Visions of the landscape | People, place and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River

Jerritt J. Frank

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Visions of the Landscape:
People, Place and the Black Canyon
Of The Gunnison River

by

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Visions of the Landscape: People, Place and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River

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Abstract

In “Visions of the Landscape: People, Place and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River” I argue that using a la longue duree in conjunction with approaches common to environmental history illumines several important aspects of human inhabitation in one particular environment. Through my investigations, I first found that climate and the unique environment of western Colorado have always been important factors in shaping how people relate historically to the region. Moreover, I found that nearly all people, across vast expanses of time, have reacted to the powerful topography of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River in their attempts to understand themselves and this place. The Utes, and perhaps those that came before, viewed the canyon as some sort of sacred place. Moreover, it is likely that the Utes used the canyon in their attempt to understand their relative position in their physical and psychic worlds. Anglos who later inhabited the region also reacted to the wilds of the canyon in unique and interesting ways. To some the canyon offered a testing or proving ground for progressive conservation, a place where technology and know-how could be used to rectify nature’s failings. To others, the canyon represented a place to apply and practice preservation. Over the twentieth century, the sometimes dueling ideologies of conservation and preservation have battled to define western Colorado, and especially the Black Canyon. The competition between these ideologies has resulted in a bifurcated landscape—one that is protected and revered and dammed and developed.
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Introduction

Knowing Place

Nearly everyone, at some time or another, has been moved by a landscape: a mountain meadow slathered in brilliant wildflowers; the sun coming to rest behind the pink sandstone of the unforgiving Canyonlands; the San Juan Islands hunkered tightly in a placid bay of obsidian water—these and thousands more have inspired poems, books, songs and legends. Why is it, how is it, that landscapes can be such force in our lives? How much may be learned from watching the seductive dance between humans and the environment? For the past few years I have chased the answers to these often elusive questions.

As a child my family moved often. Regardless of where we lived, however, we always returned annually to the western slope of Colorado. Here, near the town of Montrose, I spent joyous summers roaming the vastly diverse landscapes of this place and enjoying the friendship and wisdom of my grandparents. Over time, I came to know western Colorado and its people through the outdoors—I met other hikers in the high meadows of the San Juan Mountains, fishermen along the hot rocky bottom of the Black Canyon and fellow pheasant hunters in Mr. Warren’s alfalfa fields. Through these encounters I came to realize that nearly all people living in the area had an opinion about the meaning and importance of place and the environment. Some, like the kind Warren family who had long eked their living from the alkaline-rich soil of the Uncompahgre Valley, saw the boons of nature as vital links in their survival. Though they may have regretted the dams and diversion tunnel that released the flow of the Gunnison River from menacing walls of the Black Canyon, they nonetheless counted daily on that water to wet
their fields. They spoke often about rain, heat, the ditch rider and the yields of this or last year's crops. Others, like the patient anglers of the Gunnison River gorge, often saw things differently. To many of them the river was not a commodity to be used, at least not for growing crops. With fly rod in hand, the river became a refuge, a place to escape the hurried world that whirled above while soaking tired feet in cold clear water. For some the river and its canyon became a sanctuary where the rush of the water and the warble of the grouse affirmed the existence of God. Dams, diversion tunnels and water storage projects were tantamount to sacrilege, they claimed.

Through discussions, some civil, some not so civil, with the people of the region, I have come to one firm conclusion. Regardless of one's age, profession, culture, class standing, etc., place matters. Where we live, the places we call home, impact the way we behave and think. This is not to say that a certain type of environment will consistently shape societies in the same way: what I have seen through my research on the western slope of Colorado demonstrates just the opposite. Over the past ten thousand years (give or take) humans have formed a variety of relationships with the environment in their efforts to survive in a sometimes hostile western landscape, ranging from societies centered almost entirely on hunting big game to societies based largely on agriculture.

Though many possible routes exist that may shed light on the ways people have shaped, and in turn been shaped by, this particular region, I have found the work of the Annales School, especially Ferdinand Braudel, the most helpful. Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch's founding of the Annales journal in 1929 marked a turning point for the field of history. According to historian Fritz Stern, practitioners of Annales School history combined "a traditional, humanistic view of history with questions and methods adopted
from other disciplines [while] insisting on a broad definition of the historian’s proper field.”¹ Rather than sticking closely to narrative history driven by major events, especially political events, these two argued stringently that carefully incorporating theoretical frameworks and approaches from geography, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, etc., would greatly enrich and broaden historical understanding. Picking up the mantle of the Annales School following the tragic death of Marc Bloch in World War Two, Ferdinand Braudel further stretched the definition of what constituted the proper bounds of history.²

For Braudel, time itself was no small matter. “The historian,” Braudel claimed, “can never extricate himself from a historical conception of time: time clings to his thought like soil to a gardener’s spade.”³ The central nature of time to the historian’s craft, then, warrants serious thought. According to Braudel’s reckoning, there exist three types or speeds of time, the first of which consists of the “dramatic, staccato rhythms of traditional historiography, with its emphasis on the shorter, the individual, and the event,” which had long been used by historians. Though these short units of time are exciting, Braudel argued that this was the “most distorted and unpredictable lens through which to view reality.”⁴ The second type of time according to Braudel’s framework focused upon “large periods of time—ten, twenty, or fifty years—in order to discover the background circumstances of events.”⁵ Though this level of time could better capture larger trends and themes, it also was too narrowly defined. The third, and to Braudel the most useful,

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⁴ Stern, *Varieties*, 408.
⁵ Ibid., 406-407
type of time was that focused upon centuries and millennia. This *longue duree* history, though capable of answering a variety of questions, is particularly well-suited to view the interactions between humans and the environment over great expanses of time. Utilizing *la longue duree* in my work has illuminated the many ways that people across time and culture have shaped and been shaped the western slope of Colorado.

Needless to say, employing *la longue duree* does not come without difficulties. Some critics have rightly pointed out that it has the tendency to obscure the political events that so often receive center stage in historical narrative. To address this concern, I have done my best to include a discussion of the political dimensions of this history. As is often the case, however, the discussion of the political does not begin until white Americans entered the area. This is not to say that the environment of western Colorado, especially the Black Canyon, was not a political matter to the previous inhabitants, but rather the available documents allow for no investigation into the degree to which it did, or did not, function as such. Second, I would add that although this approach is not a wise choice for someone seeking only to answer why a given political event occurred, if used properly, *la longue duree* has the potential to answer questions and illuminate trends that a shorter temporal focus cannot.

Other critics of this approach, especially of Braudel’s work, argue that it tends toward environmental determinism. These critics rightly point out that culture, modes of production, governmental structures and religion are not determined by any given environment. Although this may be a valid criticism of Braudel’s work, it hold less currency today as modern environmental historians, even those who employ *la longue duree*, are ever-aware of the deterministic pitfall and work diligently to avoid it. Much
more common in today’s environmental history is the recognition of possiblism: any one environment, rather than dictating the contours of society, can support a range of productive techniques and societies.

Beyond setting broad temporal limits for my study as championed by many of the Annales School, I have also borrowed much from the spirit of their work. Bloch, Febvre and Braudel’s criticism that history is too rigidly constructed in its refusal to borrow from other disciplines still rings true today. Certainly many historians currently utilize the methodologies and tools employed by their colleagues in other fields, but too many cling to the antiquated notion that their cross-field cousins have nothing to offer. Though I did so with great trepidation, I drew from a variety of fields and sources in constructing this history. Only by using the many disparate tools at my disposal was I able to build a story that includes American Indians, and even their ancestors, in my attempt to understand how all people, across all of time, have lived in and understood this one place. Without the work of several experts in a rather wide range of fields this story would have begun with white settlement and ended with the creation of a national park. Not satisfied with what such a history would yield, I added to the traditional archival and governmental sources a bit of anthropology, archaeology and paleoecology to more fully depict the entire story.

Aware both of its benefits and limitations, my use of *la longue durée* and the tools of other disciplines has enabled me to see once again that a significant portion of human history (though not one commonly recognized) revolves around peoples’ struggle to adapt to and alter the environment. The human impulse to alter ecosystems and landscapes is a constant throughout history; what has changed over time, however, are
the motivations and capabilities to foster those changes. Viewing this area’s history as a long process unfolding gradually has enabled me to recognize several interesting and important trends.

First, those people who have created the most successful and long-lasting societies have been those most willing and capable of practicing highly diversified, and therefore fairly sustainable, modes of production. Indeed, the correlations between subsistence diversification and human success are widely recognized as two parts of the same whole. Here on the western slope, more diversified Indians eclipsed the specialized Paleoindians, and they in turn were supplanted by the more diversified Utes. Although valuable in and of itself, this knowledge may help us better understand our current land-use policies, especially in regards to farming, practiced on the western slope.

Second, all people, from the first inhabitants to the present, have inhabited a world that they could not control; a world from which they could not extricate themselves completely. This is not to say that people have not long been attempting both to alter/control the natural world and to mediate or ameliorate the effects of that world. Paleoindians and Indians may have used fire to drive game; they may have prayed to their gods for successful hunts and healthy families. Certainly, Indians across time have been more than willing to adopt and adapt technology that increased their chances for survival. They used spears, atlatls, game drives, fire, bows and arrows, horses and firearms all to their betterment. All of this is not to cast aspersions upon Indians for actively seeking to alter the places they inhabited. Nor do I raise this point to argue that these actions are not congruent with their religious beliefs. Rather, viewing Indians as
willing participants of change removes the stereotypes that have for so long dehumanized and robbed them of agency.  

The dynamic relationship between people and the environment did not disappear, however, when Anglos dragged the last of the native inhabitants of the area, the Utes, from the stage. Whites, like the Indians that came before them, although certainly to a greater extent, also sought to alter the natural world while simultaneously striving to separate themselves from it. Throughout the course of the twentieth century especially, many white Americans long fought to transform the high desert Uncompahgre Valley into a productive and stable area of agricultural production. Over the past one hundred years, farmers and engineers have dug hundreds of miles of ditches and canals, built three major dams and one impressive diversion tunnel within the Black Canyon of the Gunnison River, all in the effort to transform this desert into the garden it could be.

The final pattern that emerges from this story, and the most important one, is the role that the Black Canyon has played in the varied and diverse human histories of western Colorado. Something in the Black Canyon, its wildness, its uniqueness, perhaps its relative uselessness, has compelled people across time to construct for it a unique place in their understanding of the region. The body of evidence connecting the

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6 For more detail on the impact of Indians on the environment see Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999). Krech sums up many of the most hotly debated topics regarding Indians and the land in his effort to demonstrate that Indians did significantly impact their environment. He summarizes the works of Paul Martin, Stephen Pyne, Dan Flores, William Cronon to prove his point. See also Paul S. Martin and H.E. Wright JR., eds. *Pleistocene Extinctions: The Search for a Cause* Volume 6 of the Proceedings of the VII Congress of the International Association of Quaternary Research (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). This was one of the first works to draw into question the idea of the "ecological Indian." The authors seek to discern exactly what role humans played in the megafaunal extinctions. Finally see Stephen J. Pyne's, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) Pyne is the authority on fire history and he provides a good account of how fire acts naturally upon the landscape and how humans have used it as a tool to alter their environments.
Paleoindians to the canyon is merely suggestive, but it seems that they seldom, if ever, traveled into its depths. Much more exists reflecting the relationship between this particular landscape and the later Ute Indians. The Utes deemed the canyon a sort of sacred space as reflected through petroglyphs, vision quest sites and oral stories, all of which indicate that the canyon was indeed a place to be avoided—perhaps even seen as a portal to the underworld.

After whites wrested control of the area from the Utes, two competing interpretations of the canyon arose. The initial white settlers did not feel awe or God in the canyon, but rather saw it as the key to unlocking the full agricultural potential of the adjoining farmlands. Confident in their ability to engineer themselves out of the “aridity riddle” of the West, progressive conservationists dedicated millions of dollars and several decades to reworking the local environment. Viewed from a broader historical perspective, the remaking of the Uncompahgre Valley and Black Canyon allows us an opportunity to witness first the birth of the conservationist ethos and trace its evolution over a century of change. The process began with canals and a diversion tunnel and reached a crescendo with the construction of three major hydroelectric dams, all of which stand as monuments of the developers’ vision and determination to harness nature.

For others, however, the canyon was a sanctuary of peace and beauty, one to be protected and revered. This deeply-felt belief manifested itself in a nearly century-long struggle to achieve national park status for the canyon. This is not to say, however, that people have always sought to preserve the ecosystems of the canyon or its river. Ecology as we know it today is a rather recent invention as is our evolving appreciation for ecosystem management. Simply put, scenic protection, not ecology, provided the
motivation for those involved early in the preservationist movement. Gradually, however, with the publication of works like Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and later, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the general public and our public servants gained an appreciation and understanding for the importance of preserving both scenery and ecosystems. The process through which part of the canyon became a national monument, and later a park, reflects the gradual ideological shift taking place across the country as preservation came to encompass both scenic and biotic protection.

The whole of the Black Canyon, with its heavily dammed and developed upper reaches, and its sanctified and protected lower reaches, represents and reflects the development and maturation of these two central currents of environmental thought in the twentieth century—conservation and preservation. The development and implementation of both ideologies, and their respective government agencies, has created a landscape that bears witness to both.

Each of the following four chapters operate at two basic speeds. First, each reflects some or all of the major themes listed above while also seeking to answer more narrowly-defined topical questions. In Chapter One I argue that climate change played a major role forcing transitions from one subsistence practice to another throughout the region's so-called prehistory. I also argue that here, so many thousands of years ago, humans first began treating the Black Canyon as a distinct part of a larger landscape. Chapter Two, which is devoted to the Utes and their relationship with the region, shows that they, to a greater degree, came to understand themselves and their place within their universe through the landscapes they inhabited. Finally, Chapters Three and Four, both of which focus upon white settlement and inhabitation, demonstrate how two competing
interpretations of the landscape, and especially the canyon, played out over the past century. Before coming fully to terms with the interplay between the environment of western Colorado and the people who have inhabited the area, however, it is helpful to understand the character of a place that could invoke such powerful responses.

**Defining Place**

The intimate knowledge I gained as a result of steady contact with the wilds of western Colorado is inseparable from how I understand the people and history of this place. In a field where historians are excoriated for not remaining distant enough from the material, or for failing to hide all hints of bias, the personal approach that follows comes at some risk. However, telling this story as a far-removed and “pure observer” would have been a disservice to myself, the reader, and western Colorado. Rather than shamefully hiding my excitement and love for this place in the hopes of lulling the reader into accepting this work as purely objective, I embrace and acknowledge my relationship with western Colorado and its people. Many have argued that such an approach leads historians into a murky world where “truth” is obscured by emotion—a world where the probing and critical eye of the historian is blinded by passion. I would argue, however, that knowing this place and its people as I do has made me, if anything, more critical than had I been a researcher who only came to know this place through the solitary confines of dusty archives. Though personal missives are not traditional, I include them in my attempt to be honest with the reader—in part this history is read through and measured against the experiences, both good and bad, that I have had on the western slope.
During the hot dry days of summer, while Grandpa worked and Grandma faced
the household chores, my brother Jason and I often found ourselves scouring the banks of
the Uncompahgre River for unsuspecting trout. The river, which runs through the heart of
the Uncompahgre Valley, delivers vital water from the San Juan Mountains to the
valley's parched soil, which receives an average annual rainfall of about nine inches.\(^7\)

Although it's now host to a relatively large human population and imported plant species,
the valley of two hundred years ago supported prickly pear, yucca, cottonwood, pinyon,
and juniper. The Uncompahgre Valley, which marks the northern boundary of the Upper
Sonoran life zone found in Western Colorado, also harbored healthy populations of mule

Printing Office, 1911), 93.
deer, antelope, cottontail rabbit, black-tailed jack rabbit, Arizona skunk, coyote, and badger.

Jason and I were mostly free to entertain ourselves throughout the week. But weekends usually meant hooking up Grandpa's shiny old camper to the rumbling International truck and heading out of town. The Uncompahgre Valley forms the bottom of a sort of bowl that is bound on all sides by major topographic features, so no matter which way we went, we always went "up." Heading south, the hapless camper waggled behind as the jagged peaks of the San Juan Mountains streamed before us. Relatively young in geologic terms, the peaks of this rugged range often surpass 14,000 feet in elevation and have played a significant role in guiding human migration in and out of the Uncompahgre Valley. The San Juans also trap precious winter snow and release it continuously to the valley through the hot summer months.

If Gramps had heard from one of his coffee-shop buddies that the fish were biting in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, our weekend adventure would have no doubt led us to the narrow bottom of the chasm. From the floor of the Uncompahgre Valley, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison rises toward the sky looking much like a mild-mannered mountain range—devoid of mystery and power, a mere obstacle for travel. Standing on

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the canyon’s rim, however, rushing wind enlivens the senses and the smell of life excites the soul. While the Grand Canyon is larger, and Hell’s Canyon on the Snake River deeper, “no other North American Canyon combines the depth, narrowness, sheerness, and somber countenance of the Black Canyon.” The canyon as we see it today is a product of hard, patient work. Year after year, day after day, the Gunnison River has crafted the canyon.

The Black Canyon stretches some fifty miles east to northwest between Sapinero, Colorado and Delta, Colorado. Although the average depth of the canyon is 2000 feet, it reaches a staggering depth of 3000 feet at the western edge of the Black Canyon National Park. Part of the river’s success in carving the canyon may be attributed to its plunging gradient. Collecting streams across its 4,000 square mile drainage, the Gunnison rumbles through the canyon falling an average of 43 feet per mile. Through a two-mile stretch, between Pulpit Rock and Chasm View, the river falls an awesome 480

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feet. Compared to the 7.5 feet per mile that the Colorado River drops as it courses through the Grand Canyon, the Gunnison’s drop is impressive. Cutting the canyon at a rate of one foot per thousand years, the river has washed away some twenty five cubic miles of granite, gneiss, and schist in a little over two million years.

If tourists had infested the high cool ground of the San Juans and the fish were hiding stubbornly in the swirling pools of the Gunnison River, we may have pointed the “corn-binder” (colloquialism used by rural folk when referring to an International) toward the lofty tabletop known as the Grand Mesa. This awesome expanse of flat timbered ground forms the northern border of the Uncompahgre Valley and is dotted with hundreds of inviting lakes and ponds, most of which hold healthy populations of brook and cutthroat trout. As we rumbled toward the Mesa’s top, our eyes were treated to constantly changing scenery. At the foot of the mesa we whizzed past scrub oak and sage-brush, and as we climbed ever closer to nine thousand feet, the smell of aspen, blue spruce and pine passed through the truck’s cab and awakened our minds. If we kept our eyes peeled as Gramps maneuvered the truck up the mountain, we might have spotted elk, deer, black bears, a furtive mountain lion, or a host of not-too-bright but quite tasty birds (grouse, turkey and sage hen).

We enjoyed more than our share of weekend camping and fishing trips around the Uncompahgre Valley, but not all weekends were made for fun. As distant thoughts of winter invaded Grandpa’s head an irrepressible urge to cut and gather wood dominated his thoughts. The Uncompahgre Plateau, which rises gently in elevation from east to west, eventually reaching an elevation above ten thousand feet, was a favorite locale for

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10 Ibid., 9-11.
11 Ibid.
wood gathering expeditions. As we headed up the dusty Highway 90, which dissects the Plateau, we gradually passed through several life zones. In ascending the Plateau we crossed the same life zones that we did as we headed up the San Juans, the Black Canyon or the Grand Mesa, but each was a broader band that gave way to the next more easily. These places I hold so dear, then, encompass several distinct ecosystems and harbor a vast array of plant and animal species, but each shares one common thread: they are all part of the drainage system of the Uncompahgre and Gunnison Rivers.

Since local plant and animal communities in the Rocky Mountain region are determined largely by elevation and aspect, foragers replicating our various journeys found a wide range of foodstuffs and goods year-round without having to travel great distances. Walking in almost any direction from the valley floor, a traveler will cross several distinct life zones from the Upper Sonoran, Middle or Transition, to Sub-alpine and finally Alpine. The Uncompahgre Valley and the lower reaches of the Plateau provided a relatively mild location for winter inhabitation, and as the days warmed and summer approached, Indian groups often migrated to higher and higher elevations as they followed game and capitalized on the sequence of maturing vegetation. 

Here, where I lazily spent the days of my youth hunting, climbing, fishing and hiking, humans had for millennia struggled to define this place, which in turn also defined them.

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Hornytoads, arrowheads, elk and deer; steep mountains and daunting canyons; the smell of a hot dry sun; the taste of fresh cut hay; cut-off shorts, bare feet and fishing—these are my memories of western Colorado. We ran along rivers, floated lazily in canals and searched sun-parched canyons for secret caves and Indian hideouts. We made bows and arrows from stringy green willows and fought fiercely against all manner of imaginary enemies. We were cowboys; we were Indians; we were little boys in love with a place.

Every time I stumbled across an arrowhead or a pile of flint chips I engaged the powerful imagination that gives color to a child’s world. I saw Indians perched high on the rims of juniper-covered sandstone canyons making arrowheads and enjoying the sun. Far below, families rustled about and gray-blue smoke meandered through the canyon. Why were they once here? Why had they gone? Grandpa never really answered my questions; he just mentioned that they “had been moved” and it was for the better.

I still haven’t found acceptable answers to the questions I asked so many years ago. Armed with many years of expensive education and harboring a deep curiosity about western Colorado, I now gladly scratch that itch that has so stubbornly persisted. Certainly I am not the first to ask and attempt to answer the who’s, why’s and how’s of this area’s pre-contact history. For over a century, historians, archeologists, anthropologists and locals have patiently been assembling this jigsaw puzzle. Some have done so carefully, making sure that each piece fits nicely; others have forced them into
place in a rush to prove a point or gain notoriety and, in the process, made the puzzle more difficult to reconstruct.

Steve Cassells, Virginia McConnell Simmons, Alan Reed and Michael Metcalf, to mention just a few, have all furthered our understanding of this place and its people before whites stepped so heavily on stage. While the scholars above have produced valuable and engaging works, few of them use all of the techniques available to the modern researcher to answer the many questions that linger. If our goal is to reconstruct an accurate and true past we must embrace other disciplines and come to terms with unfamiliar approaches. Only when we have carefully done so will the past come more sharply into focus.

Utilizing anthropological theory, the archeological record and paleoecological data, I hope to construct a more thorough, more explanatory history of this area than has previously been done. Where most archeologically-based books tell that one people disappeared and another took their place, those centered on western Colorado rarely attempt to investigate how and why this happened. Scholars’ reluctance to do so is understandable given the relative paucity of archeological information on the western slope, but we must make the most of all available means to understand these important questions. I admit from the outset that some of my conclusions are based on a rather small body of evidence, but it is my sincere hope that by opening a dialogue and perhaps ruffling some feathers, I will entice scholars to spend more energy and attention on this important subject.

As I immersed myself in the murky waters of archaeological, historical and climatic information, some interesting trends revealed themselves. First, when the body
of archaeological data (including site location, frequency and period/date) is compared to the growing understanding of the Holocene climatic regimes of the western slope of Colorado, it becomes clearer than ever that climate has always played a major role in people’s success or failure in the region. Some peoples were successful for long periods of time, but climate acted as sort of a mechanism for natural selection, granting competitive advantages to those willing to adapt to the new climates, or those who brought new strategies from distant environs.

