

# Protecting a Western Icon:

## The Bureau of Land Management's Vermillion Basin Decision

Story and photos by

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LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN, COLORADO — Viewed from this bald, windswept peak in Northwest Colorado, the Vermillion Basin is impressive for what it lacks. No roads, no cars, no roofs, no people. There's also hardly any shade and not much water. In the surrounding federal lands, you can drive dirt roads for hours on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend without seeing another soul. At night, from a ridgetop campsite, the only lights visible across hundreds of square miles are the occasional headlamps of pick-up trucks plying the darkness on lonely state highways.

Lookout Mountain figures prominently in the landscape of Moffat County and in the story of the Vermillion Basin because it's where a helicopter carrying some very important people landed in 2007. Bill Ritter, Colorado's recently elected Democratic governor, and Ken Salazar, then the state's U.S. Senator, toured the Vermillion Basin by air and took in the views from atop the mountain. Ritter described the visit as a "spiritual experience" and pledged to protect the land.

At that point, the Vermillion Basin's future was very much in doubt. In 2007, when the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released its plan for managing its holdings in Northwest Colorado—more than 2 million acres—the agency proposed oil and gas drilling in the Vermillion Basin's wilderness.

But between the release of the draft plan and the announcement of the final proposal on August 13, 2010, the BLM shifted direction. Rather than open up the Vermillion Basin, the BLM would preserve its wilderness characteristics and keep energy development out of the 77,000 acres, one of the last remaining big chunks of undeveloped habitat in a region rich with fossil fuels (Figure 1).

Moffat County commissioners said they felt blindsided and even some environmentalists expressed surprise at the decision.

Why the big change? The most obvious explanation was the election of 2008 and the Obama administration's arrival in Washington. For eight years, the Bush administration had elevated energy



The Vermillion Basin, as seen from Lookout Mountain.

development to a top priority on public lands and waters, but Salazar, Obama’s pick for Interior Secretary, vowed to clean up corruption and elevate environmental concerns. Counter-factual history is tricky, but it seems safe to assume that under a McCain-Palin administration, the Vermillion Basin would have remained squarely in the crosshairs.

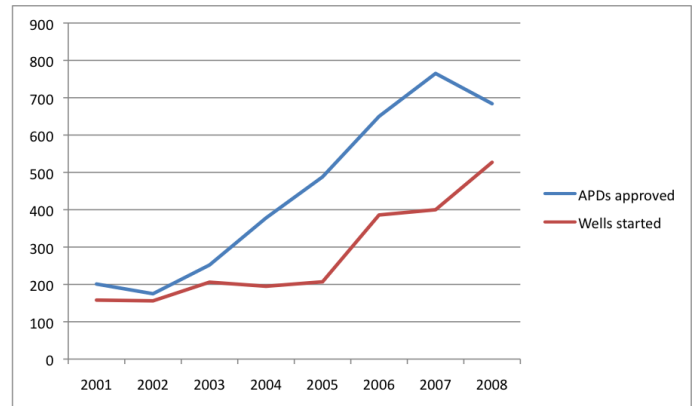
The change in the White House wasn’t the only reason why the BLM shifted course. The campaign to protect the Vermillion Basin stretched back more than 15 years, starting with a citizens’ inventory of the area’s wilderness characteristics. The state of Colorado, manager of the great herds of elk, deer, and pronghorn that populate the region, was keenly interested in the process and had also witnessed a changing of the guard when Ritter replaced Republican governor Bill Owens.

Years before, a diverse group of more than 100 stakeholders in Northwest Colorado had met in meeting after meeting to search for common ground. Ultimately, the group disbanded without agreement on the Vermillion Basin—environmentalists wanted it all protected, and gas companies wanted in. But the process at least made everyone’s positions clear and carved out some space for the BLM to do business a little differently. Open-minded staffers in the BLM’s local field office also played a role by proposing more progressive approaches to drilling.

Yet another factor was environmentalists’ on-the-ground presence, including a new storefront office in Craig, the region’s hub. Grassroots advocacy—ranging from letters to the editor to YouTube videos—demonstrated the support of plenty of area residents, making it easier for the BLM to protect the Vermillion Basin. “To not have people on the ground is a recipe for continuing that distrust and that misconception that everything is being run from Boulder, Denver, Salt Lake City, Missoula, or wherever,” said Luke Schafer, northwest campaign coordinator of the Colorado Environmental Coalition and one of three staff in the Craig office. “They can never say this is coming from afar or that outside forces are prying into their business. We live here and we work here.” Nada Culver, director and senior counsel for The Wilderness Society’s BLM Action Center, said that these boots on the ground gave Ritter the confidence to take a stand for the Vermillion Basin on his visit to Lookout Mountain. “Without people from the conservation community living in Craig,” she said, “he wouldn’t have been comfortable stepping up there.”

If the BLM goes ahead and finalizes its plans to spare the Vermillion Basin, it will be a major win for wilderness preservation in the West. The Packard Foundation’s support of environmental advocates in the region will have played a role in that victory by lifting up local conservation voices. All this will further the Foundation’s mission of protecting iconic landscapes in the West. But the impact on the Foundation’s other main goal—preserving and restoring biologically important places—is less clear. The Vermillion Basin, dominated by saltbush and sagebrush, provides valuable habitat for a variety of species, but it is not exactly a jewel of biodiversity. Few, if any, greater sage grouse are found in the basin, though the bird, a candidate for listing

**Figure 1: Oil and gas development in Colorado**



Data: The Wilderness Society

under the Endangered Species Act, lives nearby (see Figure 5 below). Oil and gas drilling will be allowed on 90 percent of federal land covered by the BLM plan, and what happens in that habitat will have a much bigger effect on the sage grouse and other sensitive species.

