

THE GREAT SALT SCANDAL

An environmental outrage perpetrated unchecked for 55 years may finally be close to rectification

In 1982, together with many fellow Thrust2 team followers, I spent an awful lot of time walking up and down a 20 mile strip of the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, just outside the gambling town of Gerlach.

The sun scorched and blinded us, but our task was simple and essential: clean the desert foot by foot, clearing up stones, rocks and spent cartridges from USAF planes which long ago used the playa for strafing practice. On the occasions when we actually found live ammunition - nasty little two point seven-five calibre rocket warhead

suckers more dangerous than the rattlesnakes - we left removal to militia specially summoned to detonate them behind Bruno Selmi's bar back in town.

We had relocated there after rain had washed out Richard Noble's second attack on the land speed record at the famed Bonneville Salt Flats, which in any case had proved in 1981 to be a less than harmonious match with Thrust2's solid aluminium wheels. Rather than give up and go home - probably never to return - Noble had taken the advice of his friend Peter Moore and

reconnoitred the new venue.

"We need a minimum of 11 miles of flat area which is dry, accessible and devoid of any plant life," Noble had said.

"Have you thought of the Black Rock Desert?" Peter asked. "I've camped there and it seems to satisfy your criteria. I'd say it's worth a look."

It was. He had just identified the answer to Noble's prayers - and opened up a whole new era for ultimate speed seekers.

But the notion of running Thrust2 there was



far from universally popular, even if the fabulous people of Gerlach – population 200 – fell over themselves seeking ways to ‘adopt a Brit’ as we suddenly invaded them.

I ended up staying with a fantastic fellow called Dick West, who put his house keys on the table in front of me within 15 minutes of us meeting.

“My place is back in Empire – on Third Street,” he said. “Make yourself at home. There’s plenty of beer in the icebox.”

“But you don’t know me from Adam. What if I burgle you?” I said.

Whereupon he placed his Magnum 357 on the table alongside his keys and said: “In that case

I’d have to shoot you.” Dick was the local sheriff. Many times in the days that followed, I could think of a few people he might be better off aiming that cannon at, and some of them worked for the Bureau of Land Management which was tasked with the environmental protection and preservation of such regions.

To begin with, it made Noble jump through myriad hoops. He needed a permit to run on the desert. The Project Thrust team had demonstrated its resolve by relocating from Bonneville to Gerlach in just six days, but it took longer than that to get that precious piece of paper.

One of the conditions under which Thrust was allowed to make initial trials was that the BLM

stipulated the desert surface could not be graded or marked in any way – so no scraping it flat or laying down a black oil line for Noble to follow like they did at Bonneville. Instead, team manager Ken Norris drove the Firechase Jaguar in dead-straight lines to mark out each of the 16 lanes in which Noble would run, siting on points in the far distance. Plus we did all that back-breaking, skin-blistering cleaning work on the surface, defodding the tracks. It wasn’t just rocks and bullets, either – there were bits of rusted steel hawser, beer bottles and cans. All sorts of foreign objects that could spell disaster for a 650 mph car.

Noble had applied for the permit on October 5th, and it was ready by the 12th. He hit



349 mph on his first run on the 15th, but then a bunch of environmentalists – the Nevada Outdoor Recreation Association - started to get uppity at the thought of ‘their’ desert being so defiled. An injunction against Thrust2 was granted. Together with the Sierra Club, NORA represented a body with muscle – one that hated any sort of offroad vehicle. Working with the BLM’s Lynn Clemons, a decent guy, Noble formed his defence against NORA, which was led by a guy called Charlie Watson.

The nimby environmentalists had reckoned without the resolve of the residents of Gerlach, who were not going to let their little hamlet be denied its moment in the spotlight.

“Never mind Charlie Watson,” they said, “he

doesn’t even live up here. It’s our desert, we live on it, and we say Thrust should run.”

Joanne Irazoki and Kathy Mito, from Bruno’s Country Club in Gerlach, duly presented Nevada congressman Jim Santini with a petition signed by the people of Gerlach and Empire. His representative, Susan Linn, was impressed. Like Santini she was a lover of the desert, and after an inspection said: “I can understand that the protesters are worried about traffic and the vulnerability of the desert to racers, but I haven’t seen the kind of damage I’d expected. I’d say the protesters have no case bar the precedent set at Alvord Lake a couple of years back. The damage is minimal, and in any case the desert will rejuvenate

itself when the rains flood it after the Fall.

“As far as I’m concerned these guys are honourable people working very hard to anticipate the BLM’s requirements. They’re honest, first class people.”

Noble got his permit back – and would eventually break the land speed record at 633.468 mph on October 4th, the following year. He would go back with ThrustSSC in 1997, as Andy Green went 714.144 mph that September, before going supersonic with 763.035 mph on October 15th. To date, nobody has even got close to going any faster.

Black Rock, however, is no longer suitable for land speed attempts, due partly to the annual



Burning Man festival that the BLM made so welcome. 60,000 free-thinking, free-drinking revellers create their own city-sized accommodation of giant wooden structures on the hallowed ground in an event dedicated to “community, art, self-expression and self-reliance” (right). It has arguably inflicted far more damage than either of the Thrust projects ever did.

