

[The Bonneville Salt Flats need to be saved](#). The location where many of the world-records for land speed have been set is in danger. A combination of years of racing, plus the construction of Interstate 80 and alterations in salt mining techniques has meant that the hard salt surface of the flats (similar in hardness to concrete) has worn down and is not being replaced. There is a risk that in a few years high-speed racing will no longer be feasible at the flats.

This might not sound like an environmental crisis. But much of the rhetoric of those involved in the controversy is environmental. The headline of the New York Times article (in the Automobile section, of course) is Conserving Utah's Fragile Salt Flats. There is an organization formed by the racing community called "Save the Salt." The area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the federal land manager (Bureau of Land Management) has designated the site an Area of Critical Environmental Concern.

Probably a lot of people who consider themselves environmentalists wouldn't think it that important to protect a site for high-speed racing. But the fight to "save" the Bonneville Salt Flats shows that there is a tremendous diversity of values and goals that people might consider environmental.

Sometimes those goals will be in tension, even when the goals are more widely embraced within the traditional environmental movement. Much of the controversy over industrial-scale [solar power projects in the California desert](#) has been around how to [tradeoff one goal \(rapidly increasing low- or no-carbon renewable energy production\) with other goals](#) (protecting [biodiversity](#) such as [desert tortoises](#); protecting what is a relatively wild landscape that is visually inspiring to many people; protecting [Native American cultural and spiritual resources](#)).

In an [earlier post](#), I discussed the dangers of creating exemptions from general environmental laws (such as CEQA) where there might be significant asymmetry in political power. But even if that asymmetry does not exist, even where the only interest groups involved are environmental groups or other citizen groups, these kinds of exemptions have a risk. They identify some environmental goals as "better" or "more important" than others. That might well be true - I can very much understand the argument that some local environmental harms in the California desert are worth massively increasing renewable energy to help deal with the problem of climate change. But it carries a political risk.

Those whose goals and values are identified as "less important" through statutory exemptions are surely going to be frustrated and angry. They may question why the general environmental law deserves support, if their preferences are not going to be considered.

This is important because environmental law is statutory law in the United States, always subject to revision and repeal. Those laws are more likely to be sustainable if they have more allies – whether they be proponents and opponents of solar power projects, or even racing enthusiasts. Some environmentalists might question whether the Salt Flats should be identified as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, arguing that this diminishes what it means to be an environmental problem. But a big tent might mean all the more support for BLM’s ability to protect environmental values – of a wide range – on its lands. The same may be true for CEQA.