

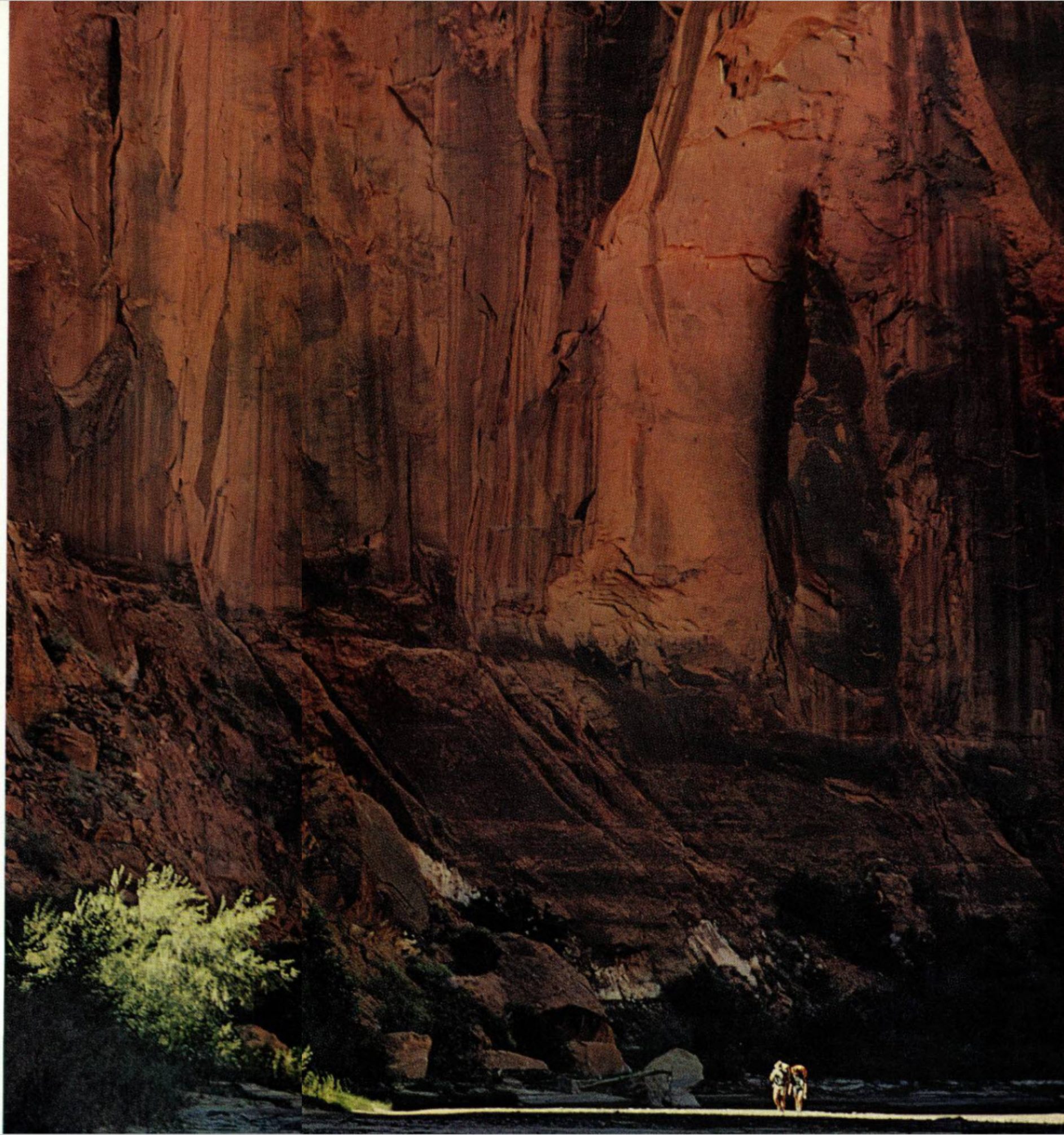
# Escalante Canyon— Wilderness at the Crossroads

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY  
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**C**HILD of a stone-gnawing river, Escalante Canyon slashes a twisting 185-mile path through the desolate badlands of Utah. It's not the deepest canyon in the world, or the longest. But the Escalante is unique, with its river-carved gorges, majestic cliffs, and sun-speckled alcoves—a pocket of wilderness that has been called “a symphony of rock, water, and time.”

