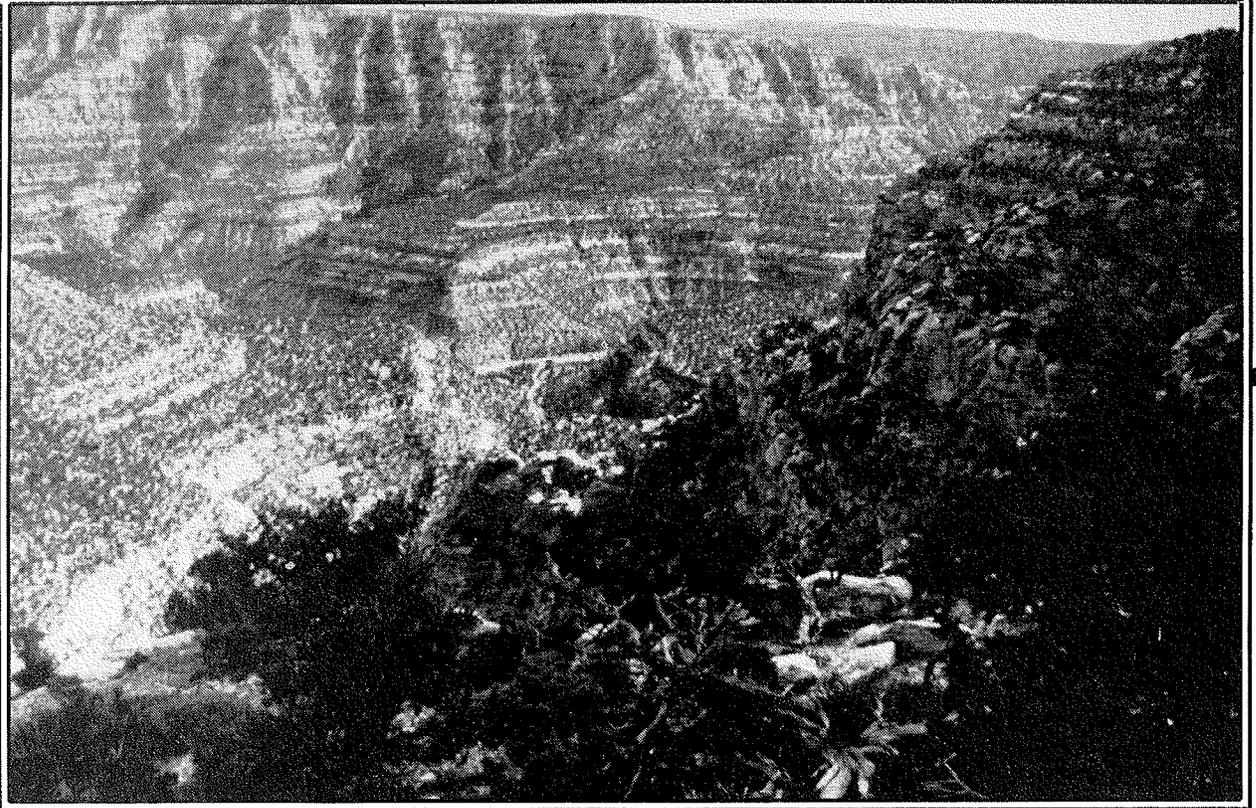


# Dark Canyon Complex





**DARK CANYON INSTANT STUDY AREA COMPLEX**

**1. THE STUDY AREA: 68,030 acres**

The Dark Canyon Instant Study Area (ISA) Complex is located in San Juan County, about 30 miles west of Monticello, Utah (population 1,929). It includes the Dark Canyon Primitive Area/Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and the Middle Point Wilderness Study Area (WSA). The study area is irregularly shaped, with 4 main "fingers" extending in an easterly direction and is about 15 miles from north to south and up to 15 miles from east to west. The southern part of the ISA Complex is adjacent to the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (GCNRA) on the east and the north and Manti-La Sal National Forest to the south. The southeasternmost edge of the ISA Complex is contiguous with the Dark Canyon Woodenshoe Wilderness Area (60,000 acres) designated in 1984, in the Manti-La Sal National Forest. The ISA Complex is bounded on the east and south chiefly by the rims of canyons.

