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## *The Slickrock Desert: Author Q&A*

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**Q: From the title, it is obvious this is a book about the American Southwest. It's not the first book about this region, so how do you distinguish it from all those other books written over the last fifty years?**

A: Yes, there are plenty of other books about the Southwest. They fall into three general categories. First are the hiking guidebooks. They tell you how to hike the trails but not much about the region itself. Then there are coffee-table photo books, filled with beautiful full-color photographs but little else. Finally, are the text-based nonfiction books that typically include few if any photos. These usually focus on narrow topics like the author's hiking adventures, a particular slice of history, or the threats to this land from money-hungry outsiders.

I took a different approach with *The Slickrock Desert*. I wrote it as a nonfiction text enhanced with over 50 photographs. I wanted it to inspire the reader to love this land, to understand how unique it is and why it needs protecting. I use stories of my forty years of personal explorations as a way to introduce readers to its history, natural history, geology, paleontology, ecology, and what we know of its earliest inhabitants. It plays to the reader's sense of wonder. One person said I should call it "Einstein Goes Camping" because of how it seamlessly blends my personal experiences in the backcountry with the scientific insights behind what I am seeing.

**Q: Who is your intended audience?**

A: Anyone who has been inspired by the American Southwest and anyone who hasn't yet been there but wants to learn more. It's not a hiking guide. I don't give directions to any secret hideaways. The stories I share are intended to inspire you to get out and explore on your own. You are as likely to read it while curled up on a couch with a warm cup of tea or cool glass of chardonnay as you are while camped out in a tent under the stars. Even long-time residents may learn something new. Two of my reviewers are people who live in the Southwest and have been active for years in efforts to protect it. Both commented that they learned things about this land they never knew before.

**Q: You've got an unusual background for an author of outdoor books. What drove you to write this book?**

A: True, my biography is not what you might expect of an outdoor adventurer. I've got bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering, and I've spent my entire career in the high-tech industry. I started as an engineer and eventually moved into senior levels of management. I've managed businesses with revenues as large as three hundred million dollars per year. I

have three patents in telecommunications technologies, and in 1988 the international industry trade association IPC presented me with their President's Award for what they called my "outstanding contributions" to the advancement of the electronics industry.

While I have loved working in high-tech, it is not my entire life. Ever since I was a small child, wilderness has been important to me. I grew up in Southern California, close to both the Mojave Desert and the Sierra Nevada Range. My parents would take our family out on camping adventures to remote locations nearly every month. When I started my career that stopped. I soon found I was spending all day either in my office or in aircraft flying to other offices in cities around the world. I needed an excuse to get back into the wilderness, so I came up with an idea. In my spare time I would write books that would force me to get outdoors. My first was a guidebook to the state parks near my home in California. After that I wrote a book for hikers and backpackers showing them how to use map, compass, and GPS to navigate safely in the wilderness. Both of those books have gone through multiple editions. *The Slickrock Desert* is my latest excuse for spending more time in the wilderness. I suppose now that it's done I'll need to find yet another excuse to get out there.

**Q: That sounds like it was a lot of work. How did your family feel about it?**

A: They have always supported me. My wife, Nicki, understood how important this was to me and encouraged me to do it. My children were already used to me being away on business travel for about a week every month, so it was nothing new for them. My daughter once told me that when she was in grade school she assumed business travel was something every father did. She was shocked when she learned from her friends that no one else's father traveled like I did.

**Q: You say your book includes over fifty photos. Did you take them all?**

A: Photography was a major excuse I used to justify this whole project. I took almost all of the photos myself, but I did include a few photos I didn't take. There were several places where I wanted to illustrate a story with an aerial photograph, but I didn't have access to an aircraft. I was fortunate to find some excellent photographers who had in their portfolios just what I was looking for. And I should credit Nicki for the photo of me at the back of the book.

**Q: You cover a lot of topics in your book: history, geology, paleontology, ancient cultures, and the threats the land is under today. How did you decide what to include and what to leave out?**

A: I decided early on that I didn't want to make this just a book about the threats to the landscape. I've read too many books where right from the beginning the author hits you over the head with all the terrible things being done out there by greedy people who care nothing about the land. I get turned off by what I call this "blitzkrieg" approach. This is a beautiful land, and you should convince me why I should care before you launch into a diatribe. I'm sure other readers have similar reactions and may even stop reading, which means the author hasn't achieved what he or she was trying to accomplish.

My approach is to first inspire the reader's love of this land by showing them how amazing it is, so they understand why it needs to be protected. I do talk about the threats, but only after the reader understands the land's importance. And you're right, in 280 pages I can't cover everything about every topic in the book. So, I've picked out stories that introduce the reader

to a topic and hopefully encourage them to want to learn more. Paleontology is a good example. I could devote an entire book to the subject (others already have), but instead I pick out a few examples. One story tells about how Dr. Alan Titus, the paleontologist for Grand Staircase-Escalante, discovered a whole family of tyrannosaur fossils in the Kaiparowits Plateau. At the time, paleontologists thought tyrannosaurs were solitary predators. Titus showed they hunted in packs, which would have been a terrifying proposition for the herbivores of the day. There is much more to the paleontology of the region. There is no way I could cover it all, so at the back of the book I include a list of references showing where to go to learn more.

