

Dark Canyon

Findings

INVENTORY UNIT ACRES		
Federal	State	Total
With Wilderness Characteristics		
66,400	5,400	71,800 (99%)
Without Wilderness Characteristics		
1,000	0	1,000 (1%)
Inventory Unit Total		
67,400	5,400	72,800
Contiguous Area-Wilderness Characteristics		
Dark Canyon WSA (ISA)		68,030
Canyonlands National Park— The Maze Area		18,100
Glen Canyon National Recreation Area—Dark Canyon Unit	105,980	
Dark-Woodenshoe Canyon Wilderness, Forest Service		45,000

The vast majority of the four Dark Canyon inventory units (71,800 acres) retain their wilderness characteristics. They are logical extensions of the contiguous Dark Canyon Wilderness Study Area (WSA), the Forest Service Dark-Woodenshoe Canyon Wilderness, and specific units of Canyonlands National Park and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area that have been administratively endorsed for wilderness by the National Park Service. However, Unit 4 (1,000 acres) does not have wilderness characteristics because it is isolated by a road and is not large enough to stand alone.

The inventory units offer a wide variety of outstanding primitive recreation opportunities, including extended off-trail travel in extremely remote and little-known areas. A substantial portion of the units' boundaries follows the edges of piñon and juniper chainings, which have been excluded from the units. A few older chainings, which are difficult to recognize on the ground, were found to be substantially unnoticeable and have been included within unit boundaries. Faint evidence of past oil and gas exploration, some current livestock facilities, and vehicle-based recreation impacts exist, but these are all substantially unnoticeable across the entire inventory area.

Unit Description

The Dark Canyon inventory units are located in San Juan County approximately 30 air miles from Monticello. The units are large and complex, stretching across ten 7.5-minute topographic maps and having well over 200 miles of boundaries. Several routes and chained areas have

been cherry-stemmed from the units. Terrain generally consists of plateaus, benches, and parks overlooking the large canyon systems that are within the contiguous WSA and designated Forest Service wilderness. Vegetation includes Douglas fir and ponderosa pine at 8,500 feet, substantial piñon and juniper woodlands, sagebrush parks, and riparian vegetation in drainages at 5,500 feet.

Current uses include hiking, backpacking, canyoneering, horseback riding, all-terrain vehicle use, hunting, photography, viewing of unique geological and archaeological features, and livestock grazing.

Wilderness Characteristics

Naturalness

Units 1, 2, and 3 retain their natural character, given their extremely remote location. Vast portions of Unit 3, including the Sweet Alice Hills, Sweet Alice Canyon, Bull Valley, and Imperial Valley, appear untouched by human activity. In terms of naturalness, with the exception of Unit 4, all of the units are a logical extension of the contiguous WSA or designated wilderness. The 20 or so vehicle ways, the few scattered livestock facilities, and the recreational impacts from all-terrain vehicles and camping are all dispersed over large distances and are substantially unnoticeable. The inventory units have convoluted shapes because of the topographic boundaries of the contiguous WSA and a large number of long cherry-stems. Many of the cherry-stems contain substantial islands of disturbance, primarily from chaining projects.

Outstanding Opportunities

Solitude

The Dark Canyon inventory units provide outstanding opportunities for solitude because of their remote location, limited access, low use levels, and diverse terrain. Thick woodlands and deep canyons provide screening. The units are large and contiguous to several even larger roadless areas. In fact, the units are part of one of the largest and wildest roadless areas in the lower 48 states, thus creating intense feelings of isolation for those specifically seeking such opportunities. Many places offer a virtual guarantee of experiencing zero encounters with other visitors, even during the highest-use seasons.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Although the Dark Canyon inventory units do not contain the famous 2,000-foot deep canyons of the contiguous WSA, they nonetheless offer outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation of a different nature. These include hiking or horseback riding along the canyon rims, where distant views are panoramic and views into the canyon are spectacular. What makes these opportunities especially outstanding are the large number of cross-country travel options that can be used to diversify or connect a canyon-oriented trip, or to provide an extended all-upland trip that is completely off-trail.

