

## Nurturing a Fragile Giant

Will 25 million acres within the National Landscape Conservation System truly be conserved? Landscape architects take on political and funding challenges. **BY MICHAEL LECCESE**

**I**n September 1996, President Bill Clinton invoked executive powers under the Antiquities Act of 1906 to create the 1.9-million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah. By proclaiming the monument, Clinton blocked a proposed coal mine that would have scarred one of the nation's most remote and scenic settings.

Environmentalists cheered and compared Clinton to Teddy Roosevelt, but a group of Utah high school students burned Clinton in effigy and released black balloons. Others staged vigilante-style protests that reflected the ire of some Western citizens and politicians, not to mention the mining industry.

Despite howls over federal suzerainty, Clinton wasn't done. By the time he left office, he proclaimed 14 more national monuments totaling 6 million acres.

In June 2000, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt created the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) to oversee these new national

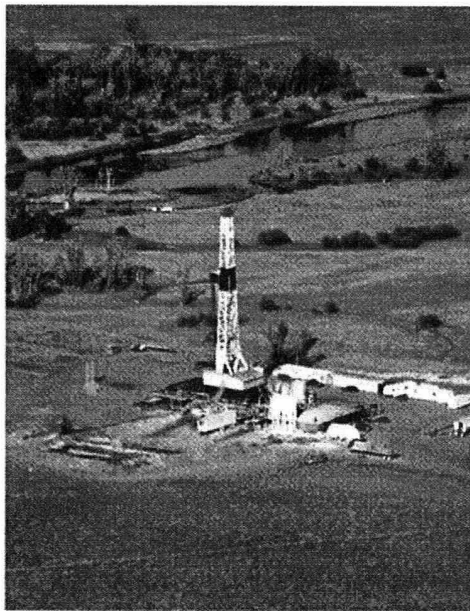
monuments. They were consolidated with 14 national conservation areas, 148 wilderness areas, 36 wild and scenic rivers, 9 national historic trails, and 2 national scenic trails—a total of 25 million acres, or about the size of Washington state. All NLCS lands, from Colorado's Lowry pueblo ruins to 825 miles of California coastline, are in the western United States.

Yet environmentalists were concerned that the NLCS was placed under the Interi-

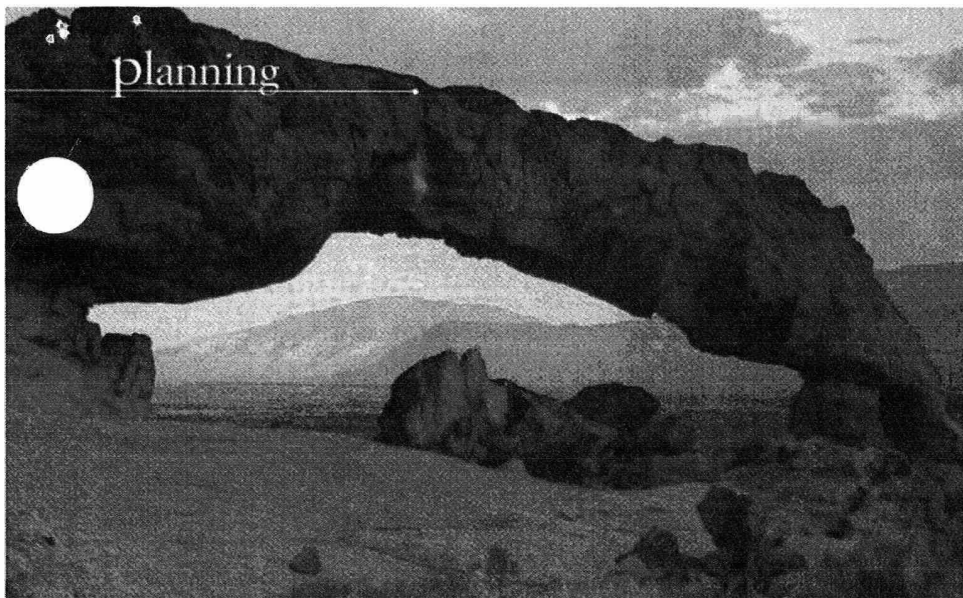
or Department's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Formed in 1946 by marrying the General Land Office to the Grazing Service, BLM had long been considered in liege to mining, grazing, and oil exploration interests. Before Clinton's edicts, BLM had never managed a national monument, the designation of which is often considered a stepping-stone to national park status.

