Recreation Experience Baseline Study Report
Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

*Phase 1: Hole in the Rock Road Area*

Executive Summary

The Natural Resource Center at Colorado Mesa University

2014

Principal Investigator: Dr. Tim Casey, Professor, CMU
In the fall of 2012, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) entered into a five year assistance agreement with the Natural Resource Center (NRC) at Colorado Mesa University (CMU) in Grand Junction, Colorado to conduct a recreational experience baseline study of the Monument. A recreational baseline study is designed to develop an understanding of the recreational use and demands of a particular location at a particular time to establish a baseline for future planning or projects. This baseline will also serve as a starting point for conversations between the BLM and their partners in the surrounding communities and beyond regarding recreation on GSENM. The study was planned to be conducted in five phases across the approximately 1.9 million acre monument, beginning in 2013 with the areas accessed by Hole in the Rock Road. The Hole in the Rock corridor contains or provides access to several of the Monument’s most frequently visited attractions (Devil’s Rock Garden, Peek-a-boo and Spooky Slots, and Dance Hall Rock) as well as provides access to many popular sites in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (Hole in the Rock, Coyote Gulch, Egypt Slots, and Harris Wash) where visitor use is steadily increasing.

A mixed methodology focus group, using audience polling in addition to engaging participants in open dialogue, was determined to be the appropriate approach to establish the recreation experience baseline. In this case, a focus group is a structured conversation with a limited number of participants (less than 25) regarding recreation in GSENM. The small nature of the setting and open-ended nature of the questions allows for a good deal of interaction between the participants and the facilitator, and between the participants themselves. This methodology allows participants to express the subtleties and nuances of what really matters to them about recreating in the area. This mixed methodology approach provides a data set that captures both a complete set of responses from each participant using audience polling technology as well as documents a rich set of notes from the group dialogue that gives context and depth to the polling data. Dr. Tim Casey, a Professor of Political Science at CMU and director of the NRC, was named as the principal investigator to conduct the focus groups and prepare the analytical reports.

A total of 17 focus groups were conducted between March and September 2013 for this first phase of the study researching the Hole in the Rock area. Twelve of those focus groups were conducted in person in the towns of Boulder and Escalante, Utah, in three separate visits during March, May and September. The remaining five focus groups were conducted digitally via the internet and conference call (these will be referred to throughout this document as “digital focus groups”). There were a total of 123 participants in the 17 focus groups for this phase of the research. Of the 123 participants in the study, 72 attended a focus group in Escalante, 25 in Boulder and 26 participated digitally via the internet. The participants were allowed to remain anonymous, although their responses were tracked and collated by the use of audience polling technology. Some basic demographic information was collected at the beginning of each
The majority of participants came from zip codes in Utah (85%). Most of those came from Escalante (27.6%) or Boulder (23.5%), the two gateway communities to the area, as well as Kanab, Utah (9%) and the Salt Lake area (3.5%). Other participants represented a total of nine other states and a Canadian province. There were participants from 41 unique zip codes. Participants were also asked to select one affiliation (role) they have in relation to the landscape. Those selections included: visitor, local resident, community leader, outfitter/guide, business owner, other. The majority of the participants selected affiliations associated with the local area: local resident (40%), business owner (10%), and community leader (2%). Visitors represented 25% of the total and outfitters/guides made up 11%. 6.5% of respondents did not select an affiliation, and 4.5% chose “other”. When asked, most of those were part time residents and still also considered themselves part-time visitors.

The design of the focus group for data collection entailed a series of discussion questions intended to engage participants in open dialogue about their preferences, interests and expectations regarding recreation so responses could be captured in their own words, followed by a list of choices that represented a spectrum of possible answers to the discussion questions. They could respond to this list of possible responses by selecting them via anonymous audience polling using hand held remote response devices (clickers). The focus group script covered all the major elements needed in planning for recreation on public lands: preferences for outcomes and experiences, interests and expectations, setting characteristics, activities, and the services needed to support the recreation experience.

After analysis of the responses from 123 participants in 17 focus groups over seven months of data collection in 2013, the following observations and recommendations began to emerge regarding the areas of GSENM that are accessed by Hole in the Rock Road. Although in a baseline study, the principal focus would be on observations of the setting and context, inevitably as participants expressed their ideas concerning the Hole in the Rock area, some of these ideas came as recommendations for future action. These were not solicited in the study, but are recorded as part of the response given.