Backpackers in this rugged clutter of slickrock and sand find few trails to guide them through the gullies, no signs to direct them to shelter. In this gnarled land that Indians abandoned and settlers shunned, man deals with nature on her terms—and his grateful soul tallies the rewards.

But the winds of change gust nearer. Today the future of Escalante Canyon hinges on the outcome of a roiling controversy, pitting those who would preserve its wild state intact against those who would use it to benefit nearby communities.





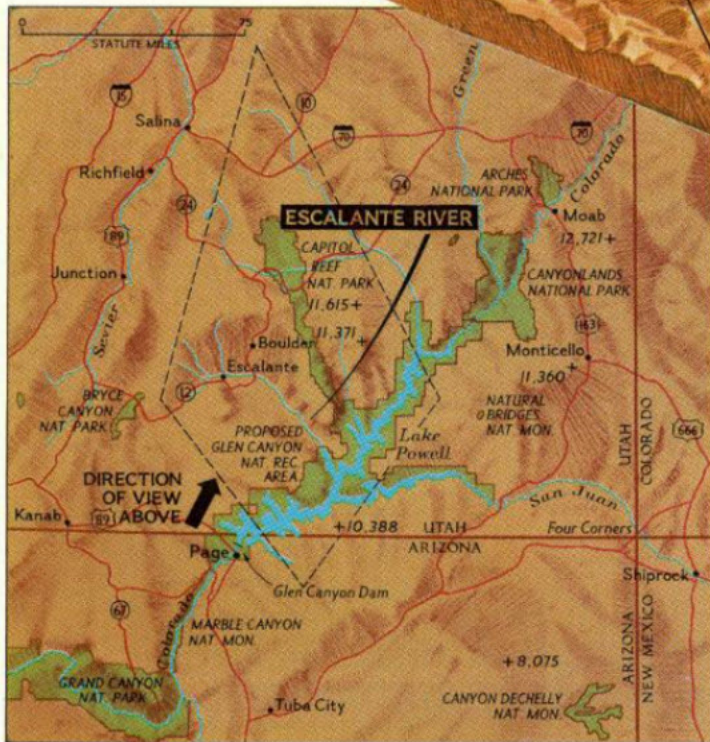
# Escalante Country

**L**OCKED DEEP in the fastness of southern Utah, Escalante Canyon is part of the last-explored region of the contiguous United States. For some ten million years the river that sculptured the tumbled canyon has bulled its way from the Aquarius Plateau to its rendezvous with the swift-flowing Colorado. Not until 1872 did A. H. Thompson, chief geographer on John Wesley Powell's second Colorado River expedition, discover and christen the stream. The name honors a Franciscan monk, Father Silvestre Velez de Escalante, a member of the first non-Indian group to penetrate Utah's canyonlands.

"A prettier mountain region than this could not be imagined," noted an 1872 explorer of 11,000-foot Aquarius Plateau, birthplace of the Escalante River.

Named for rain-trapping hollows pocking its barren sandstone, Waterpocket Fold marks the northeastern boundary of the 1.1-million-acre basin traversed by Escalante Canyon—an area 98 percent publicly owned. Ranchers must pay for grazing privileges in most of the region.

"Unknown Mountains," explorer John Wesley Powell called these peaks upon first sighting them in 1869. His expedition mapped the range in 1872 and named it for Joseph Henry, first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.