Brad Cownover, ASLA, the chief landscape architect for BLM, says that Babbitt created NLCS to build a public mandate for sensitive management of the best lands within the BLM's large and diffuse system of 264 million acres—three times the size of all national parks combined.

"This is an agency few people know or understand," says Cownover. "We're largely associated with surface-disturbing activities and off-road vehicles. But BLM has



**The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, top, in central Montana, designated in January 2001, protects a landscape remarkably unchanged since the Lewis and Clark expedition passed through 200 years ago. Under President Bush's Bureau of Land Management, questions remain about how many of the Clinton-designated national monuments will be protected from drilling and other resource exploration, left.**



**Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, above, one of the most spectacular examples of southern Utah's vast canyon country wilderness, has been subject to a major dispute over grazing rights versus landscape protection. The National Landscape Conservation System comprises 25 million acres, right, of national monuments, wilderness, and other lands in 12 western states.**

more to do with preserving the American West than anyone else."

The public is already paying more attention to BLM's acreage. "Most people think of the national parks as the crown jewels," says Cownover. "The BLM has what's left, the land you drove through to get to the park. Now those people are turning around [from the parks] and coming back to find that rustic sense of solitude."

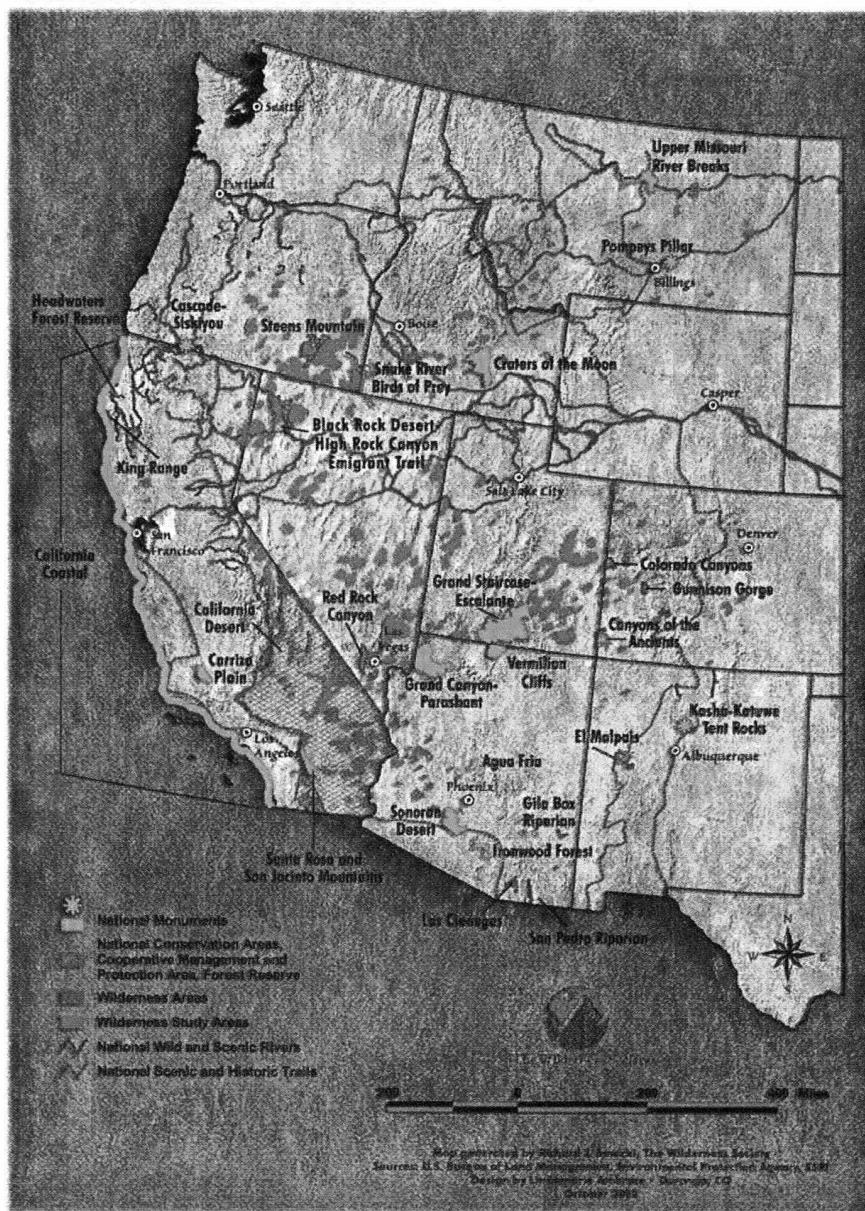
For example, Cownover estimates that the BLM lands around Moab, Utah, draw three times as many recreationists as Arches National Park in the same region. *Beyond the National Parks*, a recent BLM guidebook, depicts mountain bikers approaching slickrock with the imperative to "discover and enjoy America's 264-million-acre backyard!"

