

CELEBRATING CANYON COUNTRY

GRAND STAIRCASE–ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

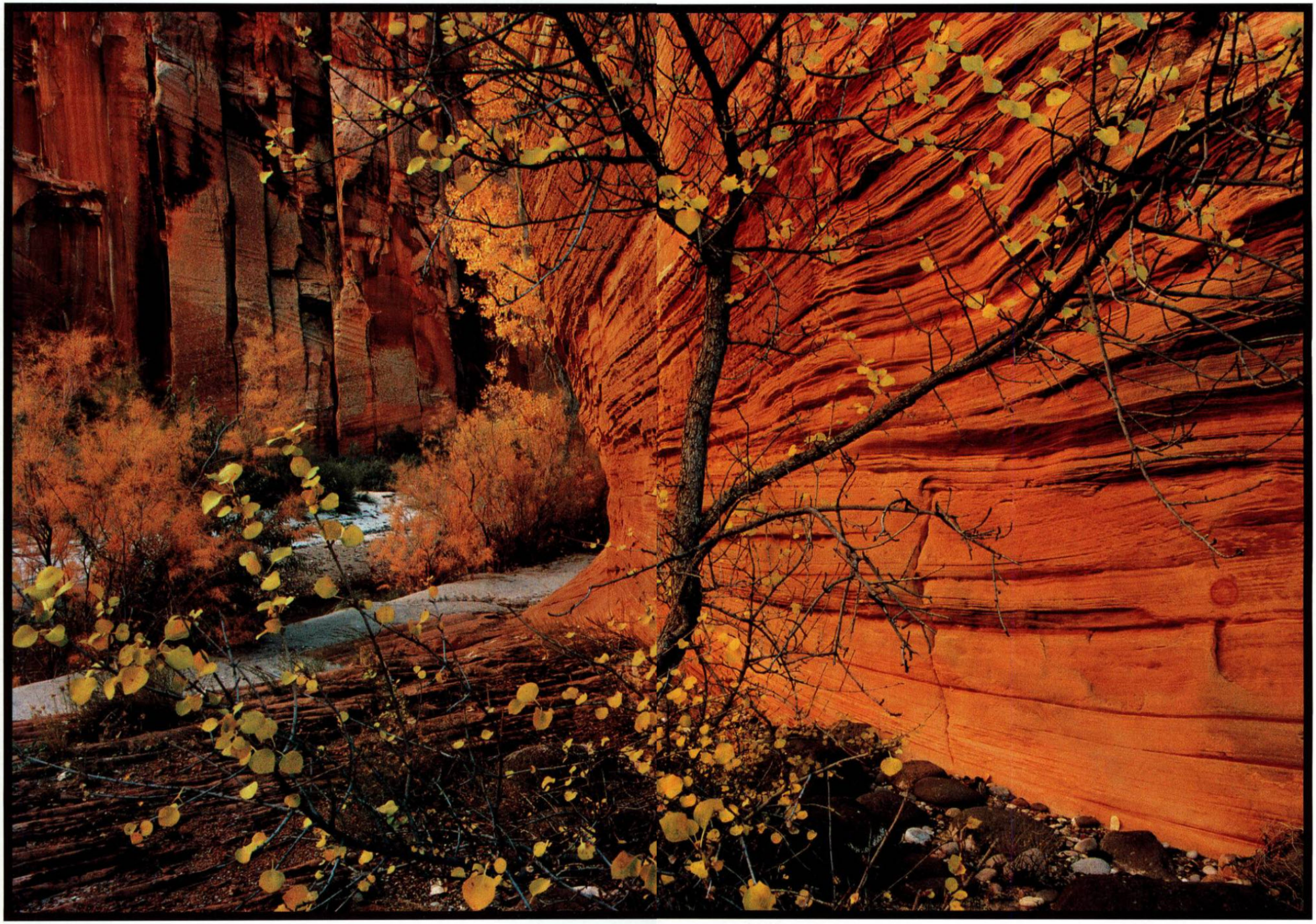
By T. H. WATKINS
Photographs by DIANE COOK
and LEN JENSHEL

THE GHOST OF Everett Ruess, some say, still haunts the canyons of southern Utah, for it was here that he vanished in 1934. The 20-year-old writer and artist had set off from the town of Escalante with a couple of pack burros to spend some time painting and writing in red rock country. "I am going south towards the river now," he wrote his parents, "through some rather wild country. I am not sure yet whether I will go across Smokey Mountain to Lee's Ferry." Ruess was never seen again.