Nor is the end game for the Vermillion Basin easy to foresee. If protected administratively by the BLM, the area would still lack the permanent safeguards of a full-fledged, legislative wilderness area, which Congress is unlikely to support anytime soon. But the path to durable protection may not need to pass through the legislative branch. In a region with a deep suspicion of the federal presence, the threat of a national monument, created by presidential fiat, still looms large.

### **A hidden corner of Colorado**

To understand the significance of the BLM's decision, it helps to understand the geographic context of the Vermillion Basin. The area slated for protection is about 77,000 acres, but it's just one piece in a much larger mosaic of private, state, and federal lands (Figures 2 and 3). The BLM decision was part of a Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the agency's Little Snake Field Office. An RMP is essentially a land-use plan and this one was a blueprint for a fairly massive area: 1.2 million acres of public lands and 1.1 million acres of subsurface mineral estate in Northwest Colorado.

The Little Snake Field RMP covers a variety of environmental topics and controversies, including grazing and off-road vehicles, but with oil and gas development considered the most significant threat in the region, much of the debate has focused on this issue.

The Vermillion Basin is easy to pick out when you examine where oil and gas companies have been operating. As shown in Figure 4, the basin is surrounded on many sides by leases. It therefore retains the primitive qualities, solitude, and isolation that once made the region a refuge for cattle rustlers, horse thieves, and other criminals, including Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. The settlement of Browns Park was the birthplace of Ann and Josie Basett, famed outlaws who were also girlfriends to some of Cassidy's "Wild Bunch."