Many scholars are not convinced that a minor fluctuation in annual mean temperature or moisture could have a significant effect on human’s ability to function successfully within a given environment. This position may hold true for Indians inhabiting environments where nutritional resources are plentiful. The loss of a minor game species or edible plants may not have forced Indians of the Pacific Northwest to adopt new subsistence strategies; but the same does not hold for Indians inhabiting more marginal environments. Though scientists have conducted no complete studies demonstrating cultural changes likely wrought by moderate temperature fluctuations in western Colorado, the work of B. Robert Butler is highly suggestive. Through his “The Holocene in the Desert West and Its Cultural Consequences,” Butler demonstrates the vast ecological and cultural ramifications of moderate temperature fluctuations on the sagebrush-grass steppes of the American West. Butler concludes that even mild changes in the climate regimes, only noticeable in the most minute of ways, “would have provided a strong ‘negative feedback’ and prompted new adaptive strategies.”¹ His research clearly

indicates that climate fluctuations so have the potential to shape and reshape human societies in the West.

The second trend that begins to emerge is that even though western Colorado's earliest inhabitants roamed widely and ate just about anything they could get their hands on, they did not often venture into the depths of the Black Canyon. This point, which I will carry into the next chapter, is especially interesting given many of the prehistoric Indians' use of game animals found with the canyon itself.

**Paleoindian Period 13,500-8400 BP**

For people who made their living directly from the plants and animals of western Colorado, place certainly mattered. Here in western Colorado, the earliest human inhabitants enjoyed a diverse landscape, which, in addition to providing a constantly maturing food base, influenced weather patterns, precipitation and temperature. Whether prehistoric Indians focused their attention on the hunting of large game animals (as did the Clovis people) or hunted and farmed (as did those of the later Fremont tradition), local climatic patterns played a major role in shaping subsistence strategies. For hunters of big game, increased precipitation and warmer temperatures meant increased biomass (larger/healthier herds) and an increase in overall vegetal food resources. Temperature, which generally decreases as elevation increases, also impacted biomass in that it determined the length of growing seasons, which in turn shaped herd size and health.

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²Lovella Learned Kennedy, Colorado State Historical Society's Database of Artifacts. Based on township, range and section, this database reports all recorded artifacts found within the given ranges and offers a brief description, including likely cultural affiliation, of the given artifact. This database reflects use of the canyon's rim by Paleoindians, and fairly consistent use by Archaic stage Indians. Archaeologists have recorded no significant evidence of prehistoric Indians within the Canyon itself.


⁴Ibid.
Due then, in large part to the somewhat unique local terrain and that terrain’s impact on climatic patterns, Indian groups over time were able to practice a wide array of subsistence strategies in the region.

Although the geologic story of the Black Canyon and the Uncompahgre Valley began millions of years ago, the region’s human history began much more recently. Generous estimates place humans in Colorado roughly fifteen thousand years ago, and several artifacts (most of which are projectile points) indicate that people of the Clovis tradition were the first to inhabit the western slope of Colorado. Michael Metcalf and Alan Reed break the entire prehistory Paleoindian period into four separate and distinct traditions—Clovis (13,500-12,500 BP), Goshen (13,000-12,700 BP), Folsom (12,800-11,500 BP), and Foothill-Mountain (11,000-8,400 BP). The major difference between the various traditions is marked mainly by differences in projectile style, but each focused largely on the hunting of large game animals.

Based on the large nature of their projectile points and the many associations between Clovis artifacts and kill sites, archaeologists agree that the Clovis were hunters of big game, primarily mammoth, bison, horse, and camel. Additionally, “a number of discoveries of now-extinct forms of Pleistocene megafauna have been made in the region, including mammoth, mylodont sloth, Shasta ground sloth, horse, bison, American cheetah, Catclaw’s mountain sheep, and musk ox.” While archeologists have found no megafaunal remains in direct connection with Clovis artifacts, they are often found in

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similar environs (primarily river bottoms and lush swamp areas). Through either a massive climate change or extensive over hunting by humans, however, several of the Clovis peoples' most favored prey began to disappear, and by 10500 BP as many as thirty genera of large Pleistocene animals in North America had become extinct, which placed significant stress on the Clovis people. As the mammoth, giant bison and other Pleistocene megafauna disappeared, the Folsom tradition eclipsed the Clovis tradition in Colorado.

Currently, archaeologists have recorded eight well-documented Folsom sites in Colorado. The stronger representation of Folsom sites as compared to Clovis sites might be reflective of an increasing population. Just as their Clovis predecessors had been, those of the Folsom tradition were primarily hunters. Using carefully manufactured fluted projectile points, Folsom hunters focused their efforts at finding and killing “now-extinct varieties of bison.” Although archaeologists have found only a few Folsom sites in the study area, the San Luis Valley of south-central Colorado contains an “unusually high number of Folsom sites,” some of which occur in conjunction with Bison antiquus remains. The archaeological record is not complete enough to indicate whether the Folsom tradition is reflective of a Clovis adaptation to a changing environment or represents an entirely new cultural regime. However, the continued emphasis on big-game hunting and the continued use of fluted projectile points, which originated in the

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9 Reed and Metcalf, *Colorado Prehistory*, 56.
13 Reed and Metcalf, *Colorado Prehistory*, 56.
Clovis period, indicate that the Folsom likely represents adaptation by, not replacement of, the Clovis people.

In his article “Evidence for Paleoindians on the San Juan Forest, Southwest Colorado,” Robert York demonstrates the strong possibility that some version of the Plano tradition was existent on the western slope of Colorado some 8500 years BP and possibly as early as 10,000 BP. Archaeologists have found several projectile points of the Plano complex in the study area over the past century. In addition to York’s finds, archaeologists have located two additional Plano points between Montrose and Gunnison at the Soderquist Ranch. Finally, the Tabeguache Canyon, which lies on the western edge of the Uncompahgre Plateau, also contained Plano elements. Much like the Folsom peoples, Plano hunters focused attention largely on bison hunting, but “greater social organization seems to have developed, as evidenced by more massive and complex kills that would have required a large number of coordinated drivers and hunters.”

While the increasing complexity of social systems is especially important and applicable to the Plano people of the plains, I doubt that the Plano of the western slope underwent similar changes. First, the environment of western Colorado did not favor the large bison herds that the Plano preferred, thus increasing social organization would not have been necessary or beneficial. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of bison on the western slope caused those who inhabited the area to alter their resource utilization strategies. Lacking access to large herds of bison, Plano people of the western slope responded by placing “a

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16 Instead of including the Plano in their breakdown of the Paleoindian period, Reed and Metcalf consider the Foothill Mountain the western slope version of the Plains Plano.
17 Reed and Metcalf, Colorado Prehistory, 56.
19 Cassells, Archaeology, 69.
subsistence emphasis on different resources."^20 The increased number of grinding slabs reflects this difference. Given the more diverse subsistence strategies and the lack of a need for increased social structure, the Plano people who inhabited the western reaches of the Continental Divide are classified by several archaeologists as the Foothill-Mountain Tradition (11,500-8,400 BP). In addition to showing signs of more time focused on plant procurement, "the projectile points of the Foothill-Mountain unit reflect the difference in subsistence focus from bison to deer, bighorn sheep, and pronghorn."^21 The expansion of resource utilization that began during this tradition would continue throughout the subsequent Archaic period.^22

**Archaic Era 8400-2400 BP**

Reed and Metcalf break the Archaic Era into four periods: the Pioneer (8,400-6,500 BP), Settlement (6,500-4,500 BP), Transitional (4500-3000 BP), and Terminal (3000-2400 BP). The Archaic "contrasts with the preceding Paleoindian era in that the lifeway was less mobile and was more focused on the use of local resources on a scheduled seasonal basis."^23 The era was also characterized by less-finely-crafted projectile points, which are likely indicative of decreased reliance on hunting. The more diversified subsistence strategies that characterize the Archaic began to replace the more narrowly focused Paleoindian strategies around 8400 BP. The marked difference in subsistence strategies between the two eras raises the important question of why the shift occurred. Using the climate data constructed by a number of paleoecologists in

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21 Ibid., 57.
conjunction with optimal foraging theory, I conclude that a climate shift and a nearly concomitant migration of Desert Archaic peoples into the region precipitated the transition from the Paleoindian to the Archaic. The combination of these two events eventually pushed the Paleoindians to extinction or forced them to abandon their previous lifeways.

In 1991 Paul Carrara, et al., published the results of a climate study under the riveting title “Holocene Treeline Fluctuations in the Northern San Juan Mountains, Colorado, U.S.A., as Indicated by Radiocarbon-Dated Conifer Wood.” Utilizing a series of carbon dates derived from conifer wood samples taken from various high mountain sites in the Northern San Juan, the research crew was able to piece together some interesting information regarding the Holocene climate in western Colorado. First, their research indicates that by 8000 BP “timberline may have been at least 140 m higher than present.” Working from the premise that timberline and treeline are determined by growing season temperatures, Carrara, et al., were able to make some estimates about seasonal temperature variations. According to their calculations, the higher treeline may indicate temperatures as high as .9 degrees Celsius warmer than the immediate post-glacial July temperatures. In other words, a general warming trend was in full swing by 8000 BP and continued for several thousand years thereafter. In addition to demonstrating a warming trend in the study area, the research team concluded that solar radiation by 9000 BP was about 8% greater than at present. This increased solar

25 Ibid., 242.
26 Ibid., 243.
27 Ibid.
radiation warmed the Arizona deserts, which in turn triggered an increase in the Arizona monsoonal flow. Using current climate models, the team concluded that a long term increase in monsoonal flow translated into more effective moisture for the Rocky Mountains.²⁸

Patricia Fall’s work indicates a similar pattern. Working from core samples from the Ironstone peat bog near Crested Butte, Colorado, Fall finds that some rather significant climate shifts occurred during the early Holocene. According to her research, pollen influxes reached a maximum between 8000 BP and 6400 BP.²⁹ Such pollen influxes are apparently indicative of increases in effective moisture and/or temperature. So, piecing together the information from both studies, the paleoecological data indicates a shift in climate from cool and moist, to warm and moist in the Northern San Juan Mountains around about 8000 BP. In short, some major climatic shifts were taking place at roughly the same time that the Paleoindian lifeway was passing from existence.

So what to do with all this information? Discerning what impacts climate shifts have had on ancient populations is difficult, but the optimal foraging theory, as constructed by Robert Bettinger and Martin Baumhoff, may offer some help. Optimal foraging theory operates from a few basic pillars of logic. First, it stipulates that “groups more willing or able to engage in high-cost strategies [those which entail large caloric expenditures in procurement and processing] will generally displace groups less willing or able to do so [in this case those who focus more on food items with a higher caloric

yield such as megafauna." According to the theory, high-cost processors (those with a wide subsistence base) “will compete for all the resources of the traveler [in this case focused big game hunter], while the traveler competes for only a fraction of the resources of the processor, ignoring the low-ranked ones.” Over time, the increased population base afforded by the high-cost processor society would limit the animal resources available to the narrowly focused (in this case big game hunting) societies, forcing them to adapt (not easily accomplished given the vast web of socio-religious mechanisms in place which support/reinforce an adopted strategy) or perish. The theory also holds that “all hunting and gathering groups are capable of essentially the same range of adaptive responses, from which it follows that ethnic spreads [i.e. shifts from one era to another] are possible only when special circumstances intervene.” In this case, a change in climate clearly represents such a “special circumstance.”

Although it is true that a warmer and moister climate would have benefited hunters of big game (low-cost travelers) by increasing available forage and therefore benefiting herd size and health, it would have more significantly benefited those with a more diversified subsistence base. As mentioned earlier, the archaeological record demonstrates increased subsistence diversification (the Mountain Tradition) on the western slope prior to the climate shift recorded by Andrews et al. Were people

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31 Ibid., 488.
32 Ibid., 489.
33 Ibid., 486.
34 At this point it is important to stipulate that the Archaic lifeway does not reflect a full shift to a high-cost forager strategy, rather it is marked by a diversification in prey (to include more deer, rabbits and rodents) and a limited number of plant goods—it therefore represents a higher-cost limited traveler society.
35 While increased diversification is demonstrable, it should not be over-stated. The difference between the Plano and the Desert Archaic is more a matter of degree than kind. Desert Archaic people continued to spend the majority of their time hunting, but they were hunting deer and rabbit as opposed to bison.
altering their subsistence strategies in response to a climatological change that was yet to begin? The simple answer is no. Where many archaeologists see the Mountain Tradition as an adapted version of the Plano that persisted deep into the Archaic Era, it more closely resembles the Desert Archaic, which had existed in the Great Basin as early as 10,000 BP. The evidence suggests to me that the late Paleoindian diversification of subsistence strategies witnessed in the San Juan and Uncompahgre Valley were indicative of an eastward migration of the Desert Archaic peoples at about the same time the climate in the region was shifting, not a cultural response to new environs by westward moving Plano people. I contend that the migration of the Desert Archaic into the study area slightly preceded (or was contemporaneous with) the climate shift mentioned above. Applying the optimal foraging theory to the known climatic shifts and the demonstrated shifts in subsistence diversification, I reason that the climate shift gave a competitive advantage to the incoming Desert Culture people who had pre-adapted diversified subsistence strategies. As the climate became warmer and wetter, the people of the Desert Culture gained a competitive advantage that led to the eventual extinction (if only cultural) of the Paleoindians in western Colorado.

Given the diversity of topography in the study area and the wide range of differentially-maturing seasonal foodstuffs, the western slope of Colorado offered Archaic peoples a suitable all-season environment. This assumption is supported strongly by the body of known Archaic sites on the western slope. In his study of the Curecanti area (at the top end of the Black Canyon), Bruce Jones recorded 66 radio

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36 Cassells, *Archaeology*, 76.
37 Cassells, *Archaeology*, 90. This conclusion is in part supported by the work of Bill Buckles who found significant continuity between the projectile technology of the Paleoindian and Archaic Eras on the Uncompahgre Plateau.
carbon dates, the bulk of which (30 total or 45%) fall within the range of the early Archaic’s Pioneer Period. Given the warmer and wetter conditions that persisted throughout the early to mid Holocene, high frequency occupation in this high mountain valley is not surprising. Metcalf and Reed also confirm that "the most favorable period for use of the higher terrain was between about 7800 BP and 5600 BP, which corresponds first to the hypothesized period of maximum Holocene temperature." The body of archaeological evidence for Archaic people along the rim of the Black Canyon and across the Uncompahgre Valley and Plateau during this period also becomes more complete than the preceding Paleoindian Era. Archaeologists have recorded several Archaic lithic scatters and tools along the rim of the Black Canyon. In addition to countless examples of lithic finds, archaeologists have discovered at least six major Archaic sites in the region. Interestingly, very few artifacts exist to place the Archaic Indians within the Black Canyon itself.

While there are some important differences between each of the periods that fall within the Archaic, the underlying trend throughout is one of a general shift toward more diversified subsistence strategies and more emphasis on seasonal use of favorable environments. Interestingly, the paleoecological information for the mid-to-late Holocene reflects wide variability in climate patterns both in terms of long term trends and shorter climate fluctuations. Several marked periods of decreased moisture overlaying a long-term trend towards a drier climate roughly coincides with the Archaics’ appreciable diversification in subsistence strategies.

39 Reed and Metcalf, Colorado Prehistory, 76.
40 Lovella Learned Kennedy, Colorado Historical Society.
41 Cassells, Archaeology, 74.
Although several documented and agreed-upon climate changes occurred during the early-to-mid Archaic, the final or Terminal Period (3000-2400 BP) witnessed perhaps the most significant climate changes. Fall states that there “was an abrupt vegetation change” around the Ironstone peat bog about 2600 BP as the *Pinus-Abeies* (prefers moist climate) forest was replaced by a *Pinus contorta* (thrives under drier conditions) one.\(^2\) Looking at a different body of evidence, Reed and Metcalf reached essentially the same conclusion, stating that the series of “erratic shifts [in climate] necessitated more intensive subsistence, essentially ending the Archaic era.”\(^3\)

Corresponding with this fairly dramatic shift in climate was more widespread experimentation “with various intensifications in subsistence, including the faint beginnings of a shift to bow and arrow use, early experiments in growing corn, and increasing shift toward processing of seeds and other lower rate-of-return foods.”\(^4\) As people attempted to adapt to shifting environments, new horticultural techniques crept “up the Colorado and its big tributaries, the Green, Yampa, White, Gunnison, Mancos, Dolores, and San Juan” around 2000 BP\(^5\) As the stirrings of what would become the Anasazi empire were underway by 2000 BP in southwestern Colorado, the Fremont (the northern and less pervasive version of the Anasazi) was emerging on the western slope.

**Formative Era 2,400 BP-1300 AD**

Although the exact reason why horticulture spread throughout the region when it did is difficult to pinpoint, the introduction of corn from Mexico doubtless played a

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\(^2\) Fall, “Fire History,” 320.
\(^3\) Reed and Metcalf, *Colorado Prehistory*, 96.
\(^4\) Ibid., 79.
\(^5\) Rippateau, “Nature of Prehistory,” 35.
significant role. According to Peter Richardson, et al., those societies able to adopt successful agriculturally-based economies expanded "at the expense of hunter-gatherers as rising population densities on the farming side of the frontier motivated pioneers to invest in acquiring land from less-efficient users." Successful agriculture, then, gave these ancient farmers a "competitive ratchet" that allowed farming to supersede other subsistence strategies wherever environments were suited to agriculture. In the Southwest corner of Colorado, the Anasazi were able, over time, to out-compete others who did not practice agriculture, leading to Anasazi dominance of the region by 900 BP.

In the early 1940s archaeologists C.T. Hurst and Edgar Anderson found what they thought was solid evidence of Anasazi occupation on the western edge of the Uncompahgre Plateau near the town of Nucla, Colorado. However, later investigations demonstrated that most of the artifacts that Hurst and Anderson found were either not of Anasazi origin or goods traded to non-Anasazi people that were then transported into the region. It is evident that the four corners region of Colorado represents the northern border of Anasazi occupation.

Although the body of archaeological evidence supporting the efflorescence of the Anasazi in southwestern Colorado is substantial, archaeologists have found only a handful of Fremont sites and a limited collection of lithic scatters in the Gunnison River drainage. Archaeologists have identified ten sites with recognizable cultigen remains,

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47 Cassells, Archaeology, 128.
three sites with probable Fremont remains and at least two sites representing Fremont rock art. The Paradox Valley site, one of the more complete Fremont camps, provides some insight into the lifestyle of the Fremont people. The archaeological record demonstrates that the Fremont did inhabit the western slope (a point of contention in decades past), but it is equally apparent that they did not enjoy the same success as did their neighbors to the south. This conclusion is supported by the limited number of Fremont sites in the area, their relatively heavy reliance on faunal food sources, and their inability to push the neo-Archaic (Aspen) people out of the area.

Although most archaeologists agree that one of the hallmarks of the Fremont culture is the adoption of agriculture, Jan Kasper found that while the Fremont of the western slope did practice limited farming, large game animals continued to make up a significant portion of their diet. Kasper found that over 96 percent of the faunal remains in Fremont area sites were those of large animals, primarily bighorn sheep. Here we find yet another tantalizing bit of information about how prehistoric Indians interacted with their surroundings. The fact that the Fremont, and perhaps others, relied so heavily on big horned sheep (found in great numbers within the Black Canyon), but apparently did not venture into the Black Canyon to hunt them, is curious. Based on the relatively high frequency of animal remains, Kasper concludes that the "exploitation of both large and small mammals seems to have been a major factor in the Fremont economy and possibly as important as agricultural practices." After comparing the Paradox remains to the frequency of faunal remains at other identified Fremont sites,

50 Ibid., 1-3.
51 Ibid., 3-6.
Kasper also concludes that "Fremont peoples in different areas utilized basically the same animal resources depending upon the availability of faunal types in a particular region."\(^{52}\)

Due to the higher elevation, and perhaps reduced precipitation within the study area, the Fremont farmers were not able to dominate the region in the same way the Anasazi, who enjoyed a warmer southern location, did. If Richardson, et al. are correct in assuming that "in the long run the more intensive strategies will win wherever environments are suitable," the west central portion of Colorado represents an environment where agriculture paid only limited dividends.\(^{53}\)

As the Fremont hunted and raised corn, beans, squash, and gourds, they shared the resources of the western slope with a distinct group of hunter/gatherers who were not willing or able to adopt a semi-agricultural lifestyle. Reed and Metcalf consider this group, known as the Aspen tradition, a partial continuation of the Archaic that overlapped much of the so-called Formative Era.\(^{54}\) Basically, the Aspen tradition represented the continuation of the seasonally nomadic, hunter/gatherer lifeway of the Archaic period. The archaeological record does indicate the coexistence of both the Fremont and Aspen traditions in the study area during the Formative and also reveals that the people of the Aspen tradition preferred lower elevation camps to higher ones.\(^{55}\)

Throughout the Formative then, the Fremont practiced limited agriculture and supplemented their diet with hunted meat while those of the Aspen tradition essentially continued the Archaic patterns of hunting augmented by limited gathering. However, about 800 BP things again began to change as a series of short droughts placed

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{53}\) Richardson et al., "Was Agriculture Impossible," 395.
\(^{54}\) Reed and Metcalf, *Colorado Prehistory*, 141.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 141-143.
significant pressure on the Anasazi (who had already been experiencing the strain of high population) and their northern counterparts. Within a few hundred years the Anasazi abandoned their once vast settlements and the Fremont lifeway silently faded from the archaeological record. Just as the agriculturally-based lifeways of the Formative were slipping away, the Numic speaking Utes began migrating into western Colorado—by the mid-nineteenth century the Utes were in firm control of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre River basins. Just how they wrestled control of the area from the remnants of the Aspen tradition affords us one more opportunity to apply optimal foraging theory.

Protohistoric Phase 1300-1881 AD

As mentioned earlier, the Archaic lifeway (and its offshoot the Aspen Tradition) featured seasonally nomadic hunter-gatherers. While several technological adaptations (basketry, less finely made projectile points, and perhaps limited use of the mano and metate) set the Aspen apart from the Paleoindians, they had not yet abandoned fully their emphasis on hunting. How might the Utes, whose subsistence strategies at first glance look quite similar to the Aspen Tradition’s, have displaced or subsumed these people?

Although Bettinger and Baumhoff’s research explains why the Numic people came to dominate the Great Basin, their findings are easily translated to explain the same displacement of hunter/gatherers (Aspen Tradition) by the Utes (Numic people) on the western slope. According to their study, deer, mountain sheep and antelope are all considered high ranking food sources (those which require more caloric expenditure in

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57 Bettinger and Baumhoff, "Numic Spread," 485. Bettinger and Baumhoff demonstrate that the Numic speakers were migrating in an easterly direction and present in the Great Basin between 500-700 BP. The first known non-Indian contact with the Utes occurred in the early 17th century.
procurement than processing). If their theory is correct, the following two statements must be true for optimal foraging theory to function properly. First, those of the Aspen tradition would have spent the majority of their time in hunting high caloric yield game animals. Second, the Utes would have sought high-ranking food sources to a lesser degree, focusing instead on rabbits, rodents and seasonal plants. Indeed, all available evidence supports this conclusion. Reed and Metcalf's research shows that the total amount of faunal remains found during the Aspen Tradition is higher than those of the subsequent Ute era. Conversely, their data also indicates a marked increase in total floral utilization beginning roughly 700 years BP and peaking about 300 years BP (approximately coinciding with Ute migration into the area).