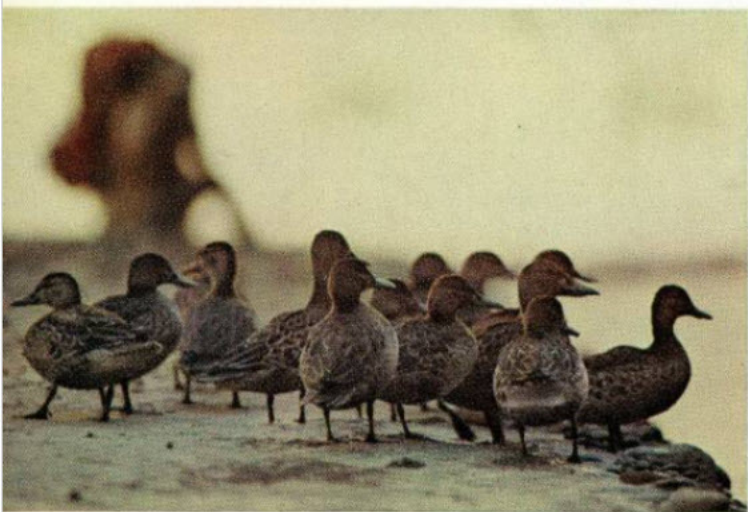
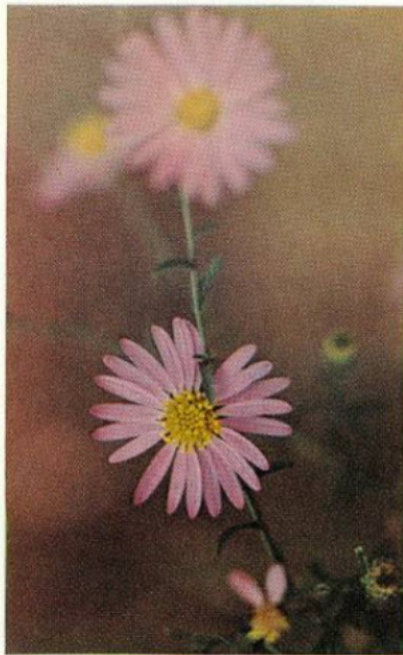
Colonizing Mormons, arriving here in 1875, named their new settlement in honor of the region's first explorer.

Carving for centuries through slowly rising sandstone, the Escalante River with its quiet might has fashioned awesome arches, overhangs, and a chasm that dips in places to 1,200 feet.

Shortened by a damsite, the Escalante River's journey may eventually be lessened by as much as 26 miles. Water of the Colorado River, backed up by Glen Canyon Dam, has already turned much of the Escalante's lowest reaches into a part of Lake Powell.

Elevations in feet  
PAINTING BY RICHARD SCHLECHT





**C**ANYON CLOSE-UPS reveal a hidden world of life in a region renowned for barrenness. Sharing the rock-ribbed habitat of more familiar desert creatures, mallards flock on a sandy bank of the Escalante, where wild asters bask at summer's end.

A backpacker beats the heat in a Coyote Gulch cataract.

**"D**ESERT VARNISH," caused by iron and manganese seepage, streaks the Golden Cathedral, a yawning pool-bottomed cavern (following pages).









**T**OURISTS have already left their marks on Dance Hall Rock, a natural amphitheater 40 miles from the town of Escalante. Here, in 1879, Mormons camped and danced while traveling to the San Juan Valley east of the Colorado River.