Figure 2: Land ownership in the Little Snake Field Office

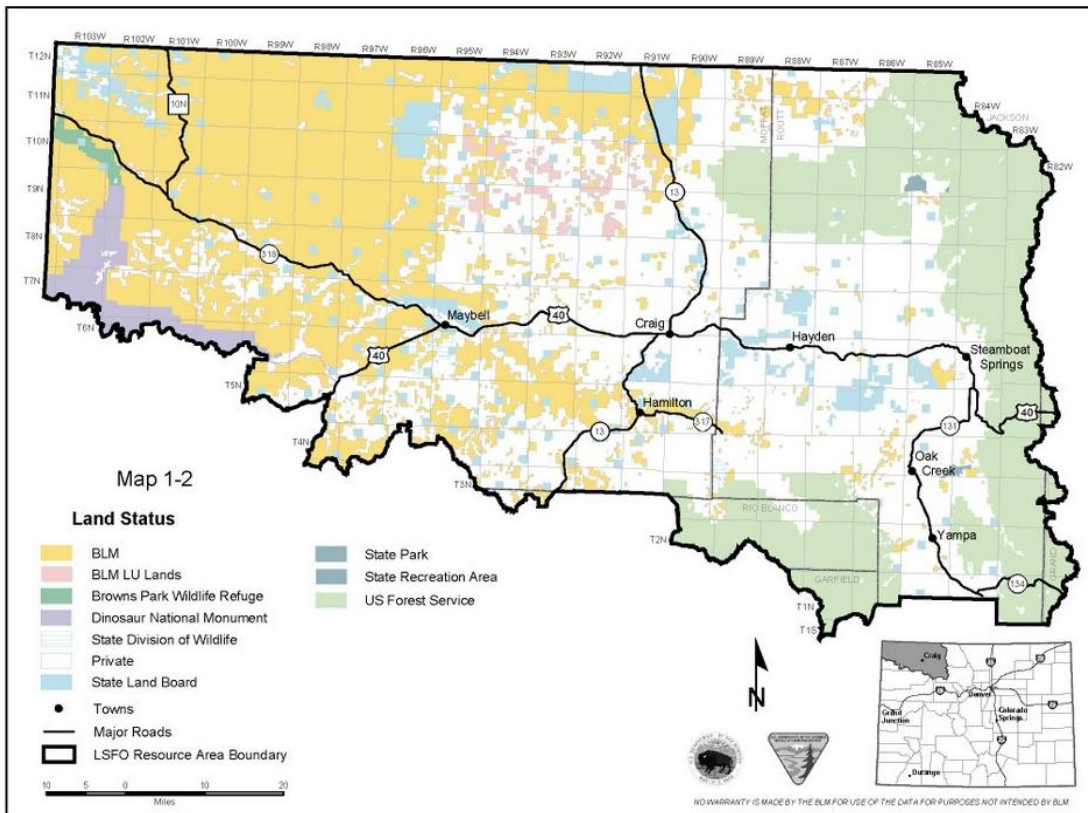


Figure 3: Wilderness Proposal Areas in the Little Snake Field Office

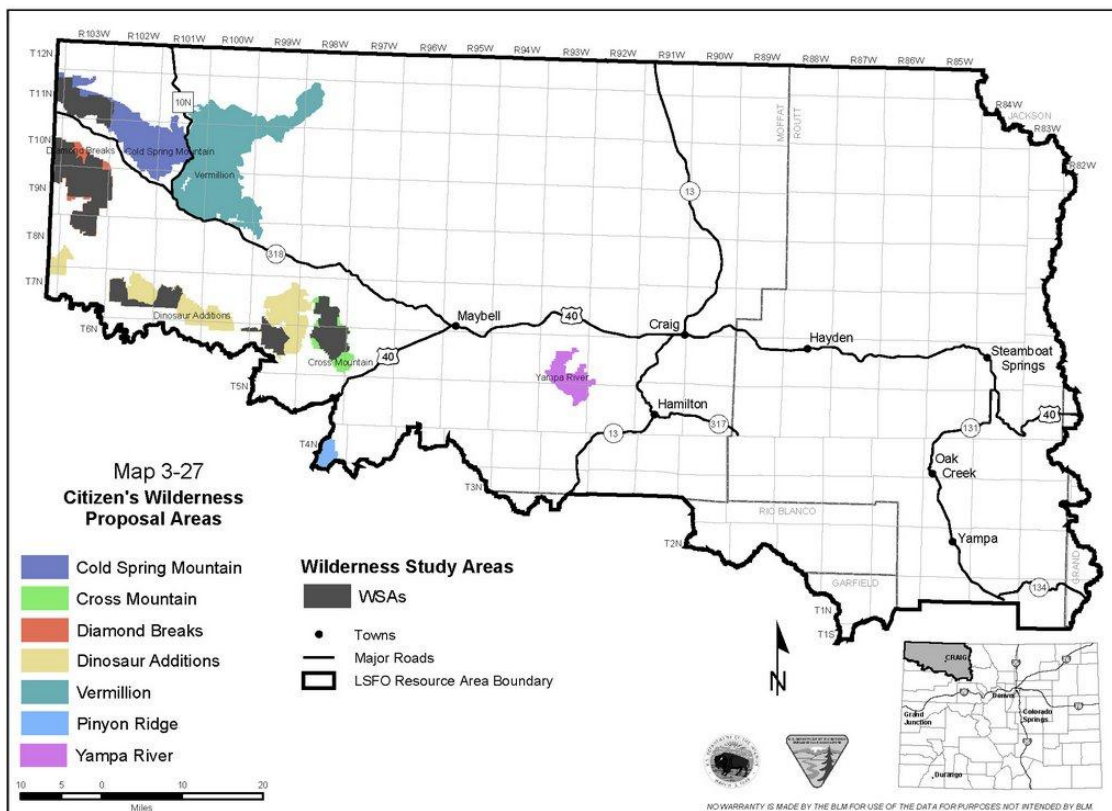


Figure 4: Oil and gas leases in the Little Snake Field Office

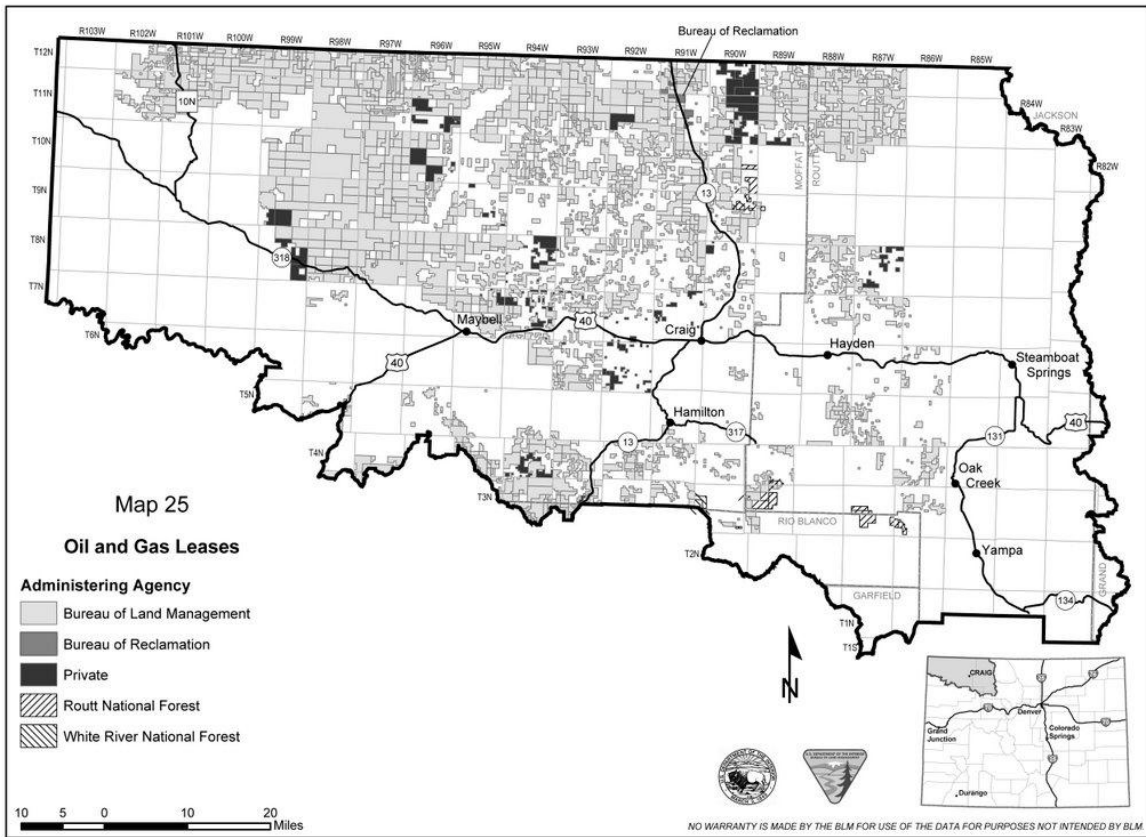
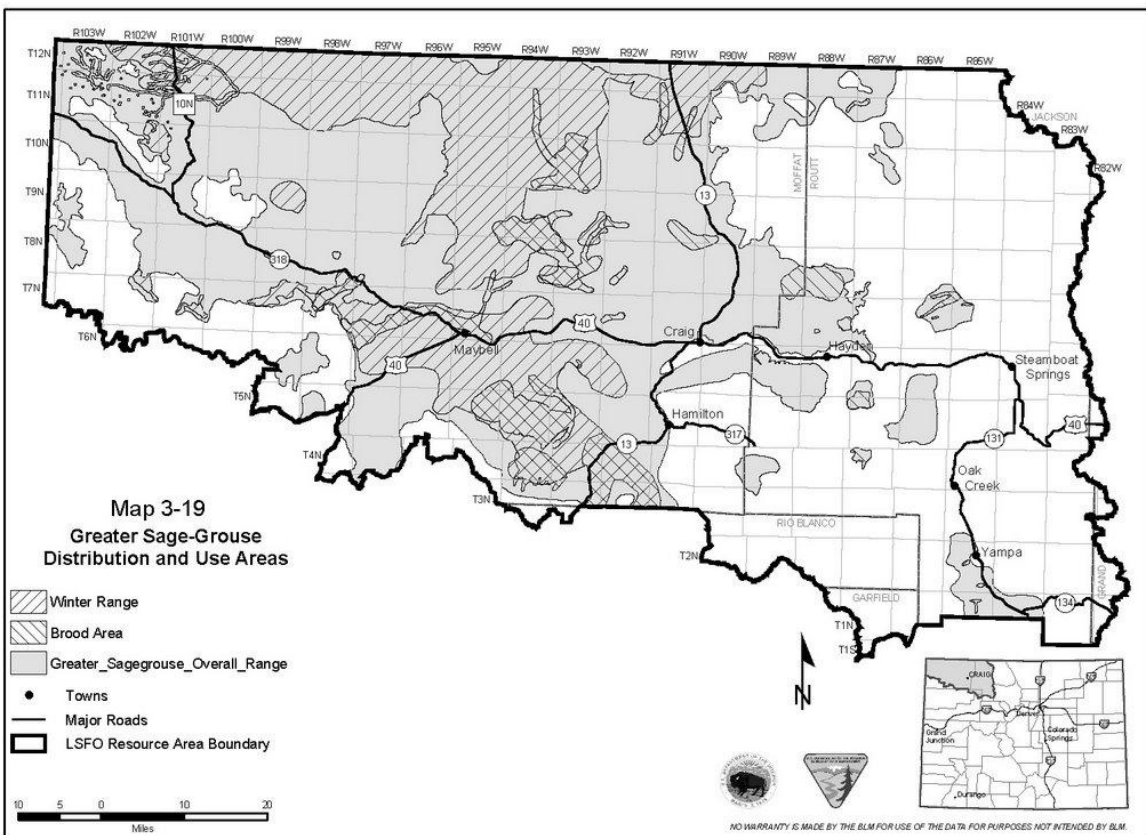