Moreover, the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 had already directed the agency to pursue "multiple use-sustained yield" as part of a more balanced approach to management. Since that time BLM has designated millions of acres as roadless wilderness and wilderness study areas. Included in this total are more than 600 wilderness study areas—amounting to

over 17 million acres of land—that have met the criteria for wilderness; the wilderness study areas may be under the most threat, as they lack congressional designation and are often not managed as wilderness.

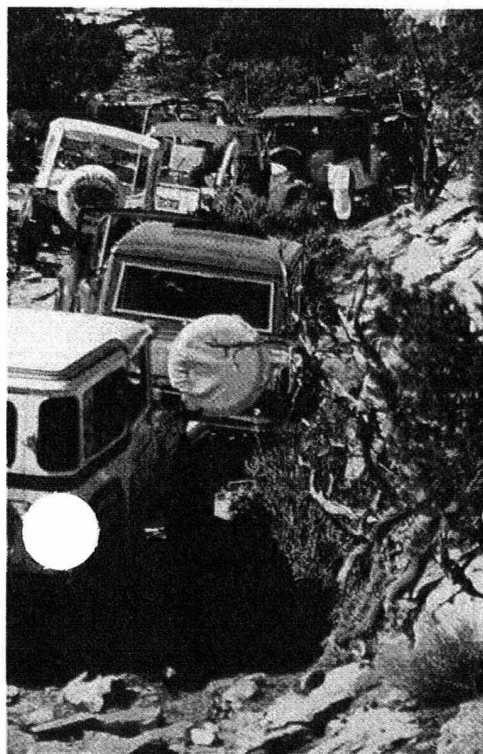
"Since 1976, BLM has had a mandate to include conservation as part of its focus on multiple use," says Amy Schneckenburger, ASLA, who in 2001 began a Wilderness Society fellowship to study NLCS issues. Schneckenburger, now deputy director of project management at Yosemite National Park, is optimistic about BLM's new charge. "Bringing these new national monuments together with other units forced the issue," she says.

Just as landscape architects have long





been integral to the mission of national parks, they are being groomed as leaders in the NLCS. They are also in the middle of what environmentalists view as a preservation-versus-exploitation battle over the NLCS's future. One challenge is that BLM has only seven staff landscape architects, down from 45 just a few years ago.



**Vehicle use off designated roads is technically prohibited in most units of the NLCS, but in many areas the BLM has yet to designate roads or enforce the prohibition of cross-country vehicle traffic. Uncontrolled use of these vehicles can gouge new routes through forests, valleys, and hillsides and cause erosion that damages watersheds.**

"I'm trying to build back a peer connection among landscape architects in the agency," says Cowner. The role of the landscape architect in the BLM has fundamentally changed, he adds. For the past 25 years, the agency has answered its environmental charge through a system known as Visual Resource Management (VRM). Often this

**I** want to focus on what I believe is perhaps our last opportunity to achieve major, lasting land conservation on a very large scale in our country. A conservation opportunity that I hope your profession will help shape and champion, much as you have for our national park system.

That opportunity lies in our remaining public lands. Not those public lands that are already protected in parks and forests, but that vast body of leftover, unknown, and unreserved public lands that are managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

...These lands are often overlooked, but they represent some of our most spectacular scenery, they hold some of our best natural and cultural treasures, and they are a unique and priceless part of our American heritage....

[There has been] a persistent upwelling of public support and understanding that we needed to protect large landscape ecosystems—not just Park and Forest Service islands. The landowners, the American people, want their lands held and managed for clean water, [for] the protection of endangered species, for abundant wildlife, for productive fisheries, for open space, for the protection of our heritage, and for the greater glory of God's creation. They do not want to see their public lands auctioned off to the highest bidder or exploited by industry....