The young man's ghost may have been watching last November when the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued the first draft of a proposed management plan for the nation's newest national monument—Grand Staircase–Escalante, 1.9 million acres that Ruess probably knew as well as anyone of his time. These are acres to be managed, the BLM's plan emphasized, in such a way as to "maintain the unspoiled nature" of their much celebrated beauty.

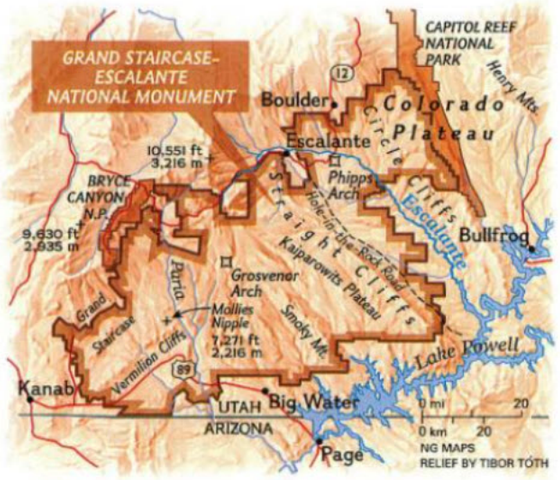
Ruess no doubt would have approved that part of the plan. Me, I was ready to do at least a modified jig.

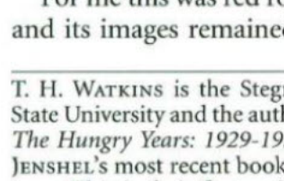
Storm clouds swell above the deep repose of red rock desert in Utah's Grand Staircase–Escalante, a vast addition to America's protected lands.



An ancient wind-creased dune, transformed to stone, forms a wall along the Escalante River, a waterway unknown to explorers until 1872 and one of the last rivers mapped in the continental United States.

A HIGH-DESERT REALM OF TWISTING CANYONS AND SUN-BEATEN MESAS





The largest national monument outside Alaska, Grand Staircase–Escalante, established in 1996, covers 1.9 million acres, almost all of it backcountry with no facilities. Given only one maintained trail in an area the size of Delaware, a trekker (opposite) leaves the shadows of ponderosa pines and cuts his own path up slickrock.

I had been tracking the fate of Grand Staircase–Escalante ever since President Bill Clinton announced its designation in 1996. I didn't know the monument country anywhere near as well as Everett Ruess, but I had spent a lot of time over the previous ten years getting gloriously lost in its canyons, particularly in the northern portion, where the Escalante River tumbles down from the mountains and gathers a collection of winding tributaries on its way to Lake Powell.