Admittedly, there is much room in statistical information for error; however other available sources also indicate a similar trend. Betteinger and Baumhoff conclude that the care and effort put into constructing rock art suggests "that the procurement of large game was a major aspect of Prenumic subsistence." While the rock art of the western slope is stylistically different from that of the Great Basin, the pre-Ute people on the western slope did place a similar thematic emphasis on hunting. According to Sally Cole, themes of the pre-Ute are dominated by "hunting, warfare, societal practices, and religion," while those associated with early Ute rock art depict "anthropomorphs on foot and mounted ones," shielded figures and some quadrupeds. While this evidence is far more subjective than statistical information, it does at least indicate that Utes placed less emphasis on hunting than did the neo-Archaic people on the western slope. Again, if

58 Betteinger and Baumhoff, "Numic Spread," 492.
59 Ibid., 493.
60 Cole, Rock Art, 84.
61 Ibid., 225-226.
the optimal foraging theory functions properly, more diversified high-cost foragers (as were the Utes) should replace those with less diversified subsistence strategies (the Aspen Tradition). When Escalante made his 1776 journey across the study area, he made no mention of a non-Ute people; they had been replaced by the highly diversified Ute.

What lessons, if any, can be gleaned from the preceding pages? First, each transition from one era to the next on the western slope was contemporaneous with a major climate shift. This holds true for the transition from the Paleoindian to the Archaic, from the Archaic to the Formative and the Formative to the Protohistoric. Each time, the existing societies were forced to adapt or perish. Their ability to adapt was likely linked to the severity and rapidity of the given climate shift—the more gradual the climate shift, the more likely a society was able to adapt. While the exact contours of this process remain hazy, the constant improvements made in technology and technique for reconstructing past climates and the expanding body of archaeological information brings us ever-closer to a full understanding.

As climates changed and people adapted, another interesting pattern emerged. Consistently throughout the archaeological record, more diversified people replaced or incorporated less diversified ones. The Archaic hunter/gatherers replaced the hunters of the Paleoindian. The more diversified Fremont and Aspen replaced the Archaic people, and finally the Utes, the most diversified of all, replaced those of the Aspen tradition. This pattern is interesting in and of itself and it should give all of us pause today. If history is any guide, those with diversified subsistence strategies tend to persist at the expense of those who specialize. As today’s farmers face mounting problems on the western slope from limited water supplies and the deadly build-up of selenium in the soil,
perhaps it’s time to begin rethinking how we currently inhabit this place. Finally, prehistoric Indians of the western slope ranged widely, inhabiting environments from lush alpine forests to lowland deserts. As they followed migratory animals and maturing vegetation, however, they seldom, if ever, ventured into the depths of the Black Canyon—a pattern the Utes would later repeat.
The brisk desert morning quickly gives way to the hot summer day and a respectable stream of sweat flows down my face. My eager Labrador works from sagebrush to yucca, saltbrush to juniper. Occasionally an alarmed cottontail bounds ahead of her, cutting from side to side in a frenzied rush to escape the jaws of my hellhound. Really, she is getting rather soft around the middle and poses no threat to any self-respecting rabbit, but it makes for a good show. We enjoy each other’s company as we labor our way nearly three thousand feet to the river’s edge.

While we hike, voices hang in the air and the wind momentarily sleeps; they emanate from countless flint scatters and the occasional stone circle. If you know the area well enough, or are just plain lucky, you know where the voices sing, where they hum, where they move spirit and hold time captive. The panels of rock art nestled sparsely along the rim of the Black Canyon are as magical, as powerful, as they were the day the artist pecked or painted them onto the sturdy sandstone canvas.

I’ve noticed, as a boy and a young man, that while these haunting voices can be heard all along the foot and rim of the canyon, they fade quickly to dark silence as I descend into its depths. I have seen countless places along the canyon’s rim where a man chipped patiently at his tool kit, refining arrowheads or making sewing awls. But as many times as I have fished, hiked and camped in the canyon, I have never found one such
place within its interior. Why is this? Is it a mere coincidence that I have not seen
evidence of Indian life in the bottom of the canyon?

The Utes’ relationship with the Black Canyon is a bit of a mystery. Often hidden
in local newspaper accounts, off-the-cuff remarks by politicians pushing to create a
national monument or park and books about the history of the western slope, are brief
references to how the Utes seldom, if ever, went into the canyon itself. However
tantalizing these references are, none of them demonstrate that the Utes didn’t use the
canyon, nor do they clarify why this was the case. For nearly a century people have been
willing to accept claims that the Utes were a simple-minded people who were afraid to
venture into the canyon. What follows is my attempt to discern if Ute peoples would have
any need to enter the canyon, establish firmly if they did or didn’t enter it, and explain
why.

Any attempt to understand how the Utes related to the canyon must first begin
with a basic understanding of where they came from and how they made their living.
Knowing to what degree the Utes utilized the various environments that they inhabited on
the western slope demonstrates that, contrary to what we know about their behavior, they
should have viewed and used the canyon as any other part of their landscape, as it
contained a variety of calorie-rich plants and animals. Working from this information, it
seems logical that Ute artifacts would occur at roughly the same frequency within the
canyon as across the rest of the western slope. However, this is not the case. The
Colorado Historical Society’s database of archaeological finds shows that while lithic
scatters, fire pits, grinding slabs and other artifacts are fairly common along the rim of the
canyon, they seldom occur within the canyon itself. In short, the Utes had every reason to enter the canyon, but it seems that they rarely did.

Explaining why this was the case is a far more difficult matter. First, the Utes, who are known for their fluid and adaptable culture, were removed from the area in the 1880s to the distant deserts of Utah. More than a century of poverty and assimilation has left few traces of Ute knowledge about the place they once called home. Second, most early accounts of the Utes do not stem from trained and sensitive ethnographers, but rather from crass traders and dreamy-eyed explorers who were more interested in profit than cultural knowledge. The relative scarcity of traditional historical documents forced me to look more creatively, dig more deeply, to better understand the Utes’ relationship with this place. Their rock art, vision quest sites, oral tradition, and cosmology all indicate that the Utes didn’t frequent the canyon because they viewed it as some sort of sacred place—perhaps even a portal to another level of the universe. Before taking on these more intensive questions, however, we should first learn a little about the Utes themselves.

The story of the Utes on the western slope began as they migrated out of the Great Basin from southern California—a migration that began as early as 1000 years ago. While scholars’ estimates for the arrival of the Numic (of which the Utes are a subgroup) speaking people in the Great Basin vary widely, the “lexicostatistical estimates suggest it

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1 Lovella Learned Kennedy, Colorado State Historical Society’s Database of Artifacts. After sending off township/range/sections (roughly from the present day site of Blue Mesa Reservoir to the southern boundary of the National Park) it became apparent that both pre-historic and Ute artifacts were common along the rim of the canyon, but nearly non-existent within its confines.

2 For many years scholars debated where exactly the “Proto-Numic” people came from. Through several carefully-constructed lexiconical studies, it seems more than likely that the Utes did originate from southern California. See Catherine S. Fowler, “Some Ecological Clues to Proto-Numic Homelands,” Great Basin Cultural Ecology: A Symposium. ed. D. D. Fowler, Desert Research Institute, Publication in Social Sciences, No. 8, 127.
occurred between 700 and 500 years ago.\(^3\) If the Numic spread was part of a gradual west/east migration, it is safe to assume that the Utes were present in significant numbers on the western slope 500 to 600 years ago. Indeed, the body of existing archaeological evidence roughly supports this timeline.

As reason dictates and the archaeological/ethnographical record demonstrates, the Utes’ migration across the harsh expanses of the Great Basin taught them valuable lessons that served them well for several centuries. Aside from becoming an incredibly hardy people, able to survive in extremely dry environments, they became highly resourceful and impressively creative about food sources. By the time they reached western Colorado the Utes had incorporated a wide range of foodstuffs into their diet, and it was this diversity that allowed them to survive and thrive where so many people had failed before.

Having no pesky taboos on eating high-protein critters like crickets, grasshoppers and locusts, Utes capitalized on the range of available foodstuffs in their daily search for sustenance. In addition to insect fare, the Utes took full advantage of the floral and faunal resources of the western slope. The range of habitat that the Uncompahgre Utes (those who lived roughly within the confines of the study area as outlined in the Introduction) roamed included twelve usable plant species including pigweed, lamb’s quarter, Indian millet, yucca, and the perennial favorite, pinyon nut. In addition to ample (if you knew how, when, and where to obtain it) plant-food, the Utes hunted in the neighborhood of

\(^3\) Bettinger and Baumhoff, “Numic Spread,” 490.

The Utes followed a seasonal round migration as they followed the game animals and maturing plant foods that sustained them throughout the year. Their seasonally nomadic lifestyle made it impractical to carry large amounts of pottery or shelter material. Accordingly, the most common pre-horse shelter consisted of low brush wikiups that were left behind \textit{in toto} when camp was relocated.\footnote{Reed and Metcalf, \textit{Colorado Prehistory}, 149.} Pre-equestrian Utes, especially those located west of the continental divide, also had fewer opportunities to capitalize on bison, although they did make occasional trips into the San Louis Valley, Middle Park and North Park to hunt them.

Although those who roamed western Colorado enjoyed access to a wider array of food materials than their Great Basin counterparts, the Utes of western Colorado nonetheless lived in harsh and sparse environment, especially when compared to other Indian groups. Largely because they inhabited a stark and seemingly barren landscape, Ute population densities hovered around one person per square mile.\footnote{Callaway, \textit{Handbook}, 337-338.}

According to several anthropologists, Ute social structure prior to the acquisition of the horse was more simplistic than after.\footnote{Reed and Metcalf, 161.} Having little need to rally with neighbors for defensive reasons, or to organize large bison hunting parties, pre-equestrian Utes enjoyed a seemingly relaxed style of leadership. Usually dispersed in bands consisting of five to ten households throughout most of the year, the Utes gathered during the warm summer months in groups as large as 20 households. Such gatherings allowed an opportunity for
extended families to re-acquaint and single or unhappily married people to shop for another mate—a practice not frowned upon in a society where ideas of marriage were fluid. The serial monogamy of the Utes led ethnographer Anne M. Smith to conclude that Ute marriage "was a tenuous and temporary bond in all Ute groups... Separation and divorces were frequent, which made sense in terms of the economic subsistence patterns." All of this began to change, however, with the Spanish introduction of the horse in the seventeenth century.

The acquisition of the horse around 1650 played a major role in reshaping Ute society. The ability to travel greater distances, fight with tribes far removed from "home," and acquire and easily transport goods not previously available (including an ever-widening array of Euro-American trade goods and bison products in large quantity) significantly impacted Ute social structure. Increasingly, men possessing the "right attributes" were sought out to lead war and hunting parties. Gone too were the days of sleeping in brush huts; with the aid of the horse, Utes began to rely more and more on traditional Plains-style teepees, which they dismantled and took with them from camp to camp. As traders and trading posts crept ever closer to western Colorado, the Utes incorporated manufactured cloth, cookware, firearms and knives into their lives. Interestingly, a precipitous population decline coincides with the Utes' increased contact with whites. According to Alan Reed, the period between 1650 and 1750 shows a marked

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8 Anne M. Smith, *Ethnography of the Northern Utes*, Papers in Anthropology (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Printing Plant, 1974), 128. According to Smith's research, bad temper, sterility and jealousy were the usual causes of separation. 132.
decline in overall number of Ute sites. While experts are not yet certain as to the cause of the decline, disease and drought are the two leading suspects.9

Unlike their neighbors on the Plains or their Hopi cousins, the Utes did not participate in many elaborate religious ceremonies. Of the known ceremonies that the Utes conducted on a regular basis, only the Bear Dance (a ceremony to awaken and appease the great bear—a feared and revered figure) appears to be a Ute original. Others, like the Sun Dance, were co-opted by the Utes through their contact with Plains tribes. Much like Ute views on marriage and leadership, Ute religion was fluid and based on a system of bad (ate po ayat) and good (owu po ayat) shamans. Unlike some Native Americans, the Utes accepted and recognized the importance of both male and female shamans,10 both of whom were “the ultimate specialists on fertility, health, sickness, and death and attempts to balance the universal forces for community well-being.”11 The acquisition of the horse also impacted Ute religion as the increasingly larger bands came to be dominated by “shamans, and by war and hunt leaders.” Likewise, Utes expanded their death ritual to include the burning of the deceased’s lodge and the killing of his horse.12

Lacking a written language, the Utes relied on oral tales and rock paintings to transmit their religious beliefs. According to Joseph Jorgensen’s Functions of Ute Folklore, Ute tales served two primary functions: to transmit cultural history and

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9 Reed and Metcalf, 162. Reed and Metcalf derive horse acquisition at 1650 by balancing the work of Omar Stewart and ethnographer Anne Smith. Interestingly, it does predate the more common date following the 1680 pueblo revolt.
10 Smith, who has conducted more ethnographical studies on the Utes than any other, found in 1934 (when she began her research) that of her eight Uncompahgre Ute informants, two women and no men considered themselves shamans.
tradition, and to explain life and creation. Of the 156 tales collected and analyzed by Jorgensen, thirty three percent relayed information about life or creation. In addition to reinforcing cosmology, tales also served to warn and inform young Utes and to “elicit proper behavior” from all tribe members. Although the pantheon of Ute religious figures is rather immense and complex, four primary supernatural beings dominate Ute tales, including “saints”, water babies, ghosts, and devils. Of the four, only “saints” are reliably good, while water babies, ghosts and devils are feared figures. Although none of the known Ute tales mentions the Black Canyon specifically in either Ute or English, several of them contain elements that would give a Ute pause prior to entering the depths of the Canyon.

An Uncompahgre Ute story relayed to Anne Smith in 1936-7 entitled “Ghost Robs Dove” tells a tale of how a young male dove was tragically separated from his mother. The villain in the story is Echo, the voice that bounces off canyon walls. As the story goes, Mother Dove had told her two children never to answer the Echo when she asked questions. One day, while sitting on a cedar tree, the two children were confronted by Echo. Doing as they were told by their mother, the children did not answer her questions. Growing impatient, Echo finally grabbed the one of the children and took him away—it was not until years later that he was reunited with his mother. The story ended when Echo had intercourse with Rattlesnake, thereby trapping her forever in “the cliffs.” While the story ambles on as Ute tales tend to do, the gist is that people, especially the young, should avoid contact with Echo (the canyon walls) whenever possible.

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13 Ibid., 45.
14 Ibid., 54.
If the fear of a chance meeting with Echo was not enough to convince a Ute to stay away from deep canyons, several other stories tell of the dangerous water babies that lurk near rivers, thus making river-laced canyon bottoms even more worrisome. Commenting on water babies, Old Mary (an Uncompahgre informant for Anne Smith) said that

Water Babies cry like real babies. Mary has heard them down at Ouray. It was high water. She was in a menstrual hut. She heard the cry and said, 'I wonder what baby that is?' She knew there was no one there. People are frightened when they hear the Water Babies.  

In addition to this tale, the Utes have at least five other stories directly related to water babies. In each of these, water babies are sinister characters who usually attempt to seduce an unsuspecting man or woman or drown a helpless child. In one story, Pearl Perika (another of Smith’s informants) commented that a long time ago, “when you tried to get water, the hands of the water people would try to pull you under the water. A man was afraid to draw water.”

If the above was not enough to prevent them from entering the canyon, however, the Ute repertoire of tales includes yet one more that indicates the power found in deep canyons. Originally relayed to John Wesley Powell in 1868, the following tale relates how and why the canyons of Colorado were created.

Many ages ago when wise and good men lived on the earth the great Chief of all the Utes lost his beloved wife. Day and night he grieved, and all his people were sad. Then Ta-vwoats appeared to the Chief and tried to comfort him, but his sorrow could not be allayed. So at last Ta-vwoats promised to take him to a country away to the southwest where he said his dead wife had gone and let him see how happy she was if he would agree to grieve no more on his return. So he promised.

16 Ibid., 39.
17 Ibid., 111.
Then Ta-vwoats took his magical ball and rolled it before him, and as it rolled it rent the earth and mountains, and crushed the rocks and made a way for them to that beautiful land—a trail through the mountains which intervene between that home of the dead and the hunting ground of the living. And following the ball, which was a rolling globe of fire, they came at last to the Spirit Land. Then the great Chief saw his wife and the blessed abode of the Spirits where all was plenty and all was joy, and he was glad.

Now when they had retuned Ta-vwoats enjoined upon the chief that he should never travel this trail again during life, and that all his people should be warned not to walk therein. Yet still he feared that they would attempt it so he rolled a river into the trail—a mad raging river into the gorge made by the globe of fire, which should overwhelm any who might seek to enter there.  

While each story on its own would probably not have provided a sufficient deterrent, taken collectively they offer a compelling argument that the Utes constructed a series of tales to keep people away from deep canyons, especially those that enveloped raging rivers.

In addition to transmitting religious beliefs through the oral tradition, Utes also used rock art to depict and relay sacred information. According to author Sally Cole, who has completed the most reliable and valuable study of rock art on the Colorado Plateau, rock art serves to reinforce group identities, to leave messages about important hunting or gathering information and to reflect religious ritual. She also states that rock art for hunters and gatherers such as the Utes has “been interpreted as being symbolic of shamanism.”

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18 Jan Pettit, *Utes: The Mountain People* (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1990) 95. Pettit claims that this tale was first related to John Wesley Powell, but her book does not include footnotes. In my quest to substantiate this assertion I was not able to locate the report where this story first appeared. My attempts to find the author have also been to no avail—apparently Jan Pettit has retired and hit the road with her R.V., last thought to be somewhere in the deserts of Arizona. However, through a phone conversation with Ute Cultural Representative Clifford Duncan I was able to authenticate the story—it was one he was familiar with.

As would be expected, the Uncompahgre Valley is dotted with several examples of rock art, much of which is apparently of Ute origin. As is the case with other archaeological finds, few pictographs or petroglyphs have been found along the rim of the Black Canyon but those known instances of Ute rock art along the Canyon’s rim do contain some interestingly unique figures. Many of the Ute rock art sites across the Uncompahgre Valley depict scenes of hunting, horses and figures with rifles, but such figures are not commonly present on the panels along the upper Gunnison River. About eight miles below Montrose, Colorado, archaeologists have located and partially recorded one group of Ute petroglyphs. According to archaeologist Jean Allard Jeancon, the only person to have published a report of this site, the petroglyphs are decidedly of Ute origin and contain several figures that reflect the religious theme of the panel. Among the figures represented, Spider Woman, a well-known mythical figure of at least semi-religious standing among many southwestern tribes, was inscribed into the rock by a Ute artist. Additionally, the panel contains at least one, and perhaps two, figures with arms outstretched wearing what appears to be headdresses. According to Sally Cole, figures such as these, with upraised arms and headdresses of some sort, are usually representative of supernatural beings or people in ceremonial dress.

In addition to containing Spider Woman and at least one supernatural being/shaman, the panel also includes what appears to be a representation of a tree. According to Cole, this “ladder or notched pillar image is closely aligned to the World Tree symbol in shamanistic ritual, and both are used to symbolize the supernatural power

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of a shaman to experience the various branches or levels of the cosmos. If Cole’s interpretation is correct, this figure fits nicely into Ute cosmology, which deserves a bit more investigation here.

Anthropologist James Goss firmly believes that Shoshonean peoples (including the Utes) understood their world, or more accurately, came to understand their world, through the places they lived. Drawing from linguistic interpretation, ethnography, biotic classification and color symbolism, Goss aptly demonstrates that the Shoshoneans believed that the universe contained five vertically-oriented levels consisting of The Sky, The Upper Earth, The Center Earth, The Lower Earth and the Underworld. Of the five, the Sky and the Underworld were physically and spiritually separate from the earthly levels (Upper, Center and Lower Earth). As a result, the Utes recognized only two directions—up and down. Consternated at this unfamiliar cultural construct, early explorers reveal that the Ute use of directions was directly tied to the places they lived, and more specifically, the rivers that flowed through those places. For example, Utes living where the Colorado River flowed south defined direction “up” as cardinal north while “down” referred to cardinal south. However, at points where the Colorado flowed west, direction “up” meant east and direction “down” meant west. Making matters more complicated, the Utes also used high mountain peaks in creating their sense and definition of space. Upon moving to a new location, the Utes relocated the center of the universe based on the highest mountain in the area, which then came to represent the


Upper Earth. In short, directions “up” and “down” had several key components. They could be used in reference to upstream/downstream (physical directions on a purely horizontal plane), gradations of elevation (mountain tops as Upper Earth, valley floors as the Lower Earth\(^{25}\)) and finally, “up” and “down” could be used in reference to the distant, invisible levels of the cosmos. On the most basic of levels then, every environment that the Utes inhabited played a central role in how they understood their relative position in the universe.\(^{26}\)

The Utes’ use of “domain bosses” also helps us better understand Ute cosmology. They believed that one animal, or “domain boss,” was responsible for and representative of each of the five levels of the universe. The eagle was the domain boss of the Sky, the mountain lion of the Upper Earth, the wolf of the Center Earth, the weasel of the Lower Earth and the rattlesnake of the Underworld. Furthermore, the Ute language contains five basic color references (ranked from highest to lowest): white, yellow, gray, red and black, each of which corresponds with the five respective levels of the universe. Moving between the various spiritual levels of the universe was no small matter. Fasting and sweating at vision quest sites allowed Utes, especially their shamans, to travel spiritually between each level of the universe. Clifford Duncan, a Northern Ute Cultural Preservationist from the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, firmly believes that two circular stone structures situated at the upper end of the Black Canyon were indeed, vision quest sites.\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) Though Goss does not mention canyon bottoms as representative of the Underworld, it is plausible that this was indeed the case if the logic of his framework is extended.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 123-124.

\(^{27}\) Phone interview. April 5, 2002 with Clifford Duncan, notes in my possession. In fact, Mr. Duncan mentioned the sites during a discussion of the religious significance of the canyon, prior to my mentioning the structures in question.
So how might all of this add to our understanding of how the Utes interacted with the environment? First, the above demonstrates the importance of place in Ute cosmology—real physical space provided the very foundations for that cosmology. Second, this information indicates that it is possible, even probable, that the Utes imbued the Black Canyon with symbolic importance as they attempted to fit the western slope and all of its varied landscapes into their understanding of the universe. The Utes may have viewed the canyon as an avenue to the Underworld, as demonstrated by the symbolism of the color black, the proliferation of snakes within the canyon, and the fact that, according to the logic Goss lays out, the canyon was the antithesis of the Upper World (mountain tops). Or they may have viewed it as a portal to the Sky World as indicated by the tale of the bereaved chief traveling via canyon to the spirit world. Whether or not it represented a good or bad place need not detain us here; rather the evidence merely suggests that it was a special place, and one to be avoided.

Historian Dan Flores' work offers some interesting insights into this process of creating sacred space. In his "Alternative World: Comanche Spirit of Place and the Pre-Agricultural Llano Estacado," Flores demonstrates how the Comanche, a not-so-distant relative of the Utes, demonstrated a similar impulse to avoid deep canyons. According to Flores', for the Comanche, the many deep, narrow canyons of that region—exactly the spots our culture is encouraged to set aside, because of their monumentalism and scale, as parks, the sacred places of our landscape—evidently were suspect in the Comanche worldview. Such narrow canyons were often the domain of ghosts to Comanches and so were avoided. Which explains why a 1980s archeological reconnaissance done in

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Tule Canyon, the deepest and narrowest of the High Plains canyons, yielded up fewer and fewer sites the deeper the archeologists went into the gorge.

