



Completing CANYONLANDS

The Park Service and environmentalists want to reconfigure Canyonlands National Park in Utah to follow the basin that defines its natural boundaries. A completion proposal advocated by NPCA would more than double the park's size to 819,000 acres.

BY ROBERT B. KEITER

ON JULY 19, 1869, after an arduous climb up steep canyon walls, Major John Wesley Powell described the scene that greeted him: "Wherever we look there is but a wilderness of rocks; deep gorges where the rivers are lost below cliffs and towers and pinnacles; and ten thousand strangely carved forms in every direction; and beyond them mountains blending with the clouds."

At the time, Powell was on his epic journey down the Colorado River, mapping the vast and unexplored Colorado Plateau country. The legendary explorer

cure national park status for this remarkable desert country.

But not all agreed with these two park supporters, and the Canyonlands park creation battle was hard fought. Some Utah politicians, sensitive to the concerns of many local citizens, repeatedly pressed to limit the park's size and to allow mining inside the new park. Officials from San Juan County, where most of Canyonlands is located, viewed the park largely as an economic magnet for tourist dollars. At the same time, they sought to retain the full array of grazing, mining, and other uses within the new park.

"there is much area that has been left out of the park that probably deserves to be in."

Over the ensuing years, that point has been brought home. In 1971, Congress adjusted Canyonlands' own boundaries, adding roughly 80,000 acres that included the Maze and Horseshoe Canyon. In 1972, Congress protected 150,000 acres contiguous to the park by including it in the newly created Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. But according to Mark Peterson, NPCA's Central Rockies regional director, the park is still dangerously incomplete and at risk. He explains that visitors stand-

ing on the popular Needles Overlook and gazing across the basin at the majestic scene are viewing a mixture of national park and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands, which are managed quite differently.

Indeed, a closer look—into Lockhart Basin—reveals a fragile desert landscape cross-hatched by off-road vehicle (ORV) trails. This is BLM land, where a variety of recreational and other uses are the order of the day. In the red rock country of southern Utah, multiple use increasingly means heavy-duty recreational use. Veritable armies of four wheelers, ATVs, mountain bikers, and others have converted BLM's desert lands into a playground where practically anything goes.

According to Bill Hedden, the Grand Canyon Trust's Moab representative, the ORV crowd with its go-anywhere attitudes has etched a "network of destruction" across the basin, creating a "bathtub ring around the park." Off-trail driving and related recreational activities disturb the fragile cryptobiotic soils that hold the desert ecosystem together, creating serious erosion problems. Plant loss from trampling compounds the problem. Jayne Belnap, a local ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, explains that "soil erosion from these recreational activities is tremendous. The system is losing fertility faster than it is being replaced."

BLM, according to Field Manager Kent Walters, has issued an emergency closure order, prohibiting off-trail use



The desert bighorn sheep frequent unprotected areas surrounding Canyonlands National Park and are threatened by mining and recreational use.

was standing on the mesa above the Colorado and Green rivers, staring across a rugged, desert landscape that still looks much the same today. That's because Congress, nearly 100 years after Powell's journey, decided to designate this maze of jumbled red rock, soaring cliffs, and deep-cut chasms as Canyonlands National Park. The protection effort, however, was incomplete, leaving many key areas vulnerable to development and overuse.

