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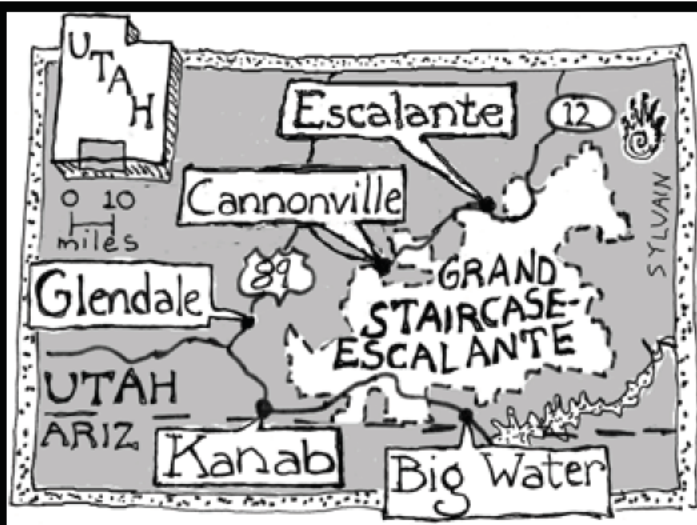
RECREATION

# Is the Grand Staircase-Escalante a model monument?

Paul Larmer | Nov. 22, 1999 | *From the print edition*



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SCENIC ROUTE: Utah Highway 12 as it winds through the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument



Jerry Meredith  
(BLM photo by Kelly Rigby)



JUST THE BEGINNING: President Clinton at the Grand Canyon with Utah writer Terry Tempest Williams and SUWA executive director Mike Matz (Larry S. Glenn photo courtesy SUWA)

*Note: a sidebar article, "Ninety years of the Antiquities Act," accompanies this feature story.*

Three years ago, Jerry Meredith was pretty sure he had landed one of the toughest jobs in the federal government. The 51-year-old middle manager for the Bureau of Land Management had just been tagged to oversee the brand-new Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah.

From the moment it was breathed into existence by President Clinton in the fall of 1996, the monument had been a lightning rod for rural Western anger against the federal government. The designation by executive order killed plans for a proposed coal mine on the rugged Kaiparowits Plateau, which local communities had been banking on for decades. It also came seemingly out of the blue: None of Utah's public officials or the residents of the small towns surrounding the 1.7 million acre monument were forewarned of the president's decision, and they responded with angry protests and vows to get even in the courts (HCN, 9/30/96).

On the other hand, many conservationists were skeptical that Meredith's agency, the BLM - derisively called the "Bureau of Livestock and Mining" by some - was capable of managing a national monument, a task traditionally handed to the National Park Service. Throw on top of that a rigid deadline - the presidential decree gave the Interior Department three years to come up with a management plan - and Meredith could see the makings of a failure.

"My first thought was, 'No way, this can't be done,'" ""recalls Meredith. "I had no employees, no budget, not even an office."

But done it he has. Bolstered by a Clinton administration intent on making the monument a model of success, Meredith's team of 20 scientists and policy makers has

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finished a management plan that will likely be signed by U.S. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt by the end of the year, capping a remarkable three years of on-the-ground conservation accomplishments in southern Utah.

Significant pockets of dissent remain. Meredith's office has received nearly 100 letters protesting portions of the new plan, and the monument is still under a legal challenge from the Utah Association of Counties. But Meredith says the BLM has weathered the storm quite nicely, and shown that it can manage a world-class resource while still accommodating local uses, such as cattle grazing and wood collection.

As Bruce Babbitt zeroes in on protecting other ecologically significant public lands in the West, perhaps through further use of executive orders under the Antiquities Act of 1906, the monument is being held up as the model. The question: Is it a good one or a bad one?

## **Muted praise**

A good model, would be the answer from most environmentalists, though they see flaws in the new management plan.

"We have some problems with the grazing and ORV provisions, but the BLM did a pretty good job (with the management plan)," says Heidi McIntosh, a lawyer with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, an organization that has often been at odds with the BLM. "The agency took a fairly protective stance to protect the primitive character of the land." The BLM's preferred management option calls for 65 percent of the monument, or 1.2 million acres, to be protected as a primitive zone, with no visitor facilities and extremely limited motorized access.

What development takes place will occur in the communities surrounding the monument, an approach that has drawn muted praise from local leaders. Next year bulldozers will begin clearing land for visitor centers in Big Water, Glendale and Cannonville. And Kanab is close to securing a contract for constructing the

monument headquarters building, which it plans to lease back to the federal government, as part of a large, centrally located "city heritage plaza."

"The community is excited about this," says Kanab mayor Karen Alvey. "It will help make us a destination point for visitors and give them a reason to stay for two or three days instead of just passing through."

The headquarters will also bring a sizeable payroll - as many as 35 federal employees will work out of Kanab.

"The creation of the monument is still a real sore subject around here," says Alvey. "But we're trying to make lemonade out of lemons."

Meredith says his agency has won the support of both locals and Salt Lake City environmentalists. "We've gone out of our way to listen to people and be accessible through this process, and we're proud of what we've come up with," he says. "How many federal planning projects do you know that come in on time and under budget?"

