

## **CHAPTER 14 – VISUAL RESOURCES**

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### **14.1 RESOURCE OVERVIEW**

The Monticello Field Office (FO) planning area contains an unusually large number of areas that possess a high degree of scenic quality and a high level of visual sensitivity. Each year, an increasing number of visitors come to the area to recreate and sightsee. The visual attributes of the region have made the Monticello FO area popular for locals and visitors alike. In general, high scenic quality within the Monticello FO area results from the extraordinarily diverse and distinct topography, geology, and cultural history. The area possesses scenically unique vistas and river ways; rare and unusual geological formations of sandstone, limestone, and shale; colorful and highly contrasting sandstone cliffs, arches, canyons, and spires; a diversity of vegetation ranging from aspen, pinyon and juniper, to cottonwood and cacti; and an extraordinary concentration of prehistoric rock art and prehistoric and historic structures. Visually sensitive areas within the Monticello FO planning area are also the result of visitor interest in and public concern for an area's visual resources, an area's high degree of public visibility, the level of use of an area by the public, and the type of visitor use that an area receives.

The major areas within the Monticello FO planning area that possess both outstanding scenic quality and high visual sensitivity include, but are not limited to: the Dark Canyon Wilderness, Comb Ridge, Comb Wash, Butler Wash, Lockhart Basin, the Grand Gulch/Cedar Mesa Plateau and associated canyons, Valley of the Gods, Indian Creek Corridor, Goosenecks State Park Overlook, and the San Juan River from Sand Island to Clay Hills.

Areas of high scenic quality and visual sensitivity that are associated with travel corridors within the area include the Indian Creek Scenic Byway, the Scenic Byway from the Arizona Border to Bluff (US-163), Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway, the Bicentennial Scenic Byway (U-95), and the Lockhart Basin Road Scenic Backway. The Monticello FO planning area also contains thousands of miles of jeep, bike, and foot trails that are traveled as scenic routes, many of which are internationally recognized.

### **14.2 SPECIFIC MANDATES AND AUTHORITY**

The visual resources within the Monticello FO area are managed under numerous federal and state laws and regulations. The major applicable laws and regulations are listed below.

- BLM's responsibility to manage the scenic resources of the public lands is established by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) which states that “. . . public lands will be managed in a manner which will protect the quality of the scenic (visual) values of these lands.”
- The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires that measures be taken to “. . . assure for all Americans . . . aesthetically pleasing surroundings . . . .” This responsibility is reinforced by the BLM's mission statement.
- BLM Manual 8400 Series, Visual Resource Management (VRM) dictates policy and procedures for the VRM system and outlines procedures for the inventory, evaluation, and classification of visual resources on BLM-administered lands. The series also provides a framework for establishing guidelines for reducing visual impacts, describes the use of the visual contrast rating system in analyzing visual impacts, and describes the steps necessary for portraying the visual resource requirements to determine if a project can meet acceptable limits of impact on visual resources.

- BLM Information Bulletin 98-135 restates the BLM policy on the use of VRM in land-use planning, decision-making, and environmental documents. VRM classes shall be assigned to all public lands as part of the Record of Decision for an RMP. Visual design considerations shall be incorporated into all surface-disturbing projects occurring on public lands regardless of the size or potential visual impact of these projects.
- BLM Information Bulletin 98-164 provides additional BLM guidance on the use of VRM, when making VRM-related decisions.
- BLM Instruction Memorandum UT-83-144 directs that oil and gas facilities be painted a uniform color that does not contrast with the surrounding landscape.

**14.3 CURRENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

The current management of visual resources within the Monticello FO area is guided by decisions made in the San Juan Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Management Plan Record of Decision (BLM 1989, 1991). The RMP establishes the VRM goals, which are to: 1) provide a systematic method to identify, evaluate, and manage visual resource values; 2) protect certain scenic values; and 3) minimize adverse visual impacts in other areas while allowing land use activities to occur. The management guidance to achieve these objectives are to: 1) designate five ACECs (Butler Wash, Cedar Mesa, Dark Canyon, Indian Creek, and the Scenic Highway Corridor) in accordance with special conditions stipulated in Chapter 3 of the RMP; and 2) prepare management plans for these areas (see AMS Chapter 2–ACEC, for current information on these areas).

**14.3.1 Objectives**

Under the current RMP, visual resources have been identified according to VRM classes, based on conditions such as scenic quality, viewing distance zones, and viewer sensitivity levels. A description of the BLM VRM class objectives is included in Appendix A. Details about the VRM Classification Process are provided in Appendix B. The VRM classes within the Monticello FO planning area are listed below, in Table 14.1, with their acreages.