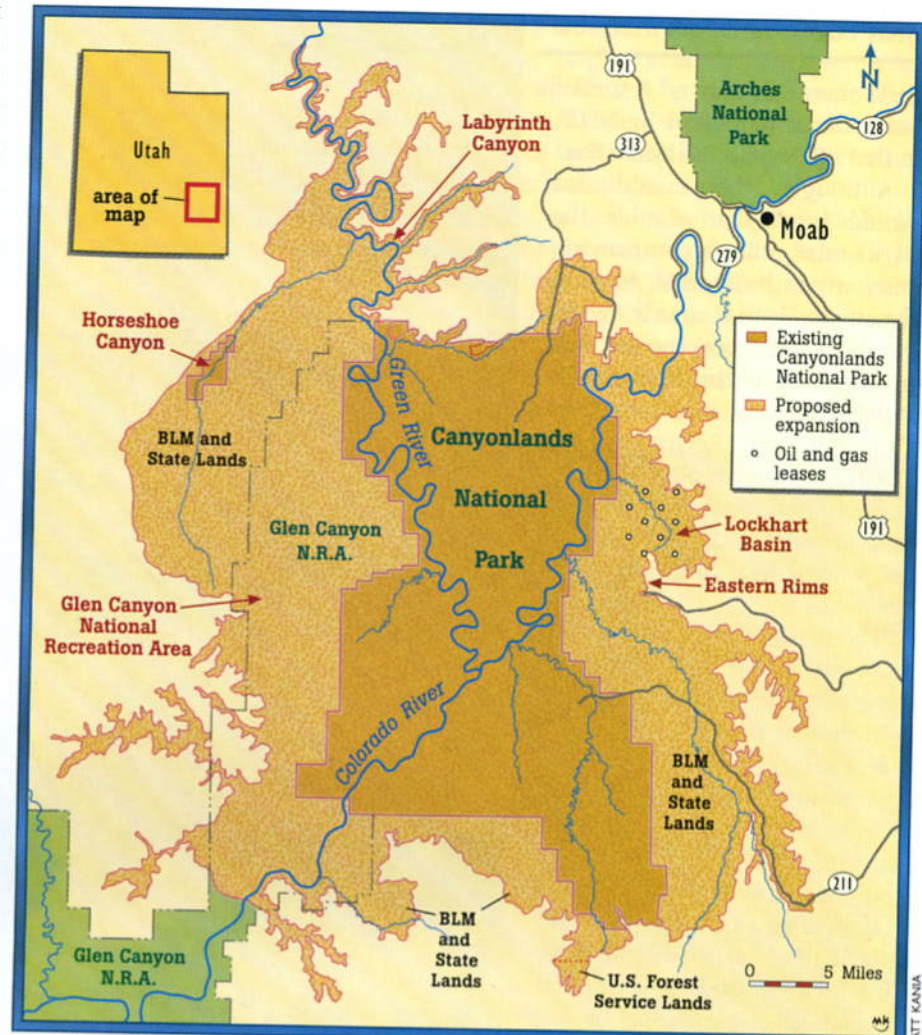
The establishment of the park in the 1960s occurred primarily at the behest of Utah Sen. Frank Moss and Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, who waged a determined campaign to se-

As finally established, Canyonlands National Park bore the distinct marks of political compromise. Although the National Park Service (NPS) initially studied nearly 1 million acres for inclusion, park supporters eventually settled for 257,000. The park's heart lay at the confluence of the Colorado and Green rivers, while its outermost boundaries were described in unerringly straight lines. Rather than follow the erosional basin topography that so sharply defines the Canyonlands landscape, Congress instead protected a few key features and dropped potential mineral lands from the final designation. In the end, Sen. Moss ruefully lamented,

in the basin. But local observers report that BLM's trail closure signs are routinely ignored. Walters readily acknowledges that ORV use has become a big problem. He recently secured a second law enforcement officer for his 1.8-million-acre district but observes that he would need two or three more to patrol the basin regularly. Similar problems exist elsewhere around the park's perimeter, where escalating ORV and other recreational pressures are taking a heavy toll on the delicate desert lands.

More than 1 million people now visit Moab and the surrounding canyon country annually, seeking thrills and adventure as well as solitude and splendor in the rugged desert outback. This should not surprise anyone. When Canyonlands National Park was established in 1964, all indications pointed to an upsurge in regional tourism. With Interstate 70 nearing completion across Utah, the new park as well as nearby Arches National Monument, now a national park, would soon be accessible from a major east-west highway. Two years earlier, during his annual state of the union address, President Kennedy had predicted: "Our already overcrowded national parks and recreational areas will have twice as many visitors ten years from now." At Canyonlands, park visitation has soared from 214,000 to 450,000 annually over the past decade.

The park's current problems don't end with recreation. BLM has leased portions of the Lockhart Basin to the Legacy Oil Company for oil and gas exploration. Legacy has received BLM's



permission to drill two exploratory wells, even though the region is pockmarked by more than two dozen dry holes from previous exploration efforts. The park's sensitive desert bighorn sheep herd, just now recovering from a decimating disease episode, also frequents Lockhart Basin. Even though

BLM recently suspended leasing in the area and placed timing stipulations on Legacy's drilling permit, it remains to be seen whether these measures will adequately protect the sheep.

