

Tim Williams, teacher and outdoor leader at Baylor School, wrote the following response:

“There are no secret spots”

This is the goal of RootsRated’s business model, but I hope with every ounce of my being that it does not become a reality. While I fear your voice is much more powerful than mine, I also believe there are others who share a more hopeful perspective about the existence and preservation of obscure magical places.

While it is thankfully true that we all own public land, is increasing the number of people who use that land always the wise choice? Are there places that should remain off the radar? Who makes that decision? In my hometown, RootsRated makes that decision. RootsRated is a self-appointed authority governing the exposure of wilderness areas. With a mission statement to make obscure areas easier to find and a mobile app that reaches the masses instantly, RootsRated wields a power that can trump decades of thoughtful and measured stewardship with the click of a button.

In many towns across the country, local users have forged relationships with land owners, park officials, and each other to construct an understanding of wise use of particular areas. In some cases, the collective decision is to keep particular areas off the radar. It would be easy and inaccurate to characterize that decision as a selfish desire to keep a “secret spot” to themselves. There are other reasons. A closer look would reveal that keeping a place off the radar can be motivated by a desire to preserve something magic and delicate. Some areas simply cannot handle the traffic created by advertising them.

Making all wilderness areas known and accessible to everyone sounds like (and may feel like) a noble mission, but it is actually a very simplistic and short-sighted view. It ignores complex issues of timing, resources, manpower, education, delicate relationships, sensitive environments, risk management, and history. It ignores the judgement and local wisdom of climbers, paddlers, hikers, trail runners, land owners, park officials, local residents, and countless thoughtful human beings that have been stewards of these magic places for years. Their collective wisdom sometimes opts to keep an area off the radar. When RootsRated decides that wisdom is faulty, significant and often irreversible damage is done.

The examples below are from my hometown. My hope is that greater wisdom prevails in other towns, but I fear the damage is spreading nationwide.

Example #1

Directions to a local hiking/trail running spot recently showed up on a RootsRated post. The area has a long history that involves an evolving relationship between the town and local residents. Access has been a moving target and a delicate balance for over four decades. The parking area has space for three vehicles. Until the attention of RootsRated, use of this area was moderate. It could handle the traffic. Hours after a

RootsRated post, I counted eleven cars parked on the side of the road - some in the yards of local residents. Some (not all) of this area is public land. RootsRated decided to increase the number of users based on the idea that more access is a universal good. Does this mean that the local town officials are now obligated to expand the parking lot to handle the numbers RootsRated created? Were they consulted? What if the public land for expanded parking simply does not exist? Before the increase in users, the trails were maintained by conscientious locals. Who will maintain them now? RootsRated? Even if this area was 100% public land, does RootsRated have the authority to decide more people should use it? Apparently, they do.

Example #2

RootsRated: “Something must be said about this local jewel”

Directions to a local swimming hole recently showed up on a RootsRated post. The area does not have a designated parking area or established trail. Access to the swimming hole requires boulder hopping up a creek bed and crossing private land. The swimming hole is located on public land - a State Forest. Hours after the RootsRated post, I counted twenty cars parked on both sides of a busy highway - some in front of private residences. It is safe to say that as a direct result of a RootsRated post, over forty people were boulder hopping up the creek, crossing private land, and impacting a delicate environment. RootsRated described it as a secluded swimming hole that must be talked about. Even if the directions given by RootsRated did not cross private land, how should the State Forest officials handle the increased number of users? Are they now obligated to build a parking lot, construct a trail that mitigates risk management issues, and hire more employees to manage the crowds? This particular State Forest has a massive land area to manage with a skeleton crew of employees. They do not have the manpower or the money to manage this area with the increased number of users. What choice do they have? Should they ignore the crowds, parking hazards, and risk management issues? Would the responsible choice now be to shut it down?

Example #3

RootsRated: “We do not encourage trespassing under any circumstance.”

RootsRated recently published specific directions to an area that has been clearly posted as off limits by the State Forest. The directions included photographs with step by step instructions to walk past the sign prohibiting access. One could not follow (or publish) these directions without knowing the access to the area was prohibited. Publishing directions to private land or prohibited areas happens with RootsRated. Subsequently removing those posts does not erase the damage done.

