

3.17 VISUAL RESOURCES

The current management objective for visual resources is to manage the public lands in such a way as to preserve those scenic vistas that are deemed most important and to design or mitigate all visual intrusions so that the intrusions do not exceed the established Visual Resource Management (VRM) class objectives. Activities within the VPA that could potentially cause visual intrusions and have an impact on scenic quality are primarily surface-disturbing activities, including minerals exploration and development, OHV use, trail and/or road development, and fire management.

3.17.1 Visual Resource Management (VRM) Classes

The BLM uses the VRM system to inventory, manage, and set objectives for visual resources. The VRM system uses visual management classes (Class I through IV, Class I and Class II being the most protective) to designate permissible levels of landscape alteration, with the broad goal of protecting the visual quality of public lands. The assignment of VRM classes is based on the management decisions made in the RMP. All actions proposed during the RMP process that would result in surface disturbance must consider the importance of the visual values and the impacts that proposed actions could have on these values. The VRM Class objectives are described in Appendix J. However, a brief summary of the VRM classes objectives are: VRM I - preserve the existing character of the landscape; VRM II - retain the existing character of the landscape, with a low level of landscape change; VRM III - partially retain the existing character of the landscape, with only moderate change to the landscape; VRM IV - major modifications are allowed to the existing character of the landscape, and the level of change can be high.

An area is assigned a VRM class objective based on its scenic quality, the level of visual sensitivity of the area, and the viewing distance of the area. Once an area has been assigned a VRM Class, the area classification can be used to determine the impacts of proposed activities on visual resources and to analyze the level of disturbance that an area can tolerate before the proposed activity exceeds the VRM objectives for the area (BLM 1992).

3.17.2 Regional Overview

The entire VPA has been visually inventoried and classified according to the VRM classification system. As the VPA is located in the Uinta Basin, its visual quality is diverse, ranging from areas that are visually homogenous to areas with unique and spectacular visual quality. The areas of highest scenic quality are found along the Book Cliffs, in the Bitter Creek Drainage, along portions of the White and Green River corridors, within the Browns Park ACEC, in the vicinities of Red Mountain and Diamond Mountain, and areas that border Dinosaur National Monument (Bartel 2002; see Figure 32).

Areas being managed as VRM Class I include: Winter Ridge, Bull Canyon, Cold Springs, Diamond Breaks, and Daniels Canyon WSAs, and the Book Cliffs Mountain Browse Instant Study Area (ISA).

Areas being managed as VRM Class II are: Nine Mile Canyon, the Upper Book Cliffs, the White River Corridor, the Upper Green River and the Green River Corridor from Dinosaur National Monument to State Highway 40, and Red Mountain-Dry Fork ACEC.

The remainder of the VPA is being managed as either VRM Class III or VRM Class IV.

Throughout the VPA, unmanaged OHV use is visually evident which, although localized, is long-term. New roads and trails are being created by OHV use, and OHVs are cutting trails across and over highly visible ridgelines. At present, the only area managed for OHV use is near Fantasy Canyon (including Devils Playground). The areas of highest OHV use (and corresponding visual degradation) are:

1. in the vicinity of Buckskin Hills, north of the town of Vernal;
2. an area to the north of Red Wash, in the vicinity of Bourdette Draw; and
3. an area south of the Bonanza Power Plant and north of the White River corridor.

Throughout the VPA, the rapid increase of petroleum and natural gas exploration and extraction are also visually evident. However, through visual mitigation and careful placement of drilling well pads, this development is not presently exceeding VRM class objectives.

The proximity of intense exploration and development near areas of high scenic quality and the increasing number of people seeking recreation in the VPA are creating resource-use conflicts, particularly in the White River corridor and the Book Cliffs Divide.