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THE NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS: PEOPLE, PLACE, AND POSSIBILITY

Dear Readers,

Twenty-five years ago, a bold vision took root—one grounded in people, place, and possibility. This special issue of *Parks Stewardship Forum* commemorates the 25th anniversary of the National Conservation Lands, a remarkable system of protected public lands overseen by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that has grown to encompass over 38 million acres across more than 900 extraordinary landscapes. As we reflect on a quarter-century of conservation triumphs and community-driven stewardship, we do so with profound appreciation for how far we've come—and steadfast optimism for where we can go together.

The theme of this issue celebrates the diverse landscapes that make up America's national heritage, from the labyrinthine desert canyons of Utah to the scenic coastlines of California. But more importantly, we honor the people and communities who have given meaning to this legacy. These are the advocates who fight for these lands not just as scenic treasures, but as living spaces of culture, history, scientific discovery, sustenance, and spiritual connection.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN: GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

If the National Conservation Lands have a birthplace, it can be found in the rugged splendor of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah. Designated in 1996 under President Bill Clinton, this 1.9-million-acre monument was the first national monument to be managed by BLM.

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah. **BOB WICK, BLM**



Historically, when BLM-managed lands were deemed worthy of protection, they were typically transferred to the National Park Service and removed from BLM's portfolio. The prevailing assumption was that BLM lacked the institutional capacity or mission to properly conserve exceptional landscapes.

The designation of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument as a BLM-managed unit represented a fundamental philosophical shift in land management policy: If BLM were to evolve from what critics had long dismissed as the so-called "Bureau of Logging and Mining" into a genuine steward of public lands, then conservation had to become a central component of its mission. Grand Staircase-Escalante provided the template for a new approach to conservation—one that balanced protection with multiple use and acknowledged BLM's capacity for effective stewardship.

THE VISION THAT SPARKED A MOVEMENT

Building on the precedent set by Grand Staircase-Escalante, the Department of Interior took an even more revolutionary step in 2000 when it issued a landmark secretarial order establishing what was then called the National Landscape Conservation System (now commonly known as the National Conservation Lands). This decision codified and expanded the transformation in federal land management practices that had begun with Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

The establishment of the National Conservation Lands system shattered the old paradigm and formalized the principle that the Bureau of Land Management—the nation's largest federal public lands manager—could and *should* maintain a dedicated conservation mission. BLM-managed lands were not simply "leftover lands" scattered between national parks, but national treasures in their own right, harboring irreplaceable ecological diversity, ancient cultural sites, and breathtaking landscapes worthy of protection under BLM stewardship.

The order articulated a clear mandate: National Conservation Lands must be "conserved, protected, and restored for the benefit of current and future generations"—a mission that remains unchanged to this day. Nearly a decade later, Congress affirmed this vision with bipartisan legislation, formally establishing the National Conservation Lands as a permanent system. The message was clear: these lands, with their rich ecological, cultural, and historical significance, are essential to America's public lands legacy.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

The remarkable progress since then would have been impossible without the passion and persistence of local communities. In 2007, the Conservation Lands Foundation was founded with the belief that conservation is most durable when it is locally led and driven by those with the deepest connections to the land. With that underlying principle in mind, the Foundation created a network of organized advocates—working both locally and nationally—to ensure the protection, stewardship, and expansion of the National Conservation Lands.

Today, the Friends Grassroots Network includes over 80 organizations across the country. Take, for example, the community around the King Range National Conservation Area in California. Here, a vibrant coalition of Friends Network organizations, residents, small businesses, and recreational users came together to protect both their access to nature and the ecological richness of the King Range coastline. This is what lasting conservation looks like: rooted in a sense of place and shared responsibility, not imposed from above.

These local groups serve as more than advocates—they are active caretakers and partners. Through the Conservation Lands Foundation's comprehensive support, including direct funding, capacity building, and leadership development, they are establishing a resilient system of stewardship from the ground up. When you witness collaborative efforts at places like Chuckwalla National Monument, where Tribal leaders, BLM staff, and community members work side by side, you experience firsthand the transformation that has taken place.

The National Conservation Lands are special not only for what they protect physically, but for what they represent

Local community outing to Chuckwalla National Monument, California, one of many organized by CactusToCloud Institute to educate the East Coachella Valley community about the designation. COLIN BARROWS





Family hiking the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail that crosses through California, Oregon, and Washington. BOB WICK, BLM

symbolically. These are sanctuaries of unmatched biological diversity, sacred landscapes of deep cultural significance, and living laboratories of scientific value. They are the ancestral homelands of Native Nations, sacred spaces of ceremony, and dynamic classrooms for the next generation. Their intrinsic worth transcends boundaries and political eras.

And in today's polarized environment, they offer something even more essential: common ground. Amid escalating threats from a changing climate, biodiversity loss, and development pressures, these lands are proving to be critical buffers—both ecologically and socially.

LOOKING AHEAD: THE NEXT 25 YEARS

As we look toward the next 25 years, we ask not just what needs protecting—but how that protection can be most effectively implemented and sustained. We believe the answer lies in systems change rooted in community empowerment and engagement. It's not enough to desig-

nate land and walk away. Lasting protection requires deep investment in local relationships, capacity-building, and organizing both in local communities and within the corridors of policy-making.

This remains the core mission to which the Conservation Lands Foundation remains committed, and represents the path forward for the future growth and resilience of the National Conservation Lands system. We recognize the need for the right combination of elements—community momentum coupled with strategic engagement in the halls of power. With the foundation we've built over the past 25 years, we have well-founded optimism for the future.

Imagine a future in which more of our nation's culturally and ecologically important public lands and waters are conserved—not by decree alone, but by communities who have claimed their role as stewards. Imagine a future where BLM is not only a land management agency, but a model of collaborative conservation



Conservation Lands Foundation Chief Executive Officer Chris Hill presenting former Secretary of the Interior and founding CLF Board Member Bruce Babbitt with the Stewart Udall Award. **CHRIS FERENZI**

across federal agencies. Imagine a future where Native communities are not just consulted, but leading land management practices based on Traditional Ecological Knowledge and centuries of connection to the land. That future is in reach—if we collectively commit to making it a reality.

There is much to celebrate in this 25th anniversary year, and there remains much important work ahead. But we are not starting from scratch. We are building upon a remarkable legacy shaped by visionaries, made tangible by communities, and sustained by people like you who recognize the irreplaceable value of protecting nature.

Thank you for being part of this journey.

Chris Hill

Chief Executive Officer
Conservation Lands Foundation

The Honorable Bruce Babbitt

Former Secretary of the Interior



**CONSERVATION
LANDS
FOUNDATION**

25TH ANNIVERSARY
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS