

Black Canyon Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 5,400 acres

The Black Canyon WSA (ID-32-9) contains 5,400 acres of BLM-administered land located at the southern toe of the Lemhi Mountain Range. The WSA's landscape is characterized by rocky canyons, massive cliffs and thrust faults. The lower slopes and canyon bottoms contain sagebrush, forbs and grasses typical of this low moisture, high desert environment. Patches of juniper trees are found throughout the area and small stands of Douglas-fir grow at the higher elevations.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Eastern Idaho Management Framework Plan Amendment/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) filed in October 1986. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS for Black Canyon WSA: the proposed action (no wilderness) alternative, which is the recommendation of this report (5,400 acres would be designated as nonwilderness); and an all wilderness alternative.

2. Recommendation and Rationale

0 acres recommended for wilderness

5,400 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for the Black Canyon WSA is to release the area for uses other than wilderness. The environmentally preferable alternative is the all wilderness alternative. It would cause the least change from the natural environment over the long term. The recommendation would use all practical means to avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts. Existing regulations, BLM policy and the Little Lost/Birch Creek Management Framework Plan will guide the use of the land to mitigate impacts. The Black Canyon WSA is shown on the Black Canyon Proposal map.

All 5,400 acres of the Black Canyon WSA are recommended as nonsuitable for wilderness designation because the area does not contribute significant solitude and primitive recreation opportunities in an area of Idaho already abundant in wilderness. Existing roads and trails would remain and manageability problems would be incompatible with the preservation of wilderness values. BLM recognizes that the Black Canyon WSA possesses the required basic wilderness characteristics and has certain natural values worthy of preservation but difficulties in wilderness management and trade-offs with other resource uses outweigh the benefits of wilderness designation.

The Black Canyon WSA's opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation are judged to be less than exemplary. Solitude is available, but the area is small. Visitors are limited to traveling in four canyons within the area which are one to two miles in length. This physical limitation will constrict the visitor's opportunity to be alone. Primitive recreation opportunities are present but the area lacks significant physical features that attract wilderness users. Other roadless areas and designated wilderness areas in the nearby mountain ranges offer similar primitive opportunities but are more attractive to recreationists. They include more than four million acres of designated wilderness in six areas and more than 400,000 acres in five roadless areas. The roadless areas are located in the Lemhi Mountain Range north of the WSA and in the Lost River Range to the west. These areas are on national forest lands and contain similar landscapes and wilderness-related opportunities but are available in a greater scale and abundance than found in the WSA. They also offer a greater challenge and more variety of primitive recreation activities. They have more natural features that attract recreationists such as high peaks, basins, streams, rivers and isolation.