Cattle also graze on BLM lands surrounding the park. They trample the desert soil and vegetation, causing additional erosional pressures. In recent years, conflicts between cattle and hikers have intensified across

the southern Utah deserts. But fewer than ten ranchers hold grazing leases adjacent to the park, and several leases were recently "bought out."

The way to deal with these land protection challenges, according to the Canyonlands park staff, is to complete the park by reconfiguring it to fit the basin that defines its natural boundaries. The park staff, led by former superintendent Walt Dabney, drafted a park completion proposal that would increase the park's size to 819,000 acres by strategically extending its boundaries to match the surrounding topography. The proposal would give much-needed protection to such areas as Lockhart Basin and other Eastern Rim lands, as well as Horseshoe, Labyrinth, Gypsum, and Imperial canyons. The proposal, according to Deputy Park Superintendent Phil Brueck, would redefine the park by its erosional basin ecosystem, which he says is "exactly how the boundaries of big natural area



Canyonlands completion could protect habitat for wildlife in the area, including the collared lizard.

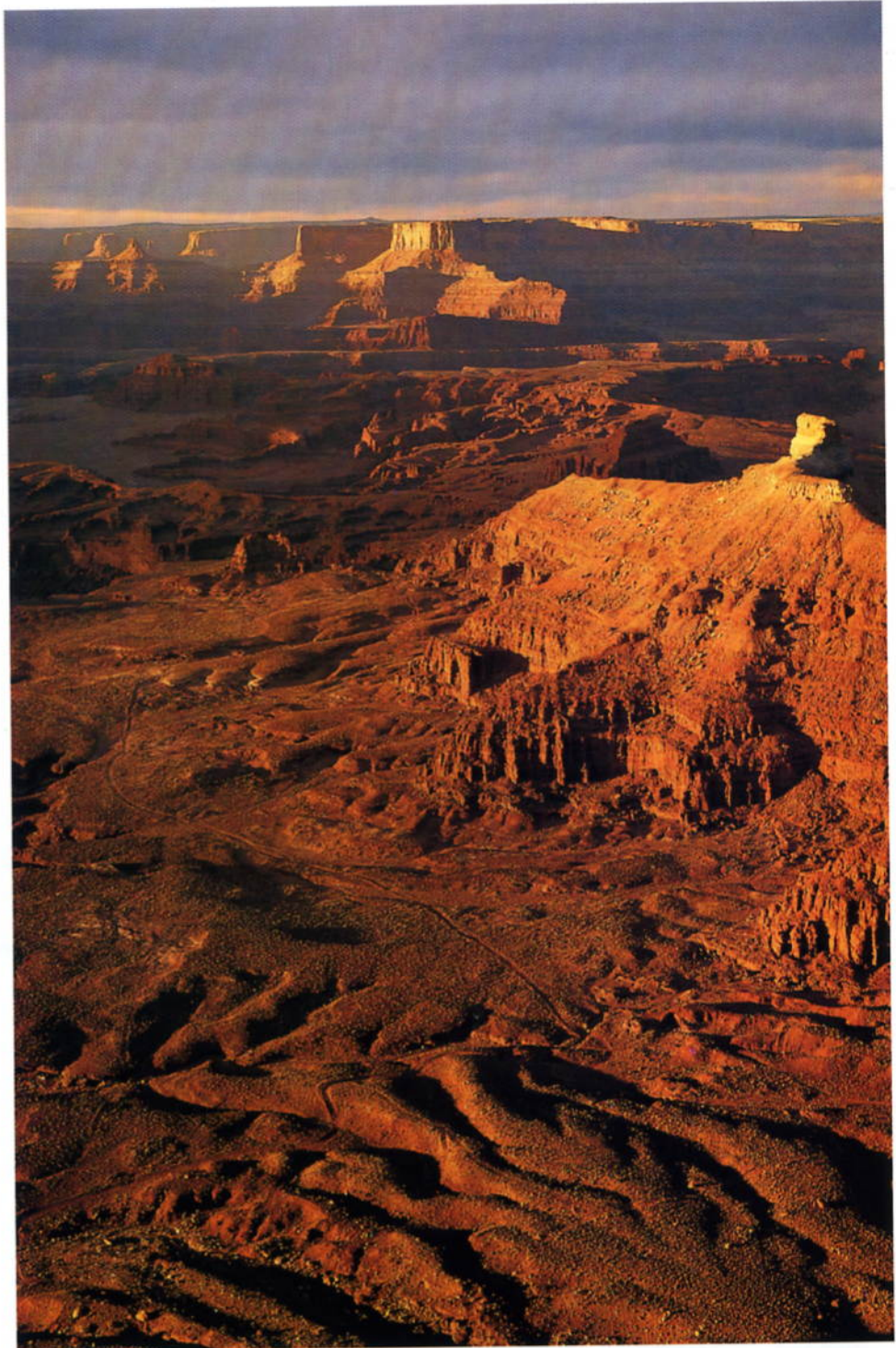
CANYONLANDS *Continued*

parks should be drawn." A similar proposal was advanced by NPCA in its 1988 *National Park System Plan*.

Although these additions would more than double the park's size, the accompanying costs would be modest. Most of the affected land is already owned by the federal government and managed by either BLM or the Park Service, which oversees Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. The remainder consists mainly of scattered state school trust land parcels that could be exchanged for other federal lands outside of the park.

The Canyonlands completion proposal would promote management efficiency and save the government money. On the east side, the Park Service currently has a permanent staff presence in the Needles district adjacent to Lockhart Basin. These park rangers could regularly police the area to control illegal ORV use and end destructive off-road practices. (Even if these lands are converted to national park status, use of four-wheel-drive vehicles and mountain bikes would continue on established roads in accord with Park Service policy.) On the west side, because the park already provides law enforcement and search-and-rescue services for adjacent Glen Canyon lands, the completion proposal would basically confirm the existing arrangement. The few ranchers still holding grazing permits could either be grandfathered into the new park (as was done when the park was created) or their permits could be bought out as has already occurred with several lessees. A suitable arrangement would also have to be worked out with the current mineral lessees.