**Q: How about another example of a story from the book?**

A: On one of my expeditions through Utah, I was driving along Highway 191 between the towns of Moab and Monticello. I passed an isolated, 200-foot-tall rock pedestal labeled “Church Rock” on the map. It looked intriguing, so I thought it would be interesting to learn more about it. That led me to discover that back in the 1930s it was the domain of a religious cult called “Home of Truth.” The cult’s leader, Marie Ogden, was a widow from New Jersey. She convinced over a hundred followers to turn everything they owned over to her and follow her to this remote outpost in the desert. They might have lived there unnoticed for decades except that when one of their members died, Ogden promised the body would come back to life. She had it washed with salt solutions multiple times a day to await its resurrection. That’s not the kind of thing you can keep secret, and before long it made national headlines. The amazing thing was that when Utah officials investigated, they decided that since the body had been mummified by the salt, the cult could keep it. In the 1930s Utah had no law requiring the dead to be buried. But after all that negative publicity the cult soon disbanded. It’s the kind of weird local story most visitors wouldn’t know anything about. I’ve tried to include other stories that neither visitors nor locals might know. For example, how many people know that Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument might never have been created without President Clinton’s daughter Chelsea advocating for it with her father?

**Q: One of your stories is quite personal. In 2019 your wife’s brother died in a fall at the Grand Canyon. How difficult was that story to write?**

A: It was a challenge. He slipped and fell 400 feet from the South Rim, and as his only relatives it was up to us to take care of his affairs. It is still traumatic for us, and I seriously considered leaving that story out. But I finally decided it needed to be told, if for no other reason than to warn people and hopefully prevent other deaths.

**Q: I don’t think there has ever been another book about wilderness explorations written by a senior corporate executive. What can you say about that?**

A: All the other wilderness-related books out there seem to be written either by social outcasts who rail against society or by super-athletes who pride themselves in claiming to be the first person ever to climb some lofty mountain or explore some desolate terrain. I don’t try to hide the fact I’m a business executive, and not an overly athletic one, either. I want everyone to know that even ordinary people can have adventures in the wilderness, and they should have permission to do so. I’ve known too many people in the working world who worry that if they have any kind of life outside of work their boss will think they are not fully committed to their

jobs. I want them to know that having a job and being a lover of the wilderness aren't mutually exclusive. By showing how I was successful doing both I hope it will offer encouragement for others to do something similar.

**Q: In your book you talk about how Utah's national parks are overrun with tourists. At certain times of year, the wait to get into some of those parks can be over an hour long. Aren't you concerned your book will encourage even more people to flood those parks?**

A: Crowding is certainly a problem. For example, starting this year (2022), Arches National Park is requiring that visitors during peak seasons have reservations just to enter the park. It's the latest fallout from a massive advertising campaign the State of Utah launched that has brought half a million more people into the parks every year—to parks that can't handle that growth. There's no way my book could have even a tiny fraction of that impact. And it's more likely to be read by visitors who pick it up in a gift shop or visitor center after they arrive. If it helps those visitors learn more about this magnificent land they are already in, they are more likely to be better stewards of the land.

**Q: Where can someone find a copy of your book? How much does it cost?**

A: It's in many of the bookstores and park visitor centers in the region, and of course in all the usual on-line stores. We are also trying to get it into as many libraries as we can. And you can always go to the Atenera Press website at [www.atenera.com](http://www.atenera.com), click on the link, and be taken to the ordering site of our distributor, Mountain Press. As for price, the paperback's list price is \$21.95, but individual retailers are free to set their own prices.

**Q: Is there an eBook version?**

A: Not yet. Call me old fashioned, but I believe the book will do well in bookstores and park visitor centers. I wanted to give those retailers the summer season to not compete with an eBook. The plan is to have the eBook ready to release in the fall.

**Q: What's next on your priority list?**

A: I'm semi-retired, so I've got some time over the next few months to be fully involved in launching this book. Depending on the situation with the pandemic I hope to be able to do a live tour of book signings at retail outlets across the West. If I can't do in-person appearances I may need to do some of them remotely using Zoom. Plans are still in progress, and we will make sure to keep the [atenera.com](http://atenera.com) website up to date. If anyone has a store they especially want me to visit I encourage them to go onto the [atenera.com](http://atenera.com) website and use the Contact form to let us know. We will try to work it out with the store owners to do an in-person visit. After this book launch is done, we will see what's next. There are plenty more deserts out there to write about.