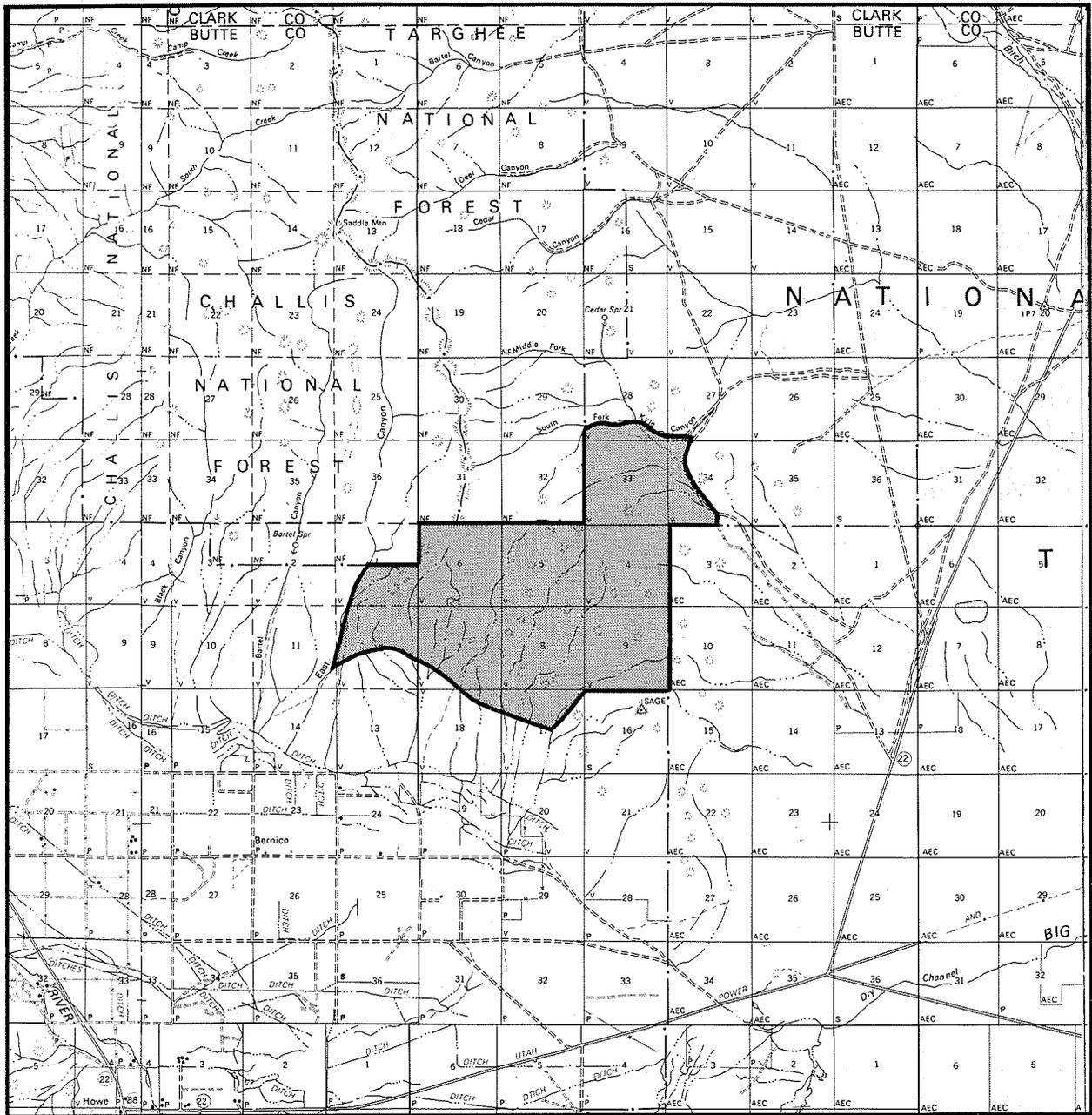
The WSA would be difficult to manage over the long term as wilderness. The major concern is the ability to exclude motorized vehicles. The area lacks natural barriers to vehicle travel on most of the access routes. Lowland portions along the southern foothills of the WSA and canyon openings lack natural barriers to motorized vehicle use. Five vehicle access points branch off from the main boundary roads and extend up to two miles into the WSA. One heavily used trail nearly reaches the U.S. Forest Service boundary on the area's north border. A boundary adjustment to eliminate these trails would decrease the size of the WSA to less than the required 5,000 acres. Hunters along with sightseers and other recreationists using motorized vehicles use these routes for access. Signing, patrol and public education efforts would be needed to manage vehicle use but motorized trespass would likely occur because of the isolation and distance from administrative personnel. Vehicle trespass would degrade the visitor's solitude opportunities.

The area is too small to offer solitude for many people at one time. If the WSA became wilderness, management efforts would encourage only a low number of visitors. Use would be concentrated in the area's four narrow canyons which are one to two miles in length and dead-end near the national forest boundary.

The no wilderness recommendation will allow motorized recreation to continue on existing jeep trails, primarily during the hunting seasons and less frequently during the spring and summer. The use amounts to approximately 150 visitor days annually.

The Black Canyon WSA contains cultural values, high scenic quality and important habitat for a variety of birds. These values would be protected through visual management objectives to retain the existing landscape, Little Lost/Birch Creek Wildlife Habitat Management Plan, Management Framework Plan and cultural resource management objectives.

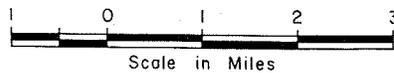
Public comments indicate there are important archaeological values being destroyed at a rapid rate. BLM studies and surveillance of the area in 1982 and 1983 showed no recent vandalism. The archaeological features appear to be no more significant than others in the Little Lost and Birch Creek valleys. Because of clear public concern for this area, an interim management plan has been developed and implemented including signs, patrols and evaluations. The area will be included in a cultural resources management plan for the Little Lost and Birch Creek valleys. The recommendation for Black Canyon would not have adverse impacts to archaeological resources. Cultural resource values can be managed effectively through the use of signing and patrols. Wilderness designation would not add to the existing level of protection.