The isolated northern portion of the Dark Canyon Primitive Area is north of Imperial Valley and Beef Basin and is contiguous with the proposed Maze Wilderness (105,980 acres) in Canyonlands National Park (see Map). The ISA Complex contains 68,030 acres of public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). There are no private, State, or split-estate land in-holdings in the ISA Complex (see Table 1).

The ISA Complex is in the Canyonlands Section of the Colorado Plateau Physiographic Province.

The study area is a complex of fragments of the Dark Canyon Plateau and seven deep, meandering canyons that drain into Cataract Canyon of the Colorado River, northwest of the ISA Complex. The remnants of the Dark Canyon Plateau are mesas that slope gently westward.

**TABLE 1  
LAND STATUS AND ACREAGE SUMMARY IN THE STUDY AREA**

<b>WITHIN THE ISA COMPLEX</b>	<b>ACRES</b>
BLM (surface and subsurface)	68,030
Split-Estate (BLM surface only)	0
In-holdings (State, Private)	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>68,030</b>
<b>WITHIN THE RECOMMENDED WILDERNESS BOUNDARY</b>	
BLM (within the ISA Complex)	68,030
BLM (outside the ISA Complex)	0
Split-Estate (within the ISA Complex)	0
Split-Estate (outside the ISA Complex)	0
<b>Total BLM land recommended for wilderness</b>	<b>68,030</b>
In-holdings (State, private)	0
<b>WITHIN THE AREA NOT RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS</b>	
BLM	0
Split-Estate	0
<b>Total BLM land not recommended for wilderness</b>	<b>0</b>
In-holdings (State, Private)	0

Source: BLM File Data

## DARK CANYON INSTANT STUDY AREA COMPLEX

The canyons are as much as 2,000 feet deep and are generally steep, with step-like "pour-offs" up to 300 feet high. The canyons are extremely narrow in places and quite wide in others, with cottonwood trees and low buttes on the floors. An unusual feature in the canyon lands country is the 10 miles of perennial streams that flow through northern portion of the study area in a series of plunge pools and waterfalls. Elevations in the ISA Complex range from 5,800 feet in the northwestern corner to 6,600 feet at the northeast. Pinyon-juniper and blackbrush are the predominant vegetation. The climate is semiarid, depending on elevation, with cool to cold winters and warm summers.

The ISA Complex was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Utah Statewide Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) finalized in November 1990. Three alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: an all wilderness alternative, which is the recommendation in this report; a no wilderness (no action) alternative; and a partial wilderness alternative where 62,040 acres would be designated wilderness and 5,990 acres would be released for uses other than wilderness.

Subsequent to publication of the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Final EIS, the Utah State Director approved the San Juan Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP). The plan includes 62,040 acres of the Dark Canyon ISA Complex (the area corresponding to the Dark Canyon Primitive Area) in the Dark Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to protect scenic values and natural values associated with primitive recreation. Special management requirements now in effect within the ACEC, where consistent with valid existing rights, include: closure to mineral leasing (Category 4), closure to geophysical work, and disposal of mineral materials; proposed withdrawal from locatable mineral entry; exclusion from private and commercial use of woodland products except for limited on-site collection of dead wood for campfires; exclusion from livestock use except in Fable Valley where livestock trailing and emergency grazing would be allowed; closure to off-highway vehicle (OHV)

use; management to meet Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class I objectives; management to limit recreation use if cultural resources or scenic values are being damaged.

The Middle Point WSA (5,990 acres) portion of the ISA Complex is not included in the Dark Canyon ACEC.

In this area, the special management requirements now in effect, where consistent with valid existing rights, include: mineral leasing, geophysical work and disposal of mineral materials with special conditions to limit surface use (Category 2); private and commercial use of woodland products in designated areas only; construction of range improvements and new land treatments so long as they meet VRM class II objectives; limitation of OHV use to designated roads and trails; construction of development projects that blend with the natural character of the land.

### 2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE:

68,030 acres  
(recommended for wilderness)  
0 acres  
(not recommended for wilderness)

The recommendation for this ISA Complex is to designate all of the area, 68,030 acres, as wilderness. This is the environmentally preferable alternative as it would result in the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The alternative selected would be implemented in a manner which would utilize all practical means to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts.