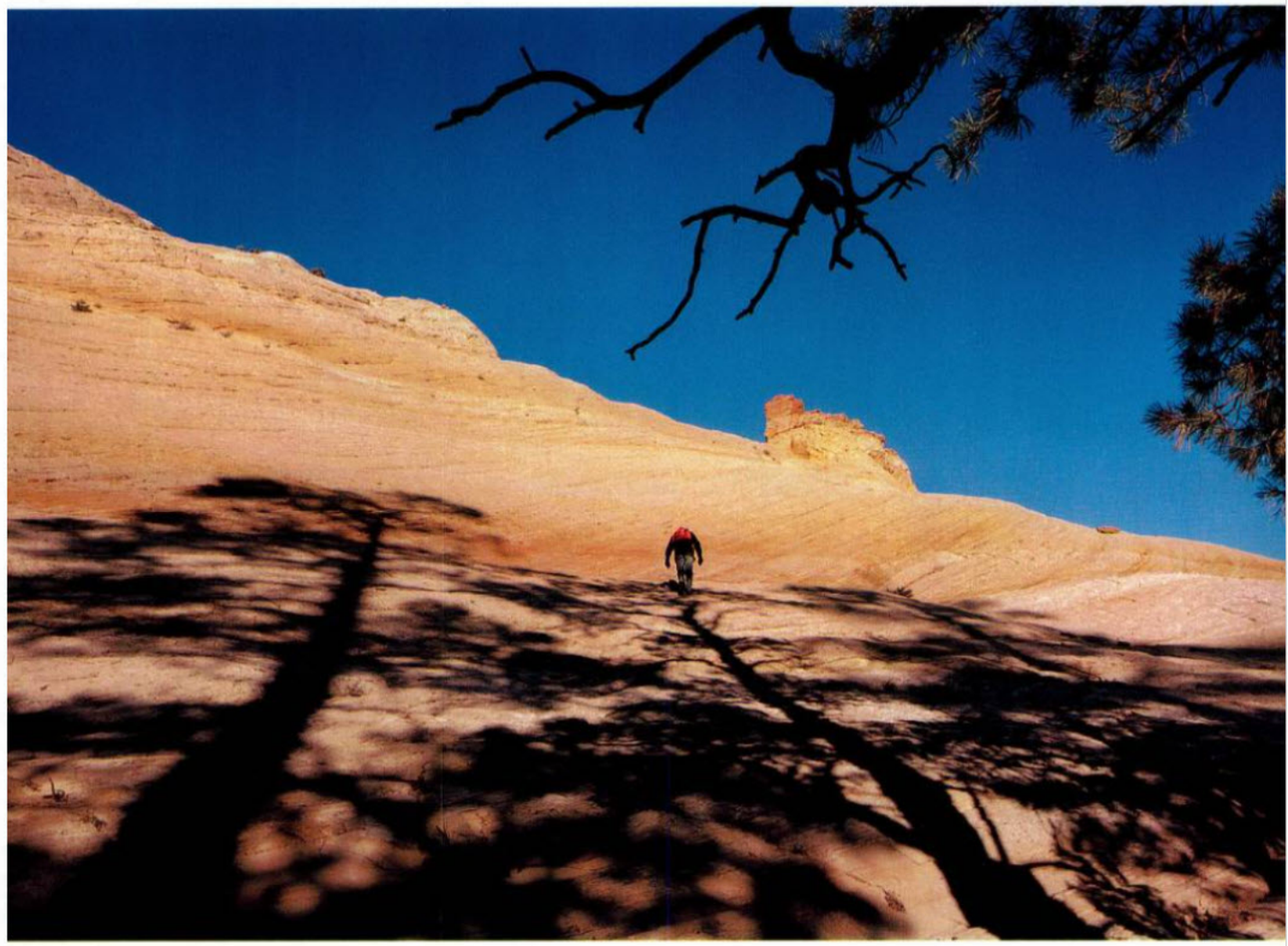
For me this was red rock country at its finest, and its images remained fixed in my personal landscape: Escalante Arch, atop a 500-foot wall of slickrock; Calf Creek, its two waterfalls glimmering like braids of lace; Sand Creek Canyon, crowded with shad scale and four-wing saltbush. I welcomed the notion that the primitive condition of all the country I had experienced—and a good deal more—apparently was going to be respected by the BLM, an agency not ordinarily dedicated to the wilderness ideal. Nor was I alone in feeling that way. Remarkably, the BLM's plan was received with relative equanimity by most of the parties concerned. Somehow it had emerged, lotus-like, from a bog of conflicting visions that had once bubbled furiously with anger.

