

## Consummate Canyonlands

*"You can talk about the Grand Canyon, you can talk about Yellowstone, Yosemite, I'm biased, I'm not sure they compare with the Canyonlands."* ~ Stewart Udall

I was six years old and growing up in a New Jersey suburb when Canyonlands National Park was established in 1964. Years later I became acquainted with Bates Wilson, Stewart Udall, Ken Sleight and many others who were instrumental in protecting this part of the majestic landscape that ultimately became my adopted homeland. But the final boundary of Canyonlands National Park was a political settlement; far removed from the vision of Interior Secretary Udall to protect the entire Canyonlands Basin encompassing one million acres and an uncompromised watershed. When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the public law creating Canyonlands NP it contained 257,400 acres, a little over one quarter of its original size. In 1971, with the addition of the Maze district, also a compromised boundary, the park increased in size to its current 337,540 acres. Fifty years after the initial effort to create Canyonlands National Park began; the same arguments are now being used to prevent protection of the lands that were removed from the original proposal. But even bedrock can crack. The question remains open regarding what former Canyonlands Superintendent Walt Dabney calls "Canyonlands Completion."

The National Park Service's first survey of southern Utah was in 1935 and included a broad look at the Canyonlands Basin, Glen Canyon, the Waterpocket Fold, Cataract Canyon and the Canyons of the San Juan River. The following year, the first Escalante National Monument proposal was introduced recognizing the extraordinary character of this immense, unimpaired landscape. It contained 6000 square miles and included the entire Greater Canyonlands region. This visionary concept was, not surprisingly, shot down in Utah but later followed by two more 'modest' Escalante proposals encompassing 2,450 square miles or 4.5 million acres; one was promoted in 1940 by then Interior Secretary Harold Ickes. The grandeur of these proposals matched the living landscape yet no protective designations existed for the Greater Canyonlands Region when Bates Wilson arrived to work as Superintendent of Arches National Monument in 1949.

Bates' first backcountry pack trip into Canyonlands occurred in the spring of 1951 and he was awed by the country. He became the most dynamic proponent for creation of the park, leading numerous jeep tours into the area for government officials including Interior Secretary Udall. He eventually earned the title, "Father of Canyonlands," and remained a passionate advocate for the region until his death in 1983. During the time Bates Wilson was still lobbying for Canyonlands, Stewart Udall had his own vision for the park while flying over the area in 1961 with Bureau of Reclamation chief Floyd Dominy. I heard Stewart recount that story at Grand View Point in 2006, where he had come with his children and grandchildren to visit the place where he said his career as Interior Secretary began. Speaking before a small crowd of admirers, Stewart said Dominy offered him a ride back to Denver in his plane and enroute wanted to show him the site of his next big dam project just below the confluence of the Green

and Colorado Rivers. Stewart looked down and said to himself, “goodness sake, that’s a national park.” The park proposal was in Bates Wilson’s words “warmly debated” for a couple years over anti-federal feelings and the perception of negative economic impact.

In the 1980s, the National Parks Conservation Association, working with then Utah Congressman Wayne Owens (D-UT), proposed legislation adding up to 750,000 acres to Canyonlands, which would create a park similar to what was originally conceived decades before. They were inspired to act in part by the Department of Energy’s proposal to construct a nuclear waste repository in the national park borderlands. Six years of hard lobbying by NPS and others killed that ill-conceived plan but the park expansion bill failed too, lacking Utah delegation support.

In the late 1990s park Superintendent Walt Dabney introduced the Canyonlands Completion plan that would add 515,000 acres to the park. Increasing the park’s size was not a numbers game, but what actually made sense in managing an entire hydro-geologic unit. Dabney’s concept used watershed boundaries including side canyons and more of the Green River. Once again the reality of Utah politics crushed this vision.

I like to think about a time when Utah had Frank Moss, a progressive Democrat Senator who was also instrumental in the creation of Canyonlands National Park. He served three terms before defeated by Orrin Hatch in 1976. Thirty-five years later Sen. Hatch (R-UT) continues to wage an all-out war against the Department of Interior along with his colleagues Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT) and Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT). They proudly beat Interior Secretary Salazar’s Wild Lands Policy insensate, introduced bills to render the Antiquities Act impotent, and joined Senator McCain (R-AZ) in sponsoring a bill to ensure uranium mining will continue at the Grand Canyon in spite of an Interior mining withdrawal. They would like to seize all federal lands in their borders and hand them over to the state of Utah. These elected officials do not collaborate, compromise or cooperate when it comes to finding answers to very complex issues associated with public lands management; in fact they are actively blocking those efforts in Utah counties.

Intractable Utah politics will not end the discussion on completing Canyonlands nor the campaign to protect the spectacular public lands that are at risk. The Grand Canyon Trust is producing a film to advocate for protection of the Greater Canyonlands Region that is currently threatened by large-scale industrial development; oil and gas drilling at the borders of Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, uranium and potash extraction, tar sands strip-mining in the Dirty Devil River country, and ubiquitous, unregulated off-road vehicle impacts. We are working to bring this wild landscape and the impending threats to its integrity to the attention of the Obama Administration. For more information contact Utah Program Director Laura Kamala.

Endnote: For a comprehensive history of Canyonlands National Park see *From Controversy to Compromise to Cooperation: The Administrative History of Canyonlands National Park* by Samuel J. Schmieding, Ph.D.

