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FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Grand Staircase-Escalante was set up to fail

How budget cuts, a divided staff and state politics hamstrung Utah's biggest monument.

Christopher Ketcham | ESSAY | July 10, 2017

When Carolyn Shelton began working at southern Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in 2001, she expected to leave it in better shape for the next generation. Fifteen years later, in spring 2016, her old friend Mary O'Brien, a local biologist, invited her over for dinner to celebrate her upcoming retirement. Shelton's eyes welled with tears at the thought of leaving. She had risen in the ranks — she was an assistant manager, the third most powerful person at the monument — but had not accomplished what she'd wanted, had not protected the land as she'd intended. "Mary, I tried," she told her friend. "I tried and I failed."

Perhaps she was being too hard on herself. The forces arrayed against conservation in southern Utah were deeply rooted. County commissioners, state elected officials, the entire Utah congressional delegation — all were against the monument from the moment of its creation in 1996. They considered it a usurpation of local power, and they had acted at every chance to attack its legitimacy. Even the agency tasked with managing it — Shelton's employer, the local field office of the Bureau of Land Management — sometimes seemed to conspire against its success. Shelton often felt her own colleagues were "moles" bent on undermining the mission. The Department of the Interior, which oversees the BLM, and Congress, which funds Interior, had not helped. By 2016, the budget for Grand Staircase had dropped to \$4 million from \$16

million in 2001. Three-quarters of the staff had been eliminated or driven out by political pressures. “Today, this monument office struggles to do the basic job,” Shelton told me recently. “We don’t have adequate funding, we don’t have adequate staff.”

Things were not supposed to go this way. At 1.9 million acres — 53 times the size of nearby Bryce Canyon National Park, bigger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined — the Grand Staircase was to have been the premier research monument in the national system, an outdoor lab for the practice of science. The 1996 proclamation by President Bill Clinton, who established it under the Antiquities Act, “identified the Monument’s birth in science,” as the BLM’s website describes. The vast Grand Staircase, Clinton said in his proclamation, was still a frontier, much of it wild, unspoiled, with “a spectacular array of historic, biological, geological, paleontological, and archaeological objects” that required protection, care, study.

In the early years, when things were going well, when the mission was on track, and the funding and staff were in place, the Staircase was known proudly as “the Science Monument.” That science staff is mostly gone. “The science we were supposed to be doing — it’s not happening,” Shelton said. “The resources we were supposed to be protecting — we’re not doing it.”



Carolyn Shelton, who retired from her position as assistant manager at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in 2016, feels like she wasn't able to do her job because the monument didn't have enough resources or staff.

Christopher Ketcham

One day this spring, Shelton invited me for a hike on the Grand Staircase not far from her home in Kanab, Utah. The afternoon before our rendezvous, I drove from the town of Escalante south across the Staircase on a rough dirt road called Cottonwood Wash. The monument's name is no mere marketing ploy: It is a geological designation. The staircase it refers to runs from the youngest cliffs in the north, the Pink Cliffs of Bryce Canyon, to the oldest, the Vermilion Cliffs way in the south. Beyond the Vermilion Cliffs is the oldest step of all, the Grand Canyon, exposing the most ancient rock.

Among these steps there are plateaus and valleys, countless peaks, folds, streams, forests, mesas, gorges, buttes and canyons. I'd been up on the Kaiparowits Plateau and in the slot labyrinths of the Escalante River's tributaries and through the deep watery places of the Box-Death Hollow Wilderness and in the tall pines on Canaan Mountain, but I had never been down Cottonwood Wash. It was a winding, dusty, washboard road, hot and shadeless and lonely, crossing for 40 miles across scrub-steppe hills, fields turned golden with sunflowers, and canyons colored purple, mocha, mauve and orange. Halfway to Kanab, at sunset, I stopped.

The night was balmy, sweetened with the spring bloom, and moonless, the stars lavish. I saw no one in another car, no one on foot, and no one at my campsite, which was nothing more than a level spot under a piñon pine in a sandy turnout beside the road. Before bed I set out in the dark into a nameless little slot canyon, wandering for an hour or so, listening for the night music of wrens, and loafing in the sandy bottom with boots off.

Shelton had advised this for any visitor to the Grand Staircase. "I tell people you don't need a trail. You don't need signs. You don't need maps. Just go out and find your own way," she told me. "Sit down, listen, observe, contemplate, be in the place where you are." The Grand Staircase is not about the fast-food vistas of the national parks, she said. "People want to drive to a viewpoint, then drive to another. This place requires effort. Time. Patience."