To work toward this vision, the BLM needed a renewed and more prominent emphasis on the conservation part of its mission—an emphasis put into practice through a system of specially protected and managed conservation units, a system that would protect the crown jewels of our public lands and interpret their history to the public. It would be a system that stands proudly alongside parks and refuges as part of our national heritage, and one that provides needed connectivity between national parks, forests, and wildlife refuges.

...This system of BLM conservation units represents our best thinking and our best hope for preserving most of the last great lands of the West and adding greater protection to land we've already preserved....

Given this growing collection of BLM specially protected units, it was time to formally bring them together in a system, with a name and a structure within BLM. We announced the National Landscape Conservation Sys-

tem—a system that encompasses all monuments, national conservation areas, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, and national trails managed by BLM. Let me emphasize the term "landscape" in this title. No doubt it is a term that is close to your hearts. The term is also key to the vision of the system—it emphasizes the idea of protecting entire landscapes of cultural and natural values, instead of preserving only disconnected islands that are cut off from the surroundings that sustain them.

...These new landscape protections reflect more recent understanding that, to truly protect natural and cultural values, we must protect the larger landscapes—whole sections of ecosystems and communities—that contain them.

But I believe all these challenges will be met for one important reason: The public wants America's miracles of nature protected for future generations. All eyes will be on the

Bureau of Land Management to see if they are capable of doing the job. While I believe they are, there is no doubt that they will need the kind of help that landscape architects are particularly well suited to provide.

If we seize this opportunity, I really believe we'll look back on it as a defining moment in conservation history, one in which the last great American conservation sys-

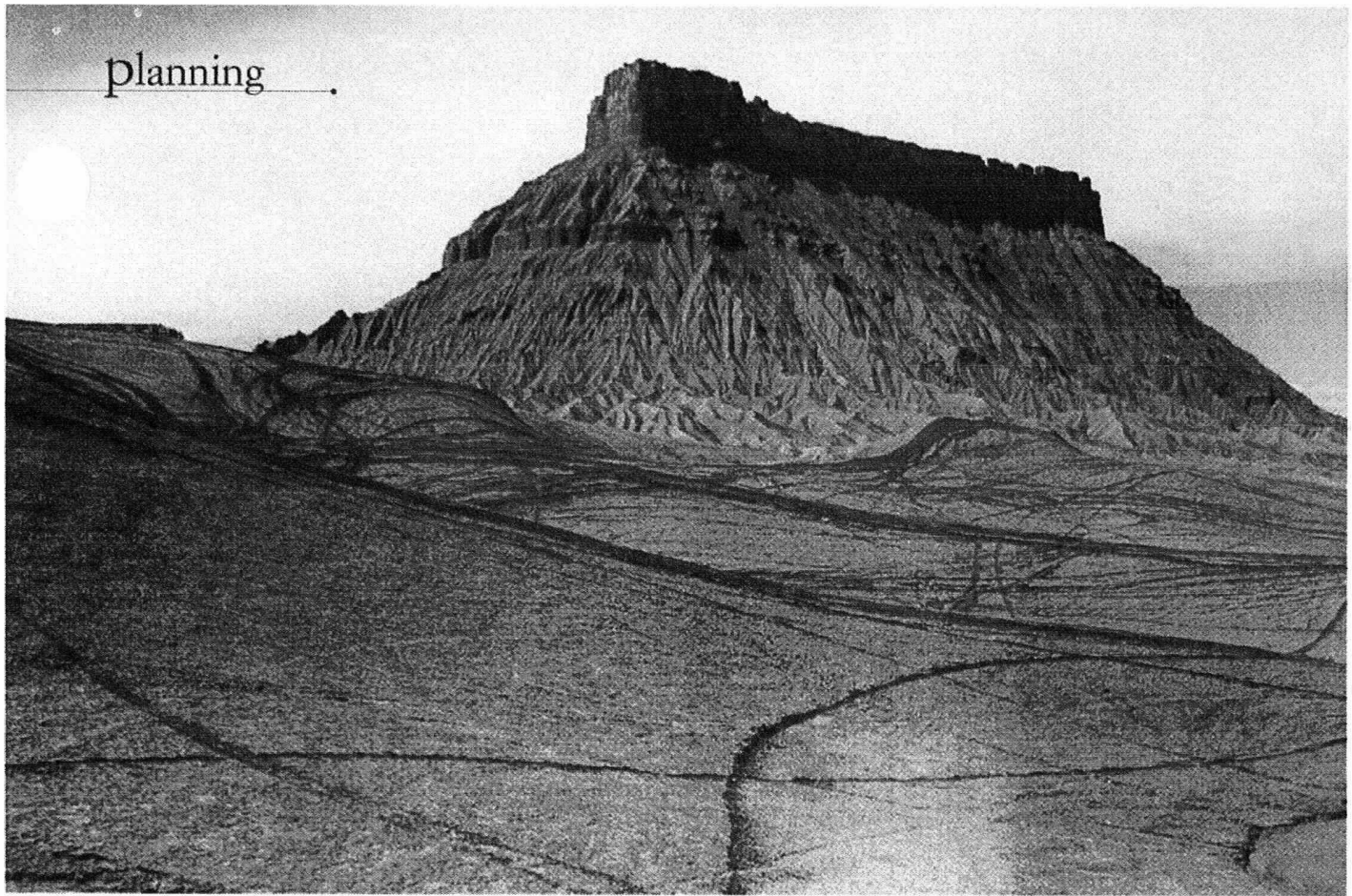
tem was born, and one in which landscape architects exerted pivotal influence....

