

# BLM's crown jewels go begging

National Landscape Conservation System remains underfunded even as visitors increase

In a speech broadcast to all Bureau of Land Management employees in March of 2000, then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said the agency faced a modern choice: "It can become the greatest American land management agency, the one that sets the standard for protecting landscapes ... and bringing people together to live in harmony with the land.

"Or," he said, "it can become a relic, an historical artifact."

In order to avoid the latter fate, Babbitt announced the establishment of a new office that would manage the agency's wild and scenic rivers, national conservation areas, scenic and historic trails, wilderness areas, and 15 of the national monuments established by President Clinton during his two terms. The office of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) was intended to formally recognize the BLM's emergence as a manager of world-class land resources, on par with the National Park Service.

By the end of that year, of course, both Babbitt and Clinton were on their way out, and a new administration was preparing to make its mark on the BLM. Though conservationists feared the Bush administration would try to abolish the new national monuments and do away with the NLCS, Interior Secretary Gale Norton did neither. Instead, in the spring of 2002, she announced that planning for the new national monuments would move forward. For the most part, it has.

Yet many observers say that, without Babbitt as its champion, the NLCS has suffered a quieter decline. "A lot of people say, 'The monuments are already well protected, so what's the problem? Let's go worry about something else,'" says Wendy Vanasselt of The Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C. "But a more subtle erosion is taking place."

## Dollars don't go far

Funding the National Landscape Conservation System has been tricky. Instead of having its own line in the BLM budget, the NLCS draws funding from about 20 separate agency accounts, divided up among programs such as recreation, wildlife and range management. This not only makes for complex bookkeeping, but also means that the NLCS must compete for funding with hundreds of other agency projects. What's more, says NLCS Senior Natural



Ancient saguaro gunned down in Sonoran Desert National Monument. Few monuments have sufficient staffing to manage increasing numbers of visitors. JASON WILLIAMS PHOTO COURTESY THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Resource Specialist Rob Hellie, "Every program that puts funds in wants to keep a tight hand on how those funds are used."

The NLCS secured a total of \$36.2 million in 2000, according to agency figures, and its funding inched upwards in 2001, 2002 and 2003 to a high of \$58.5 million. The House, along with the Senate Appropriations Committee, approved about \$56 million for the NLCS for fiscal year 2005.

When spread over more than 30 million acres, these funds don't go very far. The 57,700-acre Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area in west-central Colorado has only one permanent employee, manager Karen Tucker. "I do a little bit of everything around here," says Tucker, who oversees everything from land-use planning to visitor services. Tucker says the conservation area even struggles to maintain its road and trail signs. The forthcoming Gunnison Gorge management plan, which drastically limits the areas open to cross-country motorized travel, will add new burdens to the staff.

The NLCS budget "has left a lot of places without the resources they need to close roads and provide basic visitor safety and support," says The Wilderness Society's Vanasselt. "People are starting to show up, and there are hardly any rangers."

While the nearly 1.9 million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah has a relatively flush annual budget of more than \$5.9 million, its science program has suffered some recent hits. Staff paleontologist Alan Titus

says the monument has provided funding to researchers associated with museums, universities and other federal agencies. Their work, he says, has yielded "an incredible amount of information," including a half-dozen new species of dinosaurs.

As the monument has expanded its visitor facilities, however, the money available for all scientific research has dropped from approximately \$1 million to less than \$400,000 per year. This year, says Titus, the paleontology program was only able to fund two of the three partner institutions it had supported in the past.

## Has the BLM abandoned Babbitt's vision?

The overall financial forecast for the NLCS isn't optimistic. In 2003, the system had some \$10 million to spend on developing management plans. Seven national monuments, including Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument and Vermilion Cliffs National Monument in Arizona, expect to finish their management plans in 2005, and several national conservation areas have already completed their plans or plan revisions. But there's not much money available to turn those plans into reality.

"You'd hope that as the planning money comes down, you'd ratchet up the money for (plan) implementation," says Rob Roudabush, group manager for national monuments and national conservation areas within the NLCS. That's not happening, he says.

Part of the problem is the system's low visibility in Congress. But is the Bush administration intentionally blurring the Babbitt vision? Neither Norton nor BLM director Kathleen Clarke has made many public statements about the NLCS. In a 2002 teleconference with citizen members of the BLM Resource Advisory Councils, however, Clarke spoke positively about the system, describing it as one way to "increase the public's awareness and appreciation of the mission that we have and the land that we manage."

Yet the priorities of the BLM as a whole have shifted away from conservation during the past four years, and funding levels across the board have altered accordingly. "The present administration certainly hasn't made NLCS — or ecological restoration and conservation activities on BLM lands in general — one of their priorities in terms of funding support," says Vanasselt.

But conservationists and NLCS staffers say they're not giving up. "Five years after the Park Service started, it was probably a fairly small blip on the radar screen," says Hellie. "I think we're at a very early developmental stage, and I don't think it's reasonable to expect all to go smoothly."

BY MICHELLE NIJHUIS  
michelle@hcn.org

The author is HCN's contributing editor.

Bureau of Land Management, National Landscape Conservation System, [www.blm.gov/nlcs/](http://www.blm.gov/nlcs/)  
The Wilderness Society Wendy Vanasselt, 202-429-7431  
National Landscape Conservation System Coalition [www.discovernlcs.org](http://www.discovernlcs.org)