

To keep it wild

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Steve Yozwiak/The Arizona Republic

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt stands at the summit of Mount Dellenbaugh. The mountain, at 6,990 feet, is the highest point in what he hopes will be a national monument on the Shivwits Plateau north of the Grand Canyon.

Babbitt has plan for 400,000 acres north of Canyon

By Steve Yozwiak
The Arizona Republic

Threats from encroaching civilization are leading Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to consider greater federal protection for a vast swath of Arizona wilderness at the west end of the Grand Canyon.

Nearly 400,000 acres of the North Rim's Shivwits Plateau are under study for a possible national monument.

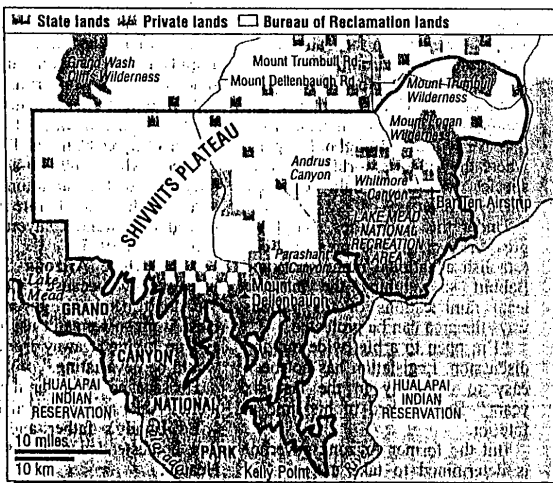
It is some of the most isolated, mysterious and surprisingly beautiful land in the Southwest, settled by Mormon pioneer ranchers last century and coveted by hunters for trophy mule deer.

The landscape flows from pine-studded volcanoes, across grasslands and waves of pinon-juniper shrub to multicolored gorges, reaches of the Grand Canyon that are not within the million acres of Grand Canyon National Park.

As such, the plateau — named Shivwits for a band of Paiute Indians — is subject to a variety

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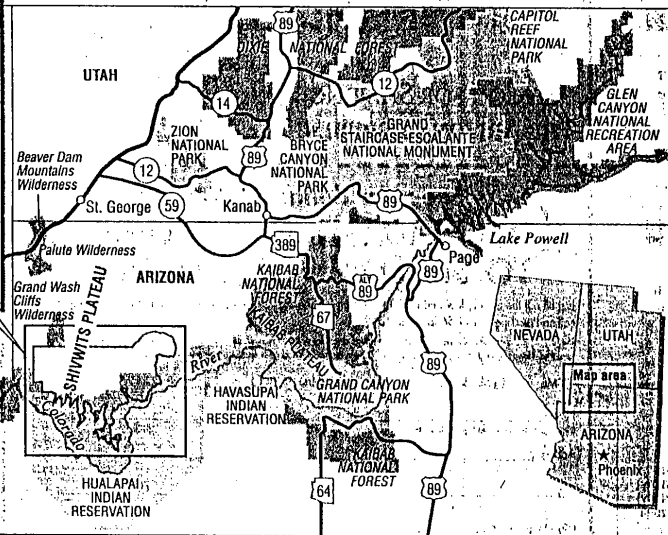


Source: U. S. Department of Interior

Map showing the proposed Shivwits Plateau National Monument area in southern Utah, near the border with Arizona. The map includes labels for various land designations and geographical features.