I congratulate each of you and the American Society of Landscape Architects for embracing the protection of these spectacular lands as your own by making the National Landscape Conservation System a part of your legislative agenda next year.

With the new National Landscape Conservation System, the door has been opened to a new public lands conservation future. My hope is that this system will be the start of a transformation of the public lands. Instead of leftovers, they will be recognized and protected for their role in maintaining complex desert and grassland ecosystems, in providing the connective tissue that sustains biodiversity and seasonal wildlife migration patterns, in providing valuable wild and open space, and in defining and preserving the landscapes of the American West. These landscapes are the very heart of who we are—the ancestral soil of all of us who trace our roots to a love of the land. Let's pass it on.

## Excerpts from the keynote address by Bruce Babbitt at the American Society of Landscape Architects Annual Convention,

WASHINGTON, DC,  
APRIL 27, 2002.



amounted to screening out the visual effects of resource exploration and extraction. VRM measures might include burying tanks or painting them green to blend with the landscape.

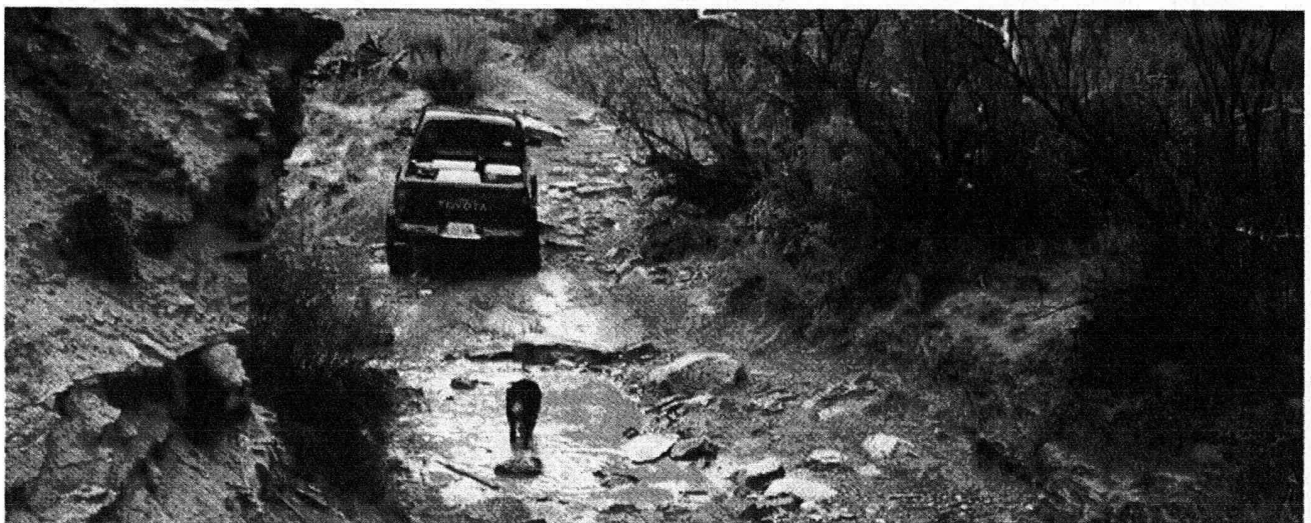
In the 1970s, BLM began hiring landscape architects to survey lands for VRM. As surveys were completed, BLM's landscape architect staff shrank through attrition. Cownover thinks the role of the landscape architect may expand again—but this time

**Above: These tracks around Factory Butte in Utah's San Rafael Swell area—a potential future NLCS site—testify to the damage caused by uncontrolled off-road vehicle use.**

**Below: Monument plans define areas for recreation without encouraging visitation. "If you allow 100 people into a slot canyon, it will have...an impact on the experience," says landscape architect Bryce Lloyd.**

mainly through private contractors and partnerships.

