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40 and frail: Canyonlands National Park found woefully underfunded

By **Lee Davidson**

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As its 40th birthday approaches this weekend, Canyonlands National Park's health is frail — with a \$2 million annual operations shortfall, a \$36 million maintenance backlog, three of every five historic structures there deteriorating, an ongoing invasion by nonnative species, and threats looming from nearby development.

That's according to a yearlong study released Thursday by the private National Parks Conservation Association. It is the 17th in a series of reports about the health of various parks nationwide but the first about a Utah park.

"This report is a wake-up call," said Jim Nations, vice president of the NPCA's State of the Parks program. "The health of Canyonlands National Park could noticeably worsen unless Congress and the administration work together to address its needs."

Canyonlands National Park spokesman Paul Henderson said none of the problems identified in the report "come as any surprise to us." However, he said Canyonlands actually tends to rate better than other parks previously evaluated by the NPCA, "so people shouldn't think that all is gloom and doom here."

The park was created 40 years ago, on Sept. 12, 1964.

After a year of analysis, the environmental group rated Canyonlands' conditions and management. It ranked condition of its cultural resources as "poor" with a score of 49 out of a possible 100, condition of its natural resources as "fair" with a score of 75, and its overall stewardship as "poor" with a score of 60.

It said that the most significant factor affecting how well the park can protect resources is its funding from Congress. It also said Canyonlands' annual operation budget needs a 40 percent increase.

Its operating budget this year is \$5.33 million, down \$20,000 from 2003. The new report said that is about \$2 million a year below what the park's 1999 business plan said was needed "to meet basic mandates and provide a satisfactory level of services."



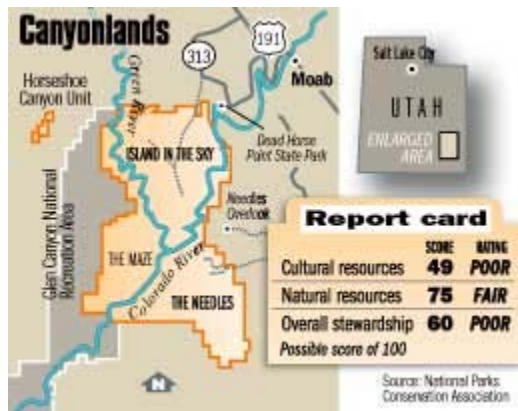
White Rim Trail in Canyonlands National Park offers a panoramic view of the surrounding wilderness. The park was created on Sept. 12, 1964.

Ravell Call, Deseret Morning News

On top of that, the report said, "The park needs nearly \$36 million for deferred maintenance projects and 171 identified unfunded projects."

It said that among problems lack of funding is causing is that 71 percent of identified historic structures within the park "suffer the effects of vandalism, weather, neglect, animal and pet infestation, visitation and erosion."

It added, "Archival and museum collections do not get the attention they deserve because the park must share its part-time curator with three other parks." It said the park has never conducted a systematic assessment to identify all cultural sites (such as Indian rock art or dwelling sites), nor does it have money for projects to preserve those now identified.



Deseret Morning News graphic

Also, the report said, "Natural resources staff are unable to stem the invasion of nonnative plants and re-establish native vegetation largely as a result of limited budgets."

Henderson said in reaction, "I have spent 25 years in the Park Service in seven or eight parks. But I have never worked in a park yet that had all of the funding and all of the staffing that they needed. We certainly have shortfalls here" — but he said he could not verify whether they are as bad as the report says.

The report worried about threat to natural resources from development outside the park, plus the possibility of new road construction within it.

While oil and gas drilling are banned within the park, the report said areas just outside it are targets for possible development. It said one well is a mile from a park boundary in the northern Island in the Sky district.

Also, it said resources are threatened by the old Atlas uranium mill tailings across the river from the park near Moab, which leaches thousands of gallons of radioactive water into the river daily.

And the report worries about the possibility that local counties and the state may push to make new roads in the park on disputed claims made through an old law, called R.S. 2477.

The NPCA calls for more funding for the park, cleanup of the uranium tailings and ensuring that any R.S. 2477 road development does not degrade the park. More drastically, it calls for expanding park boundaries to incorporate an additional 500,000 acres of neighboring federal lands — which could ban oil and gas development there.

Henderson said the NPCA report is useful and is "kind of a validation of where we are trying to build programs over the past few years."

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