The area that is recommended for wilderness designation includes the Dark Canyon Primitive Area/ACEC of 62,040 acres and the adjacent Middle Point WSA which totals 5,990 acres. All of the recommended area is in a natural condition and has outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation.

Approximately 62,040 acres of the area are in the Dark Canyon ACEC where restrictions on OHV use, mineral and energy exploration and production, mineral material disposal, woodland harvest, visual impacts, and livestock use would continue to be administratively applied if the area is released from

## DARK CANYON INSTANT STUDY AREA COMPLEX

wilderness consideration and protection of wilderness characteristics is not a management objective.

No significant conflicts exist with minerals or other resource uses or activities. The primitive area was withdrawn from mining claim location in 1970 and is also closed to mineral leasing.

Designation of the area would complement the existing Dark Canyon Wilderness east of the ISA Complex in the Manti-La Sal National Forest and wilderness proposed to the north and west, in the GCNRA, and the Canyonlands National Park, north of the ISA Complex. These areas of wilderness and proposed wilderness together would form a wilderness cluster of about 251,230 acres.

### 3. CRITERIA CONSIDERED IN DEVELOPING THE WILDERNESS RECOMMENDATION

#### Wilderness Characteristics

##### A. Naturalness

Naturalness is defined as an attribute in which the evidence of man is substantially unnoticeable to the average visitor and where minor imprints of man exhibit no cumulative impact that is substantially noticeable. Less than 1 percent of the ISA Complex is impacted by imprints of man. The entire 68,030 acres meet the naturalness criteria.

Dark Canyon was declared a primitive area by the BLM in December of 1970 to protect its outstanding natural beauty and unspoiled condition. The area has only a few ways involving a total of about 7.5 miles, projecting short distances across the unit's boundary. For the most part, the primitive area boundaries were drawn along the canyon rims. Thus, the steep and rugged terrain has precluded human influence and the land retains its primeval character.

Seven miles of the 7.5 miles of ways in the ISA Complex are within the Dark Canyon Primitive Area, and are closed to vehicular use.

Most of the Middle Point area is natural, free of human imprints. A road forms part of the unit's eastern border, then is cherry-stemmed for 3 miles on Middle

Point. Another road forms part of the unit's southern boundary, and is cherry-stemmed for 3 miles to Lean-To Point. These seldom-traveled dirt roads are thus not within the ISA Complex.

Imprints within the ISA Complex include a chaining, an old U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Bench Mark, a drill pad site, and a developed spring and associated way. Vehicle tracks also fork off the southern road for approximately a 0.5 mile and are a minor imprint.

The chaining at the end of the Middle Point road was done in 1956. Approximately 80 acres of sage flat with scattered pinyon and juniper trees were chained and seeded for improved livestock grazing. With decomposing deadfall and with sage and young trees reestablishing, it appears as a natural sage flat.

Adjacent to the cherry-stemmed road on Middle Point, a drill pad site used in the 1960s is marked by a steel drill hole plug. The site is revegetating with snakeweed and grasses and is not a substantial imprint. Five other oil and gas wells in the ISA Complex also have been rehabilitated and are substantially unnoticeable.

A spring in a small drainage between Lean-To Point and Middle Point was improved sometime around 1960. The improvement consists of a buried cement collection box, about 30 feet of barbed wire fencing, some buried 1/2-inch piping, and an 8 foot square by 2 foot deep metal reservoir. The spring development is in a small draw and is not noticeable outside of about a 100 foot radius. The spring is a 0.5 mile west of the eastern boundary road and vehicle tracks have made a way between the spring and the road.

Since establishment of the ISA Complex, less than 1 acre has been disturbed. The disturbance resulted from hand construction of 20 waterbars on the Fable Valley stock trail in 1985. The impact of this activity is substantially unnoticeable.

##### B. Solitude

The entire ISA Complex (68,030 acres) has opportunities for solitude that meet

## DARK CANYON INSTANT STUDY AREA COMPLEX

the criterion for outstanding solitude in areas under wilderness review.

The deep, winding, and rugged canyons provide seclusion. Vegetation enhances these opportunities by providing shelter from the sun and screening from other users. Off-site influences are essentially limited to the sounds of airliners and the sight of their vapor trails. With the absence of other influences, these jets sometimes stand out as a reminder of the outside world, intensifying the feeling of remoteness.

