

National Landscape Conservation System: A New Approach to Conservation

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Abstract—The U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has created a National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) in response to their growing shift toward protection of special areas. This NLCS brings National Conservation Areas, National Monuments, Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Historic and Scenic Trails into a single network in order to improve protection of benefits and increase public awareness of scientific, cultural, educational, ecological, and other values.

Introduction to the Bureau of Land Management

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for more land than any other agency in the United States of America with over 260 million surface acres (1.05 million km²). The vast majority of this land is located in the arid western third of the United States and in Alaska. These lands are the canyons, deserts, and cacti of the American Southwest, the open landscapes of the short grass prairie, the isolated tundra, the wide-open landscapes that surround Western towns, and the isolated retreats that often form the image of the American West. Public lands managed by the BLM are those Federal lands left over from the early years of Western expansion. In the country's first 150 years, our national policy was to dispose of these Federal lands to build a strong nation, raise funds, and encourage settlement of new territories. Lands were sold or given to settlers, homesteaders, veterans, towns, colleges, private corporations, and States. Some of the land was set aside to become National Parks, National Forests, Wildlife Refuges, Indian Reservations, or Military Bases. During the disposal era, over 1.1 billion acres (4.45 million km²) of public lands were transferred out of Federal ownership.

The disposal era ended for the BLM in 1976 with passage of its organic act: The Federal Land Policy and Management Act. This law changed the course of BLM management in numerous ways including directing that public lands are to be retained in Federal ownership. The lands that remained

are the 260 million acres (1.05 million km²) of public lands that are now managed by the BLM. The BLM-managed public lands are a priceless legacy and a long-term investment for the American people. Prized originally for their commodity value, today the public lands offer much more: unparalleled recreational opportunities, wildlife reserves, and in the increasingly crowded American West, one of the last guarantees of open space.

Special Values Identified

In the 1960s, Congress began to recognize the need to protect some of the natural, historical, and cultural resources on these public lands. Efforts designed to raise awareness of the BLM started in 1964 when the lands were renamed the National Resource Lands. The need to protect the unique values of public lands was realized by BLM and Congress over the next decade. A major step in creation of a BLM land protection system was taken in 1970 when Congress created the King Range National Conservation Area on California's northern coast. This first National Conservation Area was designated to conserve and develop for the use and benefit of the people of the United States the lands and other resources under a program of multiple use and sustained yield.

Congress expanded the areas protected under national designations numerous times in the following decade. The 10.6 million acres (42,897 km²) within the California Desert Conservation Area were set aside in 1976. The Steese National Conservation Area, which contains 1.2 million acres (4,856 km²) in east-central Alaska, was designated in 1980 to protect wild and scenic rivers, crucial caribou calving grounds, and Dall sheep habitat. Additional protective designations were passed into law for the rugged lava flows on New Mexico's El Malpais "badlands" (1987), the rich wildlife and riparian area along Arizona's San Pedro River (1988), and other areas throughout the West. In total, Congress created 14 National Conservation Areas in eight Western States from 1970 to 2000.

In 1996, the BLM was entrusted with the responsibility of managing its first National Monument with the Presidential Designation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah. The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument was designated to protect the area's objects of historic or scientific interest, including geologic treasures, world-class paleontological sites, extensive archeological resources, and outstanding biological resources. Since then, the BLM's responsibilities have continued to expand. Congress and the President created an additional 14

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National Monuments in seven additional States from 2000 through 2001.

In addition to National Conservation Areas and National Monuments, Congress used a variety of protective designations to protect the natural values of other landscapes, including Wild and Scenic Rivers, National Trails, and Wilderness. This explosion in land protection led to numerous changes in the BLM. The agency began the slow process of changing from an agency responsible for developing commodities to an agency with an additional new mission, the long-term conservation of public lands.

These designations created a pattern of special areas where the overriding objective was long-term conservation, restoration of the land, and protection of biological diversity. A set of common management prescriptions emerged: the areas are withdrawn from disposal, there is more intensive management focused on providing visitor services and interpretation, and restoration is a priority. Many of the areas are also withdrawn from mineral entry.