**Table 14.1. VRM Classes and Acreages**

<b>VRM Class</b>	<b>Acres</b>
I	397,477
II	419,536
III	522,921
IV	991,331
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,331,265</b>

Source: GIS Coverage Data 2003

The visual resource management objectives of the current RMP are:

- Butler Wash ACEC will be managed to maintain its scenic quality, as VRM Class I. This would be accomplished by limiting surface disturbance to those projects for which revegetation could be successfully established within 1 year after project completion.
- Cedar Mesa ACEC will be managed to protect scenic and natural values associated with primitive recreation, and is managed as VRM Class I. Activities within the ACEC would be approved only with special conditions to protect visual resources.
- The Valley of the Gods special emphasis area within the Cedar Mesa ACEC will be managed to maintain scenic quality; surface disturbance would be managed to be compatible with VRM Class I criteria.
- To maintain scenic quality within the Indian Creek ACEC, surface disturbance will be limited to that for which revegetation could be successfully established within 1 year after project completion. The ACEC will be managed as VRM Class I. Indian Creek ACEC will be open for mineral leasing with stipulations to prevent surface occupancy; however, the FO manager could grant an exception to the No Surface Occupancy stipulation if an Environmental Assessment (EA) concludes that the project would not unduly impair the visual quality of the area. Recreational use will be limited if the activity causes damage to scenic quality.
- The Scenic Highway Corridor ACEC covers a visual zone along State Highways U-95, U-261, and U-276, and part of the White Canyon viewshed. To maintain scenic quality, surface disturbance will be limited to that for which revegetation could be successfully established within 5 years after project completion, and also managed as VRM Class I. All revegetation must be with native species naturally occurring within the area. The Scenic Highway Corridor ACEC will be open for mineral leasing with stipulations to prevent surface occupancy. However, the FO manager could grant an exception to the No Surface Occupancy stipulation if an EA concludes that the project would not unduly impair the visual quality of the area. Recreational use will be limited if the activity causes damage to scenic quality.
- Dark Canyon ACEC will be managed to protect scenic values associated with primitive recreation, and activities within the ACEC would be approved to protect these values. Surface disturbances will be limited to those that can be successfully revegetated within 1 year after project completion. The ACEC will be managed as VRM Class I, and recreation would be limited if cultural or scenic values were being damaged by recreational activities. Dark Canyon ACEC would be closed to mineral leasing, mineral disposal, and OHV use.

The acreages designated for the above ACECs are listed in Table 14.2.

- Shay Canyon ACEC, which includes two branches of the Indian Creek drainage, will be managed as a VRM Class I area to protect cultural resources and aquatic habitat.
- An 800-acre visual protection special emphasis zone is within the Hovenweep ACEC.
- Alkali Ridge ACEC will be managed as VRM Class III.
- Lavender Mesa ACEC will be managed to limit recreational use if scenic values are being damaged.
- Areas designated as Primitive (P) Class in the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) and the Semi-Primitive-Motorized (SPM) Class within the San Juan River Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) will be managed as VRM Class I areas (BLM 1989).

**Table 14.2. ACEC Designation Areas**

<b>ACEC</b>	<b>Acres</b>
Butler Wash	13,870
Cedar Mesa	323,760
Indian Creek	13,100
Scenic Highway Corridor	78,390
Dark Canyon	62,040
<b>Total<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>491,160</b>

Source: BLM 1991

<sup>1</sup>Acres are not additive because of overlap, which is accounted for in the total.

### 14.3.2 Current Conditions

The entire FO planning area has been visually inventoried and classified according to the BLM VRM Classification process (see Appendix B below). In general, the visual resources in the Monticello FO planning area can be delineated in relation to US-191 that runs north-south through the FO planning area. The area to the east of the highway is designated as VRM Class III and Class IV, with the exception of VRM Class II areas in the vicinity of Montezuma Creek and north of the town of Blanding. The remainder of the Monticello FO planning area, to the west of US-191, contains all of those areas designated as possessing high scenic and visual qualities. Figure 14-1, VRM Management Classes, depicts the VRM classes within the FO area.

The emphasis on Visual Resource Management has changed since the 1991 RMP was approved. The 1991 RMP and application of VRM objectives has afforded protection of most resources. The rapid increases in recreational use are having an impact on visual resources.

People are attracted to the area because of its extraordinary scenic quality. Throughout the Monticello FO planning area, impacts to the landscape are occurring from increased recreation and tourism. Potential impacts to VRM could occur from increased and uncontrolled OHV use. Additional impacts are resulting from development of oil and gas resources, seismic exploration, grazing, and other land use disturbances.