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IF SOME OF US—including a lot of Utahns—had been ready to toast the President for making these lands a national monument, many were just as ready to fry him. The designation was simply an enormous landgrab, some felt, one more demonstration of the federal government's insensitivity to local needs in a state where 64 percent of the land is federally owned. The bitterness was considerable throughout Kane and Garfield Counties, the two counties in which the monument lies. After the announcement both the President and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt were hung in effigy. Some citizens gathered to send up black balloons in mourning. Others drove graders into a few areas of the monument and gouged out primitive roads as a demonstration of their anger.

It wasn't just the size of the monument that rankled many Utahns, it was the perceived loss of opportunity. In Kane County, for example, some citizens in Kanab felt particularly sandbagged. They had just lost a fiercely held dream (or myth, some said) of acquiring as many as 900 local jobs in a proposed coal mine. The designation of the region as part of the monument all but killed the mine proposal.

Almost immediately after Clinton's declaration, Norman Carroll, chairman of the Kane County Commission, put his official signature to "A Resolution Resulting from the Creation of the Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument and Its Adverse Effects on the People, Lands, Resources, Economic Stability, Culture and Way of Life in Kane County." The resolution went on to direct the Kane County attorney to seek a legal strategy to overturn the presidential order. "This is beautiful country, all right, and we love it," Carroll explained to me during a break in a commission meeting in the slickrock pink county courthouse in Kanab a few months later. "But the monument is way too big."



The conflict was hardly new. Similar eruptions had followed other presidential uses of the Antiquities Act, which authorizes the President, by executive order, to establish national monuments in order to preserve "objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated upon the lands owned or controlled by the Government of the United States." Howls of anger went up among miners and commercial tourist-camp developers when Theodore Roosevelt established Grand Canyon National Monument in 1908; ranchers objected violently when Franklin D. Roosevelt created Jackson Hole National Monument in 1943; and, more recently, Jimmy Carter's designation of 15 national monuments in Alaska in 1978 inspired complaints that glowed in the dark with fury.

GRAND STAIRCASE–ESCALANTE is nowhere near the size of some of those Alaska monuments (one alone was originally 11 million acres), but there's no getting around it—this is one big place, big enough to validate the levels



An ever widening lookout, Phipps Arch perches above country defiant of roads, bridges, and towns.

Washington Phipps, a pioneer in the 1870s, ran horses in the area until he was shot dead by his partner.

"WE HEARD LOUD AND CLEAR . . . KEEP IT ROUGH, KEEP IT DIFFICULT TO ACCESS."

—KATE CANNON, BLM

of agitation that surrounded it. California's Death Valley, stretching across 3.3 million acres, was raised from monument status to the level of a national park with passage of the California Desert Protection Act in 1994, so Grand Staircase–Escalante is now the largest national monument outside Alaska. It embraces an enormous, amoeba-like triangle bounded on the northeast by Capitol Reef National Park, east-southeast by Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, northwest by Dixie National Forest, and west by a jagged boundary of right-angle lines that wanders north from U.S. 89 to the southern edge of Bryce Canyon National Park.

Easy enough to describe, not so easy to comprehend—though it helps if you take to the air to see it, as I did one blustery late winter day. With a weather front moving in and snow-burdened clouds already kissing the brow of the Aquarius Plateau, our small plane jumped off the tarmac of the one-strip airport outside Escalante and set off with an intrepid whine on a heading straight for the Circle Cliffs on the edge of Capitol Reef National Park, 30 miles away. Below us stretched a tapestry of mesas and benches forested by stands of piñon and juniper (P-J forests, most southern Utahns call them) and blanketed here and there by big patches of snow. Almost everywhere, the benchlands lay sliced with canyons—deep wounds that millions of years of flowing water have carved into a quarter billion years' worth of multicolored sandstone deposits.

The wind that was bringing in the storm clouds from the southwest had cleaned the air of desert haze. The winter sun, hanging low, cast shadows that defined the contours of the land with knife-edge clarity. Weeks of intermittent rain and snow had left everything damp, which intensified the colors of the land as if God had slathered it all with coats of fresh paint, giving the landscape a luminous character that continued as we swung southeast along the border of Capitol Reef, beyond whose lumps and curling canyons rose the snowy peaks of the Henry Mountains.