Figure 5: Greater sage grouse habitat in the Little Snake Field Office



“It can’t be overemphasized how far away we are from Denver and the population centers in Colorado,” said Soren Jespersen, Northwest Colorado wildlands coordinator for The Wilderness Society. “We’re closer to Salt Lake City than Denver in a lot of ways, and we’re even closer to Utah than Colorado in many ways.”

The Vermillion Basin is technically not part of the Colorado Plateau, the Packard Foundation’s geographic priority, but instead lies slightly north in a geographic province known as the Wyoming Basin, as does much of the area covered in the Little Snake RMP (Figure 6). To the east, neighboring Routt County has plenty of majestic conifer forests, snow-capped peaks along the Continental Divide, and the ski town of Steamboat Springs, but in Moffat County there are very few big trees, jagged mountains, or other stunning scenery. The beauty of places like Vermillion Basin “is more subtle,” Jespersen said. “It’s not this iconic alpine meadow location that many people in Colorado are familiar with.”

Resentment of the federal government, especially its environmental laws, is *de rigueur* in the rural, intermountain West. But the tensions appear to run especially deep in Moffat County. “People here have long memories and things are slow to evolve,” said Sasha Nelson, an organizer with the Colorado Environmental Coalition who grew up in Craig.

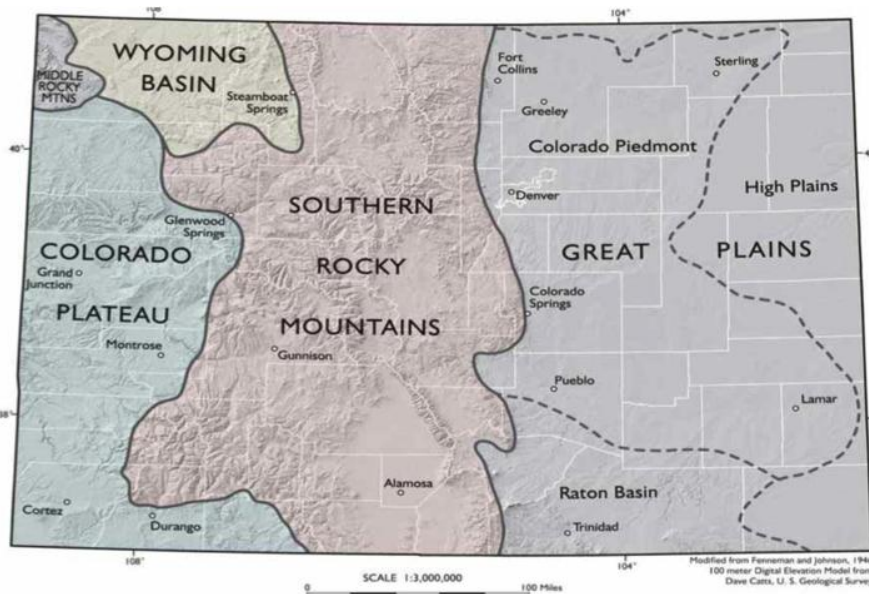
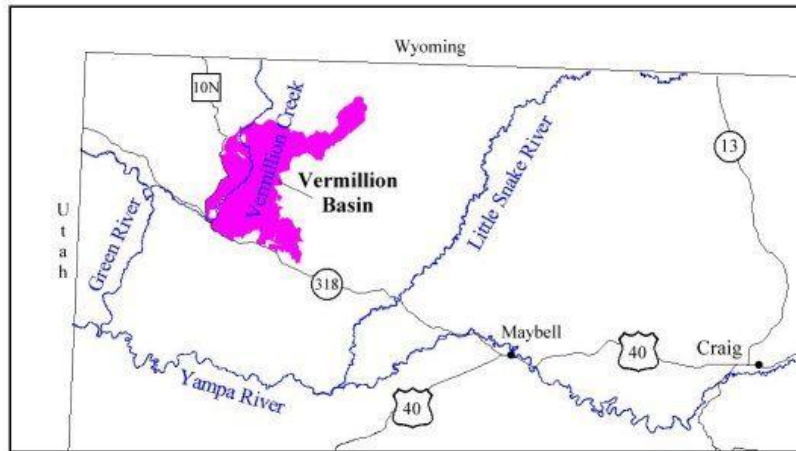
For residents who aren’t fans of the big bad federal government, memories stretch back to the controversial genesis of two protected areas in Moffat County: Dinosaur National Monument and Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge.