NPCA, along with the Grand Canyon Trust and other environmental groups, fully supports the park completion proposal. NPCA subscribes to the principle that park boundaries should follow natural landscape features whenever possi-



Oil and gas drilling and off-road vehicle use are currently permitted in Lockhart Basin, an area listed for inclusion in the Canyonlands completion proposal.

ble to fully protect park resources and promote managerial efficiency. NPCA's Peterson sees the proposal as a welcome opportunity to enhance Congress' original decision: "The issue is not about making the park bigger for the sake of size, but what boundaries make the most sense to protect fragile resources, enhance the visitor experience, and im-

prove management efficiency."

Ironically, NPCA urged Congress in 1963 not to create too small a park. NPCA Executive Secretary Anthony Wayne Smith, after noting that the original Canyonlands proposal had already been reduced by more than 500,000 acres, testified: "One of the major questions here is the size of the proposed

park.... The trouble with these small areas is that they do not protect all of the country which should be protected.... The park will serve as a lure to tourists who will crowd the surrounding area, and because it cannot be protected properly without park status, it may be seriously injured or destroyed."

The completion proposal has not been warmly received by everyone. San Juan County, which in 1964 initially resisted an expansive park designation, opposes the proposal, believing the affected lands should remain open to a variety of extractive uses. According to County Commissioner Ty Lewis, Park Service regulations "would eliminate many recreational activities," and the proposed boundary adjustments could restrict development of a nearby oil field. Asserting that the Park Service never constructed scenic roads through the park as originally intended, Lewis sees the proposal as a "land grab" rather than an effort to expand visitor access to the park. BLM's Walters also objects to the completion proposal, noting that the two different management regimes complement one another by providing visitors with alternative experiences.

In 1964, confronting similar resistance to his Canyonlands National Park bill, Sen. Moss persevered despite opposition from his colleague, Utah Sen. Wallace Bennett, who originally proposed a three-unit park consisting of 11,000 acres to protect a few scattered scenic landmarks. Once that proposal died, Bennett pushed to hold the new park open to mineral exploration for 25 years. Congress, however, rejected that idea and opted for a "pure park," although one that was reduced in size to omit lands with some mineral potential.