Then we turned southwest, along a route that approximated the border between the monument and Glen Canyon Recreation Area, over Pioneer Mesa, Little Death Hollow, Big Bown Bench, Harris Wash. Just ahead were the Straight Cliffs, an abrupt, 1,500-foot wall that runs almost uninterrupted 50 miles from Escalante Rim to just above Lake Powell. Vaguely parallel to the cliffs was the Hole-in-the-Rock Road, a rough 60-mile road established in 1880 by Mormon pioneers on their way to set up shop in the cottonwood groves of Bluff on the San Juan River. They had to cut their way down the cliffs to cross the Colorado River to do it though, and I admired the stubborn toughness of the people who had settled this unlikely country, determined to outlast their predecessors, the Anasazi. I wouldn't bet against them either.



A pretty poison, woolly locoweed, flowering during autumn, can make cattle that eat its toxic leaves go berserk and die. Hikers face their own dangers, from rockfalls to heat exhaustion. "This is not cheap scenery," wrote a visitor. "It must be bought with time and sweat."

Over the Straight Cliffs now and on to the Kaiparowits Plateau, a wide and confusingly intricate jumble of benches at an average elevation of 6,000 feet, covered in P-J forests and shaped everywhere by canyons, gulches, and washes. The Kaiparowits has the reputation of being the most isolated place in the lower forty-eight, and it was easy to see why as I looked out over a thousand square miles on which we modern humans had made hardly a mark.

There was a mark on Smoky Mountain though, a dirt road that twisted its serpentine way 800 feet up the side of the mountain and across the southern benches of the Kaiparowits. We could see the road from the air, and I knew it could stop your heart, because I had just been on it with Ken Rait, who was then with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA). This part of the monument was new country to me, so Rait had spent two days showing me some of its high points along mud-slick tracks that threatened to send our four-wheeler sliding into sundry declivities.

After one particularly long, slithery ride and a short hike, Rait had stood me at what he called a "power spot" overlooking Paria and Hackberry Canyons, an area that fell away beneath our feet in a spectacular complex of eroded pink, red, maroon, ivory, and white sandstones, their elegant convolutions rivaling those of Bryce Canyon National Park or Cedar Breaks National Monument. In the middle distance the tall white volcano-like cone of Mollies Nipple rose from the top of a bench, and on the far horizon I could see the huge snow-shouldered hump of Navajo Mountain. "If you tell anyone how to get here," Rait said, "I will have to kill you." I was touched by his notion that I could ever find my way back here again, much less tell anyone else how to do it. Later, we tried to get up Cottonwood Wash Road, a dirt track that begins near Big Water on U.S. 89 and runs north to Cannonville on Utah Highway 12. "One of the most beautiful areas in Utah," Rait said. But as we turned off U.S. 89, we found a sign planted in the middle of the road warning us it was impassable. Someone had spray-painted an addendum: "Deep Ruts, Complete Washouts, No Californians." It didn't sound promising. We retreated.

Now, in the air beyond the Kaiparowits, the pilot headed us toward the edge of the Grand Staircase. The name is a little misleading. It certainly confused some tourists shortly after designation of the monument. Just how high were the steps of the staircase, they asked a ranger in Canyonlands National Park, and how long would it take to walk them?

Quite a while. The "staircase" in fact is a series of random cliffs that pile up in fits and starts north of the Kaibab Plateau above Grand Canyon, the result of millions of years of fracturing, faulting, lifting, and shoving as the Rubik's Cube of the Colorado Plateau assembled itself. It would be a 40-mile "walk" up more than 5,000 feet of elevation from U.S. 89—up the "steps" of the Vermilion Cliffs, the White Cliffs, the Gray Cliffs, and the Pink Cliffs until you reached the top of the Paunsaugunt Plateau, where Bryce Canyon National Park resides—even higher and farther if you shifted a little east toward Powell Point or beyond that to the Aquarius Plateau.

