The Wilderness Society

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument
September 18, 2006
Introduction

The Presidential designation of Grand Staircase-Escalante as the nation’s second largest National Monument on September 18, 1996 not only preserved a spectacular 1.9 million-acre natural treasure for future generations to enjoy, but it also heralded a new era of federal landscape conservation. Prior to 1996, the land now encompassed by the Monument was managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) much the same as the rest of the agency’s 262 million acres across the United States (18% of the country’s total land mass). However, by means of the Proclamation, the President officially recognized this special area as a frontier and declared it the new flagship Monument for the BLM. The designation of the Monument broke with long-standing precedent. Instead of transferring management to the National Park Service—as had usually happened in the past—the President explicitly entrusted the BLM with its management.

Not surprisingly, the designation sparked controversy. But now, ten years later, the Monument has become an established presence in southern Utah and is rapidly maturing to meet its full potential. The intent of the Monument designation was to protect the area in a pristine, frontier state, and to provide outstanding opportunities for scientific research and education. BLM has used its first ten years to make great strides toward those goals.

On this 10th anniversary, we celebrate the progress of this remarkable American resource.
The Southern Utah Oral History Project, begun in July 1998 to preserve the cultural history of the surrounding rural communities. The Project interviews and records long-time residents of the area about their people and land use of the late 20th century, particularly about the influence of the landscape on people as they settled in the region. To date, over 200 interviews have been collected, transcribed, and archived in local community libraries.

Archaeological research to develop a prehistoric chronology for the region, source and date obsidian, and develop rock art conservation methods.

The Monument has a long and dignified human history: it is a place where one can see how nature shapes human endeavors in the American West, where distance and aridity have been pitted against our dreams and courage.

Presidential Proclamation, September 18, 1996

Local and National Educational Programs

The Monument’s educational programs are geared towards teaching about the environment and scientific discoveries at the Monument, and to engage an extensive base of the public.

Field trip programs for grade school children are interactive and tied directly to the themes at each visitor center with a “be a scientist” approach. Examples include learning about the part that pollen plays in the life of a plant, viewing a meteorite, or learning how to make a “pseudo” desert rain from dissolving a diamond in vinegar to create it in the lab.

Visitors from around the World

For example, the Big Water Visitor Center contains the 76-million year old fossil skeleton of a duck-billed dinosaur that was unearthed on the Monument, and the Kaibab visitor center features researchers discussing their research and findings.

In addition, a recent 10 year survey indicated that 23% of visitors are visiting from other countries, 14% are from Utah, and the rest visit from across the United States.

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Real-time flash flood data and information provided by eighteen climate stations located throughout the Monument.

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New Facilities

Four impressive and informative visitor centers have opened in surrounding communities, offering assistance to the visiting public. Meeting rooms and facilities are also available to local communities. The centers display a long list of various exhibits and directly commemorate many of the Monument’s associated firsts and milestones. Equipment in each visitor center reflects long-term collaboration with groups from actual research programs on the Monument.

World-class dinosaur excursions, including more than 22 since 2000. Fossils in the Monument have yielded more information about land-based ecosystems change at the end of the dinosaur era than almost any other place in the world. Many of the dinosaurs were previously not known to have inhabited the region, and several are completely new species, including an 80 million year old small ceratopsian dinosaur that researchers are rumored to consider naming "Monumentasaurus" after the Monument.

Scientific Discovery

The Monument is well on its way to being a world-class living laboratory for biological, cultural, and paleontological science. Over 30 national scientific teams are currently working at the Monument to develop projects in paleontology, geology, botany, hydrology, archaeology, vegetation, aquatic and other ecosystems, mineralogy, palynology, hydrology, history, botany, and wildlife. Key discoveries and ongoing research at the Monument include:

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Support from the Community and Other Stakeholders

Volunteers and other stakeholders have stepped up to support the Monument in numerous ways, for example:

1. The Grand Staircase-Escalante Partners is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization which local residents formed in 2004 to support the Monument by raising public awareness, funding, support, and volunteers (www.gsenm.org). The Partners help over 300 volunteers and 500 local residents to support their local national park and a college-level internship at the Monument.

2. Local and visiting volunteers give between 6,000 and 10,000 hours annually to assist BLM staff and scientists with a wide range of projects from preparing questions for exhibits. For example, in the past three years, the American Hiking Society’s “Volunteer Vacations” program has directed hundreds of hours to remove and obsolete popular trails to ensure like the Pine River and Cold Creek to reduce visitor impacts.

3. The Monument Advisory Committee (MAC) has 15 members that advise the BLM on science issues, the achievement of management plan objectives, and other important science and social issues. The MAC has 15 members including individuals from a range of disciplines and representation from the state of Utah, Kane County, Garfield County, and from the education, outfitter and guide, and environmental community.

The Monument Continues to Face Enormous Challenges

Despite its remarkable success, the Monument endures persistent challenges that endanger its very mission and long-term sustainability. Lawmakers and agency directors threaten to open the backcountry to off-road vehicles that disturb wildlife, cultural sites, vegetation, and scenic views. Despite this, through the Monument Management Plan finalized in 2001, many issues have yet to be implemented.

A more hidden problem is the gradual erosion of the BLM’s funding for the Monument. Congress has cut the budget by $1.5 million, or 25%, over the last 5 years. These cuts not only reduce BLM’s ability to hire staff, but also to protect and manage the public lands managed by the BLM. The new conservation strategy consists of more than 10 new units, including Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, and National and Scenic Trails.

Background on the Monument

The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is a national treasure. It is located in southern Utah, approximately 200 highway miles north of Salt Lake City and 250 miles east of Las Vegas. The 1.9 million-acre monument is the largest national monument in the United States, encompassing both natural and human history. It contains outstanding resources including incredibly remote prehistoric rock art, paleontological resources, early cultural and historical sites, and a system of trails and interpretive natural and cultural processes. Few sites that receive as many visitors or visitors to grandeur and park city, the Monument is home to more than 300 species of amphibians, birds, mammals, and reptiles.

The National Landscape Conservation System Coalition www.discovernlcs.org

http://www.ut.blm.gov/monument/

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Partners
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"Remoteness, limited travel corridors and low visitation have all helped to preserve intact the monument's important ecological values."

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For more information contact:
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