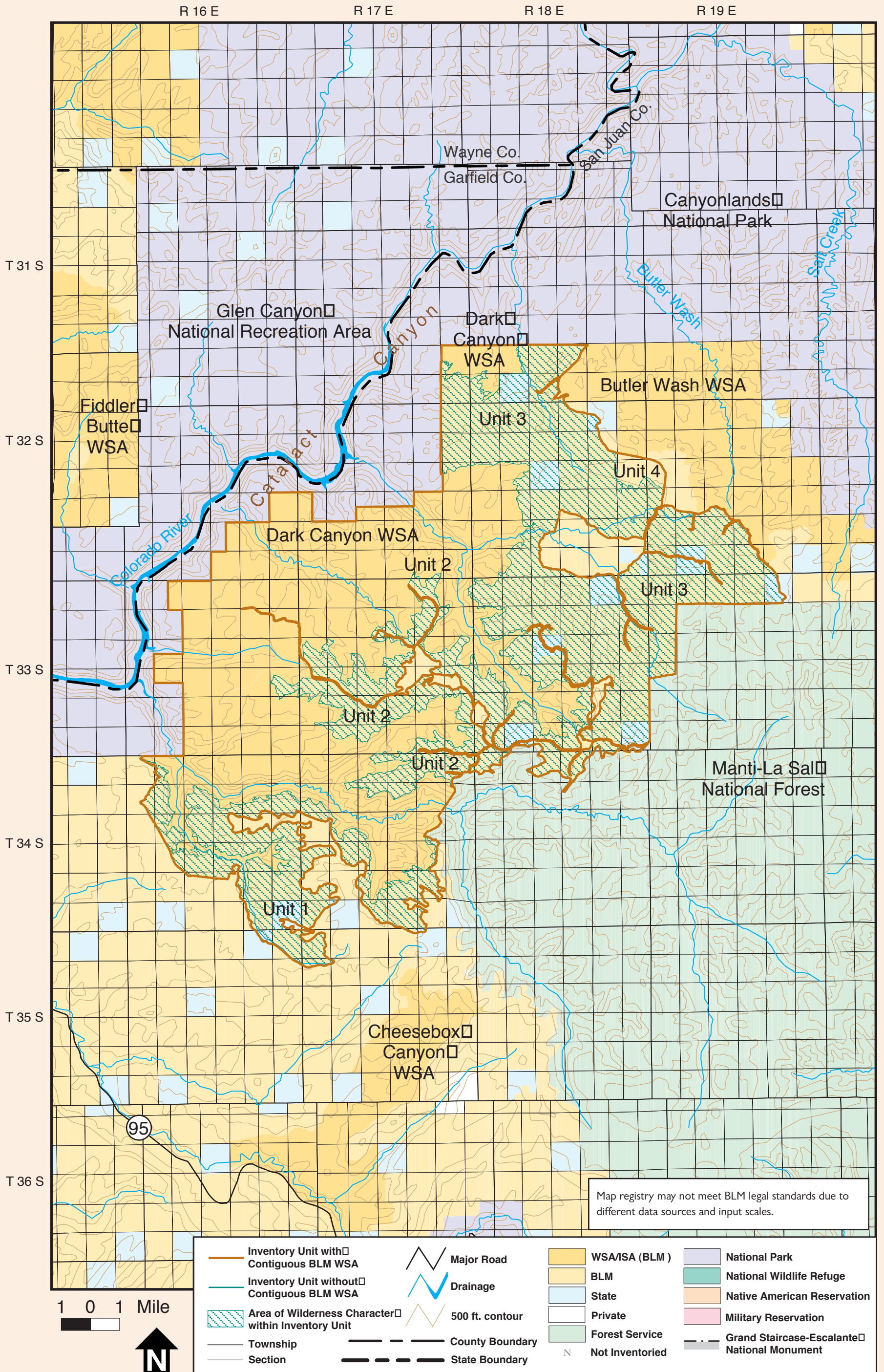
Fable Valley is relatively popular with backpackers and occasional horse packers because of the canyon's natural beauty and high concentration of archaeological sites. While most of Fable Valley is included in the Dark Canyon WSA, Units 2 and 3 provide the only access to this valley, including three trails that continue into the WSA. Accessing Fable Valley upstream from Gypsum Canyon is an extremely technical prospect that requires advanced rock-climbing ability. This and other portions of the inventory area are used by Outward Bound and other outdoor educational organizations.

Supplemental Values

Scenic values include expansive views of the 2,000-foot deep Dark and Gypsum Canyons, the colorful and unique buttes in Beef Basin, and, in the distance, the Henry Mountains, the Needles area of Canyonlands National Park, and Cataract Canyon along the Colorado River. The units contain a substantial concentration of prehistoric and historic ruins, many unusually situated in open parks instead of along cliffs. The units also contain several old cabins and named historic trails associated with early cowboy use, some of whom were fictionalized in one of Louis L'Amour's famous novels. Wildlife populations are relatively large and viewable, including several wilderness-associated species like bighorn sheep, peregrine falcons, and Mexican spotted owls.

A photograph of Dark Canyon is shown in the front part of this document on page vi.

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SOUTHEAST REGION—Dark Canyon