We did not walk, we flew, the pilot and I, watching the disorganized, overlapping, colorful mix of cliffs and plateaus unroll beneath us as we raced the storm clouds back to the Escalante airstrip. America's new monument, I reflected, was indisputably big—big and wonderfully various. But was it big and various enough to satisfy all the visions people had for it?

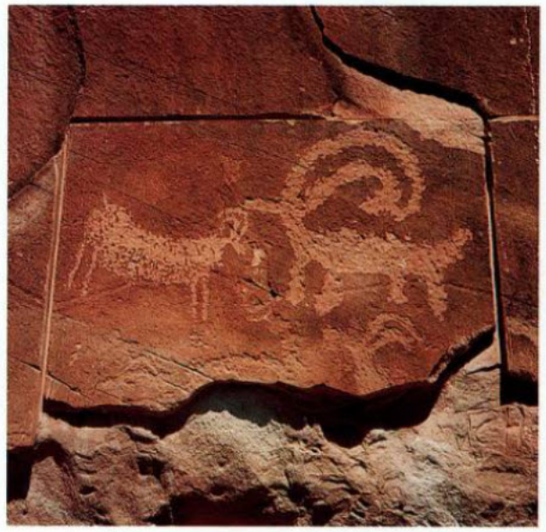
THE BLM had just started its mandated three-year planning process for the monument that March of 1997, and there were plenty of people who intended to take full advantage of the government's call for public participation. Many of those I talked with, like Allen "Viv" Adams, then mayor of Kanab, told me that most of the monument's now primitive roads should be paved so that tourists could get to its wonders with a minimum of effort and that there should be visitor facilities, including campgrounds, RV hookups, and toilets. Others, like Garfield County Commissioner Louise Liston, were less enthusiastic about paved roads and facilities but said that mining, including coal mining, oil

When the dust lifts, Dell LeFevre will have ended his last cattle drive to the Escalante River, now off-limits to cattlemen. A fifth-generation rancher, LeFevre clings to grazing rights elsewhere in the monument.

and gas development, and livestock grazing should be allowed where appropriate. Dirt bikers and all-terrain-vehicle riders should be given places to play. "We wouldn't want just a hiker's monument," Liston emphasized.

Wait a minute, said environmentalists. Too many such uses would damage the very land the monument designation is meant to protect. "Grand Staircase–Escalante is one of the largest chunks of basically untouched wild landscape in the lower forty-eight states," argued a SUWA activist I talked with in Salt Lake City. "It was designated to protect wilderness values and should be managed largely as wilderness."

Jerry Meredith, the BLM's monument manager, was the man saddled with reconciling these conflicting visions in his plans. When I talked with him, he had just started, and he said he was determined that every interest get a chance to participate in the planning process on an equal basis. And he was convinced that the process itself ultimately would leach the bitterness out of people. After all the comments and complaints I had been hearing, I was not so sure.



Unkind cuts mark the attempt of thieves to steal a petroglyph of bighorn sheep. The carving dates from about A.D. 900, when peoples of the Fremont and Anasazi cultures shared the area. The monument holds as many as 100,000 archaeological sites, most unsurveyed.

BUT I MAY HAVE BEEN WRONG. About a year and a half after the planning process began, I returned again to Escalante country. The difference in attitudes was little short of astonishing. In the small towns that pock the edges of the monument, there was less talk about lawsuits and confrontation and more about how folks might accept the monument and make the most of it—particularly when town fathers and mothers considered the increase in tourism since the monument was announced. Between 1996 and 1998, annual visitation had risen from 520,000 to 850,000.