On the higher, relatively flat terrain of the Middle Point area, moderately dense stands of pinyon-juniper forest provide screening for users. The Middle Point area is reached by over 30 miles of infrequently traveled dirt road and is usually inaccessible during the winter.

### C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are outstanding throughout the ISA Complex (68,030 acres). The remote and rugged canyons cut through rock layers and mesas for a total of 75 miles. With this large canyon complex, the challenging terrain, and the unique and varied rock formations, recreationists find many possibilities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The remoteness of the area adds to the enjoyment of the primitive experience.

Among the outstanding opportunities present are hiking, camping, backpacking, exploring, rock scrambling, horseback riding in Fable Valley, swimming or wading in the running water and pools of the various canyons, and hunting. Other forms of primitive and unconfined recreation possible in the ISA Complex are photography, sketching, bird watching, and sightseeing for biological, zoological, and geological features.

Finally, the Colorado River, less than 1 mile west of the boundary of the ISA Complex, has recreational and historical values. Cataract Canyon is a popular white water rafting run through "big drops" and spectacular canyon country. Lake Powell, reaching to the vicinity of Gypsum Canyon, allows boating access to

the major canyons of the Dark Canyon ISA Complex.

### D. Special Features

Of geological interest are the limestone exposures with red chert nodule inclusions. The limestone also includes cockleshell and crinoid stem fossils. These limestone ledges make the deep and narrow lower Dark Canyon an especially scenic canyon due to their waterfall-producing effect.

Approximately 91 percent of the ISA is rated as outstanding for scenic quality. Unimpaired vistas from the unit enhance the wilderness values present. To the west are the Henry Mountains and the Orange Cliffs, to the north the lands of Canyonlands National Park, and to the east are the La Sal Mountains. Natural arches are not prevalent in the unit, but at least two are known.

Anasazi Indian occupation in the ISA Complex seems to have been somewhat sparse compared to canyons further south such as Grand Gulch. Cliff dwellings, granaries, petroglyphs, and lithic scatters do exist within the ISA Complex. These features enhance the primitive recreation values present and add to the feeling of timelessness in these rugged and remote canyons. Sixty-eight archaeological sites have been recorded, and there is a potential for up to 3,400 sites.

Historic evidence of use of the ISA Complex for cattle and sheep grazing includes a stock trail (Fable Valley), a corral (Fable Valley), and cowboy camps (scatters of cans, bottles, and other debris).

Groups of desert bighorn sheep are occasionally observed by hikers in the canyons of the ISA Complex and by boaters on the Colorado River just west of the unit. All of the major canyons in this ISA Complex have been identified as crucial desert bighorn sheep habitat. Cougars, a species associated with wilderness, inhabit remote canyons in the unit. Being a large inhabitant of wild and remote areas, the cougar has an esthetic value. Most people highly value the sighting of one of these animals in the wild.

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Bald eagles are winter transients in the ISA Complex and peregrine falcons may inhabit the ISA Complex. Both are listed as endangered species.

Six other animal species and two plant species that are considered sensitive may occur in the ISA Complex. Refer to Appendix 4 and the Affected Environment, Vegetation and Wildlife Including Special Status Species sections of the Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Final EIS for additional information.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

A. Expanding the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

Wilderness designation of this ISA Complex would add a potential natural vegetation (PNV) ecosystem not presently represented in the NWPS.

PNV is the vegetative type that would eventually become climax vegetation if not altered by human interference, and is not necessarily the vegetation that is currently present in an area.

In the ISA Complex, however, the PNV is of the same types as the current vegetation, although in different proportions.

The ISA Complex is in the Colorado Plateau Province/Ecoregion. The PNV in the ISA Complex is blackbrush (43,210 acres) and juniper-pinyon woodland (24,820 acres).

The juniper-pinyon woodland PNV in the ISA Complex is represented in the NWPS nationally and in Utah and in other BLM study areas both in and outside of Utah, but blackbrush PNV is not represented at all in the NWPS.

This information is summarized in Table 2 from data compiled in December 1989.

B. Assessing the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation within a Days Driving Time (5 Hours) of Major Population Centers

The ISA Complex is not within a 5-hour drive of any major population centers.