Shelton is 60, petite, with a lush head of hair and a long Roman nose that gives her a serious, philosophical air. That she was willing to talk with me was both a pleasure and a shock. For months, living in southern Utah near the Grand Staircase, I tried to interview current and former employees on the record about the state of affairs. But no one would talk. Even in retirement, monument staffers were afraid.

We met by the side of another of the innumerable dirt roads in the Staircase, and ditched our cars, setting out cross-country. Shelton wanted to find a passage up a line of jagged cliffs called the Cockscomb. She and her husband, Jim, a retired homebuilder who joined us for the hike, spend a lot of time outdoors, bird-watching and fly-fishing and hunting for deer and elk, pheasants and ducks and chukars. Mostly they hike.

We never got to the Cockscomb. Instead, we strolled in an aimless pleasing way, stopping to sniff at wildflowers in a pygmy forest of piñons and junipers. The day grew very warm and the gnats swarmed. I was stunned by the variety of the flowers, the colors, the perfumes: Hopsage with its intricate fuchsia petals, creamy milkweed beloved of monarch butterflies, the white Sego lily, purple phacelia, orange globemallow so small and delicate, the garish red fingerling petals of Indian paintbrush, the claret cup cactus, the pale yellow petals of the prickly pear, the white and pink of the flowering buckwheat.

“The subtleness of these colors,” Shelton said, taking a knee next to a phacelia. “The tenacity of this plant. It’s tough to communicate these things. Or this.” She found a spot of hard black moss, *Syntrichia ruralis*. A few droplets from her water bottle: the moss was instantly green, soft as baby-flesh, photosynthesizing, growing before our eyes. “Resurrection moss,” she said. “Now think of the adaptation. We’ve measured surface temperatures of 160 degrees here in summer. This moss goes to sleep. It survives. We’re so anthropocentric we think technology is the highest form of literally everything on earth, when in reality the adaptations of a moss or a flower are far more evolutionarily successful than our building a skyscraper in Dubai. Maybe these are esoteric thoughts, I don’t know. The landscape draws this thinking out of you.”



Paleontologists remove hadrosaur material, which is approximately 80 million years old from the Wahweap Formation in the Kaiparowits Plateau in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Dozens of different dinosaur fossils have been found in the monument, but now only one paleontologist is staffed there.

David Rankin/Grand Staircase Escalante Partners

Not long before meeting Shelton, I took a walk along the Escalante River to spend time with the bees. The astonishing diversity of flowers in the spring brings a stampede of pollinators. Some are bright orange and furry, some metallic-looking, lime-green, others yellow or black or purple or neon-blue, all exquisitely distinct.

Once upon a time, these wild native bees were among the subjects of the pioneering entomology funded by the BLM. In a five-year study during the early 2000s, researchers discovered that the 1.9 million acres of the monument had the second-highest bee diversity in North America. They found 648 species, 46 that were newly described, many of them endemic to southern Utah. They discovered a bee that only lives in the sandstone walls of the canyonlands. “Some of these bees only pollinate certain flowers at certain times in specific conditions,” Shelton told me. “We still have so much to learn. And now that process has been cut off.” (Recalling her own doctoral research on pollinators decades ago in California, Mary O’Brien, Shelton’s friend, told me, “It took me two years to discover a relationship two wasp species had with two buckwheat flower species. The loss of this kind of research in the monument is devastating.”)

When Shelton started in 2001, the Staircase had 140 employees, with more than half involved in science and research. There were two full science divisions: Cultural and Earth Sciences and the Biological Sciences. The science staff included botanists, soil experts, hydrologists, geologists, archaeologists, paleontologists and ecologists. The BLM maintained a dedicated \$1 million annual fund for university research on the monument.

There were studies on the effects of climate change on native flora. There were studies on hydrology and erosion, on the microbes that live in sandstone, on aquatic insects in the driest parts of the desert. Researchers discovered a species of moth believed to be extinct. Scientists were consistently discovering new species of plants and insects that had never been described. One entomologist told Shelton that he had so many new insects piled up in his lab that he was hard-pressed to identify them all. Paleontologists recorded the fossil remains of dozens of different kinds of dinosaurs, including a new species of tyrannosaur, the world's largest oviraptor, and numerous new triceratops-like species. And archaeologists documented scores of prehistoric Native American dwellings, granaries, rock art panels. "In the early years, in any given year, there were probably 60 universities, in virtually every scientific discipline you can think of — biological, cultural, geological, paleontological — conducting research on the monument," Shelton told me. "This was the last place to be mapped and settled in the United States. Part of our mission was to discover what's out there, to set some baseline data."

