GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE
NATIONAL MONUMENT

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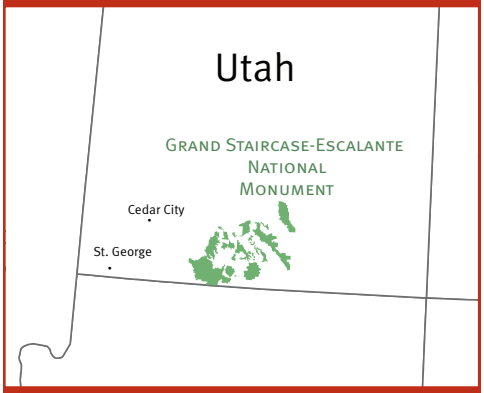
Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT
Utah

Established in 1996, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is 1.9 million acres (larger than Delaware) of multi-hued canyons, surreal rock formations and limitless vistas located in southern Utah.



NATIONAL SYSTEM OF PUBLIC LANDS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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Walk Through 100 Million Years

What does 100 million years of history look like? In Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument it's breathtaking. The monument is 1.9 million acres of multi-hued canyons, surreal rock formations and limitless vistas in southern Utah. It's the kind of western landscape that shifts your perspective, causing you to see the size and wonder of the natural world anew.

It's also one of the great treasure troves of fossils in the United States, with exposed layers of earth that go back millions of years. On a windy morning, a team from the Denver Science Museum is working along a steep ridge, brooming away the dirt in search of specimens.

"Here's something," says Greg Walth, a Colorado University student on the team. The delicately veined imprint of an ancient leaf, rust-colored, stands out on the stone surface he has just brushed clean. The lines are so crisp the leaf looks like it could have fallen last week.

Ian Miller, the museum's curator of paleontology and chair of earth sciences, nods. The team's focus was plant fossils — paleobotany — and they had already uncovered several. "People have been looking at dinosaurs here for 15 years," Miller says, "but nobody's been looking at the plants. There's a lot of them."

Standing to the side of the dig, Steve Roberts, president of the Grand Staircase Escalante Partners, smiles with quiet satisfaction. The small town of Escalante on the edge of this vast swath of public land might be as remote as any spot in the continental United States, but the Partners see an economic opportunity in the increased scientific research going on at the monument.

"This could be one of the keys to the future here," Roberts says. "If you can help make science and the arts the focus of this town, it will really help the economy."

The Partners are the official citizens' support group for the national monument, organized to increase awareness of the BLM-administered lands and to assist with

"The monument *is* our business."

- Steve Roberts, president of
Grand Staircase Escalante Partners

interpretive and educational programs. The organization's job hasn't always been easy. The monument was highly controversial when President Clinton first created it in 1996, sparking a surge in anti-government sentiment in the region.

That sentiment hasn't disappeared, but Roberts and several other residents believe it has mellowed as businesses have seen the benefits of an upswing in visitors, from the United States and Europe, who make the long trek — five hours' drive from either Las Vegas or Salt Lake City — to experience Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

"I think the feeling is changing," says Susan Nelson, who owns a rock shop in Escalante. "I think people are beginning to see its value to the area."

"It's a unique American commodity, this kind of wilderness," adds Dana Waggoner, who with her husband, Dennis, is one of Roberts' partners in a café and outfitter's store.

The monument is part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. The system was created to bring together a special collection of areas among the lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, to be managed with an emphasis on the conservation aspect of the Bureau's multiple-use mission.

Other uses of the land in Grand Staircase-Escalante, such as grazing and recreation, are allowed where they are compatible with the goals of conservation and protection. All the uses are important, and all contribute to the local economy, but as Roberts and other Partners look to the future, they see increased opportunity in the monument's rich cultural history, the beauty of its wilderness and that scientific treasure trove buried within its rugged landscape.

BLM site for the monument:
http://www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/fo/grand_staircase-escalante.html

Grand Staircase Escalante Partners site:
http://www.gsenm.org/

National Landscape Conservation System:
www.blm.gov/nlcs

Other informative sites:
http://www.utah.com/nationalsites/grand_staircase.htm
http://www.gsenmschool.org/

Wilderness as a Commodity

In the toughest economy in decades, Escalante saw solid growth last year, and the town's short main street is lined with

motels and eateries. Even early in the summer, Utah State Highway 12, a National Scenic Byway that becomes the main street, is dotted with RVs slowly cruising the captivating landscape. Local residents say the trip is popular with Europeans, particularly Germans.