**Observations:**

- The area is a unique landscape that is a very special place to a wide variety of people. It is a dynamic landscape that affords many different experiences and connections.

- The wild, unspoiled, remote, and rugged character of the place, combined with its natural and scenic qualities overwhelming define its specialness. The combination of
these contributes to its sense of solitude and privacy as well as to a sense of discovery and wonder that is highly valued by the public.

• People come here to experience the naturalness and tranquil escapes embodied by the landscape.

• The importance of the area’s history, archeology, geology, and paleontology enhance the specialness of the area.

• There is a sense of discovery and self-reliance encouraged by the land itself.

• It is also an important place because of the connection people have with the place historically, spiritually, scientifically, recreationally and traditionally.

• This is an area that is often approached by vehicle, but is more likely encountered on foot. It is prized for its inspiring scenic qualities and the kinds of activities associated with such dramatic scenery such as photography, site-seeing, writing, and making art.

• Use of this space has increased in recent years, and this has been a mixed blessing. On the one hand it is seen as a positive thing to have more people enjoy the resource and boost local economies, but it can be “loved” to death or at least enough to substantially change the qualities people seek in this remote location. Most respondents thought the increased use had made it somewhat to significantly worse over the last five years.

• Threats to the specialness of the landscape include overuse, damage to the resources, and over development. There is also concern that many who come in the future will not have a connection to or appreciation of the place.

• The current management approach is generally working well on the landscape with some important noted areas of concern where the resource and its specialness are threatened. These areas of concern are noted and explained in the larger report.

• There is a strong preference for the lack of development (transportation and recreational facilities) of the area and a fear of what those would do to the specialness of the place as it is and has been. In the comments of many, improvements to access and facilities would trade off with the qualities of wildness, ruggedness and discovery/exploration. People overwhelmingly love the characteristics of this unique place as it is.

• Although some participants indicated that paving the road would be a benefit for access, the vast majority of participants opposed the paving of the Hole in the Rock
Road, preferring the ruggedness of the road, particularly the further one gets from Highway 12.

- Visitors and locals rely on a variety of services from the gateway communities (Escalante and Boulder) and beyond to support their recreational outings in the Hole in the Rock area. These include gas and groceries, but also information provision, guide services, lodging, and restaurants.

- The interpretive and educational services provided by Escalante Interagency Visitor Center staff, outfitters/guides, and locals are vitally important to help people develop and nurture a monumental sense of place around the area accessed by Hole in the Rock Road.

- Part of the specialness of the area accessed by Hole in the Rock Road is a result of the way it is nested in a larger landscape of Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Capitol Reef and Bryce Canyon National Parks, Dixie National Forest, and other federal and state public lands.

- It is also important to the agencies as well as the communities to understand how public lands contribute to the character, identity, and economic livelihood of the local gateway communities.

**Recommendations:**

- Visitor education was suggested as important tool to address the threat posed by a lack of connection to the landscape from future visitors.

- Many participants recognized the responsibility and need the land management agencies have to manage the increase in use (and abuse) of the landscape, but this should be done in cooperation with the public (including public stewardship), and with an effort to minimize the impact of that management on the undeveloped character of the place.

- Targeted attention to maintain the specialness of the place in such areas of concern as Coyote Gulch, or to address issues such as vandalism, trash, human waste and crowding is supported.

- Developing certain areas to accommodate heavier use and directing visitors to those areas to help maintain the remote character of the rest of the landscape was supported by many. Such locations could include Devil’s Garden, Dry Fork Slots (Peekaboo and Spooky), Dance Hall Rock, and Hole in the Rock.
The results of this first phase of the GSENM Recreation Experience Baseline Study were presented to the public and agency staff in a series of presentations held in early March 2014 in Boulder, Escalante, and Kanab. One of those presentations was at the 2014 GSENM Outfitters and Guide Workshop in Kanab. In April 2014, the results of the study were shared via a webinar presentation with staff in the local GSENM and GCNRA offices, as well as staff in the BLM Washington and Utah State Offices. Additional phases of the study began in 2014 and are slated to continue through 2017 as funding allows.