During development of these conservation designations, Congress and the BLM learned that no single type of designation was appropriate for all situations and no single designation was adequate to protect all the landscapes that deserved protection. In some cases, Wilderness was the most appropriate designation. In other situations, a National Conservation Area designation did a better job of protecting an area's values while allowing certain existing uses. In some cases, it is appropriate to have more than a single designation for a special landscape. This most often occurs when a Wilderness, Wild and Scenic River, or National Trail is located within a National Conservation Area or National Monument.

National Landscape Conservation System

Although this expanding collection of special areas was managed under somewhat consistent prescriptions, the BLM did not have an organized approach to management of these areas. In the summer of 2000, the BLM responded to the growing concern over management of these areas with creation of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS). The NLCS brings into a single system BLM's most protected landscapes. By putting these lands into a single system the agency hopes to improve management of these special areas, improve public benefits that flow from a well-managed system of conservation areas, and increase public awareness of these areas' scientific, cultural, educational, ecological, and other values. The NLCS includes the BLM's National Conservation Areas, National Monuments, Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Historic and Scenic Trails.

Although the NLCS does not create any additional legal protections, the BLM manages these great landscapes of the American West with a set of common principles:

- The conservation of natural values is of primary concern.
- Areas are managed in partnership with surrounding communities. In developing management plans, the BLM is working with local communities, particularly with regard to amenities such as food services and lodging. The BLM does not provide food, lodging, and

intensive visitor services within the areas. Instead, visitors are encouraged to see the landscape in the context of the history and tradition of the entire region. Intensive services are provided by the surrounding communities.

- Conservation Areas and Monuments often include within their boundaries Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas or Wild and Scenic Rivers, where motor vehicles are excluded. Outside such areas, the maintenance of roads and the use of motor vehicles are managed to protect fragile soils, riparian areas and other plant communities, and wildlife habitat. Vehicles are restricted to designated routes.
- Valid existing rights such as existing mineral leases are recognized.
- Traditional uses such as grazing and hunting will continue, provided that these activities are consistent with the overall purpose of the area. The BLM recognizes that in many instances these uses can be compatible with good wildlife management, protection of biodiversity, and enhancement of natural values.
- Many of the areas are unavailable for development under the Mining Act of 1872 and various other general lands laws that are incompatible with long-term protection of our natural environment.
- Management plans should be prepared, or existing plans reviewed and updated, to reflect the importance of the conservation principles for which the place has been recognized.
- Acting with public and private partners, the BLM can be the paradigm of the Interior Department's motto: Communication, cooperation, and consultation all in the service of conservation.

Early Success

Although it is too early for an assessment of the NLCS, its creation appears to be a success. The BLM has improved management of these special areas. Improved management has in part been the result of an increase of approximately \$9 million in operation funds and \$4 million in planning. These funds have been used to increase staffing, improve visitor services and facilities, and provide public information. The benefits from increased emphasis on planning will take several years to show but will result in improved management of various uses, restoration of disturbed areas, and numerous long-term efficiencies in delivering public service.

Public interest and support has been outstanding. Numerous national publications, including the *National Geographic*, *Audubon*, *Sunset Magazine*, *Sierra*, *Sky Magazine*, *Wilderness Magazine*, *Backpacker*, and *USA Today*, as well as untold local newspapers, have celebrated formation of the NLCS and discussed some of the more outstanding landscapes protected under the umbrella of the system. And finally, public support is building. One example of this is public response to a series of letters sent by the Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton, requesting the views of public officials regarding the management of the National Monuments. Over 7,000 responses have been received. The majority of these letters and E-mails addressed the overall topic of monuments, without focusing on a particular area, and

supported protecting all newly designated monuments. However, the majority who wrote about a particular area also supported the management and protection of the monuments. Similar to the creation of the National Parks in the 1900s, some of the areas have been controversial. The majority of Americans recognize the importance of these designations, however, and support their long-term conservation management.