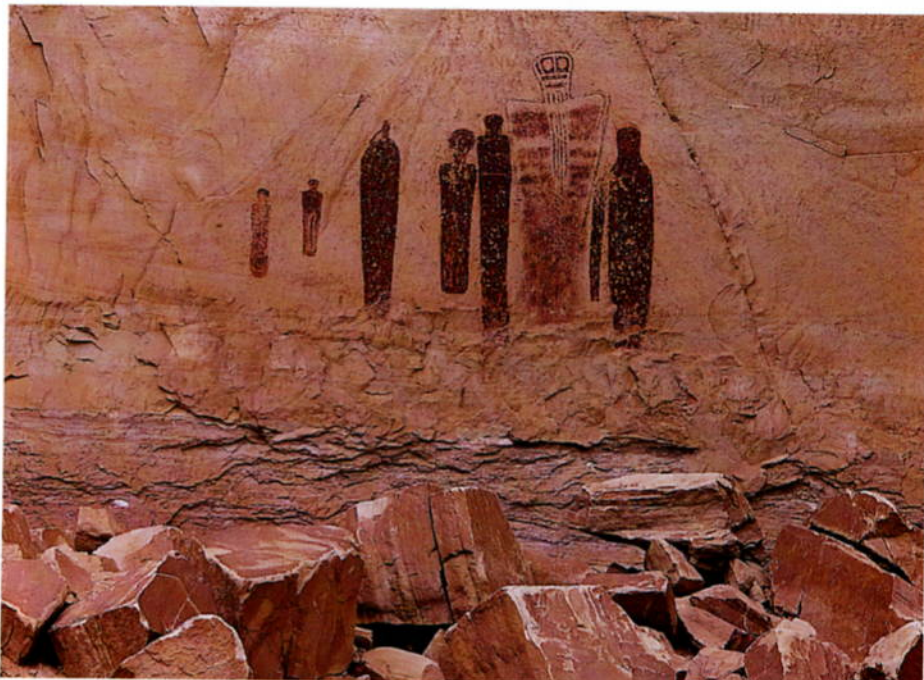
Today the question is whether another park champion is prepared to step forward on Canyonlands' behalf. Key

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members of Utah's congressional delegation are taking a wait and see attitude. While acknowledging that the proposal makes good ecological and managerial sense, no one is yet prepared to buck local opposition as Moss did 35 years ago. The park lies in Rep. Chris Cannon's (R) district, and he recently spearheaded the successful legislative effort to expand Arches National Park by adding Lost Spring Canyon. But according to Keith Nash from Cannon's office, the sheer size of the Canyonlands proposal

desert region. If successful, this initiative might break the BLM wilderness deadlock and be tried elsewhere in the state. By then, though, the damage may well be irreversible on the Canyonlands perimeter terrain.

In a curious twist of fate, Utah's junior senator today is Bob Bennett (R), whose father, Wallace Bennett, fought to limit the park's size. A spokesperson for Sen. Bob Bennett readily acknowledges that the Canyonlands completion proposal is a good idea but also expresses



Pictographs in Horseshoe Canyon were protected in 1971 when Congress adjusted Canyonlands' boundaries, adding roughly 80,000 acres to the park.

means it will require local support for his boss to endorse it. Brad Barber, who oversees public lands issues in the governor's office, observes that the proposal has "a great deal of merit," but adds that it is "fraught with political peril from that part of the state."

Nash and Barber separately explain that the Canyonlands completion proposal involves several BLM wilderness study areas, noting that the deadlocked BLM wilderness designation process has bitterly divided the state for more than a decade. They suggest the park completion proposal might be integrated with that process. The governor and Secretary of the Interior Babbitt are currently experimenting with a new regional approach to wilderness designation that is now focused on Utah's west

concern over the current political climate. Without making any commitment, he suggests the senator would consider taking action to finish the park. If that occurs, who better to serve as Canyonlands' champion to correct the historical boundaries and to give this fragile country the full protection it needs in perpetuity?

TAKE ACTION: To support the Canyonlands completion proposal, please write letters of support to Sen. Robert F. Bennett and Rep. Chris Cannon. Ask them to complete the park as a legacy for all Americans. Write to Bennett, Senate Dirksen Office Building, Room 431, Washington, DC 20510; and to Cannon, Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515.