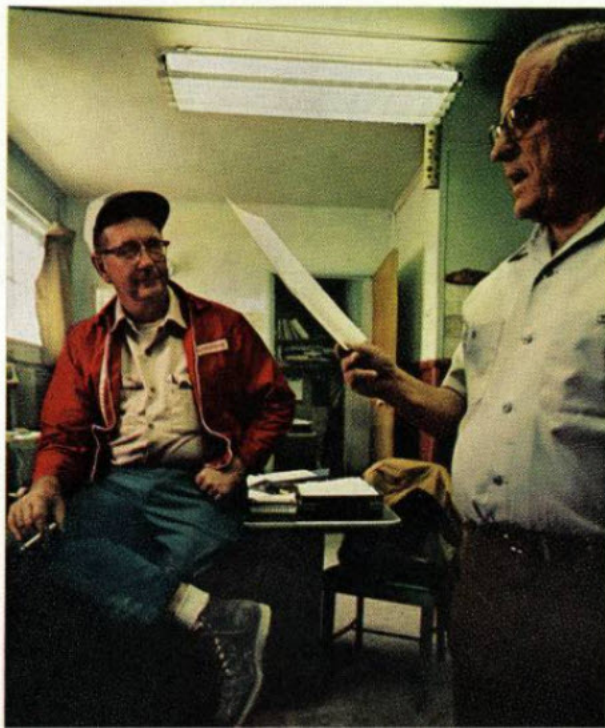
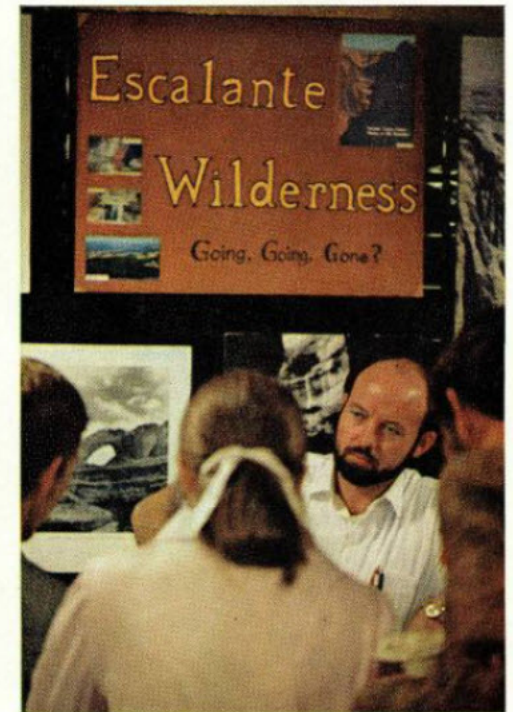
The vandalism disturbs Jack McLellan (**upper right**) of Salt Lake City, leader of the conservationist Escalante Wilderness Committee. He sees the graffiti as harbingers of the future, unless measures are taken instantly to prevent further desecration of the primitive wonderland.

Mr. McLellan, in turn, disturbs cattle ranchers Melvin Brooks and his father Arlis (**lower right**), as well as Escalante businessmen Paul Steed and Dale Marsh (**lower left**). Mr. Marsh, also a county commissioner, reads from anticonservationist literature distributed by the local chamber of commerce.

The cattlemen fear, despite denials, that save-the-Escalante schemes by "outsiders" like Mr. McLellan include plans to revoke grazing privileges on the surrounding public land, making ranching impossible in this remote section of Utah. Cowboys grow grim at the thought of lost livelihoods, and traditional Western hospitality gives way to talk of frontier "justice."

"You a conservationist?" one of Escalante's 640 townsfolk asks a visitor. "If I thought that was true, there'd be a horse comin' back to town with no rider. And blood on the saddle."

Businessman Steed, proponent of a tourist-funneling wilderness road and a new reservoir, is more tactful. "We all believe in conservation. But preservation for embalming something? To put it away and never use it? We don't believe in that!"