The Future

In an increasingly crowded American West, NLCS lands are unique. They are havens of solitude and a reminder of the West as it originally was. The BLM is proud to be stewards of these special landscapes. As we continue to improve our long-term conservation management of these landscapes, we will assure the increased benefits that flow from a well-managed system of conservation areas.

Conservation Areas

With over 800 units in the NLCS, it is not possible to describe them all. Summarized below, however, are a few of the areas in the System:

National Conservation Areas

Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails (December 21, 2000)—This area includes nearly 800,000 acres (3,237 km²) in northwestern Nevada. Ten Wilderness Areas provide additional protection to the rugged interior mountain ranges in the area. A National Historic Trail protects wagon wheel ruts and historic inscriptions, largely unchanged from when pioneers moved westward through the area in the 1800s.

California Desert (October 21, 1976)—This area's 10.6 million acres (42,897 km²) feature vast desert areas with a myriad of wildlife and recreational opportunities. The desert's outstanding values are also protected within 65 Wilderness Areas, one National Monument, and two National Trails.

Colorado Canyons (October 24, 2000)—From salt-bush desert to the spectacular canyons of the Black Ridge Wilderness, this diverse area in west-central Colorado encompasses over 122,000 acres (494 km²), including more than 75,000 acres (304 km²) of Wilderness.

El Malpais (December 31, 1987)—These 226,000 acres (915 km²) of rugged lava flows in west-central New Mexico display some of the Nation's most significant geological, cultural, scenic, scientific, and wilderness resources.

Gila Box Riparian (November 28, 1990)—This 22,000 acre (89 km²) desert oasis contains cliff dwellings, historic homesteads, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, and more than 200 species of birds in southeastern Arizona.

Gunnison Gorge (October 21, 1999)—A variety of natural and geologic features and unsurpassed recreational opportunities are on display in western Colorado's Gunnison Gorge, a 57,725-acre (234-km²) area. This unit supports a diverse range of uses such as whitewater rafting, big-game

hunting, and domestic livestock grazing. The inner gorge is designated Wilderness.

King Range (October 21, 1970)—West of Arcata, 35 miles (56 km) of remote coastline comprise the 57,000-acre (231-km²) King Range, the nation's first National Conservation Area.

Las Cienegas (December 6, 2000)—This area's 42,000 acres (170 km²) of desert grasslands and rolling oak-studded hills in south-central Arizona are home to a great diversity of plant and animal life, including several threatened or endangered species.

Red Rock Canyon (November 16, 1990)—This 197,000-acre (797-km²) area outside of Las Vegas boasts unique geologic features, plants, and animals that represent some of the best examples of the Mojave Desert. The area offers spectacular climbing and hiking opportunities. The most remote mountain areas within the NCA are also designated Wilderness Study Areas.

San Pedro Riparian (November 18, 1988)—This 56,500-acre (229-km²) area in southeastern Arizona supports over 350 species of birds, 80 species of mammals, and 40 species of amphibians and reptiles.

Snake River Birds of Prey (August 4, 1993)—Home to the largest concentration of nesting raptors in North America, this 485,000-acre (1,963-km²) area in southwestern Idaho provides a complete and stable ecosystem where both predators and prey occur in extraordinary numbers.

Steens Mountain (October 30, 2000)—Officially called the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area, these 425,500 acres (1,722 km²) in southeastern Oregon include volcanic uplifts, glacier-carved gorges, wild rivers, wilderness, and diverse plant and animal species.

Steese (December 2, 1980)—This 1.2-million-acre (4,856-km²) area in east-central Alaska contains a Wild and Scenic River, crucial caribou calving grounds, and Dall sheep habitat.

Headwaters Forest Reserve (March 1, 1999)—These 7,400 acres (30 km²) in northern California, comanaged with the State of California, protect old-growth redwood stands that provide habitat for threatened species such as the marbled murrelet, a seabird, and coho salmon.