Rejecting his Old Faithful venue which should have been the ideal starting point as the location of upcoming Bloodhound SSC’s 1000 mph attempt, Green explained that the combined effects of a 10-year drought and Burning Man had taken a deleterious toll.

“The lack of rain over the last decade, together with increasingly heavy use for the playa surface, principally by the annual Burning Man festival, has left the surface in poor condition with a dip in the middle of the old course,” he reported. “It’s bumpy, crumbly, rutted and uneven for much of its 140+ square mile surface and is not currently a suitable surface on which to run a car like Bloodhound.”

Who knows where the environmentalists were who had so vehemently opposed Thrust2 when Burning Man got the official nod from the BLM.

Meanwhile, as all of these stories were being played out as history was created, 330 miles to the east, at Bonneville, the authorities were still turning a blind eye as one of the most heinous environmental scandals in history continued unchecked.

Thirty years earlier, before the salt flats’ Great Confrontation of 1960 in which five contenders – Donald Campbell with Bluebird; Mickey Thompson



with Challenger; Dr Nathan Ostich with the world’s first pure-thrust jetcar, Flying Caduceus; Athol Graham with his homebuilt City of Salt Lake; and Art Arfons with his piston-packing Green Monster – had each tried and failed to better the late John Cobb’s 394 mph record with the Railton Special which dated back to 1947, the first threat to the great white lake began to emerge.

Within two years of Thompson going one-way at 406 mph in that epic battle, before blowing an engine to spoil his return run, the salt was in desperate shape. Commerce, it seemed, was winning the battle with competitors, as local businesses extracted the potash and compromised

Ma Nature’s ability to heal the flats each year.

The respected automotive writer Griff Borgeson penned an authoritative letter of defensive support to Stuart Udall, then Secretary of the Interior in Washington DC, and it was published in the January 1962 issue of Car and Driver.

‘The purpose of this letter is to call the attention of your Department to the advanced and continuing deterioration of one of America’s and the world’s most unique and beautiful natural formations. This is the area known as the Bonneville Salt Flats.

‘Under optimum conditions this area contains about 175 square miles of hard,

crystalline, snow-white salt. The thickness of this huge slab range from about four feet to three inches where, at the edges, it abruptly feathers out on to the surrounding and underlying clay. With its backdrop of surrounding mountains this is one of the most beautiful desert areas in the world. It ranks aesthetically with, for example, Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It serves more than aesthetic uses.

‘It is the only known site in North America where attempts can be made in relative safety upon the World’s Land Speed Record. Until recently, it was the only such site known to exist in the world. Since Sir Malcolm Campbell’s successful attempt in 1935 all attempts on the LSR have been made at Bonneville. Since that time this natural speed course has been used for testing purposes

by major firms in our automotive industry. It has been used by a great many challengers of lesser International records. For 13 years it has been the site of the world-famous Bonneville National Speed Trials.

‘This area has another practical use. Early in World War 1, when the nation was without sources for potash, the Solvay Process Company





constructed a pioneer potash-processing plant at Salduro Station, in this area. The mining technique consisted of pumping brine from the vast water table which then lay in and under the salt. This brine was pumped through a series of evaporating ponds until about 75 percent of the original water and sodium chloride had been eliminated, leaving a feed for the refinery of about one third potash and two thirds sodium chloride; the latter is waste.

'The Salduro operation was not a financial success and was abandoned after World War 1. In 1935 new capital became interested in exploiting this resource and a new potash-processing company was formed under the name

of Bonneville Ltd.

'Meanwhile, fabulous surface deposits of potash-sodium chloride had been discovered and developed in New Mexico. Although Bonneville Ltd was a relatively small producer in the new domestic potash industry it showed a profit and continues to operate.

'The natural beauty of the Salt Flats and their suitability for a safe, high-speed automotive racing and test course depend upon moisture, in the form of precipitation and water table. Two processes are involved:

'First, when precipitation and runoff inundate the salt the fresh water takes surface

salt into solution and tends to erase the rough irregularities caused by expansion of the crystalline salt during the balance of the year. As this brine evaporates a fresh and immaculate salt surface is created, healing previous flaws and renewing itself annually.

'Second, solar heat apparently causes the water table of normal years to rise to the surface daily during the warm season. As this exposed brine evaporates it deposits fresh salt on the surface, aiding the constant renewal process.

'In the absence of these forms of moisture the salt cannot renew its surface as it has done during recent geologic time. The water table

normally fluctuates between surface level and about four inches below the surface. It is now about four feet below the surface; there have been many years of drought and in the absence of spontaneous regeneration the Salt Flats have degenerated deplorably and alarmingly.

'Their condition was so bad that two Land Speed Record attempts had to be cancelled and it was even doubtful that a usable short course could be prepared for the Bonneville National Speed Trials. If the present trend continues the speedway facility may be rendered totally useless and the possibility of an American or anyone else setting a Land Speed Record on American soil will end. Meanwhile, Australia and the USSR are developing such natural speedways. Others, ripe for development, exist in Latin America.