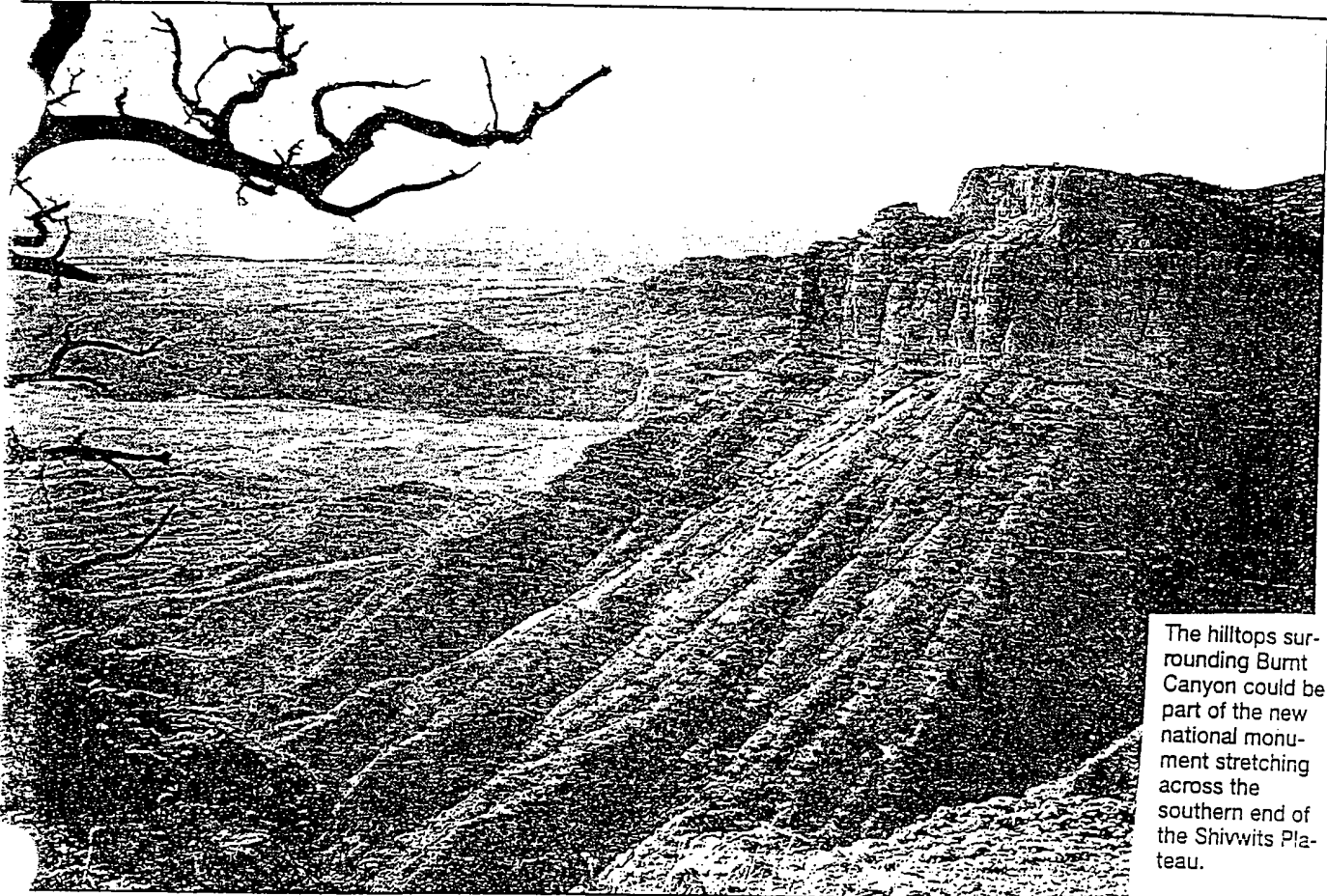
PROPOSED SHIWITS PLATEAU NATIONAL MONUMENT

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt is considering more environmental protections for the west end of the Grand Canyon. Outlined in red is the area under study for possible designation as a national monument.



Gus Walker/The Arizona Republic

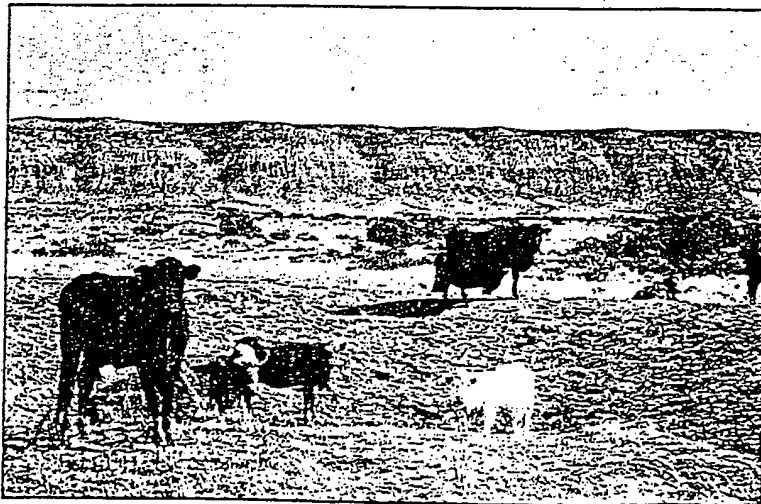
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The hilltops surrounding Burnt Canyon could be part of the new national monument stretching across the southern end of the Shivwits Plateau.