Dinosaur, located at the confluence of the Green and Yampa Rivers, was established in 1915 by President Woodrow Wilson. It was one of the first such monuments created through the Antiquities Act, which gives the president the ability to set aside federal lands with the stroke of a pen (see box below). At first, Dinosaur only covered 80 acres to protect a treasure trove of fossils from the Jurassic era, including some complete dinosaur skeletons. But like many of the national monuments, Dinosaur grew into something much more than a protected dig site. In 1938, at the urging of Interior Secretary, Harold Ickes, President Franklin Roosevelt dramatically expanded the monument to 204,000 acres. Two decades later, Dinosaur was ground zero for a defining conflict in the history of America’s environmental movement. The Bureau of Reclamation sought to build a dam in the



The Green River in Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge. Created in 1963, the refuge remains a sore spot among many residents in Northwest Colorado.

Figure 6: The Vermillion Basin is just off the Colorado Plateau



monument at Echo Park, where the Green and Yampa rivers meet. David Brower, the Sierra Club's executive director, was outraged at the prospect of the federal government flooding one of its own national monuments and led the fight against the project. In 1956, Brower and the Sierra Club board accepted a horse trade: Dinosaur would be spared, but the Bureau would be allowed to build a dam in Glen Canyon in Northern Arizona.

### **The Power of the Antiquities Act**

One of the available tools for conserving habitat [is] the little known Antiquities Act, signed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. Roosevelt held an especially muscular view of the executive branch's environmental prerogatives, and he had put the philosophy into practice in 1903 by creating the nation's first national wildlife refuge. For many years, ornithologists had been seeking protection for Florida's Pelican Island, and when they pleaded their case to Roosevelt, he posed a question to a government lawyer: "Is there any law that will prevent me from declaring Pelican Island a Federal Bird Reservation?" No, the lawyer responded, there was none since the island was federal property. "Very well," Roosevelt replied, "then I so declare it."

The Antiquities Act codified this desire to lock up federal lands by allowing Roosevelt and his successors to set aside "objects of historic or scientific interest." Such monuments were supposed to encompass the "smallest area compatible with the proper care and management of the objects to be protected," and the archaeologist behind the idea was apparently thinking about defending small digs from robbers. But Roosevelt and the presidents who followed took a rather broad view of what "smallest area" meant. Nothing less than the Grand Canyon was one of Roosevelt's first designations. Although the act didn't allow the president to create national parks, more than two dozen areas protected by the statute were eventually upgraded to that level, including the Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Zion, Bryce Canyon, and many others beyond the Southwest. Roosevelt used the Antiquities Act to create 18 national monuments, and by the time Clinton entered the White House in 1992, every president except Reagan and Bush had invoked the law to protect federal land.

The 105th national monument was born on September 18, 1996. Clinton sat at a desk on the Grand Canyon's South Rim, the brush behind him cleared away to improve the visuals, and created the 1.7-million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The only hitch: the Grand Staircase of the Escalante was in another state, 70 miles north. In Kanab, Utah, schoolchildren released black balloons to symbolize the community's opposition to the largest national monument ever created in the lower 48. The designation effectively killed plans for a coal mine that would have brought hundreds of well-paying jobs to a county where the federal government already owned 95 percent of the land. Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, who said he learned of the monument's creation in *The Washington Post*, called it the "mother of all land grabs." "Isn't it interesting that adherence to an open, public process, where policy decisions are made in the light of day, has always been advocated by environmental groups?" he wrote. "But now, when it serves their own purposes, these groups remain silent and refrain from crying foul to a deal crafted behind closed doors."

— from Tobin, Mitch. *Endangered: Biodiversity on the Brink*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2010.

Creation of a national monument like Dinosaur highlighted the executive branch's unilateral power to lock up public lands. Another nearby federal area, Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge, reminded local residents of the government's ability to condemn private property using the power of eminent domain. Established in 1963, Browns Park straddles the Green River and was meant to mitigate the damage done upstream when the Bureau of Reclamation constructed Flaming Gorge Dam.

### **Citizens' proposal and an attempt at consensus**

The Wilderness Act of 1964 never had many fans in these parts, but that did not stop some Colorado residents from trying to protect public lands in the region from development. After conducting a painstaking inventory of the landscape, environmentalists submitted a citizens' proposal for protecting the Vermillion Basin in 1994. "Moffat County went berserk," recalled Suzanne Jones, who took part in the original surveys and is now regional director of The



Wilderness Society. Unlike Pinedale, Wyoming, where oil and gas drilling is booming, Jones said, "this is a region that's not screwed up yet, and there's still a chance to do it right." Pressure from Jones and other environmentalists led the BLM to conduct its own inventory of the area, and the agency concluded that 77,000 acres contained wilderness characteristics. Other unprotected areas throughout Colorado similarly met the agency's criteria, but the Vermillion Basin became the poster child for the cause.