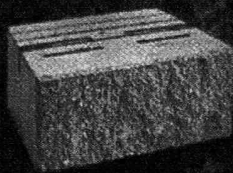
Compared to VRM, which is still widely used, the NLCS calls for much more comprehensive management of ecological and cultural resources. "Each unit is required to come up with its own management plan," says Cownover, "and that plan must respond to the objects of interest the area was designated for—whether those are ecological, scientific, cultural, paleontological, or scenic."



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After NLCS's promising start, optimism faded with the election of George W. Bush. He promptly inserted Gale Norton, a former James Watt protégé and Colorado attorney general with resource-industry ties, to succeed the conservationist Babbitt as interior secretary. With Norton at the helm and the NLCS's 25 million acres held within the extraction-minded BLM, it seemed as if the cat had the keys to the canary cage.

In March 2001, Norton generated outrage when she sent letters to 11 Western governors and elected officials soliciting suggestions to redraw national monument boundaries to make them friendlier to resource exploration and off-road vehicle use. Many feared that Bush would even try to persuade Congress to abolish the new monuments. In November 2002, BLM allowed oil exploration on 9,600 acres of the Canyon of the Ancients National Monument in Colorado, further dismaying conservationists.

While at the Wilderness Society, Schneckenburger helped lead a counteraction. She helped forge a new NLCS coalition of 44 environmental and historic preservation groups including ASLA. While establishing itself as an advocate and a watchdog, the coalition made a case for conservation by publishing a color brochure and producing trading cards with facts about each site and local environmental-group contacts.

Some 6,000 citizens sent letters of protest to Norton, who seems to have backed off. Environmentalists now express cautious hope the administration will embrace the program. "Somewhat to our surprise, the NLCS is still functioning under the Bush administration," says David Alberswerth, director of the BLM program for the Wilderness Society. "On the other hand it's kind of being treated like a stepchild within the Interior Department and lacks sufficient funding for planning."

"I would concur with that concern," says Cownover. "But we're still in the first steps of raising awareness and building political support for these sites."

Meanwhile, landscape architects are leading a number of promising design and planning projects within the NLCS. Bryce Lloyd, ASLA, landscape architect for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, has been guiding the siting, architecture,

and landscape architecture of five visitor centers in a gateway community near the monument. Lloyd helped produce *Architecture and Landscape Design Guidelines* for the monument, which divides areas around the monument into three provinces with design responses suited to particular landscapes and environments. Cownover thinks this document may model agency-wide design guidelines.