Photos by Steve Yozwiak/The Arizona Republic

Babbitt has plan for 400,000 acres



Babbitt said that efforts have begun to heal damage caused by over-grazing, but that his plan would allow traditional family cattle ranching to continue.

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of development pressures: uranium and copper mining, housing subdivisions and wildcat roadways carved by off-highway vehicles.

"There really is nowhere I know of — in the lower 48 states — where you have this great, intact expanse that is not all chopped up," Babbitt said at the end of a fact-finding tour of the area last week.

"It also happens to be the most pristine rim area in the entire Grand Canyon system. It is the most wild. Some people might say then, 'Why bother?' My response is, that is the lesson of history: If you don't think about it before the problems are on you, then you have controversy."

Unlike Utah's Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument — declared without any advance notice by President Clinton in the heat of the 1996 presidential campaign — there is no imminent development of coal, oil or other resources here.

The area is crossed by fewer than 25,000 vehicles annually, and some places like Kelly Point, overlooking a 180-degree turn of the Colorado river, is visited by fewer than 200 people each year.

But after touring the area with his top assistants, regional land administrators and some of the nation's leading conservationists, Babbitt said he fears it is only a matter of time before this land is discovered by the general public and pressure mounts to exploit it.

"Fifty or 100 years from now, it could be very different," he said. "We need to think carefully about how we manage this for the long term, as part of our heritage."

Instead of surprising local interests and blind-siding local politicians, Babbitt wants to avoid the backlash that erupted after the Grand Staircase-Escalante move. He wants to talk with ranchers, hunters and Arizona's congressional delegation, starting with Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., to build a consensus before recommending any particular action to Clinton.

Ranchers, miners, loggers and oil drillers were not invited on Babbitt's initial rendezvous, and they remain suspicious of the secretary's motives.

They fear an erosion of property

and development rights, noting the region's evolution of federal land restrictions — wilderness to monuments to parks — over the past century, as steady as the Colorado River's roar through the Canyon.

In contrast, environmentalists see an opportunity to close the loop on a region of northern Arizona and southern Utah they envision as a massive wildlife stronghold, a place where the modern world's march of species extinctions could be halted, and even reversed.

Under the Antiquities Act, Congress as well as the president can establish a national monument, and Babbitt is weighing the intricate legal ramifications of the various ways the area can be protected.

"I'm open to a big, wide-ranging discussion. Legislation has not been easy to come by in the last six years," Babbitt said of his time at Interior.

But the former Arizona governor is determined to take action. And with only two years left in the Clinton administration, Babbitt knows his time is running out.

"Obviously, I'd like to bring it to closure on my watch."

Efforts have already begun, Babbitt said, to heal the damage inflicted by over-grazing, over-logging and suppression of natural fires across the Shivwits.

For more than four years, Babbitt has nurtured a forest restoration project on Mount Trumbull, one of the highest peaks on the Canyon's north rim. And regional chiefs of the National Park Service and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management are working in tandem to restore grasslands by setting controlled fires, removing an overabundance of shrubs and restricting livestock numbers.

But Babbitt says more needs to be done.

Simply expanding Grand Canyon National Park, however, would mean an end to hunting and ranching, destroying some of the cultural values of the area that Babbitt said he wants to preserve.

Tony Heaton's grandfather home-

steaded a ranch at the mouth of Whitmore Canyon, where upward of 600 head of cattle roam the Canyon's esplanade. And Heaton's helicopters annually fetch about 10,000 river rafters up from Whitmore Rapids to the Heaton family dude ranch on the canyon's rim.