Example #4

RootsRated: “50 things you have to do in Chattanooga”

Would the National Park Service want people stringing up their hammocks off the edge of Sunset Rock? Is that a use that is part of their risk management plan? It is public

land. RootsRated decided it was one of the “50 things one must do in Chattanooga”. Immediately after this post, I walked down to Sunset to do some early morning climbing and found a large group of people camping on Sunset Rock taking selfies of each other in their hammocks. Each visit this year has been the same experience. Access at Sunset Rock has been tense over the years - requiring the cooperation of climbers, local residents, and the Park Service. What “local expert” was consulted for this post? RootsRated put forty years of work and cooperation between users and the Park Service at risk with a single post. It is a powerful medium.

RootsRated asks us to “work harder” to find solitude.

The stated mission of RootsRated is to help people know about and access wilderness areas with less effort - especially those areas that are presently esoteric. It is odd to hear the same business encouraging us to work harder to enjoy wilderness - to find the obscure places. Which should we do - work harder or let you make it easier for us? If your mission is to remove “secret spots” and make them known and easily accessible, logic dictates that our environment to “work harder” will shrink with every RootsRated post. You are very good at what you do. The places we must work harder to find and access are quickly disappearing in my home town as a direct result of your success. To say that those places will always exist is extremely short-sighted - especially when your business model is designed to eliminate them.

RootsRated: “It’s, honestly, not very difficult to find outdoor experiences away from the crowds, but you may have to actually work for it.”

This may be true in the short term, but your business model is working against the existence of those areas. At present in my hometown, it is possible to find a place to trail run or climb in solitude if one is willing to do the work. I enjoy doing the work, so why should I be worried? We will run out of these places. It is the logical result of your business model.

Your reference to the Grand Canyon is an interesting example. Directing crowds from one part of a National Park to another spreads out the use and makes everyone happy. Both areas are designed to handle the traffic and have the manpower to do it well. It is a National Park. That logic does not hold true for a local swimming hole, bouldering area, or trail run. **Some local agencies (towns, park officials, etc.) simply do not have the resources to create the infrastructure needed to handle the demand you force upon them.** When you spread the use to obscure areas by advertising them, you assume that the people who use, manage, and own these areas will adjust because you decided they should. That is an arrogant assumption. Even if local agencies agree with your proclamation that an area should be used by more people, they may not have the resources to handle the increased numbers you created.

RootsRated: “You may have to go in the off-season, and you might have to pick the

third-most-popular destination instead of the one you saw on Instagram. Sorry.”

Sorry? You seem to refer to Instagram as the source and cause of places that are overrun with people and too popular to expect solitude. You are Instagram - just focused on the next unknown spot to make known. How many places will be punctuated by “sorry” before the magic places are gone? To think these places are unlimited is incredibly short-sighted.

RootsRated: “In fact, on more than a couple of occasions we’ve removed articles from [rootsrated.com](https://www.rootsrated.com) after realizing that an access trail crossed into private property or hearing from private landowners impacted by overflow parking.”

While I very much appreciate the moments when RootsRated removed articles that directed their audience to trespass on private land, the damage done is to a large degree irreversible. Your platform is extremely powerful and efficient. When RootsRated dramatically increases the number of users with a single post, those users do not forget the “new secret spot” when the article is removed. That genie cannot be put back in the bottle.

RootsRated: “A lack of beta for all but the most popular hike, lake, or peak in a given area creates a real barrier to entry for those looking for outdoor recreation in that area.”

Sometimes these barriers are good. The barriers create adventure, discomfort, and effort. Somehow I suspect Edward Abbey would prefer to get lost on his own without your mobile app. Some of us want to study a topographic map, get lost, spend an unexpected night out, and get uncomfortable while discovering magical places. We enjoy casting off into the unknown. It feeds our souls. When you make it easy for everyone, you also erase the possibility of anyone casting off into the unknown. Sure, I can save my money and fly to Borneo to find solitude and adventure, but that is not an option for everyone. The unknown is still available in my hometown. Unfortunately, it is only available for a limited time thanks to RootsRated’s business model.

RootsRated can be a force for good.

Getting people off the couch and into the woods is a good thing. It is a great thing. My hope is that RootsRated will consider some simple suggestions:

- Publish the names of the “local experts” you consult.
- Do not direct people to private land. Private land is public information that is relatively easy to find.
- If an area on public land can handle the increased number of users you create AND the local agencies that manage that land want the increase in users, do what you do well and let people know about it. If not, keep it difficult to find and worthy of effort.