R. 29 E. | R. 30 E.

R. 30 E. | R. 31 E.

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|--------------|
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | SPLIT ESTATE |
|  | RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS |  | STATE |
|  | LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS |  | PRIVATE |



**ID-32-9
BLACK CANYON
PROPOSAL**

OCTOBER 1988

T. 7 N.
T. 6 N.

T. 6 N.
T. 5 N.



**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
BLACK CANYON WSA**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	5,400
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
Total	5,400

Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary

BLM (within WSA)	0
BLM (outside WSA)	0
Split Estate (within WSA)	0
Split Estate (outside WSA)	0
Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
State land (outside WSA)	0

Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness

BLM	5,400
Split Estate	0
Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	5,400
Inholdings (state, private)	0

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Black Canyon WSA is essentially natural, with negligible human imprints. The 5,400 acre area is comprised of the southern toe of the Lemhi Mountain Range which includes a national forest roadless area of almost 200,000 acres. The roadless area has been recommended for release from wilderness consideration.

Impacts on naturalness in the WSA consist of five vehicle trails totaling four miles, one mile of fence and a gray steel door covering a dynamited cave. Views outside the area include traffic on rural roads, farming activities and facilities on the Idaho Nuclear Engineering Laboratory site. Views are distant and not imposing. All impacts have a minor effect on the overall natural appearance of the area.

B. Solitude

Extensive topographic variation combined with some vegetative screening make opportunities for solitude outstanding. The deep, winding canyons, caves and rock formations offer places where the visitor could find a secluded place and avoid others. Views outside the area would have little influence on the visitor's chances for solitude. Visitation would be limited to a few people in this small area to maintain quality opportunities because visitors are confined to travel in the area's four major canyons. These canyons dead-end near the national forest boundary to the north.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Primitive recreation opportunities include rock climbing, hiking, wildlife viewing and spelunking. The rock formations, caves and bird life are natural features that provide a good recreational attraction to visitors.

Primitive and unconfined recreation opportunities are judged to be less than exemplary. Opportunities are present, but the area lacks significant physical features that attract wilderness users. Other roadless areas and designated wilderness areas nearby offer similar primitive opportunities but are more attractive to recreationists. They include more than four million acres of designated wilderness in six areas and more than 400,000 acres in five roadless areas.

The roadless areas are located in the Lemhi Mountain Range north of the WSA and in the Lost River Range to the west. These areas are on national forest lands and contain similar landscapes and wilderness-related opportunities but are available in a greater scale and abundance than found in the WSA. They also offer a greater challenge, more variety of primitive recreation activities and natural features that attract recreationists such as high peaks, basins, streams, rivers, and isolation.

D. Special Features

The Black Canyon WSA's landscape is dominated by vertical-walled canyons, caves and other rock formations of geologic interest. These formations are picturesque and provide important habitat for golden eagles, kestrels, great horned owls, hawks and falcons. The caves and rock formations have also been used for shelters and hunting blinds by prehistoric inhabitants as long as 10,000 years ago. Pictographs and other signs of early inhabitants can be found in the area.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

A. Assessing the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

The Black Canyon WSA is located in the Intermountain Sagebrush Province/Sagebrush Steppe (3130-49). Wilderness designation of this WSA would not add a new ecosystem to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). This ecosystem is represented by three designated areas with 76,699 acres. There are 35 other BLM study areas in the state under study with this ecosystem. This information is summarized on Table 2. If designated, the Black Canyon WSA could increase the total area represented by this ecosystem.

TABLE 2

Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Dry Domain/Intermountain Sagebrush Province				
			<u>NATIONWIDE</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	3	76,699	136	4,359,340
			<u>IDAHO</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	12,997	35	949,916
			<u>NEVADA</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	32,407	29	1,273,919
			<u>CALIFORNIA</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	5	152,431
			<u>OREGON</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	67	1,983,074

**B.Expanding the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation
 Within a Day's Driving Time (Five Hours) of Major Population Centers**

The Black Canyon WSA is within a five-hour drive from Boise, Idaho. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population center.

**Table 3
 Wilderness Opportunities for Residents
 of Major Population Centers**

Population Centers	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Boise, Idaho	16	4,741,570	141	5,374,250

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Black Canyon WSA would not contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the NWPS.

Manageability

The Black Canyon WSA could be managed over the long term to preserve its wilderness character but with administrative problems. There are five vehicle access points and trails into the area which would extend up to two miles. One heavily used trail nearly reaches the U.S. Forest Service boundary on the area's north border. A boundary adjustment to eliminate these trails would decrease the size of the WSA to less than the required 5,000 acres. Attempting to close the motor vehicle trails would be difficult because natural barriers are lacking except on a short segment of the Box Canyon trail.