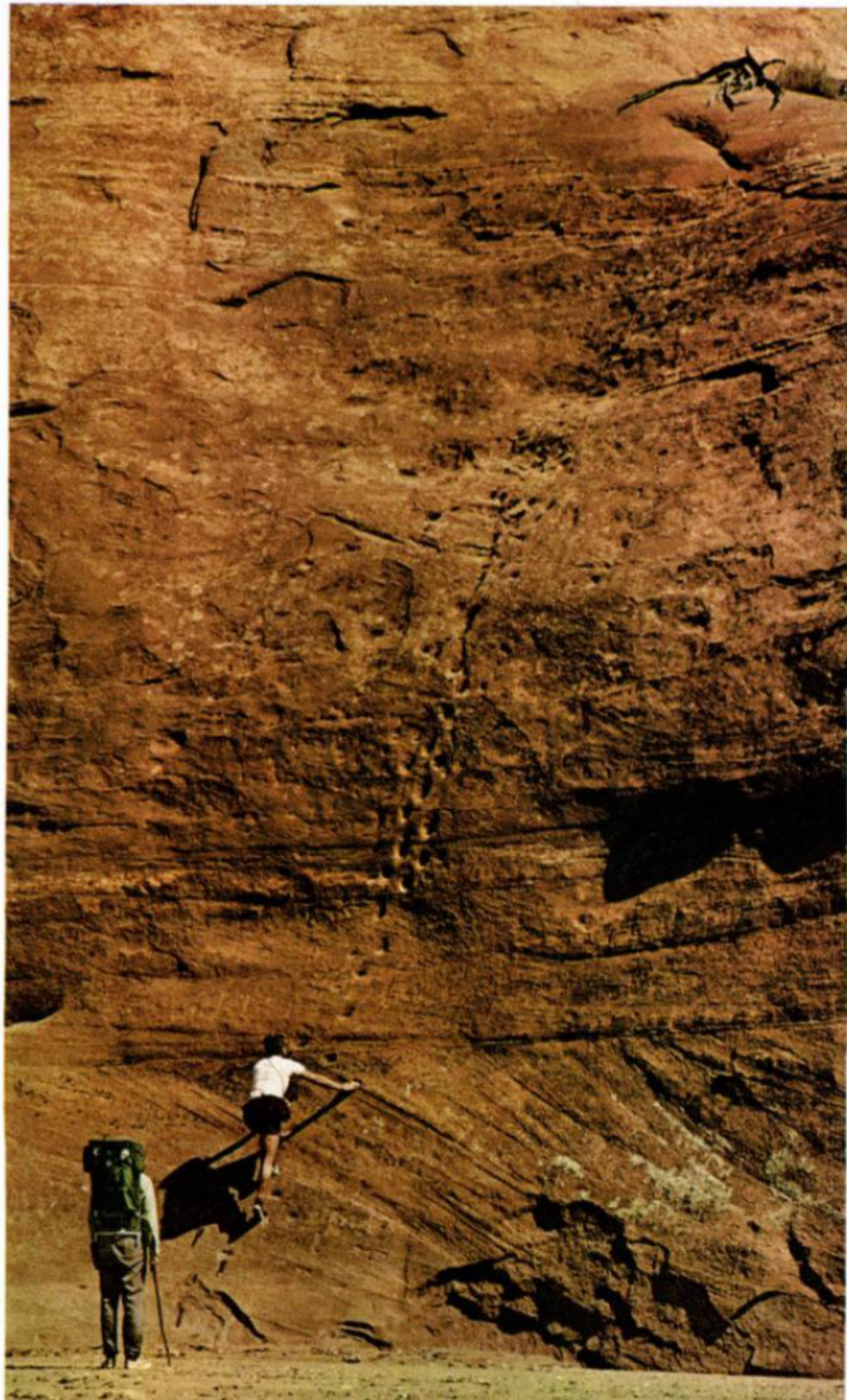
**I**NDIANS tamed the canyon once, but nature took revenge. The Anasazi—the “Old Ones”—made their homes on high ledges in the canyon walls and cultivated crops on the river-watered floor.

But, archeologists theorize, changing weather patterns brought crop failures and forced these probable progenitors of the Hopi and Zuni tribes south for survival in the 12th century.

Wind-smoothed Anasazi dwellings and granaries still remain, and

hikers still find Anasazi-chopped footholds (**below**) leading to the ancient ruins.

What irony, that a region abandoned because of uncertain rainfall should fall prey to flood! Lake Powell’s waters, at their peak, may eventually reach into Escalante Canyon almost as far upstream as Stevens Arch (**right**), the area’s most spectacular landmark. Its opening, 580 feet above the river, measures 160 feet high and 225 feet wide at the base.







**S**OFTLY PAINTED by velvet moonlight, pack-trip wranglers harry their animals from mesa to canyon floor before dawn. Horses and mules have trouble traveling the canyon's length; jumbled slickrock, lurking quicksand, and fallen rocks and boulders impede their passage.

Area ranchers know the hazards. They've heard the plaintive bawl of cattle sunk chest-deep in the sucking sand; they've tuckered many a cow pony searching for stray steers in the labyrinthine canyon. A makeshift fence post (right) anchors barbed wire that keeps livestock away from a precipitous slope.

The Bureau of Land Management, a federal agency, administers 1,005,000 acres of Escalante country. It recently designated 136,000 acres stretching along both sides of the river for preservation as an "Outstanding Natural Area."