## **Big bucks smooth the waters**

It helps, of course, if you have a sizeable budget and firm backing from your bosses. From the start, the monument planning effort has been a first-class operation. Meredith was able to draw on the best talent throughout the nation to create his planning "dream team," choosing from other federal and state agencies. In a concession to Utah, the Clinton administration let Gov. Mike Leavitt appoint five members to the team.

"When you call the planning team, things actually get done," says Joro Walker, a lawyer who, on behalf of environmental groups, has protested sections of the monument plan dealing with grazing and ORV use. "That's definitely unique."

"They have included local communities to a very large extent," echoes Mike Jenel, a planning consultant working for Kane County.

Meredith doesn't deny that a quality staff and plenty of money have been important to the completion of the management plan, but he says the monument's budget is not extravagant. It ran just under \$2 million in 1998, he says, nearly half a million below what Congress allocated.

Does the BLM have the resources to manage the other significant sites in the West being eyed by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt? Meredith says the agency has already invested heavily in places like the California Desert and the Columbia River Basin and could probably put together competent planning teams at a reasonable cost in other places.

"We have a tradition of frugality," he says. "But we are willing to put out resources where it is necessary."

### **The extra effort**

The Clinton administration's investment in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument has gone well beyond planning monies, however. This fall it closed a deal buying out leases held by Andalex, the coal company that wanted to develop a mine on the Kaiparowits plateau. If Congress approves the expenditure, U.S. taxpayers will pay Andalex \$14 million in cash in exchange for 34,499 acres of federal coal leases in the monument.

Then there was the matter of the 177,000 acres of state-owned school trust lands scattered throughout the monument. Utah politicians had claimed the monument would make it tough to access and develop mining claims on the state lands. By law they are supposed to generate revenues for public schools. But last year the Interior Department and the state of Utah sat down and hammered out an agreement that gives Utah \$50 million and 139,000 acres of federal land in exchange for scattered state-

owned school trust lands throughout the state, including those in the monument (HCN, 9/1/97).

"The real story here is what an agency like the BLM can accomplish when it is given adequate resources," says Bill Hedden, Utah representative for the Grand Canyon Trust, a conservation group based in Flagstaff, Ariz. "This monument is now becoming a full-fledged monument, irrespective of which agency is managing it."

Hedden has had a hand in the monument's maturation. Over the past year he has worked out deals with several ranchers and the BLM to move cattle out of the monument and permanently retire federal grazing allotments in environmentally sensitive areas (HCN, 2/1/99).

The creation of the monument was the catalyst for the ranchers, Hedden says. The ranchers believed there would be more scrutiny of their activities by the agency and the public, and that they would eventually be regulated out of business.

"Combine that with the collapse of the beef market and you can see why they think this is the time to sell out," he says.

### **Heavy hand or guiding light?**

Of course, not everyone is happy. The Utah Association of Counties still has a lawsuit in federal court challenging the legality of the monument itself. It claims the president exceeded his authority under the Antiquities Act.

Most observers say the lawsuit is a longshot, but the possibility of a court victory has kept resistance alive.

Last summer, Kane County commissioners were on the verge of signing an agreement with the BLM that would finally resolve the contentious issue of which roads the county owns within the new monument. Under heavy pressure from the

local chapter of People for the USA, a national "wise use" organization, the commissioners backed off.

The dissent is proof that many local citizens still haven't bought into the monument, says Ken Sizemore, deputy director of the Five Counties Association of Government in southern Utah. Sizemore, who until last summer was the community leader for the monument planning team, appointed by Gov. Leavitt, says he sees a "groundswell" of opposition to the monument bubbling up as the management plan nears completion.

"While the elected officials were conversant in the planning process and bought into it, the general citizenry was still very upset," says Sizemore.

The persistent political opposition to the monument has convinced Bruce Babbitt to take a new tack. Babbitt has said that places such as the Arizona Strip, north of the Grand Canyon, and Steens Mountain in southeastern Oregon, deserve protection. Let the locals come up with a protection plan. If they don't, he adds, he'll ask the administration to unleash the Antiquities Act.

Sizemore says the new approach is as draconian as the old one. "The administration is making the same mistake with these new areas," he says. "Sure, it would be great to have a local, legislative proposal drive the process, but when you get down to brass tacks, the administration opposes the concepts and precepts embodied in locally produced legislation."

Monument manager Meredith says some locals will always be unhappy because "there is a general dislike in the rural West for anything that's perceived to limit the ability to make money from natural resource development." Sometimes direction from on high is not a bad thing, he says, especially when there is little prospect of consensus at the local level.

"The president's proclamation for the monument clearly defines what we can and cannot do," says Meredith. "And that has been helpful."



*Paul Larmer is senior editor for High Country News.*

## You can contact ...

\* Jerry Meredith, manager of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, 435/865-5100, or check out the monument Web site at [www.ut.blm.gov/monument](http://www.ut.blm.gov/monument);

\* Ken Sizemore at the Five Counties Association at 435/673-3548.

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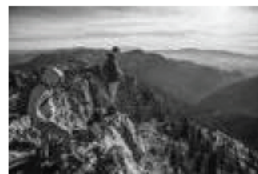
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