

DESERT FATHER

ALAN O'NEILL

Going out to natural desert landscapes like Sloan Canyon allows me to reconnect at a soul level and to really listen to my inner guidance. I get greater clarity on issues in this quiet, peaceful environment that eludes me in the noise and chaos of everyday urban living.

— ALAN O'NEILL



A community needs people whose inner compasses align with the landscape. Desert vision quests help Alan O'Neill keep centered, grounded, and advocating for Nevada's great outdoors. Alan is the former superintendent of the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, founder of Outdoor Las Vegas Foundation (now called Get Outdoors Nevada), a Friends of Sloan Canyon board member, an advisor to the National Parks Conservation Association, and an executive committee member for the Honor Avi Kwa Ame Campaign.

The Magnanimous Alan O'Neill

Before New York Times reporter John Buchanan visited Avi Kwa Ame, the newest national monument just south of the Las Vegas Valley, he spoke to Alan O'Neill who said, "This landscape talks to you when you get close to it." For almost a quarter of a century, Alan has actively listened to what it has to say.

Daniel Rothberg, writing for The Nevada Independent, described it this way: "(Alan) has thoroughly documented the landscape that will fall within the monument. He has explored backcountry roads that reveal an environment, which shifts with elevation as Mojave yucca and Joshua trees give way to pinyon and juniper. From the highway, these plants look like specks. Up close, they form an ecosystem. For O'Neill, this inspires awe."

The plants, critters, and landscape of Avi Kwa Ame also fuel this desert father's sense of advocacy. "Alan and his family have a heart for service and the land. (I believe) he wakes up and must protect it. It is how he is wired," says Mauricia Baca, Nevada State Director of the Nature Conservancy and a former Executive Director of Get Outdoors Nevada which Alan founded. "He has a deep and profound care for every element of nature including our lands and people."

Alan initiated a consultation process with the American tribes that led to Avi Kwa Ame listing as a Traditional Cultural Property on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999. He recognized the opportunity to protect the cultural and natural landscape as one and has continued to serve as an advocate and to consult on the land's designation for more than two decades.

Avi Kwa Ame – also known as Spirit Mountain – spans 506,814 acres of desert. It is the source of life and origin place for 10 Yuman-speaking tribes, sacred land to the Hopi and Southern Paiute people, home to Joshua Tree forests, and habitat for species like big horn sheep, desert tortoises, and Gila monsters. Its recent designation as a National Monument will protect Avi Kwa Ame as sacred space for spiritual uses while ensuring continued access to hunting, camping, hiking, OHV use, and other recreational activities.

Tom Warden, a founding board member of Get Outdoors Nevada (previously Outdoor Las Vegas) board member, says, "There are precious few people like Alan. He is a tireless advocate for nature, in whom kindness is a constant and compassion is second nature. Coupled with his innate leadership he is a natural trailblazer... and our great state of Nevada is better for it."

The Compass seeks to nurture awareness, appreciation, and actions that support the inter-relational wellbeing of humans, habitats, natural resources, and economies.

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