

Colorado's Canyon Country Wilderness Proposal

The Palisade

Take a drive along Highway 141, and you are at the bottom of Unaweep Canyon, the most spectacular glacial valley in Colorado. Deer and elk by the hundreds routinely graze in this pristine valley during winter. When you add in the Unaweep Seep with its rare and unusual plants, the diverse habitats that support varied wildlife, the scenic views of the La Sal Mountains from the ridge tops, and the nearby petroglyphs and dinosaur fossils, you realize this is a unique and magnificent place.

Collin Weller, Grand Junction

Citizens Wilderness Proposal: 26,914 acres
BLM Wilderness Study Area: 26,738 acres
BLM Field Office: The Palisade is located in Mesa County, north of Gateway, Colorado and approximately 50 miles southwest of Grand Junction. It is bordered to the west by the Dolores River and to the east by Unaweep Canyon.

Wilderness Qualities

The proposed Palisade Wilderness sits astride the edge of the Uncompahgre Uplift, forming an ecological bridge between the red slickrock tributaries of the Dolores River and the lush aspen and ponderosa forests of Unaweep Canyon.

On the eastern border, the broad, U-shaped Unaweep Canyon was carved into the Uncompahgre Plateau by the ancient Gunnison and Colorado Rivers. The walls of Unaweep Canyon consist of stark black and gray schists, gneiss, and granite which tower to heights of 4,000 feet above the canyon floor. This great relief causes similarly dramatic diversity in climate and vegetation. As the elevation rises from 4,500 to more than 9,400 feet, rainfall increases from less than 10 inches per year to more than 30. As expected, plant and animal life also varies tremendously; few places offer such a wide range of natural characteristics over so small an area.

The western portion of The Palisade is a barren basin of low relief cut through the Chinle and Wingate Formations along the Dolores River. At the edges of the basin, on all sides, stand numerous hoodoos - columns of soft shale, capped by rocks of a more resistant nature. The shale is a rainbow of color, predominantly milky blue, tinted in places with green or purple, and capped with red or brown stains. Springs feed two permanent streams in this area, giving rise to strings of pools and waterfalls shaded by cottonwoods. The benchlands are dominated by

blackbrush, a low desert shrub with sparse gray-green leaves, and scattered piñon pines and juniper.

The Palisade itself is a narrow fin of sandstone surrounded on all sides by vertical walls of Wingate Sandstone and capped with the carved slickrock of the Entrada Formation. Peregrine falcons have at times nested on the sheer cliffs. Stands of Douglas fir dot the north slopes of this fin, and hoodoos line its western slopes. The eastern flank of The Palisade descends more prosaically into piñon and juniper-covered slopes and shallow canyons. The low, open slopes comprise important winter range for the large herds of elk and deer which roam Piñon Mesa. An estimated 2,000 deer and 900 elk winter in the WSA.

Part of the eastern boundary of The Palisade runs along West Creek at the lower end of Unaweep Canyon. This creek and its immediate surroundings represent an ecological anomaly; cold air descending Unaweep Canyon carries with it a microclimate derived from much higher elevations. Consequently, the plant life along the creek is representative also of the higher



Hikers exploring the CWP. (Mark Pearson)

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terrain, with such trees as ponderosa pine, narrowleaf cottonwood, and others growing at elevations far lower than is typical in other parts of the state. The stream itself also exhibits this characteristic; it is cold enough to support a population of trout down to 5,000 feet elevation, much lower than one would normally expect.

Unaweep Seep, the collective name for a group of springs, perches on the northwest bank of West Creek. The seep is perhaps the most outstanding natural botanical display in Colorado and is listed on the register of Colorado State Natural Areas. The combination of cool summer air, long growing season due to its relatively low elevation, and abundant moisture result in an astounding abundance and variety of plants. Relatively uncommon species such as ground cherry and blackberry occur here, and more prosaic species reach unusual size, notably boxelder, alder, and smooth sumac. The rare butterfly, Great Basin silverspot, frequents the Seep.

The proposed wilderness encompasses many miles of the rim of Unaweep Canyon. Out of sight and hearing of the ranches on the plateau above, and towering some 3,000 feet above the canyon floor below, the rim appears to be related to neither. Stands of aspen adorn the rim. Owing to the rugged cliffs along either side of the canyon, this is one of the most photogenic places in Colorado. At the far eastern end of the rim, Fish Creek tumbles down an awesome series of waterfalls, dropping 1,700 feet in 1.5 miles.

The southeast corner of the WSA is habitat for a rare butterfly, the Great Basin Silverspot (*Speyeria nokomis nokomis*). This butterfly is under consideration for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Nearly 75% of the butterfly's critical habitat lies within the proposed wilderness.

In recognition of the area's extraordinary scenery and biological diversity, BLM designated The Palisade as an Outstanding Natural Area.

Resource Information

BLM rates oil and gas potential for The Palisade as minimal. There are no oil and gas leases within the area, and no drilling activity has occurred. Almost the entire area is restricted to no surface occupancy if any leases were to be issued.



Palisade Valley. (Jeff Widen)

The Palisade contains no patented mining claims. Based upon a BLM mineral report, locatable minerals are considered to have low potential.

The Palisade contains approximately 800 acres of commercial pinyon-juniper woodland, located in the less rugged eastern portions of the area. This woodland could be utilized for fence posts and firewood.

Portions of 11 grazing allotments are included within the proposed wilderness.

Motorized vehicle use is limited to designated roads and trails. A number of vehicle ways exist within the drainages of Bull Draw and adjacent streambeds. These are occasionally used by off-road vehicles during hunting season and for firewood harvest.

Several perennial streams drain into The Palisade from Pinyon Mesa, including North West Creek and Fish Creek. A ditch and reservoir exist on Fish Creek above the WSA on Pinyon Mesa. These supply ditches in Unaweep Canyon below the WSA, where another ditch transfers water from Fish Creek to Turner Creek as needed. The BLM holds a 1978 appropriated streamflow right through the entire area for livestock watering, wildlife watering, recreation, and fire suppression purposes

Boundary Issues

The proposed wilderness boundary follows BLM's WSA boundary, except that citizens propose closing two small cherrystemmed dirt tracks on the area's western boundary.

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