order 13792 (2017).

### **Conclusion**

In this case study members of a retirement community created a nonprofit, joined the Tule Springs Coalition, and actively volunteered on behalf of land preservation and policy change. At the beginning of this project, DeStefano was told it takes upwards of 20-40 years to get a national monument designation (Personal Communication, 2015). However, TUSK took less than ten years of concerted volunteer effort. While it is typically dangerous to draw a causal inference between an individual group and a given outcome, particularly because it is difficult to weigh the inputs from the various local and national partners, it is undeniable that the POTS nonprofit and volunteers actively contributed to the creation of this national monument. Those interviewed were passionate agents of change and regeneration; using informal lectures, classroom visits, tours, casual or formal discussions and the creation of informative materials as

their methods of building community involvement and investment. Overall, this situation can serve as an example for volunteer program administrators who seek to mobilize their communities in pursuit of significant change.

Tule Springs have been called the “model park for the coming century” (DeStefano, Personal Communication, 2015) because of its uncommon proximity to a large urban center and incredible support from the community. In 2016, the United States celebrated the National Parks System’s centennial, and while we celebrate the beauty of these sites, it also behooves us to take a moment to consider the dedication, the countless volunteer hours, of those who have worked to preserve these national lands.

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