The increasing number of roads being utilized by recreationists in the Monticello FO planning area is having indirect effects on visual resources. Seldom seen zones are decreasing within the Monticello FO planning area, and an increase in the number of vehicles and people on BLM roads is creating changes in foreground and middleground views and changes in visual sensitivity. An increasingly utilized network of two-track roads and routes is creating conditions that allow OHV users, campers, and woodcutters to expand surface disturbances and impact visual resources.

Since the approval of the 1991 RMP, an Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) decision (IBLA 98-144) over an oil lease in Lockhart Basin found that there was inconsistency between the VRM Class II objectives for the area and the resource use allocation decisions made in the RMP. The Monticello FO failed to adopt the VRM inventory class II for Lockhart Basin as a VRM management class in the RMP. The court stated: "It is because of the failure of SJRA to differentiate between inventory and management visual resource classes in preparing the RMP that it has been forced to take the position in the instant appeal that VRM class objectives are something that can be contravened under the RMP. This is also not correct." While VRM management objectives designated in the RMP process are binding and establish

levels of permissible impact to visual resources and guide land use planning, VRM inventory classes are not binding in land use planning decisions.

IBLA's decision further states: "We believe that the proper way to resolve this conflict is to give force and effect to those management resource allocation decisions clearly made in the RMP. While its visual resource analysis is . . . fairly muddled, the RMP's desire to permit oil and gas leasing in the Lockhart Basin, even if it resulted in degradation of the visual resources, is clear."

The IBLA decision and guidance provides BLM an opportunity to reduce conflicts between VRM and other resources uses and clarifying the VRM class and objectives.

## **14.4 RESOURCE DEMAND AND FORECAST**

### **14.4.1 Trends**

Tourism is increasing within the Monticello FO planning area. Increased recreational and vehicular use, and spillover from National Parks and Monuments onto BLM lands, contributes to the cumulative impact on visual resources.

The use of OHVs, trail use, and dispersed camping could have long-term cumulative impacts on visual resources. Oil and gas exploration and development are expected to continue within the Monticello FO planning area and contribute some additional impacts to visual resources. In summary, recreational, visitation, and sightseeing trends, as well as continued oil and gas exploration and development, suggest increasing cumulative impacts to visual resources within the Monticello FO planning area.

Long-term trends for impacts to visual resources are:

- Increasing OHV-related recreational use could cause visual impacts within the FO planning area;
- Increasing dispersed camping impacts, often as overflow from the nearby National Parks and Monuments, could impact VRM through increased surface and vegetative disturbance;
- Conflicts between OHV recreationists and hikers, sightseers, cultural site tourists, campers, hunters, river floaters, etc., who seek a high-level of scenic quality.

### **14.4.2 Demands**

At present, there is a high demand for access and activities within scenic areas. The increased number of visitors attracted by the area's extraordinary scenic quality has increased resource demands within the FO planning area. The preferred use of the area has changed since the current RMP was written. Historically, an emphasis has been placed on commercial use and extraction of resources while the present emphasis is on maintaining opportunity for scenic recreation.

## **14.5 CONSISTENCY WITH NON-BUREAU PLANS**

### **14.5.1 Manti-LaSal National Forest**

The Monticello FO coordinates with the USFS on various resource issues, including visual resources.

### **15.5.2 National Park Service**

The Monticello FO coordinates with the NPS on resource issues, including visual resources.

### **15.5.3 San Juan County**

The San Juan County Master Plan does not have a stated visual resource management policy objective. However, the County intends to actively participate in State and Federal planning processes. The County "has very strong opinions on public access." The County policy on public access is that "San Juan County claims all roads and trails over public land that were constructed prior to the passage of FLPMA." The County planning objective is to actively work to maintain and preserve public land access throughout the entire county (San Juan County 1996). As written, it appears that the present San Juan County planning policy for road access on public lands in the FO planning area potentially conflicts with the current BLM RMP regarding visual resource protection, which is "to minimize adverse visual impacts."

The County is a cooperating agency in the development of the RMP.

### **14.5.4 Tribal**

The Monticello FO coordinates with the Navajo and Ute Indian tribes on visual resource management issues.

### **14.5.5 Private**

The Monticello FO coordinates with OHV, oil and gas, recreational, environmental, and local user groups on issues related to recreation and VRM.

## **14.6 ISSUES OR CONCERNS**

There is an increase in OHV use as well as other uses in areas designated as open, especially in Butler Wash and the Indian Creek Falls corridor.

The inconsistencies between management and inventory classes in the Lockhart Basin need to be resolved in accordance with the multi-use mandates in the current RMP.