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Dark Canyon ISA Complex would not contribute significantly to balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas within the NWPS. As of January 1987, the NWPS included 93 areas comprising 5,475,207 acres in Utah and in Arizona and Colorado, the adjacent states nearest the ISA Complex.

**TABLE 2  
ECOSYSTEM REPRESENTATION**

BAILEY-KUCHLER CLASSIFICATION (PNV)	NWPS AREAS		OTHER BLM STUDIES	
	AREAS	ACRES	AREAS	ACRES
<b>NATIONWIDE (COLORADO PLATEAU PROVINCE)</b>				
Blackbrush	0	0	11	186,854
Juniper-Pinyon Woodland	11	1,401,745	84	2,119,185
<b>UTAH (COLORADO PLATEAU PROVINCE)</b>				
Blackbrush	0	0	11	186,854
Juniper-Pinyon Woodland	1	26,000	53	1,681,378

Source: BLM File Data.

## DARK CANYON INSTANT STUDY AREA COMPLEX

A Dark Canyon ISA Complex Wilderness would supplement the NWPS in the Canyonlands Section of the Colorado Plateau, however, where there are just two established wilderness areas, totaling 70,751 acres. There are three designated wilderness areas within 100 miles of the ISA Complex. About 2 miles to the north is the 45,000-acre Dark Canyon Wilderness (U.S. Forest Service [FS]), to the east, in Colorado, is the 8,100-acre Mesa Verde Wilderness (National Park Service [NPS]), and to the northwest is the 25,751-acre Box-Death Hollow Wilderness (FS).

Manageability (The area must be capable of being effectively managed to preserve its wilderness character.)

The Dark Canyon ISA Complex could be managed as wilderness. There are no private, state, or split-estate lands in the ISA Complex. There are no oil and gas leases or mining claims in the ISA Complex. Approximately 63,290 acres are closed to oil and gas leasing and 62,040 acres are withdrawn from entry under the General Mining Laws in the Dark Canyon Primitive Area portion of the ISA Complex. Although mining claims could be located on the 5,990 acres in the Middle Point WSA portion of the ISA Complex, the low potential for locatable minerals in the area does not support a development assumption.

Domestic livestock grazing and maintenance of one spring development, 7.5 miles of stock trail, and one 80 acre seeding, would continue as presently authorized. This would not significantly reduce wilderness values of the area.

### Energy and Mineral Resource Values

The USGS and the U.S. Bureau of Mines (USBM) prepared a map and assessment report for the Dark Canyon ISA Complex (USGS Open File Report 81-734, Joseph L. Weitz and Thomas D. Light, 1981). The report indicates that there is moderate potential for the discovery of uranium deposits in the southernmost part of the ISA Complex; however, the area reported as being favorable for uranium is actually 4 to 8 miles south and east of the Dark Canyon ISA Complex southern boundary. Based on this, the ISA Complex is

considered to have little or no potential for uranium deposits.

The potential for development of evaporite minerals and construction materials is low. The potential for discovery of oil and gas is considered to be low except possibly in the eastern part of the ISA Complex. The potential for the development of gypsum is low because of its distance from markets, difficult access, and depth of burial. Salt is present in a few localities near the eastern margins of the study area, but has virtually no resource potential because of its irregular distribution and thickness.

According to BLM geologists, sand and gravel exist in the ISA Complex but have limited potential as a resource because of their remote location and the presence of adequate supplies elsewhere in the region that are closer to possible markets.

### Impacts on Resources

The comparative impact table (Table 3) summarizes the effects on wilderness values which is considered to be the only pertinent resource that would be significantly affected by designation or nondesignation of the area as wilderness.

### Local Social and Economic Considerations

Social and economic factors were not considered to be significant issues in the EIS.

### Summary of ISA-Specific Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Comments received during the early stages of the EIS preparation were used to develop significant study issues and alternatives for the ultimate management of the ISA Complex.

During formal public review of the Draft EIS, a total of 166 inputs specifically addressing this ISA were received from 1,359 commenters, including oral statements received at 17 public hearings on the EIS. Each letter or oral testimony was considered to be one input. Duplicate letters or oral statements by the

## DARK CANYON INSTANT STUDY AREA COMPLEX

same commenter were not counted as additional inputs or signatures. Each individual was credited with one signature or testimony regardless of the number of inputs.