The election of George W. Bush in 2000 signaled the beginning of the end of this. Funding cuts and subsequent staff losses accelerated throughout the 2000s. With the election of Barack Obama, the hope was that the death-by-thousand-cuts would be reversed. But it didn't happen. "It wasn't like any other Democratic administration," said Shelton. "We expected better from Obama."

Today, the two science divisions are gone. There are fewer than 45 staffers. "There's one guy left doing science, a paleontologist. Dr. Alan Titus," Shelton said. "One guy. That's it."



Grand Staircase-Escalante is known for its geologic formations and archaeological artifacts. Here, some petroglyphs are marred by someone who tried to cut them from the rock.

Bob Wick/BLM

Before coming to southern Utah, Shelton worked at BLM offices across the American West. Her first job with the agency, in 1976, was as an interpretive specialist in the Mojave Desert near Barstow, California, developing educational programs and exhibits. Later, she worked in Colorado, Oregon and Washington, designing visitor centers and museums.

Utah, however, was different from anything she had experienced in the land-management bureaucracy. It was “like entering another country.” What made the difference in the Utah BLM was the cultural and historical influence of Mormonism. “That’s truly a factor here,” Shelton told me. “Anyone who doesn’t see it is blind.”

The early history of the Latter-day Saints was one of separatism and sedition, driven by the belief that they were the chosen people on the continent and a persecuted people. Insular and apart, the Utah territory settlers in the 1840s, led by the prophets in Salt Lake City, dreamed of an independent Mormon nation that encompassed not just Utah but all of Nevada, parts of Idaho and Oregon, and a piece of Southern California. It was to be a religious imperium, with broad exploitation of natural resources and a port in San Diego for trade overseas. In the years before Utah joined the Union, the Mormon leadership under prophet Brigham Young resisted the federal center with a passion that approached hatred, undermining U.S. authority in the territory and finally advocating the violent overthrow of the government in D.C. They wanted its replacement with a

theocracy led by the chosen ones. “Much of the heated political rhetoric in the West about the evil federal government began in Utah,” historian Will Bagley, author of many books of Western history and himself a former LDS member, told me recently.

Mormons today repudiate this secessionist past. They have integrated into the mainstream of business and government. And they dominate Utah’s public-lands bureaucracy. A position with the BLM is a plum deal, providing benefits, security, a good salary. It’s a process of capturing government jobs that Mormons call, with a sense of humor, “homesteading.”

But the homesteaders, Shelton told me, have a peculiar view of their relationship with the federal government. “You have to realize that a large part of the federal land management workforce in Utah is anti-federal,” she said. “Probably half of the staff at the Grand Staircase is anti-federal. I think a lot of it does have to do with the Mormon way of thinking.”



Iron-coated pebbles known as "Moqui marbles" are scattered across the sandstone at Grand Staircase-Escalante. They were formed about 20 million to 25 million years ago.

Bob Wick/BLM

Over the years, said Shelton, she has seen coworkers display a naked contempt for the federal environmental and resource laws that limit traditional local practices on the public domain, such as the widespread grazing of livestock or the unrestricted use of off-road vehicles. Enmeshed in the web of local group and religious ties, these staffers often come from families of public-land ranchers who have run cows there for generations. They consider it their land, to be managed by locals, for locals. “With

some of these people there's a lack of acknowledgement that we're part of the United States of America," Shelton told me. "They don't recognize that all Americans own this land, that it belongs to the people of Vermont and Florida and New York, too."

I asked her why, if they hate the feds, are they working for them. "Well, I've asked that myself. I don't know that I have a clear answer," said Shelton. "But it does translate into some real conflict at the office."

There is a toxic schism among employees at the Grand Staircase and in the Utah BLM generally. This is not just Shelton's opinion; I spoke with four current employees at the Grand Staircase who confirmed her observation. On the one side are environmentally minded folks from outside the confines of Mormon culture, people like Shelton, who believe fervently in the federal public lands. Their ranks grew following the monument's establishment in 1996 with the funding then available for hiring new staff, many of whom were trained at world-class science institutions. On the other side, said Shelton, "I see a powerful anti-conservation interest, an anti-science interest, and certainly an anti-climate change position. I've sat in meetings with high-level people in Utah BLM who will roll their eyes when you mention climate change and say, 'Well, if you believe it.' You might as well be asking them to convert to Zoroastrianism. So our staffs are at odds with each other. There's a lot of antagonism. It's a really difficult place to work."