Although it's impossible to derive any direct links between how the Comanche and Utes viewed deep canyons, the fact that the Comanche also imagined canyons as distinctive portions of the landscapes makes it all the more plausible that the Utes did the same.

In the end, the evidence supporting the Ute creation of the canyon as sacred space of some kind is compelling. The paucity of evidence indicating Ute presence in the Canyon even though they had reason to go there, several tales indicating various reasons why canyons and water should be avoided, one tale imploring that the Utes not venture into deep canyons lest they journey to another level of the Universe, a cosmology and sense of place based on a vertical construction of the cosmos, two petroglyph sites containing shamanistic/supernatural figures; and finally two vision quest sites all indicate that the Utes created a special place in their cosmos for the Black Canyon.

I imagine I can still hear voices when I walk along the rim of the Black Canyon. But now as I labor down the circuitous Duncan Trail I hear more voices, different voices, and I better understand what they are saying. Under the soothing sounds of the whispering water I hear the seductive water babies and they too call me nearer. As I clamor down steep talus slopes, inching closer to cool clear water, their voices are joined by the plaintive calls of the Echo. I rest on rock outcrop and admire the canyon wrought by fire and the river rolled into it by Ta-vwoats. I had always known that this

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29 Ibid., 8. Flores also uses Comanche use of color and linguistic analysis as evidence reflective of the sacred nature of deep canyons.
place was special, and I am comforted in knowing that another people, from another time, felt the same.
Two Hundred Dollars and Not a Cabbage to Show:  
Dams, Canals and Water Development in the Uncompahgre Valley

Before the sun warms the small house I am out of bed and sitting at the table. The air, heavy with smoke and filled with the lively hiss of frying potatoes, holds excitement and hope. All through the California school year my mind drifted to days just like this—days when I would return to the Western Slope of Colorado to sleep in the musty living room, wake early and fish late. Without saying much of anything, Gramps puts on his hat and grabs a loaf of bread, jar of mustard and some bologna and we go. When Grandma asks where we were going, Gramps says, “The canyon.”

The Black Canyon of the Gunnison lies about eighteen miles east of the small town of Montrose, Colorado, yet the drive seems to take an eternity. Coaxing the yellow '52 GMC to the top of the canyon takes patience and love, both of which Gramps has plenty. And easing it two thousand feet down to the river’s edge is no mean feat, either. There is no radio and little conversation. As we wind our way toward emerald waters, Gramps puts his broad hand, scarred from prison camps and years of mining, on my shoulder and says, “Boy, this is all that matters.” I’m sure he’s talking about fishing.

Nearly twenty years have passed since those days of eating bologna and fishing the river with Gramps. He is gone now, but my love and fascination for the river are ever present. As a boy I remember Gramps telling stories about how the river had changed, and surely it has. When Martin Frank was a boy living in Montrose, the river was still wild, temperamental. Where once wild water roared unimpeded for some two million years, three dams, one diversion dam, and a tunnel now subdue the river. For years the Gunnison seemed natural to me—the remade version was the only one I had ever known.
Only recently have I begun to ask why. Why was the river changed? How was it changed? What impact has the river had on the Uncompahgre Valley that lies adjacent to it?

The Utes, and perhaps the prehistoric Indians that preceded them, relied heavily on the landscape to create and reinforce their understanding of themselves and the universe. Clearly for the Utes, place mattered. Settlers on the western slope continued this tradition of defining themselves through place, but in a much different way. Rather than moving across the landscape as season dictated, they settled on single spots and began the process of bending the environment around them. To many of them this place became an adversary, an obstacle preventing them from achieving what God had in store. Although Indians, wild animals, cold winters and hot summers all posed major threats to the vision these early settlers held, no threat loomed larger than the nagging, persistent aridity that has, for thousands of years, defined the area. In this contest between people and the nature of a place, the Black Canyon again came to play a central role, for within its menacing walls thundered the very key to conquering the desiccated Uncompahgre Valley.

Many white settlers, politicians and self-proclaimed experts of the late nineteenth and twentieth century simultaneously feared, loathed and loved the canyon. They feared its awesome power, loathed it for their inability to put it to good use, and loved it first for the challenges it presented, and later for the water it delivered. Drawing confidence from their ability to “remake” the natural world, progressive engineers, farmers, and politicians joined hands to subdue the Black Canyon and the wild Gunnison River—having done this, they hoped, the thirsty voice of hot summer winds would speak no more.
Across the West, as dusty cow towns became bustling metropolises, town builders and farmers left no stone unturned in their quest to find the water they so desperately needed. The western slope generally, and the Uncompahgre Valley specifically, were early involved in this process. The 1906 construction of the Gunnison Tunnel and the South Canal served as testing grounds for progressive conservation and ingenuity. At the core of that conservationist ethos lay deep faith in “rational planning to promote efficient development and use of all natural resources,” and a “political system guided by the ideal of efficiency and dominated by the technicians who could best determine how to achieve it.” Supported by a broad coalition of locals, the Bureau of Reclamation willingly took control of water and property rights to ensure the project’s success. Flush with the confidence of completing the Gunnison Tunnel, the nascent Bureau of Reclamation then went forth to conquer the West. Following several major projects in California, the Bureau then returned to the Uncompahgre Valley in the 1950s as a lumbering giant. Armed with a bigger budget and more engineering ingenuity, they sought once again to remake the valley. The story of water development on the western slope illuminates first the birth and initial expression of progressive conservation, and decades later, the full maturation of that ideology.

This is not to say, however, that locals stood against the projects or what they represented. Contrary to what historian Donald Worster found in California’s Imperial Valley, no despotic hydraulic society came to dominate the western slope. Locals largely supported the Gunnison Tunnel Project just as they subsequently supported CRSP and the

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construction of the Curecanti Storage Unit. Furthermore, water development in the Uncompahgre Valley does not support the conclusions reached by historian Donald Pisani in his *To Reclaim a Divided West*. It is clear that water development did go through several rather distinct phases. The first attempts to irrigate the valley were truly local, even individual efforts. These small ditches and canals, however, did not provide enough water through the hottest summer months so the state and later, federal governments assumed control of the projects.

Early progressive accounts of water history are not entirely accurate either, though the core idea laid forth by progressive historian William Smythe in his *The Conquest of Arid America*, largely applies to water development in western Colorado. Central to Smythe’s book is the contention that water development passed through several distinct phases, ending with its transferal to the federal government. Furthermore, Smythe wanted to demonstrate the “triumph of the national irrigation movement; the work of the remarkable corps of young men organized in the United States Reclamation Service; and, finally, the spirit of what is being done by the partnership of God and Mankind in finishing one important corner of the world” [emphasis added].

It should be remembered, however, that Smythe and others of his generation were writing without the benefit of historical hindsight. Rather, these historians stood confidently at one end of the great experiment that was to remake and enhance the natural resource base of the West. Without a past to draw from, their predictions about the future of the West and humans’

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3 Opposition to the projects did arise; however, it did not formulate fully until after Curecanti Unit was complete.
6 Ibid., xi.
ability to remake that place were far too optimistic. Their conclusions for how and why the federal government got involved hold true for western Colorado, but they misjudged the outcome of that intervention. Contrary to their claims (and those made by Bureau officials and hopeful locals) the transfer of control to the steady, well-trained, tightly managed capable hands of the federal government did not mark a complete and total victory over the “problem” of aridity in the American West. Despite conservationists’ best attempts, there still isn’t enough water, and what water they do have is threatening to poison the ground they have for so long fought to transform.

Finally, most all water histories of the West are flawed in another serious way as they tend to minimize, or ignore entirely, the role of the federal government in removing Indians from the prospective farmlands. Removing the *roaming savage*, as much as cutting trees or building dams, was an integral part of the process of *taming* the West. Extirpating Indians from this history does not allow for any true assessment of the projects and clouds any attempt to understand their full cost. In judging, as the Bureau of Reclamation often does, the economic justification for the various water projects we must always bear in mind the immeasurable, unquantifiable costs of removing a people from their place.

The Dominguez and Escalante expedition provides one of the earliest written accounts of the Uncompahgre Valley. Setting out the year the United States made its bid for independence, this troop of missionaries and explorers sought an overland route from Santa Fe, New Mexico to the newly established missions of California. Although unsuccessful in finding such a route, they left behind invaluable documents containing
interesting information on the environments that they crossed and the Indians they encountered.⁷

On August 26, 1776 the expedition descended from the Uncompahgre Plateau, which serves as the western boundary of the Uncompahgre Valley. As they skirted the river that the “Yutas” (Utes) called the Ancapagri (now the Uncompahgre, meaning Red Lake) they found a “large and very level” river valley with a wide, well-beaten trail running through it. They spent the night near a large marsh and commented that the area abounded in pasturage (it’s the present day location of the Ute Indian Museum). The following day they continued northward up the Uncompahgre Valley, remarking that some portions of the area would be “good land for farming with the help of irrigation.” Upon meeting and conversing with a Yuta named The Left-Handed, the men’s discussion turned quickly to the weather, which in August was “indeed very fiery.”⁸ In a few passages of a weather-beaten journal, the missionaries captured the essence of the valley and the challenges it presented for settlement—it was beautiful and hot, but could be cultivated. The key, as they saw it, was water.

Nearly one hundred years after the explorations of Dominguez and Escalante, the Gunnison expedition of 1853 came through the Uncompahgre Valley. According to the report filed by Captain John Gunnison, the Uncompahgre Valley was “unfit for cultivation and habitable only by savages.”⁹ A little more than two decades later, in 1874, the Middle Division of the Hayden Survey traced “the north rim of the canyon throughout

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⁸ Ibid., 30.
⁹ Alvin Steinel, History of Agriculture in Colorado 1858-1926 (Fort Lewis Colorado: State Agriculture Press, 1926), 528.
its length, establishing several survey stations within the present extent of the Monument." Peering into the depths of the Black Canyon, one man of the expedition declared it inaccessible. Tensions rose as prospectors and settlers pushed ever closer to the lands held by the Utes. Upon discovering valuable deposits of gold and silver in the nearby San Juans, prospectors pressured Indian agents to remove the Utes. In 1863 Chief Ouray signed the Tabeguache Treaty, which ceded the mineral-rich San Juans to the U.S. government and forced the Utes farther north. Following the expulsion of the Utes from the San Juans, pressure from eager settlers hoping to farm the Uncompahgre Valley mounted. Chief Ouray well understood the importance of working with the government in trying to maintain tribal ownership of Western Colorado, but events far removed from his control led to the expulsion of the Utes.

In September 1879, a dispute between the idealistic Nathaniel Meeker and a Ute named Johnson escalated into what is now referred to as the Meeker Massacre. As a result of the fighting that broke out, the federal government again relocated the Utes further north to the present day site of Grand Junction, Colorado. Their stay in the semi-fertile Grand Valley was short, however, as whites soon discovered the potential for agriculture in the area. In 1881, the Utes were rounded up and relocated, this time to northeastern Utah.

13 Although Ouray was interested in maintaining Ute ownership of land in Colorado, the U.S. government paid him a monthly salary, which made him a controversial figure among the Ute people.
Shortly following the expulsion of the Utes, a small band of hopeful farmers and ranchers chartered the town of Montrose in the heart of the Uncompahgre Valley. According to western slope historian Dona Freeman, the “settlers were waiting for the moment that the Indians left to get the spot of their choice for their homestead.” While many whites sold the removal of the Utes as a necessary means to reduce the potential for violence, it is clear that homesteading and farming provided the prime impetus. Reporting on January 11, 1882, the Ouray Times commented that the area was “well adapted to agriculture” and contained good grazing and timber resources. Although the salivating settlers hoped to transform the valley into a garden, the paper commented that the “lack of water is the only damaging feature of the town.”

Although the Escalante, Gunnison and Hayden expeditions chose to avoid the depths of the Black Canyon, the desire to build a railway between the towns of Gunnison and Montrose provided the motivation for the first major intrusive enterprise into the mysterious chasm. General William Palmer elected to run a portion of his Denver and Rio Grande Railway through the eastern portion of the canyon, and although his engineers believed the task impossible at worst and impractical at best, Palmer pressed on. As government agents were herding the desperate and beleaguered Utes onto a desolate reservation in Utah, surveying for the railroad began. Construction for the railroad began that same year.

For more than a year, over one thousand men laid track, blasted rock, and experienced the punishing reality of the canyon. As the high-pitched sounds of hammer meeting spike echoed through the canyon and the smell of sweat and sulfur hung in the

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15 100 Years of Montrose Colorado, ed. Dona Freeman (Privately published, 1982), 4-5.
16 Duane Vanderbusche, “Man Against the Canyon,” Colorado Magazine L/2 (1973): 120.
air, men were defiling in days what took geologic forces and evolution two million years
to create. Several men lost their lives during this initial phase of construction: some were
swept away by the river, some killed when rocks ceased to cling to the cliff’s walls and
came ringing down; others were killed by mishaps with explosives. Ripley Hitchcock, a
writer from New York, described the end of the workday: the men were “begrimed,
tattered, gnawed at by the appetite
given by labor in the bracing Colorado aire, all brethren in a purely animal
instinct” with only “a ravenous desire
to satisfy hunger” on their minds.
Railroad officials deemed the track complete on August 13, 1882 as
the first load of passengers steamed
through the canyon. Riding this portion of the rail shortly following its completion,
famed English author Rudyard Kipling commented that the train
entered a gorge, remote from the sun, where the rocks were two
thousand feet sheer, and where a rock-splintered river roared and
howled ten feet below a track which seemed to have been built on
the simple principle of dropping miscellaneous dirt into the river
and pinning a few rails a-top . . .We seemed to be running into the
bowels of the earth at the invitation of an irresponsible
stream . . .Then the driver put on all steam, and we would go round
that curve on one wheel chiefly, the Gunnison River gnashing its
teeth below.

The harrowing ride through the upper portion of the canyon brought traveler and the
Uncompahgre Valley, one step closer to “civilization.”

17 Ibid., 123-124.
In December of that same year, Palmer asked one of his top engineers, Byron Bryant, to "undertake and explore the Grand Canyon of the Gunnison from the mouth of the Cimarron River to Delta Station, at the point where the Uncompahgre River empties into the Gunnison River." Bryant organized a team including a topographer, transit man, level man and several laborers to map and survey the depths of the canyon. The party began their work shortly before Christmas of 1882.

Through sixty-eight cold winter days, the men worked patiently down river. Thinking that a trip along the river's bottom was impossible, the troop instead chose to camp on the canyon's top, traversing the steep canyon walls daily. The group had hoped to finish its work within twenty days. On the twentieth day it was apparent that the work was far from finished and many members of the group quit. Finally, in late February of 1883, the party finished its survey of the canyon between the Cimarron River and the Gunnison's junction with the North Fork River. Bryant's report to Palmer made it clear that extending the railroad beyond Cimarron Canyon was not possible thereby sparing the rest of the canyon.

As the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad pounded through the upper Black Canyon, settlers filtered into the Uncompahgre Valley and staked their claims. What the settlers soon realized, however, was that the nine inches of annual rainfall was only enough to grow sagebrush and prickly pear—both of which they already had in plenty. Local farmers and town builders, who well understood the need for irrigation water, headed initial attempts to bring water to the valley. The Ute Indian Agency, located nine

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19 Vandenbushce, “Man Against the Black Canyon,” 123-124.
20 Ibid., 125.
21 Ibid., 127.
miles south of the present town of Montrose, initiated the first attempt to irrigate using the Uncompahgre in 1875.22

Just five years following the first intentional diversion of water across the desiccated valley floor, O.D. Loutsenhizer headed the first private irrigation project early in 1880. This canal, which is still the third largest canal diverting water from the Uncompahgre River, is roughly 26.3 miles long and contains 12.3 miles of laterals. By 1909 this relatively small canal was watering an estimated four thousand acres.23

According to historian Wilson Rockwell, Jacob Schuessler was one of the first citizens to attempt a garden in the valley using the Loutsenhizer canal. “At the time water sold for thirty-five cents a barrel for domestic use in Montrose, and one season when the ditch washed out, [Schuessler] purchased around 1600 barrels of domestic water to save his garden.” After months of backbreaking work, Schuessler reported that he had “spent two hundred dollars for water and didn’t even get one cabbage to show for it.”24 Clearly, more than a few ditches would be needed to transform this stubborn desert into fertile farmland.

Also realizing the need for irrigation water, the Uncompahgre Ditch and Land Company initiated construction on the Montrose and Delta Canal in 1883 and completed

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22 Steinel, *Agriculture in Colorado*, 528.
The total length of this canal is 31.5 miles and includes six laterals with a combined length of 46.5 miles. Although the Montrose and Delta Canal was lengthy, it was unable to provide sufficient water to farmers when they needed it most. Sterling S. Sherman, the superintendent of the Montrose and Delta Canal, remarked that although “the canal system covers about 40,000 acres of irrigable land,” and that in the years between 1888 and 1889 water was purchased for between 16,000 and 18,000 acres, “the supply has not been sufficient for near the acreage above mentioned, and many farmers have left their farms...In the last few years only 8,000 or 9,000 acres have been farmed by waters from the canal.”

When whites first settled the valley they thought that the Uncompahgre River would provide adequate water for 175,000 acres. In the years leading up to 1900, however, farmers sadly learned that the small river could not even provide enough water to wet 30,000 sufficiently. Prior to 1901, private contractors had dug some thirty-three ditches and canals with a total approximate length of two hundred miles but the seasonally erratic flow of the Uncompahgre River continued to pose a vexing problem. Although the Uncompahgre River often raged through the valley in early spring as it carried the San Juan’s snow runoff, it slowed to a lazy stream in the late summer and early fall—precisely when the relentless sun dried the ground into an impenetrable slate. According to a five-year survey, the Uncompahgre River peaks in late May and June,

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25 Ibid., 85.
27 Reclamation Service, First Annual Report, 147.
28 Ibid., 134.
29 Reclamation Service, Ninth Annual Report, 93.
30 Ibid., 134. Wilson Rockwell gives significantly higher figures. He estimates that forty-nine ditches existed at the time, which combined to withdraw a total of 1586-second feet from the Uncompahgre. Given the lack of evidence for the additional sixteen ditches and the fact that the Uncompahgre’s flow is substantially lower than 1586, his statement seems dubious at best.
suspended, and on May 27, 1905, the Reclamation Service undertook the continuation of the tunnel.  

Removing the hard-cooked metamorphic rock was perilous and demanding. Accidents ranging from floods to cave-ins killed many. The poor working conditions combined with low pay and the isolated nature of the work camps resulted in high turnover—the average worker stayed only about two weeks.  

While miners blasted away in the hot bowels of the mountain, construction of the South Canal was underway. The South Canal was to be the largest canal of the project, with a capacity of 1300 cubic feet per second. The South Canal’s primary purpose was to transport water from the mouth of the tunnel 11.5 miles across the adobe foothills of the valley and deposit it in the Uncompahgre River upstream from Montrose. Once the captured portion of the Gunnison was merged with the Uncompahgre River, farmers, state officials and Bureau of Reclamation engineers hoped that the existing system of canals could be kept full of water throughout the growing season.  

On the afternoon of July 6, 1909, the two mining crews chipped through the last bit of rock joining canyon and valley. The completed tunnel was ten feet wide and ten

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54 Ibid., 96.
feet tall, and stretched for some 35,645 feet. On September 23, 1909, some ten thousand citizens gathered at the Montrose Fair Grounds to hear President Taft officially open the tunnel. Striking a golden bell against a silver plate, the bulbous Taft called for the opening of the head gates, thus signaling a new chapter in the history of the valley. The cost for the entire project was nearly seven million dollars.57

As the Uncompahgre Project gathered steam under the new leadership of the Bureau of Reclamation, Barton W. Marsh was writing his little book _The Uncompahgre Valley and the Gunnison Tunnel_. Apparently proud of the area and hoping for an influx of settlement, Marsh provided one hundred and fifty pages of ringing praise for the possibilities of the valley. Marsh claimed that upon reading his book some “may be inclined to say that the facts have been overdrawn, but

Arkansas River had already been apportioned, so costly upstream reservoirs were needed to make the project effective. According to MacKendrick, "the state would be forced to charge such high rates for its water that no farmer in Colorado could afford to buy it." Following the 1894 indictment, the Colorado Assembly refused to make appropriations to maintain the projects already completed, placing that responsibility on the counties where the projects were located. The state abandoned State Canal No. 1 in 1907.

As Colorado's experiment with reclamation was floundering, citizens of the Uncompahgre Valley continued to seek solutions to their water shortage. According to several sources, Frenchman F.C. Lauzon of Montrose was the first to conceptualize the idea of diverting the Gunnison River into the Uncompahgre Valley. Lauzon's idea reportedly came to him during the hot summer of 1890, and soon he was selling it to any who would listen: giving speeches on street corners, in schoolrooms and at various political meetings around town. Lauzon proposed financing the project locally, but it became obvious that the small city of Montrose would not be able to foot the bill. As Lauzon worked the hamlet of Montrose into a frenzy of hope, locals were hatching plans to traverse fully the length of the canyon in an effort to survey its imposing walls and rushing waters.

The first major expedition to attempt a full-length traverse of the canyon's bottom was led by John Pelton, who guided J.A. Curtis, M.F. Hovey and W.W. Torrence.

Setting out late in the summer of 1900, this group of local farmers and ranchers clung to

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37 Ibid., 13.
38 Ibid., 14.
39 Ibid., 14-15.
41 Rockwell, *Uncompahgre Country*, 90. Rockwell estimates that the population of Montrose in 1887 was about 300.
their flat-bottomed wooden boats, *The City of Montrose* and the *John C. Bell*, as they rushed through the canyon. On the second day of their odyssey, they lost one of their boats and half of their supplies. Filled with vigor, and perhaps motivated by the fame a successful adventure would bring, the men pressed on. With every mile that was so painfully gained, the steep canyon walls narrowed and the river grew more violent. On the twenty-first day of the expedition, the weary travelers encountered a “roaring torrent which moved with Herculean force through a space only 28 feet wide.” Faced with possible loss of life, the “explorers finally decided to abandon their expedition after having fought the river for 21 days in traveling 14 weary miles.” Despite the expedition’s failure, it caused excitement and captured the imaginations of those living in the area.

Although state-backed reclamation was fading in the 1890s, one project was proposed and accepted by the Colorado General Assembly in 1901. Two local politicians, state legislator Meade Hammond of Paonia and Representative C.T. Rawalt of Gunnison County, proposed a measure appropriating $25,000 for exploration of the canyon and construction of a diversion tunnel. Hammond, a farmer in the valley who well understood the importance of the project, pushed hard to get it passed. On April 11, 1901 Rawalt’s and Hammond’s hard work paid off as the Colorado State legislature passed the measure to “construct, maintain and operate State Canal No. 3, in Montrose and Delta counties” and create a local board of control to oversee construction.