The wilderness inventory prompted the BLM to revise its RMP for the Little Snake. With conflict inevitable over the Vermillion Basin and other management issues, the agency sought to find consensus on at least some points through a new collaborative group, the Northwest Colorado Stewardship. NWCOS (pronounced "NEW-cose" by its participants) brought together more than 100 stakeholders, including environmentalists, ranchers, gas companies, and county officials. Established in 2003, the group met with the BLM planning team 29 times between September 2004 and April 2006, held hundreds of hours of meetings, but could never reach agreement on the Vermillion Basin.

NWCOS was one of many such collaborative efforts to manage environmental conflicts. The approach has become common enough that academics have invented a name for it: community-based collaborative resource management. In one study that looked specifically at the practice in Northwest Colorado, Cheryl Wagner and Maria Fernandez Gimenez of Colorado State University argued that "social capital" had increased because of NWCOS and other groups. But the study, published in *Society and Natural Resources* in 2008, found that the higher levels of trust had a "fragile quality."



Sand Wash Basin, part of the Little Snake Field Office.

After NWCOS ended, Colorado State University researcher Aleta Rudeen went back and interviewed 21 of the participants. She found that many of the members felt "burned" by the process and unwilling to take part in a similar effort in the future. Rudeen, now director of outreach and leadership development at the Society for Range Management, said that consensus simply wasn't feasible for the group because many participants held diametrically opposed positions when it came to the Vermillion Basin. "It was one or the other," she said. "You can't have a wilderness designation in the same place you drill for oil and gas." With some issues, such as fire management, there was a meeting of the minds. "There was a lot of science to help inform that decision and it was not controversial in many ways," she said. But when it came to the question of wilderness, it was a debate about values, not science. Many participants perceived The Wilderness Society as unwilling to deal, Rudeen said, while environmentalists felt county commissioners were intransigent.

The researchers, and the NWCOS participants themselves, said people at least got to know each other's values, but the process didn't appear to change many minds. "I sat across the table from some folks who were trying to defeat everything I hold dear," said Schafer. "I sat across the table from them for hundreds of hours, so they now understand who I am, and I understand who they are." If there was a main beneficiary of the process, it appears to have been BLM. Both the 2008 study and Rudeen's research found that participants' trust and opinion of the agency had increased. "The local BLM office really gained a lot of credibility and respect from all the stakeholders," Rudeen said.

## A visible presence

It was in this charged political environment, in a county where Republicans outnumber Democrats four to one in voter registration, that The Wilderness Society and Colorado Environmental Coalition partnered to expand on the local base of support. Initially, staff occupied an office tucked away in the second story of an old office building in Craig. But in October 2009, they moved to an office right on the main drag. "There's literally two blocks in Craig where 90 percent of the businesses are," Jespersen said. "Now people walk by and say, 'What's The Wilderness Society?' It's given us credibility. Before maybe they thought we were trying to hide away or afraid to be out in the open."

The office has big plate glass windows emblazoned with the logos of The Wilderness Society and Colorado Environmental Coalition, seemingly an inviting target for a vandal or opponent. But staff members haven't had any problems. "There was an assumption, when I came here, that things would be extremely ugly, that people would be threatening me on a regular basis, but I've never once had anyone say a cross word," said Schafer, adding that may have something to do with the fact he is 6'5" and weighs 300 pounds.



Sasha Nelson of the Colorado Environmental Coalition in front of the office her group shares with The Wilderness Society in Craig, Colo.

## An evolving BLM

Even before the 2008 election, the BLM had been undergoing a slow evolution of its own since the early 1990s. Lampooned by environmentalists as the "Bureau of Livestock and Mining" for its historical tendency to be a shill of extractive industries, the agency started becoming more environmentally friendly after Bruce Babbitt was appointed as Interior Secretary by President Bill Clinton. From 2000 to 2008, while Gale Norton and Dirk Kempthorne were Interior Secretaries, the greening of the BLM faded. When Ken Salazar took over Interior's top spot, expectations were low among many environmentalists because of the secretary's ranching background and his past support for energy development. But in a marked reversal from his predecessors, Salazar announced a series of policy proposals that would clamp down on oil and gas development on federal land, not just offshore in response to the BP oil spill. Besides

blocking 77 Bush-era leases near Arches and Canyonlands National Parks in Utah, the Interior Department adopted new policies to emphasize environmental concerns in leasing decisions and ordered the BLM's field offices to weigh the needs of wildlife, wilderness, and recreation, not just the economic value of mineral extraction.