- VRM is combined with Recreation – these resources should be separated.
- The Dark Canyon ACEC is missing from the list on page 89 of the 1991 RMP.
- VRM Inventory and Management classes should be clearly defined on a map.
- The current level of uses in the Butler Wash ACEC may jeopardize the ability to manage it as VRM Class I.
- Consider modifying the VRM classifications as needed to protect the resource within the FO area and incorporate into the new RMP update guidance for VRM and determine the implications of the guidance.
- The current RMP does not address the cumulative impacts to visual resources from recreational, extractive, and grazing activities.

## **14.7 MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS**

- Management guidelines could include establishing open, closed, and limited areas for OHV use; and closing off OHV trails in visually sensitive areas.
- Consider VRM category designations to be compatible and clear in relation to resource uses.
- Consider designating Lockhart Basin as a visual ACEC and develop protection for this outstanding visual area.
- The RMP needs to identify the carrying capacity of recreational use in visually sensitive, high-use areas.

## **14.8 REFERENCES**

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) 1986. Visual Resource Contrast Rating, BLM Manual Handbook 8431-1.

BLM. 1989. Proposed San Juan Resource Management Plan, Proposed Resource Management Plan. Bureau of Land Management, San Juan Resource Area, Moab District. April.

BLM. 1991. Resource Management Plan Record of Decision and Rangeland Program Summary for the San Juan Resource Area, Moab District, Utah. Bureau of Land Management. March.

BLM. 1992. BLM Handbook 8400 – Visual Resource Management.

Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA), 1998. Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, et al., IBLA 98-144, 98-168, 98-207. Decided 20 May 1998. U.S. Department of the Interior, Arlington, VA.

San Juan County 1996. Master Plan, A Guide to San Juan County's Future, San Juan County, Utah.

## **APPENDIX 14-A VISUAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (VRM) CLASS OBJECTIVES**

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### *Class I*

The objective of Class I is to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This class provides for natural ecological changes; however, it does not preclude very limited management activities. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be very low and should not attract attention.

### *Class II*

The objective of this class is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes to the landscape must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

### *Class III*

The Class III objective is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract the attention of the casual observer, but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat the basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

### *Class IV*

The objective of Class IV is to provide for management activities that require major modifications to the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the landscape can be high. The management activities may dominate the view and may be the major focus of viewer attention. However, every attempt should be made to minimize the impact of these activities through careful location, minimal disturbance, and repetition of the basic visual elements of form, line, color, and texture (BLM 1986).

## **APPENDIX 14-B**

### **VISUAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CLASSIFICATION PROCESS**

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Five steps are involved in the visual resource management (VRM) classification process. These are: 1) outlining and numerical evaluation of scenic quality; 2) outlining of visual sensitivity levels; 3) delineating distance zones; 4) overlaying the scenic quality, sensitivity levels and distance zones using a matrix to develop visual resource inventory classes (VRI) I-IV; and 5) adjusting the inventory to meet the multiple use goals of the RMP and designating VRM management classes I-IV with objectives for each class through the planning process.

#### *Scenic Quality*

The first step is accomplished by outlining scenery of similar nature on a topographic map. Once the area has been outlined, numerical values are given to its key factors (landform, color, water, vegetation, adjacent scenery, scarcity, and cultural modifications). When these values are established, the total determines whether the area is A, B, or C class scenery.

Class A scenery combines the most outstanding characteristics of each rating factor. Class B scenery combines some outstanding features and some that are fairly common to the physiographic region. Class C scenery combines features that are fairly common to the physiographic region.

#### *Visual Sensitivity Level*

Sensitivity levels indicate the relative degree of user interest in visual resources and concern for changes in the existing landscape character. Public lands are assigned high, medium, or low sensitivity levels by analyzing the various indicators of public concern. Factors considered are the type of use, amount of use, public interest, adjacent land use, special areas, and other factors.

#### *Distance Zones*

The distance zones are outlined on topographic maps in three areas: (1) foreground/midground, (2) background, and (3) seldom seen. The foreground/midground zone is a distance of 0 to 5 miles away. The background is the remaining area up to 15 miles distant, and seldom seen is the area beyond 15 miles. All distances are taken from any substantial travel corridor.

#### *Visual Resource Inventory Classes*

Inventory classes are informational in nature only and are assigned through the inventory process. Class I is assigned to those areas where a management decision has been made previously to maintain a natural landscape. This includes areas such as national wilderness areas, the wild section of national wild and scenic rivers, and other congressionally and administratively designated areas where decisions have been made to preserve a natural landscape. Class II, III, and IV are assigned based on a combination of scenic quality, sensitivity level, and distance zones. This is accomplished by combining the scenic quality, sensitivity levels, and distance zones maps, using a matrix (see BLM H-8410-1) to assign the proper inventory class (BLM 1992).