National Monuments

Agua Fria (January 11, 2000)—An hour north of Phoenix, Agua Fria's 71,000 acres (287 km²) host one of the most significant systems of late prehistoric sites in the American Southwest.

California Coastal (January 11, 2000)—This National Monument includes all the islands, rocks, and pinnacles off the 840-mile (1,352-km) California coast. These areas provide essential habitat for an estimated 200,000 breeding seabirds.

Canyons of the Ancients (June 9, 2000)—Located in southwestern Colorado, this 163,000-acre (660-km²) area contains the richest known concentration of archaeological sites in the United States.

Carrizo Plain (January 17, 2001)—Remnant of a once vast grassland astride the San Andreas Fault zone, this unit's 204,000 acres (826 km²) in central California are a critical refuge for several endangered and threatened animal and plant species.

Cascade-Siskiyou (June 9, 2000)—The convergence of geologically young and old mountain ranges gives this 53,000-acre (214-km²) Monument in south-central Oregon an extraordinary degree of biological diversity.

Craters of the Moon (November 9, 2000)—The 272,000 acres (1,101 km²) of this remarkably preserved volcanic landscape on Idaho's Snake River Plain contain an array of exceptional features, including cinder cones and vast lava fields.

Grand Canyon-Parashant (January 11, 2000)—This 808,000-acre (3,270-km²) unit contains outstanding geological and paleontological features in northwestern Arizona.

Grand Staircase-Escalante (September 19, 1996)—Labyrinthine red rock canyons, high plateaus, and dramatic cliffs and terraces make up this stunning 1.9-million-acre (7,689-km²) area in southern Utah. About one-third of the area is designated as Wilderness Study Areas.

Ironwood Forest (June 9, 2000)—This 129,000-acre (522-km²) area protects a unique ironwood forest and a wide array of bird and animal life in southern Arizona.

Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks (January 17, 2001)—This area in northern New Mexico protects over 4,000 acres (16 km²) of cone-shaped rock formations resulting from volcanic eruptions and erosion that first built up and then wore down this landscape.

Pompeys Pillar (January 17, 2001)—William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition carved his name on this sandstone butte overlooking the Yellowstone River, adding to a rich record of historic inscriptions now protected as a 51-acre (21-ha) area in central Montana.

Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains (October 24, 2000)—This 86,500-acre (350-km²) congressionally designated National Monument in southern California hosts over 500 plant and animal species, including the Federally listed Peninsular bighorn sheep. The mountain core is designated Wilderness.

Sonoran Desert (January 17, 2001)—Wide valleys separated by rugged mountain ranges offer dense forests of saguaro cactus—excellent habitat for a wide range of wild-life species—in this 409,000-acre (1,655-km²) area in southwestern Arizona.

Upper Missouri River Breaks (January 17, 2001)—The breathtaking limestone bluffs along this 149-mile (240-km), 377,000-acre (1,526-km²) stretch of the Missouri River in central Montana remain almost exactly the same as when Lewis and Clark described them in their expedition journals. The opportunities for solitude are protected in several Wilderness Study Areas.

Vermilion Cliffs (November 9, 2000)—An outstanding assemblage of deep, narrow wilderness canyons make the 280,000 acres (1,133 km²) in this northern Arizona Monument ideal for hiking and exploring.

Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas

The BLM manages 148 Wilderness Areas with more than 6 million acres (24,281 km²) and over 600 Wilderness Study Areas with 18 million acres (72,843 km²). Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas are managed to protect their primeval character and influence.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

The NLCS includes 36 Wild and Scenic Rivers, accounting for a total of over 2,000 miles (3,219 km). These rivers, in four Western States and Alaska, offer unparalleled opportunities for recreation.

National Historic Trails

The BLM-managed portions of the National Scenic and Historic Trails are also part of the NLCS. Nine Historic Trails, including those followed by Lewis and Clark and pioneers heading to Mormon Country, commemorate the nation's cultural heritage, while the Continental Divide and Pacific Crest Scenic Trails offer 641 miles (1,032 km) of some of the country's most spectacular mountain settings.