I shared Shelton's comments about the Utah BLM with Larry Crutchfield, the public relations director at the Grand Staircase. In response, Crutchfield sent me an emailed statement from the monument's manager, Cindy Staszak, who was appointed there in 2014 and worked directly with Shelton. "We pride ourselves on inclusivity and diversity," said Staszak. "The Bureau of Land Management has a long and distinguished history of public service that does not create or accept boundaries based on religion, gender, ethnicity or other artificial divisions. It is wonderful to work with people who care about what they do and have dedicated themselves to the lands we manage."

Staszak's statement did not impress Shelton. "I don't know why she'd say that," she said. "Even though we try, it's just not that welcoming of communities of diverse people. But maybe she actually thinks the staff is diverse."



***Cattle graze along Hole-in-the-Rock Road.
About 97 percent of the monument is still open
to cattle grazing.***

Ken Lund/Flickr

From the very beginning, Utah officials — almost all of them conservative, Republican, Mormon — mounted a campaign of disinformation about the Grand Staircase. And this only served to exacerbate staff conflicts. Much of the campaign amounted to “outright lies,” Shelton told me.

It was said that private land was condemned; that the land was “stolen” from local landowners; that hundreds of public roads were closed. The lies trickled into the populace and calcified as rural myth. At the salon in Kanab where Shelton gets her hair done, a hairdresser told her that after Clinton seized the land, he ordered the government to alter the maps of the Staircase in a conspiracy to erase the record of private ownership. Southern Utahans who tell this story — Shelton has heard many iterations of it — never know the names of the people whose land was stolen. That’s because those people don’t exist. The land was already publicly owned, managed by the BLM.

But the most egregious alleged offense was that the monument ruined the public-lands livestock industry, that stockmen with permits on the 1.9 million acres were forced off their grazing allotments. Statistics tell a different story. Roughly 97 percent of the monument remains open to cattle grazing. (In the 3 percent where there are no cows, the stockmen willingly gave up their permits after conservationists paid handsome sums to “buy them out.”) According to BLM grazing data, which Crutchfield forwarded to me, “Overall permitted use within the Monument is at roughly the same level now as it has been since the early 1990s. No reductions have occurred as a result of the Monument’s designation.”

Shelton notes that even with the straitened funding and staff cuts during the Bush and Obama years, one management program went untouched: livestock grazing subsidies. “That’s because grazing is sacrosanct,” she said. At the same moment they were losing science staff, the Staircase hired more range management staff, in positions that were “higher-graded” with better salaries.

“Trying to effect change is even more of an uphill effort now,” a former staff botanist named Laura Welp told me. Welp now works for the nonprofit Western Watersheds Project to ameliorate environmental damage from public-lands grazing. “My botany job was filled in-house by moving a young guy over from the range program who has lived in the area all his life, went to the nearby college where he was taught by livestock sympathizers, has extensive family and religious ties to the permittees and runs cattle himself on the adjacent field office. His understanding of advocating for the resource is running the bulldozer for the extensive vegetation treatments that are now going on to provide forage.” According to Welp, the recently hired assistant monument manager for natural resources is a former range staffer. He is also a bishop in the same Mormon church attended by the BLM official who hired him.

The job of the range staff, said Shelton, “basically is to maximize the number of cows out there.” This means maximization of forage, which requires what are called range improvements: more fences, cattle guards, roads, pumps, water pipelines, watering troughs, poisoning of noxious weeds, chopping down of piñon and juniper forest to expand forage, vegetation treatments, seedings — a massive program of invasive management that Shelton estimated to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, benefiting a tiny number of stockmen. (Crutchfield told me the BLM does not have available to the public the total amount spent on livestock subsidies at Grand Staircase.)

So the staff, bereft of resources for other matters, is kept busy with cows. “We’ve only surveyed less than 5 percent of the archeological resources on the monument because most of the staff is doing paperwork for livestock grazing,” Shelton told me. “Meanwhile, you throw all those cows out there and denude the landscape — and we don’t even know what we’re ruining, because we no longer seem to care.”