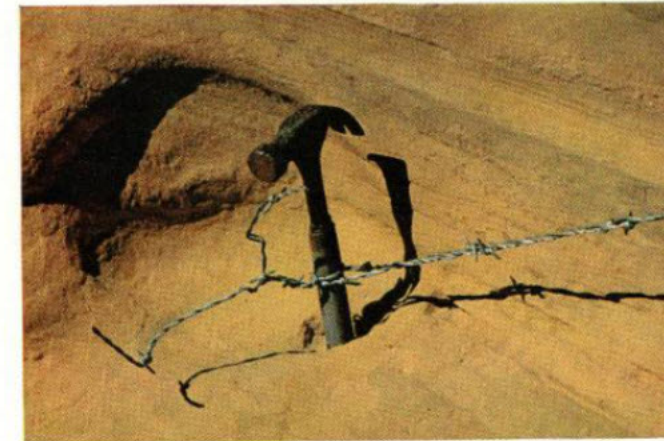
But conservationists advocate even greater protection and have urged that the entire region be set aside as a wilderness area. Already the Utah Highway Department proposes a paved road that would cut across some of the Escalante's most primitive points. From Bullfrog Basin, site of a Lake Powell marina, the scenic highway would thread southwestward for 37 miles, passing near Stevens Arch, to a junction with Hole-in-the-Rock Road from Escalante (map, pages 272-3).

The lure of tourism inspired the highway plan and keeps it alive. Escalante businessmen support the road, though it would pass 40 miles southeast of town. Surely, they hope, some travelers' dollars would be diverted to their community. In a town of dwindling

population, where per capita annual income averages under \$3,000, such hopes are not to be scorned.

Some conservation groups foresee this road through the Escalante heartland as a gateway for abuse. Scenes of defilement—names scratched on canyon walls, litter, earth-churning dune buggies, and roaring snowmobiles—parade nightmarishly before their eyes. Jack McLellan and his letter-writing, speech-making band of protectionists back a different route—a Canyon Country Parkway System that would utilize existing roads between population centers while discreetly skirting the wilder areas.

The U.S. Congress now has pending before it several bills affecting the future of the Escalante. One of them calls for a study to determine whether all or part of it should be designated as a wilderness area. Such a study, conservationists hope, would kill, or substantially modify, the Highway Department's proposal.





IT DOESN'T LOOK like much, this silty sun-bouncing waterway called Escalante, where hikers wade at the entrance to the narrowing canyon. But few places are as unspoiled. In a state that vies with Nevada and Arizona as the Nation's driest, the Escalante River remains undammed and unpolluted by man.

Escalante ranchers want more water, though, and power companies say that Utah needs more electricity to forestall a predicted power shortage by 1976. Exploitation of the Escalante River would help both situations. Thus a proposal that the river be dammed for impoundment of 23,000 acre-feet of water. Most of the water would be fed to steam turbines that would generate power; coal mined from fields in the area would heat the water. Surplus water could go to local ranchers to irrigate feed crops.

A new power plant would create many jobs and add millions of dollars to Escalante's tax base, a boon to tax-supported schools, road-improvement programs, and other public services. Irrigation would increase production of feed for cattle, which, though relatively few in number, are the area's chief economic resource. Cattlemen could approach schoolhouse meetings with Bureau of Land Management officials (**lower right**) somewhat less concerned about rising fees for grazing privileges on public lands.

An enticing prospect. Especially since, as Escalante businessman Steed puts it, "We're trying to move toward a change in attitude for this place. We want to make it attractive to our young people. Give them a chance to stay here or come back here to make a living."



Conservationists feel the cost is too high. The power plant, they say, will not only bring air pollution, access roads, and power transmission lines, but also coal mining and its attendant damage. They seek wilderness status for the Escalante to save its primitive grandeur for generations to come.

Thus, once more, a dilemma is posed—a difficult choice that must balance practical values of the moment against the diffuse, though very real, interests of tomorrow. The decision will affect not just a few Americans and a remote canyon, but all Americans and the future of their land. □