In general, 380 commenters supported wilderness designation for part or all of the ISA Complex, while 975 commenters were opposed. Four commenters addressed the relative merits of the EIS but took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Those favoring wilderness commented that designation protects wilderness values, would preserve the ISA Complex for future generations, and would add the diversity characteristic of the study area to the NWPS. The majority of those commenting were from other states.

Those opposing wilderness were concerned that wilderness would restrict public access to the ISA Complex and harm local and State economies. They also believed that there is enough wilderness already and there is no need for a Dark Canyon Wilderness, especially as the area can be adequately managed without wilderness designation. Almost all of those opposing wilderness designation were from rural Utah.

Two Federal agencies, the NPS and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), commented on the Draft EIS for the Dark Canyon ISA Complex.

The NPS supports the all wilderness alternative because this would provide for a BLM wilderness area contiguous with the proposed wilderness area in Canyonlands National Park. NPS also commented that desert bighorn sheep, cultural resources, and recreational opportunities in the ISA Complex would benefit from wilderness designation.

The EPA did not take a position regarding designation of the ISA Complex. EPA commented that several WSAs near Canyonlands National Park, including the Dark Canyon ISA Complex, should be under similar management or grouped together to form a larger geographical unit, in order to improve upon integrated multiple resource planning.

No comment letters were received on the Final EIS.

There are no State sections in the ISA Complex. In commenting on the Draft EIS, the State of Utah expressed general opposition to wilderness designation but did not take a definite position regarding designation of the ISA Complex. The State commented that Dark Canyon has the highest wilderness-quality values for this region and few significant conflicts. The only conflict which the State identified was with a proposed 80-acre wildlife habitat treatment. The State added that livestock would benefit if the wilderness boundary excluded the mesa tops. The State also commented that lands shown as split-estate are Federal lands since the State mineral leases were relinquished in 1984.

The Dark Canyon ISA Complex is in San Juan County. The San Juan County Master Plan emphasizes multiple use of public lands and zones the ISA Complex as open range and forest land. The San Juan County Commission is opposed to wilderness designation for the Dark Canyon ISA Complex and has endorsed the Consolidated Local Government Response to Wilderness that opposes wilderness designation of BLM lands in Utah. In commenting on the Draft EIS the Commission noted that designation of the ISA Complex as wilderness would be in conflict with the County Master Plan and that the area is penetrated by three roads for greater distances than recognized in the EIS. The Commission also pointed out that State in-holdings would conflict with wilderness management and that the ISA Complex was identical to other areas already protected in the GCNRA, National Parks, National Monuments and FS wilderness within the Colorado Plateau and in San Juan County.

# DARK CANYON ISA COMPLEX

Table 3  
Comparative Summary of Impacts by Alternatives<sup>a</sup>

Issue Topic	Recommendation All Wilderness (68,030 Acres)	No. Action/No. Wilderness	Partial Wilderness (62,040 Acres)
Impacts on Wilderness Values	Wilderness designation would preserve the wilderness values in the ISA Complex. This alternative would complement and enhance wilderness values, uses, and management of contiguous Forest Service and National Park Service areas which are either designated wilderness or proposed for wilderness designation.	Wilderness values would not be protected by wilderness designation. However, no disturbance that would affect wilderness values is anticipated. In the foreseeable future. Continued vehicular use of 0.5 miles of way would continue to be an occasional annoyance that would detract from opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in the ISA Complex. This alternative would not complement or enhance wilderness uses, values, or management of contiguous FS and NPS lands, which are either designated wilderness or proposed for wilderness designation.	Wilderness values would be preserved in the designated area which is approximately 91 percent of the ISA. Naturalness and outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation and most special features are in the designated portion and would be preserved. No disturbance is anticipated, in the foreseeable future, that would affect wilderness values in either the designated or nondesignated area. This alternative would enhance and complement wilderness values, uses, and management of contiguous FS and NPS lands that are either designated wilderness or proposed for wilderness designation.

<sup>a</sup> The BLM San Juan RMP was approved following publication of the BLM Utah Statewide Wilderness EIS. The analysis of impacts summarized here has been modified to reflect the more restrictive management practices established by the RMP.