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44 Steinel, *Agriculture in Colorado*, 528-529.
Shortly following the appropriation, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) was poised to spend $4000 to do a complete survey of the canyon's bottom. Lincoln Fellows, irrigation engineer and resident hydrographer for the USGS, volunteered for the job and chose W.W Torrence, veteran river rat of the previous canyon bottom adventure, to accompany him. Drawing from his experience, Torrence suggested that the men use a 4' x 6' rubber air mattress instead of a heavy wooden boat. No doubt whooping and swearing, the two bravely bobbed atop the mattress as they shot rapids and cursed God as they portaged. Bruised, exhausted and hungry, the two emerged from the mouth of the canyon having completed the 33-mile adventure in just nine days. Over those nine days they endured food shortages, killed a bighorn sheep with a knife (they carried no firearms), and lost some thirteen pounds each. Torrence and Fellows became the first men known to navigate the full length of the canyon successfully. In addition to becoming local celebrities, the men also demonstrated that a tunnel could be built to divert water from the canyon to the valley.

Working from the information provided by Torrence and Fellows, state engineers quickly selected the location of the tunnel and began construction late in October of 1901. Within one year the state had spent its allotted $25,000 while completing only 835 feet of tunnel and five miles of wagon road. Exasperated, one citizen commented that they only had a “small hole in the ground and some weather-stained machinery to show for it.”

47 Ibid., 195.
48 Ibid., 200-201.
49 Reclamation Service, Ninth Annual Report, 93.
By late 1901 the project was in serious jeopardy but was saved by the passage of the Reclamation Act of 1902. Originally, the act empowered the Bureau of Reclamation to construct water projects wherever the Bureau deemed them appropriate. Following construction, those who benefited from the projects would begin repayment to the federal government until the total cost of the project, plus interest, was repaid. The newly created Bureau was more than willing to step in and flex its bureaucratic muscles in the Uncompahgre Valley.

It is important to realize that this initial transfer of the project to the federal government was not an act of an over-aggressive federal agency. The first annual report filed by the Bureau states that attention “was originally called to this locality by petitions from the citizens of Colorado and representations made as to the feasibility and importance of the work.” Additionally, it became obvious that private “or local capital [was] unable to handle the enterprise, owing to the magnitude of the work.”\(^{51}\) Although it is true that these reports were produced by the bureau itself, a song written by Jay Glen also reflects the hopes locals hung upon the completion of the tunnel:

Our farmers will prosper and raise immense crops
And in town they will jingle their dough;
Our business men here will collect all bad debts
When the Gunnison Tunnel goes through.\(^{52}\)

More than bringing forth bountiful crops and jingling piles of dough, the Gunnison tunnel, Glen’s song claims, would ease the friction between sheep and cattlemen and ensure that all the local ladies had access to respectable suitors. This song, taken in conjunction with the letter previously documented from superintendent Sterling S. Sherman and the willingness of the owners of the canals to pass ownership to a water users’ association, all indicate that the transition was not a hostile takeover as Worster contends, but an action desired by farmers and bureaucrats alike.

Although official control was not passed to the Bureau of Reclamation until August 14, 1906, the agency took almost immediate steps to get the project back underway. Based on a report filed by Fellows in 1902, the current site of the tunnel was abandoned by the state and relocated approximately five miles upstream. The new location was approved on June 7, 1904, and the “Secretary of the Interior set aside $2,500,000 from the reclamation fund for the construction of the Uncompahgre Project” and Gunnison tunnel.\(^{53}\)

Excavation began on January 11, 1905 as miners working for the Taylor Moore Construction Company began removing earth from both ends of the tunnel. According to the annual report filed by the Bureau of Reclamation, by May of 1905,

15 percent of the contract time had elapsed and less than 4.5 percent of the work had been accomplished. Neither the organization developed nor the mechanical plant installed were adequate for the work and the contractors were in financial difficulties. The contract was therefore

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\(^{52}\) Donna Freeman, *100 years*, 42. See appendix A for complete lyrics.

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feet tall, and stretched for some 35,645 feet. On September 23, 1909, some ten thousand citizens gathered at the Montrose Fair Grounds to hear President Taft officially open the tunnel. Striking a golden bell against a silver plate, the bulbous Taft called for the opening of the head gates, thus signaling a new chapter in the history of the valley. The cost for the entire project was nearly seven million dollars.

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we beg to state that instead of overestimating the phenomenal productiveness [sic] of the lands of the Uncompahgre Valley, we have in many instances feared to tell all that has been done in the matter of crop production.” According to Marsh, “potatoes weighing five and six pounds are not uncommon,” and “ordinary seasons net the farmer $100.00 per acre above all expenses,” an almost unheard-of sum for that time. Marsh continued by positing that the recently-settled farmer will find that in the Uncompahgre Valley “forty acres is equal in every respect to one hundred and sixty acres in the east.” As Marsh saw it, there were two keys to unlocking the riches of the valley—hard work and the “merry ripple of the crystal waters of the Gunnison River,” which will “sound the death knell for slack and indifferent farming” in the valley. Marsh’s readers doubtless grew excited at the prospect of such easy and prosperous farming. But did the Uncompahgre Project transform the valley into the garden of Marsh’s dreams?

Certainly, the tunnel and canal works did supply more water to the valley, but they did not resolve the problem of a seasonal water flow. Much like that of the Uncompahgre River, the Gunnison’s flow drops significantly in the months of August, September and October. According to Bureau of Reclamation water surveys, the river peaks with an annual flow of about 3,600 cubic feet per second in May, but drops to below 1,500 cubic feet per second in June. By July it drops to less than 500 cubic feet per second and reaches its lowest flow rate in August and September averaging less than 250 cubic feet per second. Even if the entire flow of the Gunnison was diverted in the

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59 Ibid., 41.
60 Ibid., 44.
61 Ibid., 42.
months of August and September, the water would provide little relief, especially
considering that the water, before becoming useful, would have to travel over eleven
miles through thirsty soils and blistering sun to reach the Uncompahgre River. While
boosters of the Uncompahgre Project had hailed it as a solution to the valley’s water
problems, clearly it was not.

Although engineers and farmers initially hoped that an additional 100,000 acres
would be opened, by 1910 the project only irrigated 20,600 acres. By 1916 the number
of acres under irrigation had risen sharply to 49,273. The following year 53,108 acres
were under irrigation from the project, but this figure is misleading because it includes
acres that were under irrigation prior to the completion of the project, so the actual
increase in acreage opened is far less than it appears.

With the completion of State Canal No. 3 and the Gunnison Tunnel, citizens of
the western slope began the process of reworking their environment. Instead of learning
to live with and within the desert, like so many peoples had done before, farmers and
bureaucrats came to believe that they had the power and duty to transform the
environment into something “valuable” and “productive.” If a diversion tunnel and canal
system did not fix the valley, “build more and build it bigger,” they cried. Sadly for the
Gunnison River and the gash through which it pounded, the completion of the tunnel
marked the beginning, not the end of this river’s development.

As the twentieth century unfolded and water became ever more precious in the
politics of the West, the fate of the Gunnison River and its canyon was dragged into the

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65 If the 30,000 acres that were under irrigation prior to the completion of the project are subtracted from the total amount irrigated in 1917, the project only added roughly 23,000 acres to cultivation.
arena of national and international politics. Far removed from the nascent civilization of
the western slope, events in southern California ensured that the plumbing project on the
Gunnison River was just beginning.

Just as southern California’s population and influence surged in the first years of
the twentieth century, its citizens collective heads butted repeatedly against the same wall
that nearly everyone had faced in trying to inhabit the West—there simply was not
enough water to sustain long-term, high-density populations across much of the region.
Southern California’s water saga began first with the conceptualization and completion of
the Alamo Canal, which delivered a much needed, if not entirely dependable, stream of
water to the dry soil of the Imperial Valley. The canal worked well enough in the years
between 1901 and 1904, but in 1905 things took a turn for the worse. A combination of a
poorly-conceived diversion and high spring runoff allowed the Colorado River to free
itself from the banks of the canal and inundate the Salton Sink. As water historian Norris
Hundley points out in *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s-1990s*, problems
with the Alamo Canal solidified the valley’s demands for the All-American Canal. For
nearly a decade valley dwellers planned and lobbied for the All-American Canal and in
1919 they successfully persuaded a member of the House to introduce a bill authorizing
construction.

Almost immediately, the Boulder Canyon bill caught the eye of Arthur Powell
Davis (nephew to John Wesley Powell and director and chief engineer of the
Reclamation Service). Davis, and the Reclamation Service, had been long been seeking
great projects that would elevate the status and power of their agency—and the All-
American Canal and California’s desperate plea for water provided the perfect opportunity.\(^{66}\)

Davis was not satisfied, however, with merely creating a massive water artery. Only a complex system of dams, hydroelectric generators, canals and diversions, Davis argued, would ensure complete subjugation and full beneficial use of the temperamental Colorado River.\(^{67}\) Certainly the news of such massive projects excited many California farmers and schemers, but the state’s unity proved ominous for the several smaller upriver states of Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming and New Mexico.\(^{68}\) It was not enough, westerners bandied, that the “lurid and morally corrupt society, with its Hollywood flappers and strange ethnic mixture of Asians and Midwesterners and Italians, of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants” was one of the “largest and fastest growing state[s] in the basin,” now they had their sights on claiming the majority of the precious Colorado River.\(^{69}\) According to Hundley, “vigorous resistance to the bill led to a prolonged six-year battle that resulted in enactment of legislation only when California agreed to some major concessions that still limit the state’s actions,” the first of which was the Colorado River Compact.\(^{70}\)

As finally adopted in 1928, the Boulder Canyon Act included the Colorado River Compact, which held several important implications for the states involved.\(^{71}\) First, it

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\(^{67}\) Ibid., 209.

\(^{68}\) It’s worth mentioning that water rights prior to the passage of the Boulder Canyon Act, were governed by the doctrine of prior appropriation. Under this doctrine the individual, or state, that made the first beneficial use of a given body of water would have the superior claim.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 211.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 212.

\(^{71}\) For a thorough history of the crafting and passage of the Colorado River Compact, see Norris Hundley’s *Water and the West: The Colorado River Compact and the Politics of Water in the American West* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1975).
divided the seven states involved into one of two categories, either upper or lower basin. Drafters, somewhat arbitrarily, drew the boundary between the two basins at Lee’s Ferry, Arizona. Second, the Compact stipulated that the upper basin states of Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico and Colorado would have combined title to 7.5 million acre feet annually. For their part, upper basin states were obligated to ensure that the flow below Lee’s Ferry, over any ten year period, never dipped below 7.5 million acre feet. Perhaps most important of all, the Compact superseded the doctrine of prior appropriation between the upper and lower basin states, thereby ensuring all states involved could undertake detailed studies before initiating their building projects.72 As Hundley points out, passage of the Boulder Canyon Act “marked the Reclamation Bureau’s emergence as the mightiest federal agency in the American West.” Following passage of the act, the Reclamation Service steadily set its sights on larger and larger projects and came to endorse fully hydroelectric power while stepping ever-further from small irrigation-centered projects like the Gunnison Tunnel and South Canal.73 And as they did so, their ears became deaf to the muffled voices of the small farmer and western business person.74

Once the Colorado had been divided, the responsibility of allocating the water fell to the states within each basin. Since California had long been conducting surveys and water studies, they were set to initiate their construction program. The same, however, did not hold true for the upper basin states. Prior to initiating construction, upper basin states again had to divide their share of the river amongst themselves as they labored to

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72 Hundley, Great Thirst, 212-219.
73 Ibid., 220.
74 The passage of the Boulder Canyon Act marks the starting point for the process of federal and big business domination of the Gunnison River, a process first recognized by Donald Worster in Rivers of Empire.
hatch a plan that would squeeze the maximum legal amount of water from the Colorado River and its tributaries.

The first step taken by the upper basin states in their battle against the Colorado River was the crafting and adoption of the 1948 Upper Colorado River Basin Compact (UCRBC). Arizona, Colorado New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming each sent one representative to design an agreement that would equitably divide the water and provide a mechanism to guide future development. As adopted, the UCRBC was intended to “provide for the equitable division and apportionment of the use of the waters of the Colorado River System,” to establish “the obligations of each State of the Upper Division with respect to the deliveries of water required to be made at Lee Ferry by the Colorado River Compact,” and to ensure the “expeditious agricultural and industrial development of the Upper Basin.” The 1948 Compact first allotted 50,000 annual acre feet of the Colorado River to Arizona and then divided the remainder among the other upper basin states with Colorado receiving 51.75 percent, New Mexico 11.25 percent, Utah 23 percent and Wyoming 14 percent. Of central importance to the 1948 Compact was its creation of the Upper Colorado River Commission comprised of one representative from each upper basin state and one president-appointed commissioner.

The Commission, which worked within the confines of the Colorado River Compact, had several objectives. First, the Upper Colorado River Commission was charged with overseeing the scouting of possible storage facility locations and the

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collection of river flow data at various stations along the Colorado and its tributaries.\textsuperscript{77} The Commission, working with a myriad of experts and engineers, also analyzed data while striving to engineer a water storage system that would maintain compliance with the CRC’s 7.5 million acre flow requirement at Lee’s Ferry. More generally, the Commission hoped their storage program would foster steady economic growth while generating power for the much of the West. For nearly a decade, the Commission worked closely with politicians in drafting the Colorado River Storage Project Act (CRSP).

The issues involved in drafting CRSP are every bit as complex as those that informed the passage of the Boulder Canyon Act, and for the same reasons—everyone knew that water was integral to fostering and sustaining growth, and no one wanted to share. At any one of the sub-committee hearings held to discuss CRSP, the shrill voices of state representatives lobbying to attract some or all of the major proposed projects, accusative statements made by one part of a state against another (like those fired between western Coloradoans and their eastern slope counterparts) and the rising protest from the environmental community, produced a cacophony of ideas and needs, all of which muddied the process.\textsuperscript{78}

As early as 1950, citizens of the western slope of Colorado began calling for surveys of the Gunnison River Gorge. Their motivation was two-fold. First, western Coloradoans were clearly interested in attracting some of the hundreds of millions of CRSP dollars to their struggling economies, and lucky for them, Congressmen like Wayne Aspinall of Colorado early realized that the massive water impoundment projects


\textsuperscript{78} According to David Brower’s 1954 testimony, the Sierra Club had, at that time, a membership of 8,000. Colorado River Storage Project, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Irrigation and Reclamation, Eighty Third Congress, Second Session, January 18-27, 1954, page 790.
of CRSP meant jobs, press coverage and votes. Second, regulating the flow of the Gunnison River would also allow them finally to realize the full potential of the Uncompahgre Project, which operated smoothly every year until the waters of the Gunnison dropped in the months of July and August, just when summer crops needed the water most.

To the dismay of western Colorado citizens and politicians alike, the first versions of CRSP did little to guarantee development of the Gunnison. But through the political leaning of Aspinall and the persistent testimony of Uncompahgre Valley Water Users' Association Attorney Dan Hughes, Engineer Clifford Jex, and several local politicians, later versions of CRSP provided for the construction of the Curecanti Unit of the Gunnison. Comprised of the Blue Mesa (sometimes called Curecanti) Dam, Morrow Point Dam, and Crystal Dam, this unit would capture and store over 900,000 acre feet of the Gunnison River while producing also hydroelectricity. The testimony of western Coloradoans reflects a high degree of support for the CRSP passage generally, and the Curecanti Unit specifically.

As locals pushed for the inclusion of the Curecanti Unit in phase one of CRSP, in reprise of the Hetch-Hetchy Valley controversy half a century earlier, the environmental community was rallying to prevent the damming and flooding of Echo Park, a canyon bottom in Dinosaur National Monument on the Colorado-Utah Border. Sadly for the Black Canyon, the environmental community was apparently not aware of the impact that

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81 The original plan actually called for the construction of four dams within less than forty miles of the Gunnison River.
CRSP would have on the Gunnison River as none of the representatives from the Isaac Walton League, Wilderness Society or the Sierra Club made mention of it. Not until well after the passage of CRSP in 1956 did mild opposition to the program emerge—but by then it was too late.

After decades of compromise and heated debate that produced mountains of testimony, legislators finally crafted a piece of legislation that was passable in 1956. In its final form, CRSP authorized construction of the Curecanti Unit, Glen Canyon Dam, Flaming Gorge Dam, and Navajo dam. CRSP also opened a sort of revolving checking account to fund its projects. Power revenues (which constituted the vast majority of payback to the federal government) and payments from irrigators would be deposited into the Upper Colorado River Basin Fund and new projects would draw from it to cover construction costs. To get the project off the ground, the federal government initially coughed up some $760,000 for the fund.

As their white-knuckled fingers clung tightly to their hard-fought piece of legislation, bureau officials and locals began the process of planning and building three major dams on the Gunnison River. Before construction could begin, however, the cost/expense ratio of the Blue Mesa, Crystal and Morrow Point dams had to be established. After several years of study, the Bureau of Reclamation deemed the unit "cost-effective" in February of 1959.

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82 For a good introduction to the controversy surrounding the Echo Park Dam, see Jon M. Cosco's Echo Park: Struggle for Preservation (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1995).
83 The environmental community's silence on this matter is telling. Why on one hand did they fight tooth and nail to prevent the destruction of Dinosaur National Monument and not to prevent the same from happening in the Black Canyon? The answer lies squarely in the development, or lack of development, of our modern concept of ecology, which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter.
84 Colorado River Storage Project Act, P-L 485, Sections 1, 5 and 12.
85 Regional Director of the Bureau of Reclamation to [Commissioner], 5 February, 1959. Mesa State College, Special Collections, Box 10, no. 3.
All through the legislative process that produced CRSP, little or no opposition to the Curecanti Unit arose. However, following the passage of CRSP, Colorado’s Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife (BSFW) did protest the Black Canyon dams. In their 1957 Report to the Secretary of the Interior, the BSFW adamantly argued that the “Curecanti Reservoir will eliminate the stream fishery value of 22.5 miles of the most productive part of the Gunnison River through permanent or periodic inundation. Immediately downstream, Narrow Gauge, Morrow Point and Crystal Reservoirs will flood out 15 more miles of choice trout fishery.” The BSFW admitted that additional recreational opportunities would follow construction of the dams but complained that in “comparison with the existing trout fishery, the lakes of Curecanti unit will not be a replacement.”

As word got out that the Bureau of Reclamation had slated construction for three dams on the Gunnison, in 1959 Outdoor Life’s Ben East penned an impassioned article imploring sportsmen to join in opposition to the project. East’s article, which recounted the fantastic fishing and scenic opportunities on the Gunnison River, ended on a pessimistic note:

If you’re a sportsman who’d like to fish the fabled Gunnison before it dies, you still have 10 years. But if you have a young son or grandson with that same desire, you might as well break the news to him now. Short of a miracle, there’ll be no Gunnison after 1969.

Although the BSFW and a handful of local sportsmen opposed the Curecanti units, they could not muster sufficient strength to halt grinding wheels of the legislative

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86 Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Report to the Secretary of the Interior, 1957. p. 13. Mesa State College, Special Collections, Box 10, no. 2. It’s worth pointing out that this report reflects no concern for how the dams will change the ecology of the river, but rather only for the choice stretches of stream lost to inundation.

87 Sport Fisheries, 25. Again, their concern centered upon the inundation of prime water, not the alteration of water downstream of the dams themselves.


89 Ibid.
process. Construction of the Curecanti Unit began in April of 1962 as the Tecon Corporation of Dallas, Texas, poured its resources into constructing the 324-foot-high earth dam. In addition to storing over 900,000 acre feet of water, Blue Mesa Dam also had the capacity to generate 60,000 kw of electricity. Just two months following the start of Blue Mesa Dam, Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation Floyd Dominy attended the ground-breaking ceremony on July 7. Speaking of the possibilities for the future, Dominy claimed that “[b]old vision and aggressive action are the order of the day if we are to accept the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities” of tomorrow.

Where outdoorsmen and lovers of the canyon saw the Curecanti unit as a sacrilege, Dominy saw the canyon as “huge rain barrel that can catch and hold the surplus flows” of the river. Perhaps hoping to assuage the angst of those not in favor of the project, Dominy argued that the Gunnison “will take on a new look... it will feel the reins of man’s control. The Curecanti Unit will take its place alongside the Glen Canyon, Flaming Gorge, and Navajo Storage Units.”

Dominy’s words belie the confident conservation philosophy, and the driving motivation, behind the Bureau of Reclamation. Almost six decades had passed since the creation of the agency, and over those years their ability to remake the natural world increased almost geometrically. The completion of the Gunnison Tunnel was earlier hailed as the pinnacle of engineering ability. But by the 1960s, such local projects were no longer of interest to an agency who confidently spoke of managing entire watersheds.

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91 Floyd Dominy, “Curecanti Unit—Symbol of Opportunities for Tomorrow,” Address at Blue Mesa Dam Groundbreaking Ceremony, 7 July 1962. Mesa State College, Special Collections, Box 1, no. 43.
92 Ibid., 3.
93 Ibid.
and transforming one of nature’s most rugged landscapes into a “huge rain barrel.” Often working around the clock, seven days a week, Tecon completed the ambitious project just four years later.

As earth movers and explosives displaced 190,000 cubic yards of earth at the Blue Mesa site, construction of Morrow Point Dam was also underway. Located just twelve miles downstream from the Blue Mesa Dam, Morrow Point was also built to store water and generate power. The Bureau’s first thin-arch double curvature dam, this nearly five hundred foot plug was also completed in 1968. Crews finished the Curecanti Unit eleven years later in 1976, with the completion of Crystal Dam.

In its entirety, the Curecanti Unit does supply a valuable and reliable stream of water to the Uncompahgre Valley while at the same time aiding in impounding the maximum allowed under the Colorado River Compact for the upper basin states. Just as engineers planned, the impoundment reservoirs fill to capacity during years of normal or above rainfall, and release that water in times of drought or in the later summer when farmers and their crops need it most, all while generating valuable hydroelectricity. At first glance, then, it seems that people, through the steady application of technology and money, have finally overcome the problem of aridity in western Colorado. I do not argue that the water delivered by the South Canal is not of vital importance to local farmers. Nor do I claim that the construction of the projects isn’t reflective of some measure of success in altering (if only temporarily) the local environment to one more amendable to farming. And I understand fully the larger role that water plays in the politics of the West. However, two current trends threaten to reverse the Bureau of Reclamation’s hard-fought gains.
The first problem, and one not recognized by hopeful progressive conservationists or historians, stews silently in the irrigated soil itself—its effects not immediately noticeable. Over time, however, as levels of the silent killer increase, deformed and dying animals become readily visible. Selenium, which is a naturally occurring trace element, becomes more toxic than "either arsenic or mercury" when concentrations exceed its naturally occurring levels. After conducting selenium studies in 1987-88, the National Irrigation Water Quality Program and the United States Geological Survey found that the Uncompahgre Project was the likely cause for dangerous increases in selenium in the rivers, lakes and ponds below the project. Subsequent studies indicated that selenium levels in the Colorado River at the Utah State line were above the acceptable limits set by the Environmental Protection Agency. According to the Gunnison Basin Selenium Task Force, the Uncompahgre Project and Grand Valley irrigation projects may account "for as much as 75% of the selenium load to the Colorado River near the Colorado-Utah line." Although the Curecanti Unit and Uncompahgre Project supply valuable irrigation water to the valley, the water, after percolating across the valley’s Mancos shale, poses serious health risks to downstream biota. Any attempts to measure the success of the water projects in the reason must bear these facts in mind.