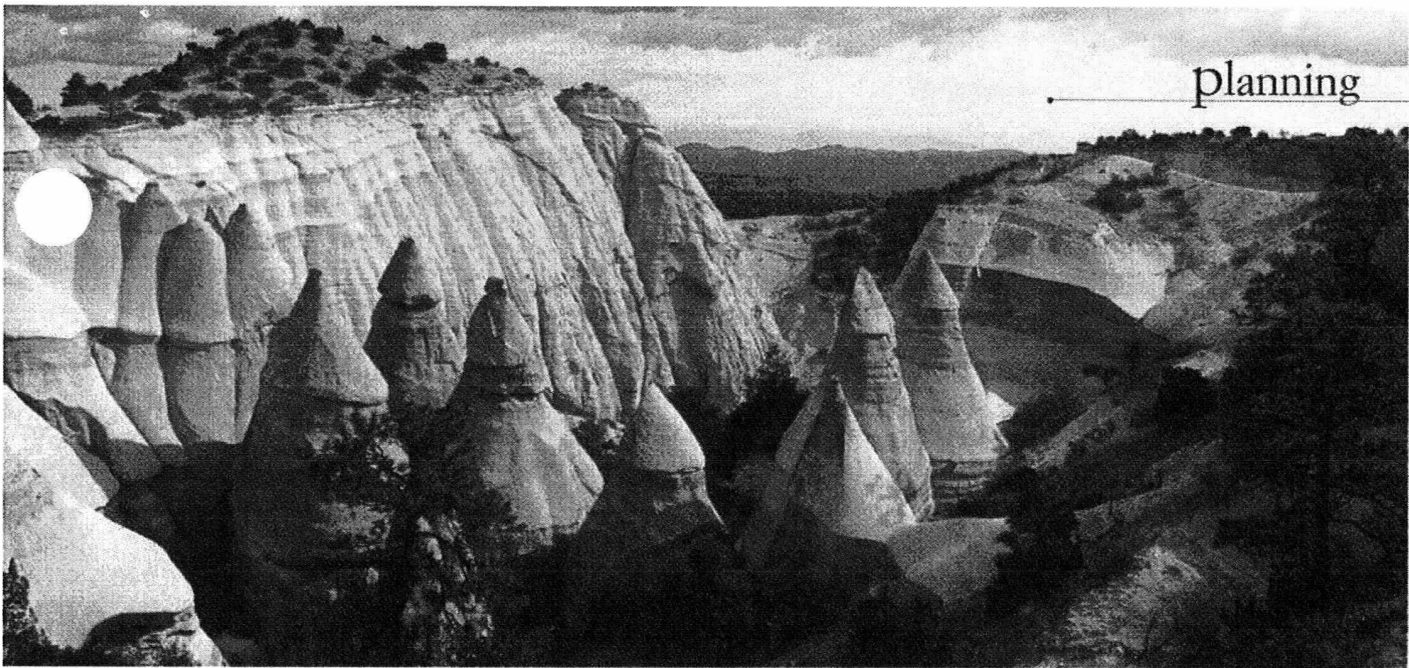
A new Escalante visitor center in Cannonville, Utah, reflects the area's agricultural roots, with rustic, Mormon pioneer-style buildings grouped around a city park and low-water native gardens. Another new visitor building in Big Water, Utah, is more naturalistic, using local stone and nautilus-like forms recalling a rock formation or canyon wall. Three more centers are in design and construction.

Near the 807,000-acre Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument (next to the Grand Canyon National Park), BLM landscape architect Cimarron Chacon, ASLA, is leading efforts to reclaim a run-down roadside rest area as a new gateway. When BLM received the land from the Arizona Department of Highways several years ago, it was a 25-acre collection of dated campsites, cinderblock buildings, and crumbling trails originally built by Boy Scouts.

Chacon helped craft a vision to reconstruct the site just south of the Utah border on Highway 15. To plan this effort, Chacon worked in partnership with the Utah Chapter of ASLA, which cosponsored a three-day charrette on the site in April 2003.

About 25 landscape architects and students attended. They hiked, biked, camped out on the site, listened to speakers on subjects like feng shui and native plantings, and cooked meals together. Then four breakout groups addressed site design, architectural image, recreational design, and interpretive planning.

When revitalized, the area (renamed the Virgin River Gorge Gateway Center) may include a visitor center, bookstore, camping spots, outbuildings for interpretation, and new launch sites for river rafting. The landscape will be restored with native plants, and buildings will feature energy and resource-saving technologies. BLM has earmarked \$500,000 for this effort.



M. LEE BENZLEY, U.S. BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Private firms have won sizable contracts for planning and design within the NLCS. For example, EDAW has worked on master plans for Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area near Las Vegas and Pompeys Pillar National Monument in Montana. Salt Lake City-based GSBS, a mul-

**Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument, located on the Parajito Plateau in north-central New Mexico, is an area of remarkable landscapes, scenery, and geology. Among the natural and scientific features the monument is meant to protect are those that give it its name: Unusual cone-shaped or "tent" rocks formed during volcanic eruptions between six and seven million years ago.**

tidisciplinary firm including landscape architecture, contributed to the design of the new Grand Staircase-Escalante visitor facilities.

Lloyd also played a major hand in shaping the Escalante monument's General Management Plan, the first completed for *(Continued on Page 99)*



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## Planning

(Continued from Page 58) an NLCS site. Rather like a McHargian overlay, the management plan divides the land into zones for appropriate activities, including hiking, grazing, and wilderness preservation. The plan also specifies intensity of uses with restrictive standards for visitation.

"In some areas, you don't want any more than about 12 beating hearts, including horses, visiting at any one time," says Lloyd. "If you allow 100 people into a slot canyon, it will have not only a biological impact but an impact on the experience of visiting. This is one way in which we are fundamentally different from the Park Service."