"It sounds like a land grab. I think it's just a way of enlarging Grand Canyon National Park," said Heaton, whose 80,000-acre ranch once included an additional 50,000 acres to the east, before Congress passed the Grand Canyon Enlargement Act of 1975.

"The whole Arizona Strip is a place we love because it's our home. We don't need the government to close it up so we can't use it. If they end up taking it away from us, that would be devastating."

He sees no need for the government to take any further actions.

Ed Bundy's father and grandfather homesteaded land just west of Heaton.

"I hope that they would meet with us and set some guidelines, so we know where we stand," said Bundy, who together with uncle Atwood, cousin Orvel and nephews Arlin and Denice run upward of 580 head of cattle across 60,000 acres of the Shivwits that federal land managers refer to as "Bundy Country."

"Whenever there's a change like that, you're sort of scared, because you really don't know what they might want to do."

Joe Snyder, spokesman for People for the USA!, formerly People for the West!, is worried that Babbitt is trying to divide his organization, which promotes ranching, mining, logging and oil drilling on public lands.

Snyder said his members believed Clinton abused his power when he declared the 1.7 million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante in Utah.

"They were very much against the way that was done, and how many acres he took," Snyder said. "If it (Babbitt's discussions) is aboveboard..., if he's looking for

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Babbitt has plan for 400,000

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consensus with hunters and ranchers, I would think that would greatly ease the way.”

A national monument designation, Babbitt said, would allow hunting and ranching to continue, but would block development of mines and subdivisions, push noise from tourist aircraft farther from the canyon, and preserve the natural quiet, isolation and the wildness of the place.

After hiking through snow to the top of 6,990-foot Mount Dellenbaugh, Babbitt ran his fingers along the black rocks where three deserters from the original Grand Canyon mapping party of John Wesley Powell scraped their names in the

blistering August of 1869.

“This ... really is classic canyon country,” Babbitt said. “I wasn’t expecting to see such wonderful examples of great, long mesas running all the way out above the river; of colorful side canyons; the pine forests; the way the land kind of drapes down off these rims.”

Yet, it is only a few hours’ drive from booming Las Vegas.

Roger Taylor, BLM field manager for the Arizona Strip — the 3 million acres of Arizona separated from the rest of the state by the Colorado River, said not a week goes by without calls from real-estate speculators.

“This is a rapidly expanding area,” said Ed Norton, vice president of National Trust for Historic

Preservation, who believes the Clinton administration should move quickly.

“I think it’s a mistake to wait until you can do everything when you can do something. I think we have some real momentum here, some real positive groundwork that has been laid,” Norton said of Babbitt’s fact-finding tour.

Thomas Kiernan, president of the National Parks and Conservation Association, said he believes this is an opportunity for Congress to reflect the recent polls across the nation, where land preservation moves were widely approved by voters.

The Shivwits, if it happens, would be the first new national monument in Arizona since 1972,

acres north of canyon

when Congress approved the obscure Hohokam Pima National Monument south of Phoenix. But it would be big enough to contain all of Arizona’s 17 other federal monuments, memorials and historic sites.

And it would help connect a circle of parks, monuments and wilderness areas that Kelly Burke, director of the Grand Canyon Wildlands Council, said will be needed in the future to prevent wildlife from slowly disappearing on ever dwindling islands of undeveloped wild land.

Biologists are finding that many forms of wildlife need vast areas to survive, to migrate, to diversify their genes, to move with shifting climate conditions.

“Our goal is to protect and

restore native biodiversity and the ecological richness in this whole area,” Burke said.

Geoff Barnard, president of the Grand Canyon Trust, said his group is seeking a way to plan the future of what he calls the “Greater Grand Canyon,” which includes almost all of northern Arizona and southern Utah.

“If a national monument designation could connect together some of these fragmented jurisdictions and provide an overlay of consistent conservation management, and restoration of wildness, and restoration of healthy ecosystems, we’d be all for it,” Barnard said.

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