'Nothing, of course, can be done about the lack of precipitation in this area. Measures can conceivably be taken, however, for the conservation of the water table under the Salt Flats. I do not have Bonneville Ltd's current figures but I was told by their superintendent in 1954 that each year, for about 100 days in the summer, the firm pumped between 25,000 and 30,000 gallons per minute for 24 hours a day, for a total of about 10 to 11 million tons of brine annually. To illustrate the magnitude of this operation, the firm calculated that artificial evaporation of the amount of water involved would require the consumption of between 3000 and 4000 tons of coal each day of the year.

'The lowering of the water table became apparent in the early 1950s, when Bonneville Ltd was forced to deepen its brine wells. This year, in order to catch up with the receding water table, the firm has dredged a drainage ditch for a great

many miles across the Salt Flats. I am told that the ditch had to go to a depth of 20 feet. This should drain water from under the salt for miles around. If and when a good season of precipitation comes along it would not be surprising if this vast canal minimises its beneficial effect upon the surface salt.'

Borgeson implored Udall and his department to give consideration to Bonneville's future.

Fast forward 30 years from Noble's first visit, and there has been little evidence of any change in

the underlying attitude to the continued pillaging of Bonneville.

I went back there in 1994 and was shocked to see that the brilliant whiteness had been marred by muddy yellow patches. Two visits in 2006 revealed an improvement and Green reported it to be in "fantastic shape, the best I have ever seen," in 2008, but he also noted that it was relatively thin at either end and lacked the bearing strength to support Bloodhound. On subsequent visits with the FIA Land Speed Records Commission in 2011



and 2014, it was clear to us that the surface had got even worse at the northern end. It was like watching an old friend going bald.

The weather and the thinness of the salt have played havoc with various speed events in the past two seasons and frustrated the efforts of many racers to go faster, but recent political developments hold hope for the future.

In September last year it was announced that the Save the Salt Coalition and Utah Alliance are working closely together as advocates for the land speed racing community to protect the salt flats.

The former is an international group of businesses and organizations with a vested interest in the venue. The Utah Alliance provides expertise and connections at the state and local level. Major LSR sanctioning organisations are members of both groups, which are united in their resolve to restore Bonneville to its one-time position as the premier venue for setting speed records. The collaboration allows experts within the groups to undertake specific projects.

The cancellation of four of the five major events last year accelerated discussions between Save the Salt and Utah Association, and the BLM, to begin the process of identifying tangible restoration actions in both the short- and the long-term. These include expanded brine pumping, barriers to keep the pumped brine within the racing area, and targeted dry salt laydowns. Over the winter months geologists took core samples, to facilitate consultations with engineers and water experts.

A meeting in Wendover, the closest town to the flats, was held on September 14th last year and



brought together representatives of Utah Alliance and Save the Salt, plus staff from Utah Governor Gary Herbert's office, Senator Mike Lee's office, the BLM, Wendover-based Intrepid Potash, the Utah Department of Natural Resources, Dr Brenda Bowen from the University of Utah, Wendover mayor Mike Crawford, councilmen of West Wendover, and a number of high-profile land speed racers.

"Everyone displayed a willingness to come together to find a solution," said Dennis Sullivan, chairman of Utah Alliance. "There was a mutual respect demonstrated among the public agencies, private entities and racers. We all need to learn more from each other as we all have specific

observations and experiences that need to be combined with scientific data to provide a viable way forward."

Doug Evans, chairman of Save the Salt, said: "Although concerns about deterioration at Bonneville have existed for decades, today marked the first time officials representing government, industry and racers sat at the same table to discuss solutions. We are finally at the starting line in the race to save Bonneville."

The group acknowledges that there are no quick fixes to resolve the issues relating to the condition of the salt. However, they believe that given the high level of cooperation, the historic and



internationally famous speedway will eventually be restored to safe racing condition.

Subsequently, Utah Governor Herbert signed a resolution urging the BLM to take the necessary steps to restore Bonneville.

"We want to make sure that up front everybody understands that this is more than just for racing," said Louise Noeth, the respected land speed racing author and photographer who is a spokesman for Save the Salt. "This is a national

treasure for everyone to enjoy."

While the racers rightly blame Bonneville's shrinking and thinning on the BLM's long-term mishandling and mismanagement of the situation, the agency and scientists counter that the problem is more complex than mining, racing, geography or weather alone. Either way, Noeth says she's happy to see the high-level attention the salt flats are finally getting - even if Herbert's welcome and well-meaning resolution lacks either muscle or funding.

"Essentially what the land speed racing community got," she says, "was a love letter from the people and the leadership and the administration of the state of Utah."

Now the group will start to seek a way to retire idle potash leases, having determined that that is the best way finally to start reversing decades of licensed commercial destruction of one of the world's most awe-inspiring and spiritual places.

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The award-winning Formula 1 e-magazine is brought to you by:
David Tremayne | Joe Saward | Peter Nygaard
With additional material from
Mike Doodson | Lotte Nygaard

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Grand
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Grand Prix

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PASSION



CHINESE GRAND PRIX

Nico's straight six