"The most common phrase I've heard," Ron Hitchcock, Escalante High School's principal, told me, "is 'We'll make lemonade out of the lemon that's been handed to us.'" Escalante, as it happens, has been making a lot of lemonade since the spring of 1997. There is, for example, the Escalante Center, a complex of educational facilities planned for 28 acres of land next to the high school. The BLM is planning to build a visitor center here, and the Escalante Center itself will feature research and educational efforts based on the monument. Ron is chairman of the center's board. "If our high school is, in many ways, the cultural center of Escalante, as so many small-town high schools are," he said, "then having a true Escalante Center next door can only enhance that role. The entire community, county, and area can take pride in it."

His wife, Sandie, agreed that the monument may eventually become a force for unity. When she was mayor of the city in 1998, she worked hard to overcome the locals' resentment of the monument and their distrust of the federal government and the environmental community. She was particularly proud, she said, of her work in getting local officials and environmentalists from SUWA, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, the Grand Canyon Trust, and other organizations to sit down together, talk over their differences, and begin, however slowly, a process of mutual understanding.

"I have to give a lot of credit to members of the city council who were willing to sit down and open up their minds to the 'enemy,'" Sandie Hitchcock said. "And SUWA, for example, has demonstrated that it's willing to work with our community to resolve problems." Not long ago, such communication would have been nearly unthinkable.

While not everyone, whether hard-line environmentalist or wilderness-resistant local, has unqualified praise for the Escalante Center, most seem to be willing to give the effort a chance. And most will give Kate Cannon, the monument's associate manager, the benefit of the doubt too. Cannon gave me a quick tour of the BLM planning office in Cedar City. I asked her if the planning team had encountered major pressure to pave roads and otherwise develop the monument. "No," she said. "That's been one of the interesting surprises. One of the things we heard loud and clear from all constituencies was 'Leave it alone. Keep it remote, keep it rough, keep it difficult to access.' And that's what we intend to do."

So how did she think people were going to react when they saw the plan's first draft? She flashed a wry grin. "They're going to *love* it."

AMAZINGLY ENOUGH, while they didn't necessarily love it, many at least liked much of it. The draft plan was released last November 16, and, just as Cannon had promised, its "preferred alternative" was long on wildness and short on development.

The emphasis throughout was on the natural and scientific values of the monument. More than a million acres would be managed as "primitive" zones, with access and use restricted to preserve their wilderness characteristics. Another half million acres would be managed as "outback," with their own, less rigid restrictions. There would be no new paved roads in the monument, no RV hookups, no big parking lots, no concessions. Seventeen streams would be recommended for designation as wild and scenic rivers. All tourist and administrative facilities would be built in surrounding communities, giving each town an economic stake in the monument's preservation—and going a long way toward diluting old angers.

The plan did meet with mixed feelings from some quarters. "I'm concerned," Louise Liston told me, "that it's clearly slanted toward preservation, and I worry that some historic uses of the land will be restricted." At the same time, she said, she favored the emphasis on the educational and scientific importance of the monument and very much liked the Escalante Center idea.

So did Mike Matz, executive director of SUWA, even though his organization and other wilderness advocates would still have liked to see most of the outback zones managed as wilderness, as the primitive zones would be, until such time as they might be folded into the National Wilderness Preservation System. He was not happy with the 591 miles of routes the BLM had set aside for the use of all-terrain vehicles or with a number of other points with which SUWA will be taking issue. Nevertheless, he found the draft plan "a whole lot better than we might have expected."

The final plan will be issued in the fall. There will doubtless be changes, good and bad, and the final result is not likely to satisfy everyone. Such plans never do. Still, I smell a species of hope here.

I remember the kind of development that has brought so many paved roads, parking lots, crowds, commercialism, and urban excess to Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Zion, and many other national parks that their managers must now spend much of their time trying to turn back history. By embracing and protecting most of the wildness that defines and sustains this newest American monument, the BLM—often ridiculed as the "Bureau of Livestock and Mining"—might just get it nearly right from the beginning. Are you watching, Everett Ruess?



No-man's land: That's what locals call this gaunt, mineral-rich slice of the Kaiparowits Plateau.

Monument status will likely stymie plans for coal mining. For this outback, wilderness is wealth enough. □