The other factor threatening the long-term efficacy of the Curecanti Unit and Uncompahgre Project comes not from the soil, but from the people themselves. Following the creation of the Black Canyon National Park in 1999, the National Park Service has increasingly insisted on minimum flow requirements below the Gunnison

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95 Salinity also poses a serious risk to the sustainability of farming in the area and across the state, According to the Agronomy News, nearly one-million acres of Colorado farmland are affected by salts. Jessica Davis, Grant Cardon, Reagan Waskom, “Salinity Issues in Colorado,” Agronomy News, Volume 12 (6), 2.
Tunnel diversion. During years of normal or above normal precipitation such demands go relatively unnoticed. However, due to the drought conditions that have persisted for the past few years, the NPS minimum flow demands have effectively reduced the flow of water from the Gunnison River to the Uncompahgre Valley. It’s too early to tell where this nascent legal battle will lead, but in the short term it has caused much fear and consternation with farmers who feel control of this resource slipping from their grasp.

This isolated valley in Western Colorado provides a unique opportunity to re-evaluate both new and old interpretations of Western water development. What I have argued for in the preceding pages is a sort of neo-progressive history—one that takes into account what progressive historians and conservationists alike did not foresee. First, water development in the Uncompahgre Valley was predicated on Indian removal. The Utes, who had long inhabited the area, were dealt with as were many other “obstacles” in developing the West. Quickly following Indian removal, land-hungry settlers staked claims and began to farm, only to realize there wasn’t enough water. After small-scale private attempts to irrigate fell short, locals convinced the state to step in. Their power and expertise only went so far, however, and soon their attempts also faltered. With the passage of the Reclamation Act of 1902, the federal government was poised to re-plumb the West. After decades of expensive failure, farmers and bureaucrats were more than willing to pass the torch to the new federal agency. Though the Gunnison Tunnel and South Canal did not create the garden many envisioned, they sincerely hoped that the three major impoundment dams would allow for a more reliable flow of useable water into the Uncompahgre Valley while at the same time impounding Colorado’s “fair share”
of upper basin resources. The Curecanti Unit, and the larger CRSP, reflect the extent to which the conservationist ethos came to dominate much of the natural resource politics of the West. Although the dams do generate much needed power, and do provide more water to the valley, the looming problem of selenium contamination and the growing disharmony between major government agencies threaten to undo the costly work of the past century.

Reclamation is a strange word. It belies a need to tame nature into a comfortable pastoral scene. Only recently have we begun simply to value the existence of wilderness, of dark, deep forests, of frothy waters pounding rocks, of steep black cliffs plunging down to ribbony rivers. It is comforting to know, however, that when we are gone the Gunnison River will have its chance to reclaim its canyon and once again run free.

Since those days on the river with Gramps I have traded in my Zebco 33 and bucket of worms for fly rod and fish-friendly net, but I still take bologna whenever I go. As I hike down Duncan Trail my mind wanders and my heart aches. I know the river has changed, the valley too, but I will never see them as my grandfather did. The dams that were plopped into the canyon like so many pieces of hot taffy and the tunnel that was bored into its heart have changed both river and valley forever. All for what? I ask. Five-pound potatoes, whispers the wind.
Conserving the Remains:  
The Legal Struggle to Protect Place

The pilot announces we will be touching down at Reagan National Airport in a few minutes; time to put the seat in its full upright position and drain the rest of my miniature orange juice. No way around it, I’m excited. I’ve never been to the East Coast, let alone Washington, D.C. The plane’s tires squeal, a canary yellow cab deposits me at the hotel, I drop my duffle at the room and I’m off. As I ride the transport from the original National Archives building to the facility at College Park, Maryland, my mind swims—musty rooms with slivers of light beaming through windows set high in a cathedral ceiling? Stacks, boxes, file cabinets filled with moldy reports? A wrinkled woman circling like a vulture insisting that I am breathing too hard on her beloved documents?

The van pulls into the facility’s drive and in a matter of minutes the National Archives I built in my head is thoroughly dismantled. National Archives at College Park is a sexy facility—clean, new, and guarded by thickly muscled people with nine millimeters always within reach. I check in, am issued a special ID, stash the bulk of my personal belongings in a secured locker (they wouldn’t even let me wear my hat or fleece pullover), pass through no less than three ID check stations, and finally arrive at the research room. I swing the doors open and am blown away Scores of laptops, scanners, digital cameras, and massive copy machines hum as they replicate and store the priceless data set before them. So this is research in the twenty-first century!

After locating the presorted, pre-categorized cart containing all documents pertaining to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison (they were prepared for my arrival), I
settle into my station. An interesting story develops as I pore through piles of yellowed files and boxes of letters, reports and memos. In just a few days I come to know the many personalities involved in the movement to make the Black Canyon first a national monument and later a national park.

From this story of the monument builders emerges two important points. First, the impulse to protect the Black Canyon from development demonstrates yet again the power of this landscape to move people's hearts, minds and imaginations. It would be an oversimplification to claim that the canyon evokes one single response from all people, but it is fair and accurate to state that since our arrival to the area now called Colorado, humans have always reacted in unique and interesting ways to this place.

Second, the history of monument and park builders reflects the evolution of the preservationist movement in general while simultaneously demonstrating how that ideology, once fully formed, came to compete with the conservationist ideology in defining this particular landscape.\(^1\) Certainly some individuals, like John Muir, were early well-versed in the interactions between living beings. For the most part, however, the early impulse to create national parks and monuments was driven not by any real appreciation for biological diversity or health, but by monumentalism. The creation of the Black Canyon National Monument in the early 1930s bears testament to the fact that preservation in the 1930s was still concerned primarily with saving breathtaking scenery.

Following World War II, however, an increasing number of professionals and lay alike grew uneasy with the rapid degradation of the environment. Through works like Aldo Leopold's 1949 *A Sand County Almanac* and Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*.

\(^1\) Preservation, as used in this paper, refers to those like John Muir, Aldo Leopold etc. who wanted to preserve and protect portions of the U.S. against any future use or development. See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Third Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 96-108.
some Americans began the process of thinking and defining nature on its own terms. The gradual shift away from anthropocentric conceptions of nature to a more biocentric understanding found voice in several key pieces of legislation in the 1960s and 1970s\(^2\) and can be detected in the process of upgrading the Black Canyon to a national park in 1999.

The maturation of the preservationist ethos allows us an opportunity to reconsider historian Alfred Runte’s controversial “worthless lands” hypothesis, which states that “economic motivations have far outweighed long-range ecological considerations in determining how much land gets protected in the first place and, even more importantly, stays protected.”\(^3\) The gradual adoption of some of the central tenants of deep ecology into mainstream preservation began the process of redefining the goals of that movement. While Runte’s hypothesis may have been true in the earlier stages in the national park movement, it may not as accurately apply to more recent national park designations. It is clear that one of the major considerations in forming the Black Canyon National Monument was that the area was not suited for further economic development. However, his hypothesis is less successful at explaining why the monument (an area now suited for economic development) was, in 1999, upgraded to a national park, which not only enlarged the size of the reserve, but also lent it increased legal protection.

Certainly, a significant portion of the white population that filtered into and settled the Uncompahgre Valley saw neither hope nor God when they peered into the

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depths of the Canyon, rather they saw an obstacle to transforming a barren landscape into a garden of democracy. But not all saw an obstacle. Some Anglo Americans, usually those who had formed an intimate relationship with the landscape, saw within it a different future. Like the railroad builders and dam makers, these men and women traversed the canyon walls and came to know its power—but they did not see something to be tamed. Rather, like the Reverend Mark T. Warner, they saw something worth saving, a place to be set aside and revered, not conquered or beaten, while others recognized an opportunity to bring valuable tourism dollars to the area. Through the tireless work of a dedicated citizenry, the National Park Service and President Herbert Hoover set aside a sizable portion of the canyon as a national monument in 1933. The Canyon enjoyed the protection brought by this status for over sixty years, until President Bill Clinton in 1999 signed the bill that elevated this portion of the canyon from national monument to national park.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, people were moving about the country more freely than ever as train, trolley, and automobile altered the relationship between time and space. Likewise, advances in electricity, health and communications placed the United States in a unique historical position. Americans were living longer, enjoying more free time and spending more money on entertainment than at any other time in history. But the changes were just beginning. One hundred years later, the tidal advance of technology had brought to the world the atom bomb, the computer, the internet, ICBM’s, and the café mocha. All of these advances, however, came at a price. Men, women and children toiled in mines and factories where soul and spirit were bought and sold for a pittance. Strip mines tore into the earth and denuded vast tracts of forest
while towering smoke stacks pumped tons of pollutants into the atmosphere daily—all in the name of progress as Americans naively looked the other way. Told from this perspective, the story of the past century looks pretty grim and indeed much of it is; but for a few, it would be all the darker.

Visionaries like John Muir realized early that if we as a nation did not sanctify and set apart some of our remarkable landscapes the crushing force of capitalism would grind them, process them, and place them on the auction block, their appendages sold to the highest bidder, leaving only the fading memories of enchanted space. Following in the same footsteps of earlier preservationists, the Reverend Mark T. Warner of Montrose was a visionary in his own right. Warner came to realize, especially through the lean years of the Great Depression, that there was money to be made from a national monument, but financial gain was merely a selling point he employed to realize his vision—a boundary encircling and protecting the most powerful portion of the canyon in perpetuity.

So then, throughout the twentieth century, two unique responses to the wilds of the Canyon competed (a drama earlier played out at Hetch Hetchy, Chaco Canyon, Grand Canyon and dozens more), each striving to impose their vision on the landscape. Wielding the tools his predecessors so painstakingly forged, Warner and others struggled to create a modern version of sacred space wherein the most rugged, most powerful portion of the canyon would be preserved just as the hands of God had crafted it. The story of their struggle, however, did not take place in a vacuum; rather it erupted some seventy years following the first stirrings of the national park idea and was part of the
continual evolution of the national monument/national park story.\(^4\)

As tensions over slavery heightened and the West began making its way into the heart and imaginations of white Americans, Frederick Law Olmstead returned from his first trip to Europe. While abroad, Olmstead visited Great Britain’s Victoria Park and was struck by its beauty and the importance of the park concept.\(^5\) As Olmstead’s mind was running wild with the possibilities for public space, Americans were grasping desperately to create and affirm a separate national identity apart from that of Europe. Coinciding with this need was the opening of the American West, a place where the marvels of Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon stood as great symbols of a long and unique history—if only a natural one. It is here, at least in part, that historian Alfred Runte argues in his *National Parks: The American Experience*, that the concept of the national park was born. Though it was true that we as a nation lacked a long-standing tradition of fine art and high thinkers, Runte asserts that the “natural marvels of the West compensated for America’s lack of old cities, aristocratic traditions, and similar reminders of Old World accomplishments.”\(^6\)

In 1864 concerned citizens of California supported a bill to protect portions of Yosemite and the majestic redwoods that stood there. While the term “national park” was not used in the bill, its intent was clear: the measure was to protect the scenic value of the area. President Lincoln supported the bill and signed it into law on June 30, 1864, thereby inaugurating a movement that would culminate in the creation of a massive federal bureaucracy that continues up to the present to preserve some of America’s most

\(^{4}\) Ibid., 1-2.
\(^{5}\) Ibid., 2-3.
\(^{6}\) Ibid., 23.
breathtaking landscapes. As Runte contends, however, the history of our national parks is not a static one; rather it reflects our ever changing values and beliefs over the past one hundred and thirty six years.

As originally conceived, national parks were not intended to preserve whole ecosystems (a concept not recognized until much later). They cordoned off the least amount of land possible while still protecting the integrity of a scenic space. In part, this practice was driven by geological “monumentalism,” but it was also rooted in commercial practice. As Runte argues, the creation and perpetuation of national parks was first and foremost grounded in the idea that land set aside for national parks was wholly lacking in marketable resources. Only when western ranchers, timber men, miners and Congressmen were convinced fully that proposed park land had no commercial value whatever, did they step begrudgingly aside.

Fewer than ten years following Lincoln’s signing of the 1864 bill protecting a spectacular canyon harboring some of California’s redwoods, the “national park idea, shaped beneath the monumental grandeur of Yosemite Valley and the Sierra redwoods, was realized in name as well as in fact with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park” in 1872. Although the national park idea was gaining strength and momentum by the turn of the century, it was by no means clear how the lands would be managed and for how long. As Runte points out, even though the total number of parks was on the rise well into the 1890s, park designations continually reflected an emphasis on monumentalism and grand scenery with the overriding stipulation that the land be void of

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7 Ibid., 29.
8 Ibid., 29.
9 Ibid., 48-58.
10 Ibid., 33.
11 Ibid., 58.
all commercial value.

Underlying this general trend was heightened tension over the nation’s shrinking resource base. As the Census Report of 1890 pointed out, the nation’s timber and arable lands were rapidly diminishing, and if something wasn’t done soon, they might be lost. After an exhaustive process, in May of 1891, Congress granted the President “unilateral authority to proclaim appropriate area of the public domain forest reservations.” Enter Teddy Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot, both avid supporters of utilitarian conservation, who worked tirelessly to increase the number of acres within the forest reserve. Reflecting the power of Pinchot and Roosevelt, Congress approved the creation of the U.S. Forest Service in 1905 to manage the growing bank of forest reserve land. Moreover, Congress placed the new agency under the umbrella of the Department of Agriculture. The message was clear—our forests were crops to be managed and harvested on a regular basis.\(^\text{12}\)

The creation and placement of the U.S. Forest Service so clearly in the hands of utilitarian conservationists no doubt made the likes of Muir a bit nervous, but the passage of the so-called Antiquities Act in 1906 would allay their fears, if only a bit. The Antiquities Act, which was passed largely to safeguard Pueblo artifacts of the Southwest, was designed to protect “objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated upon the lands owned or controlled by the Government of the United States.” Under the Act, the President can set aside areas with special scenic, scientific or educational value. Iowa Congressmen John F. Lacey, who was largely responsible for crafting and passing the bill, insisted that these new preserves be called national monuments.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 71.
Beginning with Teddy Roosevelt’s establishment of Devil’s Tower National Monument in 1906 and reaching well into the twentieth century, the monument category posed a quandary for managers. From the passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906 until the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916, the General Land Office oversaw the bulk of national monument management. While the monument category was powerful and valuable because it allowed the President to create monuments by proclamation, thereby foregoing the often laborious Congressional approval process, drafters included no provisions to raise and maintain a budget. While a swelling tide of monuments followed the passage of the Antiquities Act, no flood (or even a trickle) of dollars followed. Suffering from a severe lack of funds and organizational aptitude, the NPS was forced to rely upon dedicated volunteers and a handful of poorly paid government custodians to manage early monuments.

Monuments fared little better once the Park Service Act transferred them to the agency of the same name. Just as the national parks had been “step-children” in their early relationship with the U.S. Forest Service, monuments also came to be the same once the Park Service adopted them. Under the guardianship of the Park Service, monuments had to compete for the same management dollars as did parks, and officials were more than reluctant to re-slice an already small budgetary pie to accommodate them. But increasingly, park officials came to view the monument category as an effective tool for achieving rapid conservation of an endangered landscape. Once park officials secured monument status, interested parties could patiently lobby Congress to

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15 Ibid., 49.
elevate them to park status. The emergence of the Great Depression and Roosevelt’s implementation of the New Deal, however, would change the role of monuments within the Park Service.

National monuments came to enjoy a more prominent position within the Park Service as the federal government increased spending on public works projects in the hopes of dragging the nation out of the Depression. Likewise, as automobile travel increased, the importance of revenue-generating tourism gave managers yet another reason to devote more resources to monuments as they worked to construct a network of parks and monuments all within a day’s drive of the next. At this point in history, as managers were beginning to recognize the value in national monuments, western Colorado citizens initiated a campaign for their own national monument at the Black Canyon.

Although many citizens were interested and involved in the push to create a national monument at the Black Canyon, none was more involved, and perhaps more interesting, than the young Mark Warner. In a time when many saw trees in terms of board feet and water in acre feet, Reverend Warner saw something more. It would be an overstatement to call him a prophet of preservation (on the conservationists/preservationists spectrum he lay somewhere between the two) but he was able to see beauty in nature and the value in preservation of “God’s handiwork,” long before many could do the same. Although men of business and politicians joined hands in the battle to create a monument, Warner’s vision, one where the scenic integrity of the canyon would forever be protected, was the driving force behind the movement.

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Moving from Ohio to Montrose, Colorado in 1917, Reverend Mark T. Warner was early captivated by the Black Canyon. He came to know it as he traversed its steep walls and picnicked often on its rim with his family. The stirring vistas that often moved Warner to wax poetic made him realize that the canyon was worth protecting. In a speech presented at the Third Annual banquet of the Montrose Game and Fish Protection Association, in the late 1920s, Warner’s words reveal his love of the outdoors and his understanding of the importance of preservation. After speaking of “reveling in the beauty of the wild flowers” and listening to the “ever-changing song of the mountain stream,” Warner mentioned that these opportunities, which still existed in western Colorado, were no longer available to citizens living in other areas, where the wild things of nature are largely gone, never to return.

Our forefathers thought they would last forever even with unlimited destruction, but they didn’t. The American people have always been a prodigal and thoughtless people as regard to our natural resources. Recklessly we fling away our God given heritage and often too late we are sorry...And so, because in recent years we have become conscious of the fact that our wild life and other natural attractions are rapidly disappearing we have learned that in order to save what remains for the enjoyment and profit of future generations, we must conserve what still remains...Let us permit the “past” to tell its shameful story of wanton destruction. When the white man first set foot on this continent he found red man—Indian...They’re now extinct. In addition to the Indian he found vast forests—and they full of wild birds and animals and streams full of fish. Millions of Indians—plenty of game. But from the day white man set foot on the soil he cut down forest—thus destroyed their cover. Killed off game without any thought of conservation, built factories...There was a time when no state was richer in wild life than Ohio...there were turkeys, grouse, quail and other game birds in abundance. The lakes and streams were full of fish...When I came upon the scene and I began to answer the call of the wild, I found only a few rabbits, squirrels, migratory birds left me to enjoy...Farther west, on the

plains roamed the buffalo, antelope, by the millions. They are gone and only a few of the species remain to tell us of their existence...So much for the past. What of the present and future? Will we follow the example of the past? Will we rob our children of their rightful heritage of wild things of nature as we have been robbed of ours? You cannot exterminate and still possess. All life about us testifies to this fact.  

Having seen so much of his native Ohio despoiled—game killed, trees cut, and Indians rubbed out—the prospect of a national monument at the Black Canyon aroused Warner’s imagination in the late 1920s.

On a hot June day in 1929, County Agent Harry Land and farmer Douglas Lytle were the first to broach the idea to protect the Canyon by creating a national monument. Less than a month later, W E. Daughenbaugh of Paonia, Colorado, wrote to Montrose Daily Press Editor W.F Wilcox asking, “Now, what is the matter with trying to have the canon [sic.] made a national monument in its narrowest and deepest part?” Wilcox responded by stating “Say, folks, here is a suggestion, a mighty fine one. Make the Black Canon [sic.] area between Montrose and Crawford a national monument. Why not? Think it over.”

Less than two weeks later, members of the local Lions Club raised the issue of building a road to the canyon and working to make the canyon a national monument. The chairman of the meeting, Mark T. Warner, was excited at the prospect. Having hiked into the canyon on many occasions, Warner insisted that there was nothing like it in the world and every time he looked upon the Canyon “it presented new wonders.” Prior to adjourning the meeting, Lions Club members agreed to meet at the Canyon on July 25th

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19 Montrose Daily Press, Circa April 1929, MWP.  
20 Dex B. Walker, “The First Road to Black Canyon,” Unpublished Account, Circa 1968, MWP  
21 W.E. Daughenbaugh, Montrose Daily Press, 1 July 1929.  
22 W.F. Wilcox, Montrose Daily Press, 1 July 1929.  
and 26th to begin construction of a road to the rim of the chasm. The road, they hoped, would render the marvels of the canyon more accessible, thereby rousing support for their cause.24

A few days later a small group of men set out for the canyon. As the day warmed, swinging pickaxes worn smooth by the rocky earth flashed as the steady thok-thok-thok of Douglas Lytle’s tractor cutting through sagebrush and scrub oak sounded, thus marking the first step in the monument building process. Unknowingly, this group of volunteers took the first step in what would be a long journey. Eventually headed by Warner, western Colorado preservationists and businessmen courted politicians, wrote bushels of letters in support of a monument, and attracted as much attention to their cause as possible. While little more than three years separated the conception of the monument idea from its creation, Warner and others faced and overcame several obstacles, including unsympathetic Park officials, budgetary constraints, the onset of the Great Depression, and Indian treaty rights. Undaunted by inexperience, Warner led a sometimes-heated campaign as he strove to turn the heads of Washington politicians toward a little-known canyon in western Colorado.

Unsure of the process by which a monument could be created, W.E. Wilcox forwarded the newspaper clippings of the Lions Club meeting and a letter to Colorado Congressman Edward Taylor, who then forwarded them to the Director of the National Park Service, Horace M. Albright.25 Wilcox’s questions included “How are [national monuments] created?” and “Would a national monument interfere with the construction

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of a toll bridge?" As Albright was not available for comment, Acting Director A.E. Demary suggested that the first step in the process would be creation of a map of the proposed area. Demary further indicated that in order for a petition be successful, no private land be included in the proposal as "there [were] no funds available for the purchase of lands for national park or monument purposes." If the tone of the letter's introduction was not enough to dissuade the eager citizens of the western slope, Demary continued, stating that the

Park Service would hesitate to recommend the area for inclusion in a national monument unless it had an opportunity to officially investigate the area with view to determining its merit for national monument purposes, as judged by national park and monument standards of scenic, historical, or scientific characteristics. [emphasis added]

In this, one of the first official communications between locals and federal officials, it is clear that the creation of a monument at Black Canyon was predicated first and foremost on its scenic value; no mention is made of preserving its plants or animals.

The final blow came when Demary added that no funds were currently available for such investigations. While the letter did not state directly that the Park Service was not interested in the idea, the implied message was clear—the time was not ripe to convince the Park Service to form another national monument. Perhaps taken aback by the rebuff, citizens of western Colorado laid the issue to rest for some months; however, construction on the road continued through the support of the Lions Club.

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26 W.F. Wilcox, Montrose Colorado, to [Edward Taylor, Washington, D.C.], 17 July 1929, NARG 79, Box 568, Entry 7, File 1. A few of those involved in this process pondered the idea of building a bridge across the chasm, thereby connecting the cities of Montrose and Paonia.


28 Ibid.

29 The Park Service’s early reluctance to champion the Black Canyon cause was in part due to fact that the service had already created no less than 23 monuments in the 1920s. This number is second only to the 28 created during the 1930s. Rothman, National Monuments, 233-239.
It wasn’t until January of 1930 that the citizens of Montrose again raised the monument issue. On January 9, 1930, John Bell of Montrose wrote Taylor asking about the proper channels to monument creation. As before, Taylor forwarded the letter to Director Albright. While Bell was primarily concerned with discerning the process through which a monument was to be created, his letter reflects growing uneasiness about unscrupulous locals filing claims within the proposed boundary of the monument. Just as before, Bell was informed that the proper first step in this process would be creating a map of the area in question.

