

CONSERVATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY, BLM STYLE

Tom Heinlein

For 25 years, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has been building a legacy that no one would have predicted when the agency was founded, one where both science- and community-based conservation can thrive even alongside other land uses. We observe the anniversary of the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) this year with satisfaction in knowing that BLM can serve and support its neighboring communities by having conservation in its land use toolkit.

BLM's reputation for many years was that of a catch-all agency that manages the lands that no one else wanted. After all, these were the lands that homesteaders and others did not claim when western expansion was a national priority. And "catch-all" because BLM had such a wide-ranging portfolio of responsibilities, from land patents to grazing along with issuing other permits over these lands.

Of course, that perception falls short of reality especially once you realize that these unwanted lands include some of America's most scenic and significant western spaces, such as the Lost Coast of California, the rugged yet delicate Mojave Desert, the dramatic shoreline at Yaquina Head in Oregon, the otherworldly landscape of Vermillion Cliffs in Arizona, or the harsh yet beautiful vistas of the Great Basin, to name a few. With that knowledge another responsibility was eventually added to BLM's portfolio—conservation.

In 1946, the unwanted lands were entrusted to BLM, which formed by merging the US Grazing Service and the General Land Office. BLM-managed lands were places for cattle grazing, mining, oil and gas drilling, and timber harvesting—all activities that continue today. They also became the lands "next door" for growing numbers of Westerners who use them for hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, wildlife viewing, and other recreational activities.

Among these lands—spread across much of the West, Alaska, and pockets of the Midwest and East—are nationally significant landscapes rich with cultural, ecological, and scientific value. These special places were designated for conservation, preservation, and restoration by either the president or Congress, or in some cases both.

One example is the King Range on the north coast (Lost Coast) of California, which Congress named a national conservation area in 1970. These lands were already under BLM management, but a new law raised the idea that BLM could have a conservation mission, too.

In 1976, Congress decided BLM needed a central source for its authorities to execute an array of public land management activities. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) established the bureau's multiple-use and sustained-yield mandate. This meant lands had to be managed to serve present and future generations. FLPMA set parameters on all BLM actions (e.g., issuance of grazing permits, rights of way, mineral leases, and more). It also underscored conservation as part of BLM's mission, creating California Desert Conservation Area, and expanding King Range National Conservation Area in Northern California, while establishing a process for BLM to identify wilderness study areas.

As Congress and presidents designated more of these special places, the Department of the Interior recognized there were efficiencies to be gained in managing these lands as a system and, in 2000, set up the NLCS within BLM. Congress codified the system into law in 2009, and today the NLCS is referred to by a more descriptive moniker: National Conservation Lands (Figure 1).

Twenty-five years of work show that there is no one-size-fits-all prescription for managing National Conservation Lands, which are composed largely of national monuments,

FIGURE 1 (FOLLOWING PAGE). National Conservation Lands, June 2025. BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

National Conservation Lands Bureau of Land Management

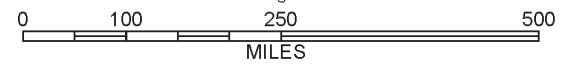
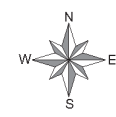


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Legend

- National Wild and Scenic Rivers
- National Scenic and Historic Trails
- Bureau of Land Management
- Wilderness
- Wilderness Study Area
- National Monument
- National Conservation Area or Similar Designation

For more information visit:
www.blm.gov/nlcs



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national conservation areas, wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, and national scenic and historic trails. Management of each unit heavily depends on the designating language, which always identifies specific features that BLM should conserve, protect, and restore. With that as BLM's guiding principle, other uses may be allowed so long as they are compatible with and do not degrade the resources or values for which the area was designated.

For instance, Canyons of the Ancients National Monument in southwestern Colorado was designated in 2000 to protect archaeological and cultural resources (Figure 2). However, because there were valid oil and gas leasing rights outstanding on public lands within the monument, leasing and development continues as long as it does not "create any new impacts that interfere with the proper care and management of the objects protected by this proclamation." Likewise, Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in Montana was established in 2001 for its biological, geological, and historical objects of interest. But to this day, fishing and big game hunting are allowed in accordance with state law, although off-road vehicle use is not because it could damage the objects of interest.

The BLM approach is one that allows uses that do not harm the objects and values identified. This is why a former senior recreation manager in BLM said that "people 'visit' national parks but 'recreate' on BLM lands." And while visitors to BLM lands should always check in advance, chances are you can more freely find a camping spot and probably bring your dog.

Another hallmark of BLM management is the pursuit of shared benefits, and use of the best available science, with respect to how an area is managed. Once designation occurs, a planning process ensues that involves local communities, states, Tribes, interest groups, scientists, and industry. With extensive engagement by user groups such as grazing permit holders and community members, the process is designed to identify what facets of the traditional multiple-use and sustained-yield mandate are acceptable given the context of the designation.

All these stakeholders know that how the unit is managed within its borders will have impacts beyond. For instance, the mix of multiple uses often benefits local economies through increased tourism and jobs related to traditional uses such as agriculture and some extractive industries. By working with BLM's planning process, stakeholders with varying interests can voice their ideas and concerns as the unit's management plan takes shape.

"There is a broad and diverse citizenry, often rooted in place, that has a deep affinity for these lands and are passionate advocates for the conserve, protect and restore mission," said one former senior land manager.

FIGURE 2. (TOP) One of over 6,000 recorded archaeological sites in Canyons of the Ancients National Monument in Colorado. (BOTTOM) A pumpjack in Canyons of the Ancients National Monument lifts oil and other fluids from an underground oil well. When the 176,000-acre monument was established to conserve and protect ancient archaeological resources, 81% of the area was leased for oil and gas development. BOB WICK, BLM



Building on its long history of working closely with communities, BLM does not maintain elaborate infrastructure at most of its National Conservation Lands sites. Visitor centers are generally in nearby “gateway” communities, not tucked behind a gate, and rarely is admission charged. By the same token, you won’t find many amenities at BLM sites. Trails might be a little rougher, and you’ll be asked to “leave no trace” in part because there is likely no trash collection. You will also find opportunities for self-discovery and other insights that come from being in a natural setting. BLM lands are

working lands that welcome visitors of all kinds, including citizen scientists, wildlife enthusiasts, students, and others as long as they respect the limited rules that conserve the unique resources and experiences found on these precious public lands.

With the 25th anniversary of the creation of the NLCS, we celebrate and explore BLM’s style of conservation, where landscapes are conserved, protected, and restored while remaining available for the use and enjoyment of current and future generations.

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