

The Archaeological Value of Utah Wilderness

A 12,000-Year-Old Legacy

The citizens' inventory of Utah's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness contains important archaeological resources, including spectacular Anasazi pueblos in southeastern Utah and 10,000-year-old cave sites in the northwestern deserts. In between are Archaic foraging sites, Fremont villages, and the ancestral dwellings of modern Native Americans. People have lived in what is now called Utah for the past 11,000 or 12,000 years. Utah's unprotected wilderness lands hold significant portions of this record; their inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System will help ensure protection of our priceless cultural heritage.

Windows on the Past

From the Archaic and Fremont Indian sites of Utah's West Desert mountain ranges to the Anasazi ruins of Cedar Mesa, Utah's wilderness lands encompass a stunning array of archaeological wonders. Each site tells a story of the past through its unique pictographs, pottery sherds, cliff houses, granaries, circular kivas, and other ancient remains. While many of these sites have already been studied by professional archaeologists, countless others await discovery.

The spectacular Anasazi sites in southern Utah date to between 900 and 600 years ago, or between AD 1000 and 1300. In the Grand Gulch proposed wilderness, hundreds of archaeological sites have been recorded from both the Basketmaker and Pueblo cultures of the Anasazi, and the BLM estimates that its Wilderness Study Area alone may contain more than 11,000 additional unrecorded sites, three-fourths of which could be eligible for the National Register.

The proposed San Juan-Anasazi wilderness is the most popular region in the state for visiting Anasazi sites. In several canyons, scatterings of broken pottery, along with corncobs and gourds desiccated by a thousand summers, hint at the daily lives of these desert dwellers. The concentration of archaeological sites in this region, up to several hundred per square mile, may be as great as anywhere in the United States.

Protecting Our Ancient Heritage

The most scenic areas in Utah are also some of the richest in important archaeological sites. Unfortunately, these sites are vulnerable to destruction through vandalism, pothunting, and other criminal activities. The more accessible archaeological sites are routinely looted by pothunters and valuable information is lost to illegal collection. Still other sites are threatened by industrial development or forest "chaining" projects, which uproot trees and may destroy archaeological sites to create artificial cattle pasture.

The Utah Professional Archaeological Council, an organization of professional archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians, advocates comprehensive wilderness designation in Utah as a means of protecting these important cultural resources. According to the council, "...maintaining roadless areas is the largest and least costly deterrent to pothunting, inadvertent driving over sites, and vandalism. For this reason we believe designating the maximum amount of wilderness possible will provide the maximum protection for the maximum number of archaeological, historical, and sacred Native American sites."