Less than one week following his initial letter to Congressman Taylor, Bell sent a map to Albright and astutely requested that all land within the proposed boundaries be set aside by the General Land Office while the issue was under consideration. Albright then forwarded the request to the General Land Office and asked them to assess the section in question to ascertain the status of the land. It is here, so early in the effort to create a national monument, that the General Land Office (GLO) uncovered perhaps the largest and most persistent obstacle to creating a monument. As the GLO looked into the status of the land, they discovered that while largely still in government hands (few private patents had been filed), the Black Canyon’s disposition was governed by the Ute Indian treaties of 1880, 1888, 1902 and 1909 which stipulated “payment to the Indians of the

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30 It is not entirely clear why so much time elapsed between the initial inquiry and the subsequent one. It is possible that citizens were a bit discouraged. It is also possible, however, that the illness that overtook Wilcox (which forced his move to California) was the cause. John L. Bell, Montrose Colorado, to [Edward Taylor, Washington, D.C.], 9 January 1930, NARG 79, Box 568, Entry 7, File 1.
32 John Bell, Montrose, Colorado, to [Horace Albright, Washington D.C.], 15 February 1930, NARG 79, Box 568, Entry 7, File 1.
proceeds of the lands when disposed of at a price not less than $1.25 per acre.”34

Since the suggested original size of the monument was an estimated 72,000 acres and given that the Park Service was not earlier willing to find the money needed to send a representative to investigate the site, raising some $90,000 just to claim the land legally (not to mention the money needed to manage the monument) made the proposition less than appealing to Albright. In his reply to Bell, Albright’s words were again discouraging as he stated that there was no money available to purchase such lands and added that “Congress has consistently refrained from making appropriations for such purposes. In view of the above this Service would not be favorable to the establishment of a national monument in this area.”35 After receiving the disheartening news, local fervor for the monument again briefly subsided.

Apparently taking all of Albright’s remarks to heart, the Montrose Lions Club drafted another version of the monument map, one encompassing fewer acres, and resubmitted it to Acting Director A.B. Cammerer in the spring of 1931. Even though the Park Service had been earlier unwilling to send a representative to view the area, Cammerer told the Montrose Lions that during the winter of 1931 there was a possibility that a Park Service representative would be in the area and could view the canyon firsthand. However, Cammerer also asked, “I wonder if you have considered the possibility of establishing a State or municipal park of the area …If so, I would suggest that you take the matter up with the Local Land Office and they may be able to give you

34 Ibid.
the necessary application blanks, etc.” While the possibility of having a Park Service employee visit the canyon not doubt excited locals, it seems that Cammerer was more interested in diverting the debate to another office—a statement that is supported by Cammerer’s later objection of monument status for the Black Canyon.

Perhaps fired up by the possibility of a “special visitor,” the Lions Club continued its stream of letters to the office of the Park Service Director. Again, in June of 1931, a letter from Cammerer inspired members of the Montrose Lions Club. While Cammerer again stated that a local park was the best option, he conceded, “Due to your strong appeal in this matter we shall try to arrange to have one of our men inspect the area and make a report on it as early as possible.” Given their firsthand experience with the powerful vistas offered by the canyon, locals were certain that having visited the area in person rather than experiencing it through pictures, maps and the written word, Park officials would easily be won to their cause. Meanwhile, they patiently grubbed away the oak and sagebrush, working their way ever closer to the canyon’s edge. Finally, in the spring of 1931 the Lions Club, with the help of the county, had finished their road—total cost, $3,000.00.

Once the road was completed efforts to inform the public of the natural wonder increased. As local papers printed editorials and articles regarding various aspects of the canyon and the exciting prospect for a bridge, the national Lions Club magazine published an article extolling the virtues of the canyon and the work of its Montrose chapter. In an attempt to demonstrate the growing popularity of the rim drive road, the

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37 Ibid.
Lions Club donated a makeshift registration book to track the number of visitors and from whence they came. In 1930, over 1100 people made the drive to the rim including several from as far away as New York, Florida and Sweden. The following year the total number of registered visitors rose to over 1700, with travelers coming from as far away as Mexico City and Alaska. Easy access to the rim and heightened interest in the canyon provided valuable ammunition for winning over park officials in the months to come.

As 1932 wore on and anxiety over the Depression deepened, monument boosters suffered another minor setback when financial difficulties forced the Lions Club to disband. Although it was a disheartening blow to members and boosters, it marked the emergence of Mark Warner as the singular leader of the campaign. Since Warner had been one of the "original committee of three" chosen by the Lions Club to spearhead the movement, the Montrose Chamber of Commerce asked him to act as chairman of the "special Black Canon [sic.] Monument committee...empowered to act for the Chamber in all matters." Warner had been centrally involved from the inception of the idea until 1932 as he aided in surveying the monument and constructing the road, but it would be his persistence as a letter writer that finally won the day.

As the cool breeze of fall stirred across western Colorado, the boosters’ hard work began to pay off. In early October news came that Superintendent Roger Toll of Yellowstone National Park would be coming to the area. Having any Park Service representative visit would have been a step in the right direction, but bringing in the likes of

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39 No author indicated, "Registered at Black Canyon Rim" in 1930 & 1931, NARG 79, Box 568, Entry 7, File 1.
of Roger Toll, a major player in the process of monument and park creation across the West, was a major victory. On October 14, 1932 Wilcox accompanied the Park Service official to the canyon. Like so many before him, Toll was captivated by the canyon. From the moment he looked at the roiling waters of the Gunnison from far atop the canyon, Toll became a steadfast supporter, offering advice and convincing words whenever necessary. A little more than two weeks later, Toll filed his official report to Park headquarters in favor of monument status. He was confident that the canyon measured up to the standards set forth in the Antiquities Act, but cautioned Warner that they needed the full support of Congressman Taylor if they were to be successful.

Not convinced that sufficient celebrity had been drawn to the cause, Warner opened communications with the Colorado Association of Denver. The Association, which worked to promote “sound development of the state,” was duly impressed by their recent visit to the canyon and indicated that they were in full support of making it a national monument, but said it would be difficult to promote the canyon without “seeming to exaggerate.” With each passing day the groundswell of support for the monument grew. As Warner tirelessly drummed up public support for his cause, he opened crucial lines of communication with Congressman Taylor.

Far removed from the dusty town of Montrose, the National Park Service was internally debating the issue in Washington, D.C. Some, like Toll and Conrad Wirth, wholeheartedly supported the idea, while Cammerer continued to stand staunchly against

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it. Even though Cammerer had been willing earlier to offer words of encouragement when communicating with the citizens to western Colorado, a memo sent from his office to Albright tersely stated:

I can see no reason for establishing a national monument in this area. It is scenically so constituted and located that nothing can hurt it even if in private hands, and has no ‘historic or scientific’ values sufficient to merit such status. I am afraid that if we start a precedent for the establishment of such a monument merely for scenic reasons, we will be up against tremendous pressure in the future from other sources for similar recognition. I am against it.

At the top of the memo, an unknown person scrawled “I agree with Mr. Cammerer.”

Addressing Cammerer’s comment that the canyon has “no historic or scientific values,” Conrad Wirth asked in the margin, “What about Mt. McKinley, Glacier Bay etc.?” At the bottom of the memo Wirth wrote “This Canyon seems to be as ‘scientific’ as the Arches, Devil’s Tower, Pinnacles, Scotts Bluff and perhaps some others. To me the question is, does the magnitude and formation of a Canyon justify its establishment as a National Monument?” Once again, the debate here is not about protecting ecosystems or even plant and animal life, but rather centered around the canyon’s overall scenic value. As the debate continued in Washington, a growing number of local organizations joined in the fray as the letter writing campaign peaked.

Late in 1932 Warner instructed several groups to pen letters to the Director of the Park Service. Following his lead, on December 6, 1932, the Montrose County Board of Commissioners, City of Montrose, Uncompahgre Valley Water Users’ Association and the Montrose Rotary Club all sent letters and drafted resolutions in support of a

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monument. Shortly following this barrage of letters, Colorado Senator Lee Knous crafted and sent a letter to Albright giving his support to the plan.

While the support of all above mentioned organizations was important, that of the Water Users was especially so, as they held a vested interest in water of the Gunnison River and would not have supported the proposition had they thought their rights threatened. Since conservationists (Water Users) thought the canyon’s water maximally utilized, they had no truck with allowing the Park Service to protect the canyon’s breathtaking scenery. Here, Alfred Runte’s “worthless lands” hypothesis holds true—prior to approval, all potential developers evaluated the plan to see if it threatened their economic interests. Since, as it appeared to them at the time, the canyon’s resources were completely developed, the monument posed no threat.

The Water Users’ support raises another interesting point. On the western slope of the 1930s, those who favored conservation (which clearly the Water Users did) were not automatically opposed to preservation (Warner). Assuming that conflict always existed between conservationists and preservationists is presentist and inaccurate. Rather, preservation as practiced by Warner and other monument proponents was not yet fully formed as their primary concern lay with scenic, not biological preservation. Conflict would arise between the two ideologies, but not until mainstream preservation came to encompass an understanding of ecosystem protection, which, more often than not, lies in opposition to any conservation efforts.

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45 Montrose County Commissioners, City of Montrose, Uncompahgre Valley Water Users’ Association, and Montrose Rotary Club, to [Horace Albright, Washington, D.C.], 6 December 1932, NARG 79, Box 568, Entry 7, File 1.
It's not clear whether the bundle of letters received from western Colorado supporters, Toll's favorable report, Wirth's insistence on the value of the plan, or the weight of all the above began to win over the stubborn Cammerer. Although he had long stood against the creation of this monument, Cammerer forwarded a letter to the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation indicating that the Park Service was now giving the Black Canyon "tentative consideration" and wished to inquire on the status of the lands in question from a reclamation standpoint. In the meantime, he asked for a draft of a resolution creating a monument and asked Congressman Taylor for his support, which Taylor gave wholeheartedly. Following his investigation, R.F. Walter, Chief Engineer for the Bureau of Reclamation, stated that the fall of the river within the proposed limits of the monument was too great for a high capacity storage dam, and the river bed a few miles upstream from the monument was owned by the D. & R.G. Railroad, so reclamation projects were not feasible in the area. As such, the Bureau of Reclamation had no reservations about the creation of a monument. But as official after official gave support to the idea of creating a monument, the issue of Ute payment again surfaced.

After receiving information that the boundaries of the newly-proposed monument contained Ute lands governed by several treaties, Cammerer wavered on the issue, but he had earlier given Taylor the impression that the Park Service would support a

49 Here again, conservationists were not threatened by the creation of a monument. Their decision not to oppose the plan arose out of the limits of their technology. Had they more advanced engineering techniques and building materials it is likely that they would have opposed the plan as it would have limited future development.
proclamation—and Taylor was not one to back off easily. As Cammerer waffled, Wirth, Taylor and several western Colorado citizens searched for a way around the legal blockade. After working closely with the GLO, Wirth sent a memorandum to Director Albright outlining what he saw as possible options, but even this early supporter was disheartened by the prospects. Although the size of the monument had been reduced from the original 75,000 acres to just over 17,000, raising the funds to pay the Indians presented a formidable challenge, especially considering the tightening grip of the Great Depression. In his final reckoning, Wirth found but two viable options—have the locals raise the money themselves or discourage the project altogether. He seemed to favor the latter. Not long following, Albright informed Warner of the snag. Meanwhile, employees of the Park Service, “Indian Division” of the GLO, Taylor and Warner wrangled over the best course of action. Tensions heightened as the sun set on President Hoover’s term and a good opportunity to get a proclamation signed began to slip through their fingers.

It is here, as Roosevelt’s inauguration approached and the project seemed doomed, that the true nature of those involved emerges from the yellowed pages of hastily written memos and interdepartmental communications. Sitting in the warm sun of a College Park window, I was drawn deeper into the story, reading greedily from one page to the next. Some, like Conrad Wirth, who wanted the monument as much as any, were not so tempted to cheat the Utes out of what was legally theirs. Others, however,

53 Mark Warner, Montrose, Colorado, to [Edward Taylor, Glenwood Springs, Colorado], 31 January 1933, MWP.
including Congressman Taylor and several locals, looked to shady deals and tight
(perhaps even illegal) loopholes to circumvent the issue. Searching through similar cases,
Park Service officials investigated the creation of the Colorado National Monument
(created May 24, 1911) and found some rather startling information. While the land
contained therein was protected by the same treaties as was the land for the proposed
Black Canyon monument, they found that the GLO "Indian Division" had asked for, but
never received, the $1.25 per acre fee.\textsuperscript{54} This fact would prove tempting fruit for some,
Taylor included, who thought that they should go ahead with the proclamation and let the
courts sort out the details.\textsuperscript{55} Taylor's optimism, however, suffered a crushing blow when
the Park Service informed him that the Secretary of the Interior would not pass a
proclamation on to the President largely because of the Ute treaty issue.

Saddened by the news, Taylor again took up his pen as he relayed the
disappointing information to Reverend Warner. Taylor conceded that "we are at the end
of our row so far as getting any action during this Administration is concerned... but I am
not going to give the matter up." Still stinging from defeat, Taylor admitted "It is a queer
situation. The fact is that the Colorado National Monument (which I succeeded in
inducing President Taft to create) contains about 15,000 acres and is in the former Ute
Indian Reservation. Nobody has ever yet raised the question of the payment of $1.25 an
acre to the Utes for that land." Although to Warner the wily Taylor conceded defeat, he
was not yet done lobbying for the issue in Washington.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} Mulladay of the National Park Service, Washington, D.C., to [Conrad Wirth, Washington, D.C.], 8
February 1933, NARG 79, Box 568, Entry 7, File 1.
\textsuperscript{55} Edward Taylor, Washington, D.C., to [Mark Warner, Montrose, Colorado], 21 February 1933 NARG 79,
Box 568, Entry 7, File 1; Conrad Wirth, Washington, D.C., to [Horace Albright, Washington D.C.], 10
February 1933, NARG 79, Box 568, Entry 7, File 1.
\textsuperscript{56} Edward Taylor, Washington D.C., to [Mark Warner, Montrose, Colorado], 21 February 1933, NARG 79,
Box 568, Entry 7, File 1.
Just days before Franklin Roosevelt took the oath of office, Taylor was again talking to anyone who would listen about the monument. On an early March morning he visited Director Albright where the two had a “kind of heart to heart talk” about the matter. After concluding their discussion, Taylor headed for Secretary Wilbur’s office where he again made his case. Taylor’s appeal must have been a strong one, for after discussing the matter for some time, they sent for Director Albright and instructed him to bring the final version of the proclamation. Wilbur then agreed to place the proclamation before President Hoover. On his last full day in office, March 2, 1933, President Hoover “automatically signed it among hundreds of other matters as one of the very last things that he did before going out of office. It really was so rapid and so favorable that I could hardly realize it myself,” Taylor later stated.57

Elated at the news of their success, western slope citizens patted themselves on the back for a job well done. Just days following the signing of the Proclamation, Warner wrote a letter of appreciation to Congressmen Taylor. Warner was certain that the monument would soon “rank high among our national scenic, and scientific attractions.” Unsure of what arm twisting Taylor was able to pull off, Warner mentioned, “Personally I shall be interested to learn how you were able to satisfy the terms of the Ute Indian treaty in order to secure the immediate establishment of the monument by Presidential proclamation.”58 Just a few days prior, the Denver Post relayed news of the signing of the proclamation in a three-paragraph article in which it too raised the issue of Ute payment. According to the Post, the land was covered by the Ute treaty “which provides that the government shall pay $1.25 an acre for lands diverted to new uses, and a

57 Montrose Daily Press, 7 November, 1933.
58 Mark Warner, Montrose, Colorado, to [Edward Taylor, Washington, D.C.], 7 March, 1933, MWP.
subsequent adjustment must be made under this requirement." The Utes, who were also suffering their own prolonged version of the Great Depression, certainly could have used the money immediately. In fact the issue was not settled until 1958, when the Indian Claims Commission forced the United States to pay the Utes for their land.

Not willing to rest on his laurels, Warner immediately began making preparations for the monument dedication and inquiring about funding. Although Warner and others were initially motivated by preserving the Canyon’s scenic splendor, their eventual success opened valuable doors to federal funding throughout the leanest years of the Depression. In part to show their gratitude, and certainly to lube the wheels of the appropriation machine, locals kept in cordial contact with the crucial Congressmen and Park Service employees through 1933, hoping that they would receive consideration in the following year’s budget. Their campaign of flattery was so effective that Director Cammerer later commented that while in Montrose he met “some of the best people in the world, whom I intend to keep as our [the Service’s] friends and as my personal friends.”

As funding for Roosevelt’s works projects increased, so too did the money flowing through the Black Canyon National Monument. By 1935 the funding spigots had been opened wide as the Park Service appropriated some $125,000 for road building that year alone. Subsequently, the Public Works Administration earmarked $156,000, $50,000, and $50,000 for 1937, 1938 and 1939 respectively to continue road construction.

59 *The Denver Post*, 3 March, 1933.
60 Norman Chamberlain, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Uintah Agency, phone interview with author, 7 July, 2002, notes in my possession.
and improvement. Additionally, for the years between 1938 and 1940 a temporary CCC camp squatted near the monument as workers improved the trail and road system. The monument gave western slope citizens a sense of pride and a warm feeling of recognition, but it also brought them bread and beans when they needed them most.

Just as the monument was coming to play a central role in the western slope economy, Americans shifted their attention to the increasingly aggressive behavior of Adolf Hitler. The outbreak of World War II marks an important transition for the role of the Black Canyon National Monument in the lives of Coloradoans. As the war heated up and the U.S. economy awoke from its decade-long slumber, locals no longer needed the cash cow as they once had. Uncle Sam put thousands of young men to work, and those who did not find themselves toting an M-1 or swabbing the deck of a battleship had a plethora of jobs to choose from. Of equal importance to the future of the monument was the loss of Reverend Mark T. Warner as champion of its cause; the U.S. Army sent him abroad to bring hope and God to our fighting men. Even though the canyon's archival record falls silent following the outbreak of World War II and Warner's departure, he had initiated and sustained a movement that would, decades later, culminate first in the creation of a wilderness area in the Black Canyon and by 1999, a more inclusive and diverse national park.

For two decades the Black Canyon National Monument went relatively unchanged as outdoor enthusiasts and monument caretakers enjoyed the protection brought by monument status. However, the passage of CRSP and the subsequent planning of the Curecanti Unit meant that big changes loomed in the canyon's not-so-distant future. How, if at all, would local and national preservationists respond to these

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62 No author indicated, "Program of Employment Stabilization Projects," circa 1940, MWP.
developments? Their response, or lack of response, tells us that ecosystem management and protection had not yet penetrated fully mainstream preservation.

Through the efforts and urgings of the Bureau of Reclamation, western farmers and power companies, planners slated the construction of three major hydroelectric/water storage dams during the 1960s and 1970s. None of the dams was to be built within the monument itself, but the nearest was to be located less than two miles upstream from its eastern boundary. Upon completion of these dams, the personality of the river would forever be changed. No longer would spring bring wild water tumbling across the dark rocks of the canyon floor. No longer would eager swimmers be tempted by the warm low waters of the Gunnison River in August. The flow would be “managed” as the constipated river poured year-long from the frigid bowels of three dams that had been wedged tightly between the canyon walls.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, opposition to the Unit came only from the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and one impassioned writer for Outdoor Life. The Sierra Club, Isaac Walton League and other environmental groups remained silent on the issue. Just a few hundred miles away, however, environmentalists fought vigorously to prevent the inundation of Utah’s Dinosaur National Monument. Again, we should ask why there was such concern over threats to one canyon and not another The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that much of Dinosaur was to be completely flooded, thus its scenic splendor lost. The Gunnison’s dams, however, were all constructed upstream of the monument and posed no immediate threat to its scenic value. Blue Mesa, Crystal and Morrow point dams would leave no unsightly “bathtub ring” within the monument itself, therefore the dams posed no serious threat to preservationists’ conception of what national monument

\[63\] The phrase is Dan Flores’.
status protected. By the time preservationists realized just what had been lost at the Black Canyon it was too late. Soured from this experience, they applied steady pressure from the 1970s up to the present to ensure that the canyon would receive the protection it deserves.

Meanwhile, as the town of Montrose steadily grew, resource development began threatening the canyon’s rim. Perhaps now realizing what had been lost through the Curecanti Unit, energetic locals and concerned Park officials fought to protect it. Fortunately for preservationists, the prior passage the Wilderness Preservation Act in 1964 established a category of land that lent serious protection by prohibiting commercial
logging, permanent roads, mining, grazing, and the use of motorized equipment. After several years of effective campaigning, wilderness proponents in western Colorado were rewarded, when, in 1976, Congress designated 11,000 acres of BLM canyon land as official wilderness. Again, in 1982, Congress added another 20,000 acres of Wilderness Study area to the Gunnison Gorge. By the late 1970s, the growing understanding of and appreciation for ecosystem management and complete protection was gaining a foothold in western Colorado and would soon manifest itself in the creation of a national park dedicated to protecting both the scenic and biotic splendor of the canyon.

Still concerned that the precious Gunnison River was not safe from development, locals, led by river rafter Hank Hotze of Gunnison River Expeditions, began asking that a major stretch of the Gunnison be designated as a wild and scenic river in 1979. Passed in 1968, the Wild and Scenic River Act offers a broad umbrella of protection for rivers that meet the scenic, recreational, geologic, historic, fish and wildlife and cultural criteria set forth in the legislation. Once deemed wild and scenic, a river is “preserved in free-flowing condition,” forever free from the threats of dams, diversions and general

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67 Hank Hotze, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Parks, Historic Preservation, and Recreation of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate, One Hundred Fourth Congress, Second Session on S. 1424.
monkey-wrenching with the natural flow regime. For two decades, the debate over the wild and scenic issue would be an integral component of the journey to gaining park status for the Black Canyon.

Interest in increased protection of the Gunnison River deepened, when, in 1985, Congressman Mike Strang began coordinating meetings between government officials and locals to form a consensus on how best to protect the Black Canyon. Local response to the meetings demonstrated a consensus among the communities of western Colorado for a higher level of protection than that lent by monument status.™ Following the urgings of his constituents, Strang introduced H.R. 4472 in 1986 to create the Black Canyon National Park Complex, but it soon foundered in committee.™ Although Strang’s efforts did not culminate in the passage of any legislation, his community meetings did get the ball rolling on the park issue. Unfortunately for Strang, his career as Congressmen came to an end when he lost his bid for re-election in 1987. As conservationists and preservationists thrust and parried over the future of the Black Canyon and the crestfallen Strang stepped from office, a new champion for preservation emerged.

Sporting a traditional Native American ponytail, wearing blue jeans, and sitting atop a thundering Harley Davidson, Senator Ben Knighthorse Campbell worked for more than a decade to get the Black Canyon National Monument upgraded to a national park. Not long after taking office, Campbell called together interested parties and formed the

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68 http://ipl.unm.edu/cwl/fedbook/wildrive.html.
70 Briefing Statement, History of Legislative Efforts to Redesignate Black Canyon, 24 May, 1996, NARG 79, Box 2.
Black Canyon Advisory Committee to research how best to protect the canyon.\(^{71}\)

Campbell also asked in 1989 that the National Park Service conduct a study of the land between the western boundary of the monument and the Gunnison’s confluence with the North Fork of the Gunnison. The purpose of the survey was to determine if the Lower Gunnison Gorge “contained significant natural, cultural and recreational resources” to qualify as a national park, and to determine if the canyon “would qualify for national park status were any or all of the study area added to the existing monument.” NPS officials concluded that the Lower Gunnison Gorge was “nationally significant in relation to the purpose for which Black Canyon was established.” But it also found that if these “lands were not added [when and if a park was created], the monument would not meet the standards of a ‘national park,’” as it would not contain sufficient cultural, wildlife and scenic diversity.\(^{72}\) The report also indicated that the stretch of river included in the study contained “remarkable scenery, geologic, fish and wildlife, and recreational values” and found it “eligible for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.”\(^{73}\) Drawing from public comments; support from the nearby towns of Delta, Montrose, Paonia and Gunnison; and agency reports from the NPS, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and BLM, Campbell drafted and introduced H.R. 1321 in March of 1991.