Planners of the NLCS studied the history of the National Park Service and were determined to forge a different type of system to avoid the shortcomings of overbuilt, over-visited National Parks. For example, NLCS sites should accommodate, rather than encourage, visitation. Visitor facilities will be placed in gateway communities instead of within monument boundaries. The system seeks to create

large, connected wildlife habitat for big game and endangered species.

Yet unlike national parks, NLCS lands remain open to mining and grazing, although these activities "should not increase in the future," contends Cownover. In some cases, nonprofits like the Grand Canyon Trust are buying and retiring grazing permits.

As one of the last areas of the Lower 48 to be explored ("there wasn't even a paved road into the region until the 1960s," says Lloyd), Grand Staircase-Escalante already has yielded major scientific finds. Paleontologists have uncovered fossils identifying species of dinosaurs, mammals, marine life, microscopic life, and plants. This is a direct result of federal protection, increased funding, and the management plan's emphasis on research.

Policing of pothunting, vandalism, and illegal off-road vehicle use has improved as the Grand Staircase-Escalante staff has increased from about 20 to nearly 70

scientists, interpretive specialists, and rangers. Yet in keeping with the NLCS objective to accommodate but not encourage visitation, the number of people visiting the monument has not spiked dramatically since 1996.

Following in Escalante's footsteps, 13 of the BLM's 15 national monuments and 7 of 14 national conservation areas are now drafting management plans, which take two to three years to complete. BLM has funded \$7 million for such efforts this year. Given the Bush administration's philosophy of states' rights and local control, these plans are being drafted with painstaking input from local interests and advisory committees.

This may be a weakness, contends Schneckenburger. "The intent of the NLCS was to start connecting habitats to establish wildlife corridors and leave cultural corridors intact," she says. "With national management left to the local level, there's a general fear among conservationists that the big picture might be lost."

There are concerns that other BLM



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## Planning

monuments will not receive staffing, planning, or design funding comparable to Grand Staircase-Escalante, which is budgeted at \$6 million annually. "The planning dollars aren't there," Alberswerth says. "Nor is the operational funding."

Furthermore, the NLCS is proving far from immune to political whipsawing. In the summer of 2000, Kate Cannon, manager of Grand Staircase-Escalante, ordered three ranchers to remove cows from grazing lands within the monument. The reason: Three summers of drought had already denuded 90 percent of vegetation. Disgruntled ranchers staged a mini-Sagebrush Rebellion and complained loudly to Utah's congressional delegation. By December 2001 Cannon was not-so-quietly transferred.

"Kate Cannon was well within her rights when she pulled those cows off the land," says Lloyd. "Some cows were so weak they had to be removed by helicopter. The problem was that the federal government had never before held a hard line on grazing. When she did, the ranch-

ers were surprised, and it broke down an era of trust."

Few environmentalists found Interior Secretary Norton trustworthy in May 2003, when she settled a seemingly minor lawsuit in a way that ceded BLM's power to study new wilderness areas. "The bottom line is it knocks a lot of land out of consideration for wilderness on the BLM monuments," says Johanna Wald, director of the land program for the National Resources Defense Council, which is challenging Norton's settlement on technical legal grounds.

Citizen activists near NLCS lands were surveying and proposing some of those potential wilderness acres. Critics of the administration say the Bush rhetoric of local control is being overridden by federal power plays and backdoor maneuvering with special interest groups.

Vigilance will be needed, Schneckenburger says, to maintain the integrity of the NLCS. "There will continue to be threats, mostly focused on drilling and re-drawing the boundaries. There are also

concerns that, rather than having a protected conservation area with low use, "there will be a heavier emphasis on recreation with off-road vehicle use," she adds.

"Not all is lost," says Alberswerth, who notes that several significant wilderness areas have been added to the NLCS in the past two years. "We're grateful that the Bush administration at least has not gotten rid of the system." **LA**

*Based in Boulder, Colorado, Michael Leese is a former senior editor of Landscape Architecture and coauthor of the Built Environment Image Guide for the U.S. Forest Service.*

### Resources

- Bureau of Land Management, [www.blm.gov](http://www.blm.gov).
- Defenders of Wildlife Public Lands Defense Program, [www.defenders.org/publiclands](http://www.defenders.org/publiclands).
- Nijhuis, Michelle. "Change Comes Slowly to Escalante Country," *High Country News*, April 14, 2003; [www.hcn.com](http://www.hcn.com).
- Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, [www.suwa.org](http://www.suwa.org).
- The Wilderness Society, [www.wilderness.org](http://www.wilderness.org).




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