The area is too small to offer solitude for many people at one time. If the WSA became wilderness, management efforts would encourage only a low number of visitors. Use would be concentrated in the area's four narrow canyons.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

A Geology, Energy and Mineral (GEM) assessment report was prepared for the Black Canyon WSA in 1985 (Geoexplorers International, Inc. 1985). Conclusions from the report are:

The Black Canyon WSA has low-to-moderate potential for oil and gas. The WSA is covered with noncompetitive oil and gas leases; however, the lessees have not conducted any exploration within or near the WSA. The WSA is underlain by stratigraphic equivalents of some rock units present in the Utah-Wyoming-Idaho Overthrust Belt; however, the Triassic and Jurassic age sedimentary rocks, which are the major oil and gas producers elsewhere in the Overthrust Belt, are absent. Little is known of the existence of other source or reservoir rocks in the area.

The WSA lies along the boundary between the Snake River Plain geothermal region, an area with moderate geothermal potential, and the Central Idaho Basin and Range geothermal region, an area with low geothermal potential. Unlike the Snake River Plain that lies immediately to the east, the WSA is underlain by Paleozoic carbonate rock, a factor which greatly diminishes the potential for geothermal resource occurrence.

No unpatented mining claims exist within the WSA. Lead, silver and copper deposits have been mined in two mining districts that are located approximately three miles northwest of the WSA. The mineralization occurred in fractures of rock units which are not known to occur within the WSA. Exploratory drilling on unpatented claims, formerly located just northeast of the WSA boundary, yielded no evidence of mineralization and the claims were subsequently abandoned.

Lands at lower elevations in the WSA are comprised of alluvial fans underlain by considerable quantities of sand and gravel. These deposits have little value because of the abundance of similar deposits located much closer to areas of consumption.

Impacts on Resources

The following comparative impact table for Black Canyon WSA summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for all the alternatives considered including designation or nondesignation of the entire area as wilderness.

Table 4
Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative
WSA ID-32-9 (BLACK CANYON)

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES	PROPOSED ACTION (NO WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE)	ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	<p>Motorized use would slightly degrade naturalness and solitude. Low use vehicle trails would be maintained by travel with the possibility of being expanded slightly by cross-country use. However, no increase in visitor use is projected above current levels and new impacts will be confined to the existing trails. Solitude would be disrupted slightly by the presence of vehicles, particularly during the hunting seasons. Over the long term the WSA would retain the natural character and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation because of the anticipated low use by recreationists.</p>	<p>Wilderness values and special features would be preserved on 5,400 acres and enhanced slightly by eliminating motorized use. The values include deep winding canyons with caves and vertical rock formations, a variety of raptors and signs of early inhabitants such as pictographs and lithic scatters.</p>
Impacts to Energy and Mineral Development	No impact.	<p>No valid existing rights. Lands would be withdrawn from location and leasing. Because of low potential for mineral occurrence, no exploration or development is anticipated.</p>
Impacts to Motorized Recreation Use	No impact.	<p>Motorized recreation use amounting to 90 visitor days would be foregone.</p>

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Wilderness designation would create a minor favorable economic impact as a result of increased recreation use. No significant social effects would occur as a result of wilderness designation of the Black Canyon WSA.

Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

BLM's wilderness inventory and study were conducted with extensive public participation and public involvement was an important consideration in making wilderness recommendations. BLM solicited public involvement in the study phase through scoping meetings, mailings on issue identification and alternative formulation, a 90-day public comment period and two formal hearings on the Eastern Idaho Draft Wilderness EIS. Comments received during the inventory period and EIS scoping efforts were used to develop significant study issues and various alternatives for the ultimate management of those lands found to have wilderness value.

Wilderness was not an issue in the original Big Desert MFP and was not a subject of comments. No comments received during the wilderness inventory were deferred for consideration during the study.

Eighty-one of the comments received during the Draft EIS comment period or at the public hearings specifically mentioned the Black Canyon WSA. Six commenters opposed designation of the WSA. Reasons were that designation would attract visitors to the area causing damage to the area's cultural sites, the unknown mineral status and that BLM's assessment of wilderness value was correct. One commenter sent a petition against wilderness that contained 119 signatures from citizens who live near the WSA. Wilderness supporters emphasized the WSA's cultural, scenic, geologic and wilderness values.

The major concern of commenters focused on the area's archaeological sites and that wilderness designation would be the best protection of these features from acts of vandalism. Two commenters felt the WSA should be combined with the 190,000 acre Diamond Peak roadless area and considered for wilderness in the U.S. Forest Service roadless area reevaluation process.

Three government agencies commented on the WSA. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency stated that they had no objection to the Draft EIS proposal. The Bureau of Indian Affairs supported wilderness because the Black Canyon WSA contains artifacts of the Indian heritage.