Campbell intended his H.R. 1321 to achieve four basic goals. First, H.R. 1321 would rename the monument at the Black Canyon a national park. Second, Campbell’s bill would have created a 64,139-acre National Conservation Area between the

\(^{71}\) Hotze testimony, subcommittee hearing on S. 1424, Montrose, Colorado.


\(^{73}\) Homer L. Rouse, Regional Director of Rocky Mountain Region, Denver, CO to [All interested parties, August 1, 1990], Subcommittee Hearing on H.R. 1321.
downstream boundary of the monument and the Gunnison’s confluence with the North Fork. Third, the bill would designate more than 26 miles of the Gunnison River as wild and scenic. Finally, the bill would also establish 21,038 acres of BLM-managed wilderness within the National Conservation Area. Campbell, with the best of intentions, tried to please too many people with H.R. 1321, but powerful interested parties opposed key portions of the bill.

To begin with, the Park Service had two serious issues with the bill. First, as they stated in their report, the Black Canyon National Monument would meet park criteria only if the Lower Gunnison Gorge was included within the newly drawn boundary, but H.R. 1321 added that land as a BLM-managed National Conservation Area. The Park Service was also rightfully concerned over the language contained in section six of the bill. Although that section of the proposal designated a portion of the Gunnison River as wild and scenic, it stipulated that “no water rights or the reservation of water which would expand on the existing reserved water right for the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument shall be created by this designation.”

To those, including the NPS, interested in protecting the integrity of the river, this clause posed a major threat both to the future health of the Gunnison River and to the sanctity of the Wild and Scenic River Act. If it passed, the Gunnison would be made wild and scenic on paper only, thereby setting a dangerous precedent. Fred Wetlaufer, representing the grassroots organization Western Colorado Congress, David Simon of the National Parks and Conservation Association, Brien F. Culhane of the Wilderness Society, Hank Hotze of Trout Unlimited, and Todd Robertson of the Colorado

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74 Lexis-Nexis, Full Text of Bills, 102nd Congress; 1st Session in the House of Representatives, H.R. 1321, Section 6, subsection C. 1991. The 1933 creation of the monument guaranteed a minimum of 300cfs.
Environmental Coalition, all agreed that the language regarding the wild and scenic designation was detrimental to both the park plan and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.\textsuperscript{75}

Summing up the Sierra Club's position nicely, Debbie Sease testified, "That which H.R. 1321 gives with one hand in the form of designations, it takes away with the other hand by denying basic organic act protections for each designation—a denial of federal water rights for the Wild and Scenic River, Wilderness, National Park and NCA."\textsuperscript{76}

Groups favoring the language of H.R. 1321 included the Delta Tourism Council, the Blue Ribbon Coalition, the Colorado Water Conservation Board as well as the cities of Montrose, Delta, Gunnison, Crawford and others. The testimony and prepared statements made by those listed above clearly indicates their motivations and concerns. The Delta Tourism Council, Blue Ribbon Coalition and each of the cities that supported the bill did so hoping that park status would increase tourism and strengthen economies. The Blue Ribbon Coalition, which represents a large number of ORV users, supported the bill because the popular Lower Gunnison Gorge would remain open to ORV use. It is equally clear that none of the above groups had any serious issues with the implications of wild and scenic language—again more tourist traffic rather than true protection provided their motivation. Finally, the support that the bill received from those dedicated to water use is telling. Both the Uncompahgre Valley Water Users' Association and the Colorado River Energy Distributors Association believed that the wild and scenic designation was too much of a threat to their pre-existing water rights. In other words, Campbell's move to deem the Gunnison River wild and scenic failed to impress both the environmental community and those interested in resource development.

\textsuperscript{75} Testimony before subcommittee on HR 1321, pages 130-242.
\textsuperscript{76} Debbie Sease, prepared statement for subcommittee hearing on 1321, page 163.
So three general camps formed following Campbell’s introduction of H.R. 1321. At one end of the debate lay local rafters, fishermen and environmentalists who supported true protection for the river and the creation of the national park. Somewhere in the middle lay those driven by a desire to boost tourism. They all supported upgrading the monument as a national park and likewise supported the wild and scenic designation, regardless of the actual protection it afforded. At the other end of the spectrum, power interests and water users did not perceive the idea of the bill as a great threat, but they showed significant concern over the implications for wild and scenic status. Sadly for Campbell, however, opposition from both ends of the spectrum proved too strong and the bill never made it to the floor for a vote.

Not deterred by this defeat, Campbell drafted yet another bill and submitted it to the second session of the 103rd Congress. This bill, much like H.R. 1321, contained four major management clauses. Just as the previous bill, S. 2284 was designed to rename the canyon a national park, create a National Conservation area, designate part of the river wild and scenic, but it also sought to create a Curecanti National Recreation Area upstream from the monument. The bill also dropped the wilderness proposal that H.R. 1321 included. Campbell did not intend to pass S. 2284 in the 103rd Congress; rather he hoped that by conducting hearings and generating debate, he could craft a bill that all parties could live with.\(^7\) Hardened by another year’s experience, Campbell and his team of advisors returned yet again to the drawing board.

For nearly a decade, Senator Campbell had been engaged in a high-stakes chess game as he inserted and removed key clauses in an attempt to isolate pockets of

\(^7\) Congressional Record, Senate, 14 July, 1994. NARG 79, Box 2, Folder S. 2284, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument.
resistance and support. Patiently, he tested his opponents' defenses, found out whom he could lean on and whom he could not. What had Campbell learned about the parties and issues involved? Basically, he saw the wild and scenic river designation as the major hurdle to crafting a successful piece of legislation. On one hand the environmental community strongly opposed the weak wild and scenic language used in H.R. 1321 and S. 2284. But if Campbell strengthened the language he ran the serious risk of alienating influential power and agribusiness interests, both major forces to be reckoned with in the West. Realizing that his previous attempts represented an effort to "be all things to all people" that "unfortunately resulted in nothing more than printed chaos," Campbell hoped that his 1995 S. 1424 would finally provide a solution to this conundrum.⁷⁸

Reflecting the tightfisted mood of Congress and tempered by years of heated debate, Campbell saw S. 1424 as an innovative approach that would protect the "unique natural resources for future generations in the most fiscally responsible manner possible."⁷⁹ Just as previous versions had, S. 1424 would redesignate the monument as a park, create a National Conservation Area and establish the Curecanti National Recreation Area. Deviating from past approaches, S. 1424 would also create a Denver and Rio Grande National Historic Site and, more importantly, establish the Black Canyon National Park Complex.

In November of 1995, under the headline: "With Resource Budgets Tight, Sen. Campbell Tries 'Park Lite,'" the Congressional Monitor recounted Campbell's efforts. In addition to creating a sort of "hybrid" system of management between the NPS, BLM and USFS, Campbell's S. 1424 dropped the wilderness area and the wild and scenic

⁷⁸ Congressional Record, Senate, 19 November, 1995. NARG 79, Box 2, File S. 1424 "Black Canyon National Park Complex."
⁷⁹ Ibid.
designation, which, according to the *Monitor*, had “caused killer disputes between water rights interests and conservationists.”

Knowing that he would face serious opposition from environmental groups and locals, Campbell slated a subcommittee hearing in Montrose to discuss S. 1424 in May of 1996.

For the same reasons as before, essentially the hope that park status would bolster tourism, local business interests threw their support behind Campbell at the May 1996. Echoing the sentiments of western Colorado water users, Randy Seaholm of the Colorado Water Conservation Board was pleased by the new look of Campbell’s bill. According to Seaholm, the wild and scenic river designation contained in previous bills was of major concern to water user interests. Seaholm also admitted that

> the removal of the wilderness and wild and scenic river designations are significant concessions which we believe, in combinations with the language which is currently in section 6 of the bill should alleviate many of the water user concerns. However, we recognize that these concessions will more than likely create opposition from local environmental organizations who desire stronger and more formal protection for the area.  

Seaholm was certainly right about that.

After enduring countless meetings and trips to Washington D.C., the environmental community and locals were outraged by the removal of the wilderness and wild and scenic designation from S. 1424. Professional Gunnison River guide and Western Slope Environmental Resource Council spokesman River Williams was adamant that S. 1424 did not offer enough protection to the Gunnison River, “which is the linchpin

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in the entire tourism and recreation industry” in the area. Disappointed with accomplishments of the last decade, Williams concluded that

We can do better than this. The original proposal developed through consensus by just about everyone in this room, Republicans and Democrats, has a good balance between development and preservation, between economics and the environment. Senator Campbell, members of the committee, we are asking you that you reconsider our original proposal. Put wilderness back in the bill. Put wild and scenic back on the river.\footnote{River Williams, Western Slope Environmental Council, Subcommittee Meeting on S. 1424, May 31, 1996, 18.}

Also frustrated with the loss of ground, Fred Wetlaufer of the Western Colorado Congress shook his finger at Campbell for allowing powerful outside influences to undermine the legislation’s original intent. “In 1992, there was no opposition to wilderness or wild river designation at the subcommittee hearing, yet there seems to be an undercurrent of opposition to these concepts,” Wetlaufer argued. Supporting Wetlaufer’s take on the issue, Club 20’s Greg Walcher recollected a Washington meeting where a previous proposal, one containing wild and scenic designation and a wilderness, was “torpedoed by paid lobbyists from national offices.” Also exasperated by his long and fruitless involvement in the debate, Hank Hotze asked, “When will our representatives in Washington enact legislation to provide ample protection for the Black Canyon of the Gunnison? It is now time we perform the prescribed tasks required to preserve this hallowed place for future generations.”\footnote{Ibid., 20, 35, 41.}

Speaking on behalf of the Sierra Club, Maggie Fox commented that the environmental community had hoped for a park complex, within which there would be this bold new plan for cooperative management that included a national park, a wild and scenic river, a wilderness, a national recreation area, and a national conservation area, which, if
we were able to accomplish that, would be unparalleled in this county. Unfortunately, after 12 years, we are not there, and I think your bill reflects that. It appears to me to be a pared down version of the dream.\(^84\)

According to Fox’s philosophy, the standard of management on non-park lands is protection of the natural environment to a reasonable degree. However, she continued, “That is not what we do with national parks. We do not protect them to a reasonable degree. We protect them to an unreasonable degree...Clearly the dream is not fulfilled, and whether or not it is best to go forward with half a loaf is probably not so clear to me.”

Certainly taken aback by Fox’s bold statement, Campbell retorted, “We have to continue to ask ourselves if half a loaf is better than no loaf.”\(^85\)

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\(^84\) Ibid., 27.

\(^85\) Ibid., 29, 30.
Realizing that gaining a consensus on the water issue was next to impossible, Campbell tried yet another approach in 1996 when he managed to attach an amendment to an omnibus parks bill that would rename the monument a park. Once again, Campbell’s work had been for naught as President Clinton threatened to veto the bill unless the amendment was taken off.

A glutton for punishment, Senator Campbell, this time with the aid of Colorado Representative Scott McInnis, introduced S. 323 in 1999. Frustrated by his losing streak on the issue, Campbell commented, “It was sometimes very exasperating. Every time we thought we had the right version, some group would oppose it.” Drawing from his past failures, Campbell hoped that the 1999 version would be acceptable to all parties involved. Similar to several of his earlier attempts, S. 323 would rename the monument a park and establish a 17,700 wilderness reserve within a newly created National Conservation Area and establish a Curecanti National Recreation Area. Realizing that opposition to wild and scenic designation was too great, Campbell decided that half a loaf was better than no loaf at all and forfeited the controversial designation. Although the bill did not expressly strengthen protection for the river, it did contain stronger language for securing water for the park. Section 10-b of the bill stated that “Any new water right that the Secretary determines is necessary for the purposes of this Act shall be established in accordance with the procedural and substantive requirements of the laws of the State of Colorado.”

The proposal showed early signs of promise as both the House and Senate easily approved the bill. Finally, on October 15, 1999 President Clinton had sitting on his desk

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the bill creating a national park at the Black Canyon. Western slope citizens anxiously waited, unsure if their latest efforts would bear fruit. On October 19, 1999, with Campbell and McInnis standing behind him in the oval office, President Clinton signed the bill. The new Black Canyon National Park encompasses more than 30,000 acres, of which 4,400 are wilderness. In addition to creating a national park, the bill also set aside some 57,000 acres of adjoining land for the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area and established over 17,000 acres of wilderness within the NCA.

So how does the creation of the Black Canyon National Park in 1999 fit into Alfred Runte's "worthless lands" hypothesis? I would argue that it doesn't. Although his hypothesis does work well to explain how conservationists and preservationists agreed about making a monument, it does not work as well in explaining how and why the monument was upgraded to a park. First, the definition of what constitutes "worthless" changes over time. Worthless meant something far different in the 1930s than what it means today. For example, the Bureau of Reclamation admittedly lacked the ability to dam the lower canyon in the 1930s, so that area held little or no economic potential for them. As a result, they did not fight the creation of a monument within the canyon. However, after engineering feats like Hoover Dam, Glenn Canyon Dam etc., the Bureau came to possess sufficient know-how and money to dam lower reaches of the Black Canyon, which in turn changed how they viewed it. In the struggle between those who wanted to further protect the canyon and those who wanted it to remain more accessible to development, the preservationists came out on top. In short, Runte's worthless lands
thesis does not apply to the creation of the Black Canyon National Park as the land now has realizable economic potential, but was nonetheless upgraded to national park status.  

It’s still too early to judge fully what impact park status will have on the canyon, but some interesting developments are emerging. In early 2001, concerned Park officials began asking for changes in the flow patterns of the Gunnison River. While they had long realized that the upstream dams significantly impacted the character and function of the river, they had relatively few options to rectify the situation. Now, however, the Park Service holds its strongest hand ever for protecting the Black Canyon as it leans on the National Park Service Act, Wilderness Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act to provide protection for the Gunnison River and its gorge. Testifying to the effectiveness of these legislative pillars is the fact that Park Service managers at the Black Canyon now enjoy sufficient bargaining leverage to occasionally to affect the day-to-day operations of the dams that have for so long threatened the river.

What lessons emerge from the seventy-year odyssey to protect the canyon? The impassioned words and dedication of those who fought to preserve the sanctity of the Black Canyon shows, once again, that this landscape evokes strong human emotion. Pre-historic Indians and the Utes feared or respected the canyon and rarely ventured into its depths. Some white Americans, driven by a complex web of emotions, felt a deep-seated

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88 Several investigations over the past two decades have been made to estimate the feasibility of downstream storage facilities on the Gunnison River. The most recent battle to protect the canyon from development, however, has centered over developers of the TDX Corporation attempting to sell small plots of land near the entrance to the East Portal. Thus far park officials have successfully thwarted the efforts. See Montrose Daily Press 10-17-99, 7-23-99 and 9-28-99.

desire to tame the Gunnison River and subdue its canyon. Others were compelled to sanctify, to set aside and protect this most unique place, while others saw yet another opportunity to attract valuable tourist dollars.

Furthermore, the process through which the canyon became first a monument and later a national park reflects the maturation of the preservationist movement on the western slope. Early in the process, in fact until the 1970s, mainstream preservationists and the NPS were primarily concerned with protecting the scenic splendor of the canyon as reflected both through the language they used and through the overall lack of opposition to the Curecanti Storage Project. By the 1970s, however, mainstream preservation had been imbued, if only partially, with appreciation for ecosystem preservation as espoused by practitioners of deep ecology. The relative late development of this appreciation meant that conservationists and preservationists were not always at loggerheads. Instead, friction between them came only with preservationists’ attempts to protect all aspect of the natural world, not just its scenic wonders.

Over the course of the twentieth century many, if not most, of the citizens of the western slope have used the local environment, especially the moving landscape of the Black Canyon, in the process of defining themselves. Through their contact with the canyon some came to see themselves as conquistadors—winners in the millennia-long struggle to escape the confines of nature. Others, drawing from the work of engineers and builders, were able to use the environment to reinforce their agrarian identities. Finally, some, like Reverend Mark Warner and Hank Hotze, saw in the canyon an opportunity to save the remains of what they saw as God’s creation from the gnashing teeth of modern
America. The struggle between conservationists and preservationists to define the Black Canyon reveals yet again the ability of this landscape to evoke powerful responses.
Conclusion

Nearly a century ago, Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch and later, Ferdinand Braudel challenged the very foundations of history by championing radically new approaches. Drawing liberally, if not cautiously, from neighboring fields, they argued, could better equip historians to address exciting questions seldom pondered. Their ideas, once combined with the “new social history” of the 1960s and 1970s, prepared the ground for the growth of a new subfield—environmental history

What is environmental history? This is a question I often find myself answering. The most direct answer, and the one that people seem to understand the best, is that environmental history is the study of the relationship between people and the places where they live. More than that, environmental history offers tools that can illuminate how the very places we live, the places we call home, impact the way we live, act and feel. Employing an environmental approach also often demonstrates how our attitudes about a given place shape our actions toward it. Through the preceding pages I have sought to demonstrate a few of the ways that the environment of western Colorado generally, and the Black Canyon of the Gunnison specifically, have shaped the human history of the region, and how, in turn, people have reshaped the local environment.

Although archaeologists, paleoecologists and historians still struggle to make sense of pre-contact America, we are closer now than we have ever been to understanding how Indian peoples lived and why some of their societies did not persist. Combining what we know about the earliest inhabitants of western Colorado with the fairly recent work of paleoecologists reveals that shifts in climate over the past ten
thousand years have played a major role in forcing subsistence adaptation, and perhaps
even driving some people past the fragile bounds of survival. The second lesson revealed
over this millennia-long saga is the importance of diversification in the long-term health
and viability in human existence. Over the past ten thousand years, more diversified
peoples have either eclipsed or co-opted more specialized ones.

Both of these messages are a bit hard to sell to a people who daily enjoy the
benefits of "climate controlled" automobiles and the endless bounty and diversity offered
by the neighborhood grocery store stocking produce from around the world. However, we
are not so far removed from these processes as we might think. When the stubborn
western sky refuses year after year to relinquish the rain that we count on, or when the
menacing winter skies dump, all at once, the moisture we had so long been denied, we
remember, if only momentarily, that we are not so far above the places we live.

The second point is no less difficult to drive home. What we forget, or simply
don't see, are the hidden costs of the bounty created by our remaking of place. Rachel
Carson realized early some of damning consequences that could follow when people
become over-specialized producers. On the western slope, at least, scientists are just now
beginning to tally up the hidden costs of that specialization as the effects of selenium
contamination and salinization threaten to erase the progress of the past century.

More than showing that major climate shifts affected Paleoindians or Archaic
hunters, employing an environmental la longue duree approach to the history of western
Colorado reveals another, even more important, trend. Spanning at least two cultures and
hundreds of years, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison has played a crucial role in the
human history of the region. Beginning at least with the Utes and continuing to the
present, area humans have relied upon this unique topography to define who they are and to understand how they fit into the world around them. A body of evidence reveals that the canyon played a crucial role in how Utes understood both the physical and spiritual world. They constructed a series of stories, built vision quest sites, chipped and pecked religious petroglyphs onto the canyon wall all in an effort to prevent people from frequenting the canyon. Their reluctance to enter the chasm is silently reflected in the lack of archeological evidence there.

Here, on the western slope of Colorado, the Gunnison River and the Black Canyon offer yet another interesting glance at the articulation between two of the most important threads of environmental thought in the twentieth century—conservation and preservation. To early town-builders and politicians, the canyon was an obstacle to overcome and an enemy to conquer in their quest to transform the desiccated valley into an irrigated Eden. Confidently adhering to the conservationist doctrine, some went forth to do just that. Their attitudes and beliefs have forever been carved into the canyon walls—three dams and one diversion tunnel stand as their monuments. But they were not all. Beginning in the late 1920s, a growing number of the people of the western slope came to recognize the beauty and value of the canyon. These early preservationists, led by Mark T. Warner, saw the canyon as a place to be protected as they thought God had created it. They were not, however, concerned with, nor did they have any real notion of, ecology. Their main concern was to protect canyon’s scenery, not its biological diversity. The understanding and appreciate for ecosystem preservation would not come to the western slope until the 1970s, as evidenced by the creation of a wilderness preserve at the
canyon. Lastly, the most recent debate over making the monument a park gave at least equal, if not more, attention to protecting biotic communities.

Most recently, two visions of the canyon have competed to control the destiny of a single landscape. The results of this conflict are readily apparent flying over the canyon. Dams dominate the chasm's upper end, while they are conspicuously absent from its lower reaches. To many a park visitor and Gunnison River fisherman, the dams and the precious stores of water they hold have ruined the canyon forever. For others, those who still see growth potential and increased farm revenue, the canyon's potential is being squandered as unused water tumbles across the canyon floor. The recent struggles between farmers fighting to water their crops and park officials fighting to water the canyon show that the contest to define this landscape is far from over.

Perhaps now, after more than a century of western Coloradoans trying to wring their lifeblood from the soil, we should recognize that a national park provides a vital link in creating a more sustainable local economy. The need for economic diversification increases every day as the soil continues to collect and store poisons that will have serious long-term consequences for any agricultural efforts. We should not forget that the people who have been the most successful on the western slope were those most willing and able to practice a wide range of subsistence activities. Rather than turn a blind eye, we should listen to the history of this place, let it fill our hearts and imaginations and more importantly, inform our actions. For the thousands of years that have passed, and for the thousands of years to come, the nature of this place will play a role in shaping human history.
Appendix A

“When the Gunnison Tunnel Goes Through”

Of Late I have been thinking and perhaps you have too,
Of the many things we will do, of the things we will see
And the changes there’ll be when the Gunnison Tunnel goes through,
Our farmers will proper and raise immense crops,
And in town they will jingle their dough;
Our business men here will collect all bad debts,
When the Gunnison Tunnel goes through.

We’ll have stream boats and ferry’s
To carry our freight at a reasonable freight rate too;
What a cinch that will be on the D. & R. G.
When the Gunnison Tunnel goes through.

Uncle Sam will need more Surveyor’s out here,
He will send young, single, handsome men too
What a snap what will be for the girls of Montrose,
When the Gunnison Tunnel goes through.

This forest reserve gang will be on the bum,
Our sheep men, our cow men will join hands as one,
For there will be lots of feed,
For all the stock we can run,
When the Gunnison Tunnel goes through.

Our Streets will be paved with the cars running through,
Called the Torrence electric railway;
Jim Taylor and Newton will wear helmets in blue,
When the Gunnison Tunnel goes through.

The committee from Washington soon will be here,
To investigate and to report,
Our citizens, are going to turn themselves loose,
And show them, that we’re the right sort;
We will get out the Band, we’ll parade every day,
We’ll have gray, Kyle, Bell, Catlin,
To lead in the fray;
We’ll bring in the cow-boys to wind up the day,
And we will keep things hot while they stay;
We will give a great banquet, champagne and cigars,
Our ladies will smile on the too;
We will have Reeves tell the stories,
And Jolly them on,
Then that Tunnel, can’t help but go through
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