The Partners, which count about 200 members, coordinate the monument's volunteers and staff the information desks at the visitor centers. They've taken an active role in a native plants restoration project and other scientific endeavors. The group publicizes events on the public lands, hosting a website that features a monthly calendar of "walks and talks."

"They're pretty vital for our operations," says Rene Berkhoudt, national monument manager. "They handle a lot of interpretive, environmental education for us, and they've really augmented our science program. There's no doubt they enhance our ability to do things on the monument."

But the Partners also have focused on boosting the economy of the surrounding area. "The monument *is* our business," is how Roberts describes it, and the group has found innovative ways to make that connection benefit Escalante and other local communities.

The organization works with local outfitters to make sure they have information about opportunities on the sprawling monument. The Partners also co-sponsor one of the town's big tourist draws: the Escalante Canyons Art Festival/Everett Ruess Days, named after a noted 20-year-old writer and artist who disappeared in the rugged canyon country outside Escalante in 1934.

A couple thousand people attended the celebration last year and more than 100 painters entered the art contest. "It's really grown, and I think it's helped people to see the benefits of what we have here," says Roberts.

It also provides an example of how the Partners have brought together residents with very different perspectives. Arnold Alvey was a boy of six when Ruess came through Escalante, and remembers meeting him. Alvey grew up in a rural culture that centered on ranching and the Mormon church. He spent years breaking horses and remains a fiercely independent westerner, with little good to say about the federal government.

But when Roberts was trying to start the arts festival, Alvey showed up at the first meeting and offered critical support in the face of public skepticism. Although the two men might disagree on a few things, they've become good friends, united by their love for Escalante and their determination to look forward.

Steve Roberts, president of Grand Staircase Escalante Partners

GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT INCLUDES:

- 1.9 million acres, larger than the state of Delaware.
- Significant dinosaur and prehistoric plant fossil digs.
- Important pioneer and prehistoric cultural sites.
- Canyons of the Escalante, Grand Staircase and Kaiparowits Plateau regions, and significant ecosystems.
- Hiking, hunting, biking and other recreational opportunities.

GRAND STAIRCASE ESCALANTE PARTNERS AT A GLANCE:

- About 200 members.
- Works with local businesses to promote economic activity.
- Awards small grants to encourage scientific research.
- Coordinates volunteer projects on the monument.
- Provides educational and interpretive tours.
- Staffs the visitor center information desks.

And Alvey has become a supporter of the Partners. “There’s no need to be hanging on to something we haven’t got anymore,” he says. “This is what we got. I think anything we can do to benefit this little valley, let’s give it a shot.”

The Partners have sought to celebrate the area’s cultural heritage. The Hole-in-the-Rock site where Mormon pioneers labored to get their wagons down an extremely sheer slope is on the national monument, and the Partners are supporting efforts to create a cultural museum on that end of town that would explore and commemorate the Mormon connection.

The organization has also worked with the BLM on establishing a Science Field Center in the agency’s offices on the edge of Escalante. The center provides lab and work space for visiting researchers, including special storage facilities for plant and geological samples. “They could come in here and basically set up base camp,” says Drew Parkin, BLM field station manager.

Roberts sees the cultural museum and the science center as economic bookends. “You’re attracting people to the area,” he says. “Some might like the science, some might like the cultural heritage, some might like both.”

Parkin hopes the field center will allow researchers to stay longer and conduct more extensive studies. To encourage research, the Partners recently established a fund to provide modest grants to scientists who would like to work in the area. “It’s not just that it will help with job creation,” says Roberts, “but that it could also help the educational opportunities for local kids.”

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>
> - Ian Miller, professor of earth sciences, Colorado University

Providing an example of the possibilities, the Denver Museum team was planning to broadcast live from its dig to school classrooms across the United States. The interactive video would allow Miller and other members of the team to answer questions and show children the fossils they had discovered.

Miller believes the monument presents a rare opportunity for education. “You can basically walk through 100 million years of time out there,” he says, pointing to a rugged area known as the Blues. “This is the only place in North America where it’s all in a stack, exposed like that. It’s really an amazing place.”

More than 75 years earlier, when Ruess, the young painter and writer, first came across the wild landscape of Grand Staircase-Escalante, it so enflamed his imagination he wrote, “I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear.”

Those two perspectives, one from a scientist, one from an artist, capture the awe the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument inspires on many levels. It’s why the Partners look at the monument and see not only natural wonders but a more prosperous future for local residents. “Let’s take advantage of what we have here,” says Roberts. “I really believe we have a chance to create something special.” ■■■

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