### **“Colorado cabal”**

Salazar wasn't the only key official at Interior with roots in Colorado, or an understanding of what was at stake in the Vermillion Basin. Enough Coloradoans filled the upper ranks of the agency that they're known as the “Colorado cabal” and have inspired jokes about Rocky Mountain oysters being served in the cafeteria at Interior. Aside from Salazar, the cabal includes:

- Tom Strickland, assistant secretary for fish, wildlife, and parks, was a U.S. attorney for Colorado while Salazar was attorney general
- Will Shafroth, deputy assistant secretary for fish, wildlife, and parks, is a fourth-generation Coloradoan and was the first executive director of Great Outdoors Colorado
- Bob Abbey, director of the BLM, was the BLM's former associate state director in Colorado
- Steve Black, Salazar's counselor for energy, was formerly Colorado's deputy attorney general for natural resources and the environment
- Anne Castle, assistant secretary for water and science, was a longtime partner in the Denver law office of Holland & Hart LLP
- Chris Henderson, Interior's “recovery czar,” is a fourth-generation Denver resident and former chief operating officer for the Denver mayor
- Rhea Suh, assistant secretary for policy, budget, and management, grew up in Boulder and was a senior legislative assistant to Ben Nighthorse Campbell, the onetime Colorado senator

This is not to say that Colorado connections made the protection of the Vermillion Basin a done deal. Some environmental groups have continued to hammer Salazar's Interior Department for its regulation of the oil and gas industry, both on- and offshore. Ken Salazar's brother, John, who represented Northwest Colorado in Congress until the November 2010 election, favored drilling in the Vermillion Basin. And in theory, the presence of so many Coloradoans in Interior could have led the agency to overcorrect and avoid protecting areas in their home state for fear of appearing biased. But the fact that so many top officials at Interior and BLM have visited the Vermillion Basin and understand the issues was probably a factor in the agency's decision. “Salazar, he knows that place,” said Jones. “He's been there. He gets it.”

### **Role of the local field office**

The decision to protect the Vermillion Basin may have emanated from headquarters in DC, but many involved in the issue said that work by the Little Snake Field Office was also critical. John Husband, the recently retired head of the office, and Jeremy Casterson, the manager of the RMP revision, earned praise from a variety of stakeholders for their willingness to listen and entertain new ideas.

Besides putting the Vermillion Basin off limits, the BLM's proposal contained some relatively progressive approaches to managing oil and gas drilling that sought to cluster development and

reduce habitat fragmentation. To the south, the BLM had adopted a surface disturbance cap on the Roan Plateau that limited what percentage of an area could be disturbed at any one time. On the Little Snake, the BLM did the same, only with a more restrictive cap. For existing leases in high and medium-priority sagebrush habitat, oil and gas operators could receive exceptions to wildlife timing rules if they voluntarily limited disturbance to 5 percent of a lease and provided the BLM with a plan for maintaining large blocks of unfragmented habitat. For new leases, oil and gas operators would be limited to 1 percent disturbance in the highest-priority sagebrush habitats (about 63 percent of the area) and 5 percent in the medium priority habitats (about 10 percent of the area).

“Rather than have BLM provide a prescriptive approach in a document that’s not easy to change, i.e. the RMP, we want to provide a benchmark or cap that will then require industry to be innovative in how they reduce their footprint and disturbance on the ground,” said Steven Hall, BLM’s communications director in Colorado. In the Jonah Field in Wyoming, for example, some oil and gas operators lay down oak mats so they can drill wells and run surface gas lines. When the rigs pull out, they pull the mats up and move on. “The real goal is to limit surface disturbance,” Hall said, “so this is a much better way to give industry more incentive to be innovative.”

Before the BLM decided to protect the Vermillion Basin, it proposed a 1 percent disturbance cap for the area, but The Wilderness Society and Colorado Environmental Coalition objected. “It’s the environmental version of death by a thousand cuts,” Nelson said. “And the viewsheds there are enormous, so the scars are really visible.” The idea is premised on recovering damaged habitat, but in a region where rainfall is sparse and spotty, that can be a slow process. Still, “a 1 percent disturbance cap is downright revolutionary in that part of the state,” said Culver. “The local field office thought that was as far as they could go, but what the DC connection did was say, ‘this is not how far you can go,’ and that was the last part of getting it over the line.” Added Jones: “The local BLM office would tell us that in the Bush administration, there was no way to choose an alternative with the Vermillion Basin protected.”

When asked where in the BLM’s bureaucracy the decision was made, Hall said “it’s a locally driven decision-making process, but it receives guidance at the state and national level.”

“The administration,” he said, “has put more of an emphasis on protecting some of these landscapes, especially from fragmentation.” Hall downplayed the role of the Colorado cabal. “You see the same types of policy directives being given in other states,” he said, “so I don’t think that’s necessarily the determining factor.” He also diminished the role of local environmental groups. “They had less of an impact than the dynamics of an administration change, both at the state and federal level—those were the driving factors,” Hall said. “Given the perception that these groups are not willing to compromise, that limits their effectiveness.”

## **Biodiversity impacts**

Although the Vermillion Basin doesn’t have any endangered species, it’s still considered ecologically valuable because it’s such a big chunk of unfragmented, relatively pristine habitat, part of what’s known as the Greater Dinosaur region. The multi-colored badlands and seldom-visited canyons of the Vermillion Basin have a large number of rare plants and an impressive collection of petroglyphs. Herds of elk and mule deer—considered some of North America’s largest—are a common sight. Neighboring Sand Wash Basin is home to wild horses—paints,

grays, bays, sorrels, red and blue roans—and the “stud piles” the male horses leave behind to mark their territories. Hunting and fishing is big business in this corner of the state, with one study estimating that wildlife-related activities, especially big game hunting, generates some \$31 million per year in Moffat County and provides 1 in 25 jobs. To the north, around Pinedale, Wyoming, scientists are documenting significant impacts to large ungulates from the widespread drilling, so the impact to hunting has been a key talking point for environmentalists.

The Endangered Species Act has figured prominently in the debate over BLM lands in Northwest Colorado because of the greater sage grouse. In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared the greater sage grouse a “candidate” for listing, meaning its protection was biologically “warranted but precluded” by higher budget priorities. The agency made the same call a few months later for the Gunnison sage grouse, which is found to the south on the Western Slope of the Rockies. As a candidate, the sage grouse isn’t shielded by the strong protections of the Endangered Species Act, but it could be added to the list in the future and restrict all manner of development.