The Islomania Dome, one of the many unearthly rock formations in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

John Fowler/Flickr

Recently, I called the former chief botanist at the monument, Walter Fertig, who quit in 2005 in protest of grazing policies there. They were not in accordance with his findings as a scientist. “I was exceptionally naive when I came to Grand Staircase,” he told me. He had worked for 10 years in Wyoming, advising the BLM on endangered and threatened plant and animal species. “In my previous experience, I had always been able to provide sound, unbiased information, and federal land managers and politicians could use that information to then make informed decisions. Or at least that is how I thought the world worked. It was a rude awakening to learn that scientific evidence did not matter in range management.” He suggested that the conflicts over Grand Staircase and other national monuments, especially when it comes to grazing, “are really just proxy fights over local authority versus outside authority. It really has nothing to do with science or logic or reason. It is all about power.”

That power play is now unfolding with an unprecedented push against southern Utah’s public lands . Last April, Republican Gov. Gary Herbert toured several towns near the Staircase to announce his objections to it. Herbert thought it “too big, too unnecessary,” as he told students during a visit to Bryce Valley High School in the village of Tropic. “Probably there are 200,000 acres that deserve protection,” he said. He would thus reduce by roughly 90 percent what Clinton described in his proclamation as “the smallest area compatible with the proper care and management of the objects to be protected.”

Two months earlier, Herbert signed a state legislative resolution asking Congress to take action on the Grand Staircase to shrink its size. The resolution, which passed by majorities in the Utah House and Senate, was sweeping in its condemnation: “For more than 20 years, the (Grand Staircase) has had a negative impact on the prosperity, development, economy, custom, culture, heritage, educational opportunities, health, and well-being of local communities.”

In fact, the monument has been good for southern Utah. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in Garfield County, one of two counties that are home to the monument, average annual per capita personal income growth “surpassed Utah's average throughout the 2000s and outperformed Utah's average over the 6-year period of the last decade (from) 2010-2015.”

A group of business owners from the Escalante and Boulder Chambers of Commerce, representing two of the larger towns near the monument, met with the governor’s staff in January armed with these statistics. That same month, Escalante residents, including a local homebuilder named Mark Austin, travelled to Washington, D.C. They talked with the staff of Utah Reps. Rob Bishop, Chris Stewart, Mia Love and Jason Chaffetz and Utah Sen. Mike Lee to share their experience of economic boon in the decades since the proclamation of the monument. “We wanted to counteract the nonsense propaganda coming out of Utah,” Austin told me. “But they were not interested, not one person in the Utah delegation, in our data or facts. They continued to portray the economy as blighted due to the monument. They’re just lying to the public.”

And so the campaign against Grand Staircase barrels ahead. At Bryce Valley High, Herbert promised the students, “We’re going to be working with President Trump and my good friend, Vice President Mike Pence.”



The moon rises over Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

Bob Wick/BLM

Trump has listened. On April 26, he signed an executive order requiring Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to “conduct a review of all Presidential designations or expansions of designations under the Antiquities Act made since January 1, 1996,” with the intention of determining whether some of those monument designations should be rescinded or reduced in scope. At the signing event, Trump was surrounded by politicians from Utah. According to Fox News, the order “was created at the urging of Sen. Orrin Hatch and other members of Utah’s Republican congressional delegation.”

The first monument up for review is the 1.4-million-acre Bears Ears National Monument, which was carved out of BLM and Forest Service land in southern Utah by Obama during the final days of his presidency. In early May, not long before I met with Shelton, she joined a group of 300 or so demonstrators in Kanab who had gathered to meet Zinke as he travelled across southern Utah. He was scheduled to fly into the Kanab airport, and that’s where the demonstrators awaited him.

Shelton wanted to tell him that the past was prologue at Bears Ears; that the story of what happened at the Grand Staircase — the failure there to protect the land, to invest in its conservation, to uphold the mission with which the Staircase was proclaimed — has enormous implications for new monuments. “Just making it a national monument does not protect it,” Shelton said. “That’s the lesson. The funding has to be there. Do you think this administration, this Congress, is going to fund Bears Ears?”

But Zinke ignored the crowd in Kanab, and instead began his review with a series of private meetings with county commissioners, who were described as “jubilant” in press accounts. He met with Herbert, whose staff had organized the trip, and with members of

Congress who have been prominent opponents of the Grand Staircase and Bears Ears, notably Utah Republican Rob Bishop. He then spent several hours on horseback with local ranchers, wearing a cowboy hat.

The private meetings with county commissioners, as it happened, were a violation of Utah's open meeting laws. "And the commissioners don't care," Shelton told me. Nor, it seems, does Zinke. "Why couldn't Zinke have spent an hour, just an hour, with the public, in a public meeting? I live here, too. I'm a place-based citizen. I'm retired, but I'm not leaving. I care about this place. I'm passionate about it. I'm going to keep fighting for it."

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