Greater sage grouse  
Photo: National Park Service

The prospect of wrestling with the Endangered Species Act has made state and local officials keenly interested in the fate and legal status of the sage grouse. While the Vermillion Basin is not home to the bird, the Little Snake Field Office accounts for more than two-thirds of its range in Colorado. Each spring, male birds congregate in long-established breeding areas, known as leks, and perform an elaborate mating dance for female birds. The sage grouse are very sensitive to disturbance and avoid tall objects, such as drilling rigs, presumably because they associate them with perches for raptors, a key predator.

What happens with oil and gas drilling beyond the Vermillion Basin will be much more important to the species’ conservation and could help determine whether the bird receives federal protection. In the BLM’s new proposal, the leks received some added protections, as conservationists had hoped. The buffer widened to a radius of 0.6 miles, up from 0.25 miles in the draft plan. The surface disturbance cap on new leases in high-priority sage grouse habitat was increased from 5 percent to 1 percent, and definitions of high- and medium-priority habitat were changed to include more sage grouse habitat.

Environmentalists were disappointed at some of the agency’s plans. For the sage grouse, white-tailed prairie dog, rare plants, and other sensitive species, “there are a lot of missed opportunities,” said Josh Pollock, conservation director of the Center for Native Ecosystems. But they also praised some improvements that they attribute to their advocacy, especially efforts to involve the Colorado Division of Wildlife. “The plan also now includes improved standards for reclamation, and an improved discussion of how BLM will assess cumulative impacts of energy development on wildlife,” said Megan Mueller, a biologist with the Center for Native Ecosystems. Adaptive management is supposed to afford sage grouse more protections if their numbers drop, but the concept of rolling reclamation remains unproven. “There’s not a field

office out there in BLM who can show you a successful reclamation in this high desert arid environment,” Mueller said.

Environmentalists say that continued advocacy will be critical for helping the sage grouse because the BLM will be preparing master leasing plans in its Little Snake Field Office and amending the oil and gas provisions of the RMP that govern the neighboring White River Field Office. “Available for leasing does not mean it will be leased. And a lease does not mean it will be drilled,” Nelson said.

If environmentalists hadn’t pushed so hard to protect the Vermillion Basin, would the much larger area covered by the plan have been better for sage grouse and other species? Most interviewees said no, with some citing the greater buffers and protections for sage grouse leks.

“It’s not zero sum, but I’m sure we definitely lost some things,” said Culver. “Of the seven wilderness units, four get some protection, three are at risk, and that’s where we were at the draft, except for addition of Vermillion. Without the Vermillion Basin, we might have had a better chance on some other areas, but those are much smaller. We’re talking a couple thousand acres, not 80,000.”

### **Permanent protection?**

The end game for the Vermillion Basin is unclear. If the BLM follows through and signs a record of decision that protects the Vermillion Basin, Moffat County may sue. If the RMP stands, it could dictate management of the area for 20 years or longer, but this land-use plan isn’t written in stone and it could be revisited in the future, when the politics have realigned or when pressure to drill is even greater. “At any point in time, an administration could get clever, find a trigger, and we’d be back to planning again,” Nelson said. “Will it be protected under a different administration? That’s a huge question mark in our minds.”

The ultimate prize for many environmentalists is a wilderness bill that’s passed by Congress, signed by the president, and made into the law of the land. But no one in Northwest Colorado, regardless of their political stripes, sees that on the horizon. In the meantime, there are two other main routes to permanent protection for the Vermillion Basin.

One is the creation of a National Conservation Area (NCA), a relatively new classification for BLM. First established in 1990, there are now 16 NCAs and seven Western states. Unlike wilderness areas, national parks, and other federal protected areas, these NCAs are subject to a wide range of management styles, with the details hammered out in the congressional legislation needed to create them. Land within an NCA could be strictly protected for its wilderness qualities, or host an off-road vehicle park. The devil is definitely in the details. An NCA might also include areas beyond the Vermillion Basin that are critical to sage grouse and other rare species.

The other possibility is a national monument. Earlier this year, a leaked Interior Department “brainstorming” memo identified the Vermilion Basin as one of 14 possible areas that “may be good candidates for National Monument designation under the Antiquities Act.” Predictably, the list provoked howls in Moffat County, but also some snickers since it described the Vermilion Basin as having “whitewater rivers” and “vital sage grouse habitat,” neither of which is true (the

language was apparently taken from a description of a much larger area that includes the Vermillion Basin.) In describing the importance of the potential monuments like Vermillion, the BLM essentially described them as Western icons. “These landscapes first captured the pioneer spirit and cultivated America’s romantic ideals of the Wild West,” the memo said. “These lands symbolize the American spirit, and their remoteness and solitude remain poignant reminders of a bygone era.”

Assuming the BLM sticks to its guns, the Vermillion Basin will continue to offer reminders of the Old West and provide residents of the New West with a chance to experience what the region was like before all of us arrived. Such places are endangered species in their own right, even if they lack rare plants and animals.

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Wild horses in Sand Wash Basin and a snake at Browns Park National Wildlife Refuge.

## Sources

### Interviews

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- Aleta Rudeen, Society For Range Management
- Dietmar Grimm, Redstone Strategy Group
- Jason Blau, Redstone Strategy Group
- Luke Schafer, Colorado Environmental Coalition
- Josh Pollock, Center for Native Ecosystems
- Megan Mueller, Center for Native Ecosystems
- Nada Culver, The Wilderness Society
- Sasha Nelson, Colorado Environmental Coalition
- Soren Jespersen, The Wilderness Society
- Steven Hall, Bureau of Land Management
- Suzanne Jones, The Wilderness Society

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