

MARBLE CANYON WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 12,715 acres

The Marble Canyon WSA (NV-040-086) is located approximately 30 air miles northeast of Ely near the Utah border north of Mt. Moriah in White Pine County. The entire WSA is comprised of public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management with no private inholdings. The WSA is approximately 5 miles long and 8 miles wide. The total acreage discussed in this report is reduced from original study acreage of 19,150 acres due to designation of 6,435 acres as wilderness. On December 5, 1989, President Bush signed into law the Nevada Wilderness Protection Act of 1989. The 82,000-acre Mt. Moriah Wilderness Area included 6,435 acres of Bureau-administered lands located in the WSA. The acreage already designated as wilderness is excluded from remainder of this report. Although the designated boundary was similar to the recommendation of this report there are 1,865 acres still remaining within the Bureau's original proposed wilderness recommendation that were not designated as wilderness.

The boundary of the WSA is formed entirely by dirt roads with the exception of a 7-mile portion on the south which is contiguous with the Humboldt National Forest. The Marble Wash and Coyote Canyon Roads form the northern boundary of the WSA while the western boundary is formed by a series of inter-connected jeep trails which traverse the ridge between Coyote Canyon and the upper reaches of Bars Canyon. The boundary road crosses Sage Flat in the southern portion of the WSA and connects to the administrative boundary of the Humboldt National Forest which comprises the southern boundary. The eastern boundary of the WSA is formed by a jeep trail which traverses the upper portion of the alluvial bench between Smith Creek Canyon on the south and Marble Wash on the north.

Topographically, the study area is a complex array of canyons, jumbled peaks, and drainages, dotted with juniper, pinyon pine and mountain mahogany. The highest point in the area, Thunder Mountain (9,331 feet), is located on a long ridge that crosses the study area's center. The ridge supports Douglas fir, white fir, bristlecone pine and limber pine.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 1,865 acres recommended for wilderness 10,850 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for the Marble Canyon WSA is to designate 1,865 additional acres as wilderness and release 10,850 acres for uses other than wilderness.

A portion of the Marble Canyon WSA was recommended for wilderness because of its pristine qualities, archaeological and geological values, lack of conflicting resource uses, and its contiguous location to the established BLM wilderness unit. The additional acres will provide a more manageable boundary than currently exists.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The majority of the WSA is in an extremely natural condition. Much of the area is rugged and has impeded most development attempts. Man-made intrusions include a 1-mile fence in the northeast corner, an abandoned concrete trough in Christmas Wash and a corral at the mouth of a drainage within Marble Canyon.

Three short ways, each totaling less than 1 mile, and four cherry stemmed roads totalling 3 miles are located along the eastern boundary of the WSA. The presence of the roads and ways along the eastern bench detracts very little from the naturalness of the area. In addition, one short cherrystemmed road accesses an

unsuccessful water development at the base of Thunder Mountain .

Minor quarrying for marble has taken place along Marble and Bars Canyons, and several small quarry scars and areas of blasted rubble exist in these rocky canyons. These disturbances are visible only in their immediate vicinity and essentially blend in with natural surroundings. Aside from these intrusions, the area appears to be untrammelled by man and his works.

B. Solitude: The rugged topographic features of the Marble Canyon WSA insure outstanding opportunities for solitude. The northern and central region of the WSA is characterized by sparsely forested plateaus and divides cut by massive canyons. The impressive Bars Canyon, slices through the unit and its limestone and marble walls drop nearly 800 feet to the canyon's floor. Major side canyons equally as deep branch off and wander for additional miles. Each turn of these tortuous canyons isolate the visitor further and further. The cliffs are pocketed with shelter caves, expansive ledges, and huge natural amphitheaters. Other major canyons, including Marble and Coyote Canyons, have similar topographic isolation. Vegetative screening varies throughout the WSA. Pockets of white fir, Douglas fir, bristlecone pine, limber pine, and mountain mahogany are found at higher elevations on most of the ridges within the WSA. The broad, low-sage covered plateau, nestled between the two main arms of Bar Canyon in the southwest corner of the study area, and the sparsely vegetated east bench are the only areas where opportunities for solitude would be diminished.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Recreational opportunities in the Marble Canyon WSA are very good and quite varied, but are not considered outstanding. Most recreational use would be concentrated along Bars and Marble Canyons, the forested ridgelines, and the sage plateau in the southwest portion.

Camping, hiking, cave exploration, climbing, and horseback opportunities are excellent within the major canyons. Sandy canyon bottoms provide travel routes to numerous scenic camping spots and shelter caves. For more hardy explorers, the tremendous range of cliff faces afford innumerable climbing opportunities. The canyon rims offer protected pockets of coniferous forests as cool, moist retreats from the canyon's heat. Photographic subject matter ranges from dramatic rock arches and gnarled bristlecone pines to stooping prairie falcons and ancient pictographs.

Wildlife related recreational activities such as bird watching, wildlife studies, and photography are all very good, but hunting and trapping opportunities are limited. The cliffs host populations of raptors, including golden eagles, red-tailed hawks, and great horned owls, as well as numerous smaller birds such as swallows, chickadees and towhees. A varied but low population of mammals, including ringtail cats, mountain lions, kit foxes, Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, and antelope can be seen in the WSA.

D. Special Features: The WSA contains abundant bird populations, Bristlecone pines, unique geologic features and cultural resource such as pictographs, rock shelters and open campsites.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The entire Marble Canyon WSA is manageable as wilderness. The ruggedness of the area, the continued very low visitation it is likely to receive, lack of conflicting potential uses, and the absence of private inholdings mean that no major impediment to management of the area as wilderness would occur. In addition, the entire WSA's boundaries are easily identified roads.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The U.S Geological Survey and the Bureau of Mines prepared a mineral assessment report for the Marble Canyon WSA in 1989, (U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 1731-F). Thrusted Paleozoic marine sediments are flanked by Tertiary volcanic outcrops in the northeastern part of the WSA and alluvial materials to the east,

north and west. The predominant rock type in the area is limestone.

The entire Marble Canyon WSA is classified as having a low favorability for metallic minerals. The northeast portion of the WSA has been rated as having a moderate to high potential for marble, which is low grade and suitable for crushed decorative stone. The marble potential area includes approximately 1,915 acres with high potential and about 5,745 acres with moderate potential. Minor marble quarrying has taken place in the past, however, there is no recorded production of marble within the WSA. No known oil and gas, geothermal, uranium or thorium deposits occur within the WSA

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

Comments received during the inventory process and early stages of the EIS preparation were used to develop significant study issues and various alternatives for management of those lands with wilderness values.

During public review of the draft EIS and Wilderness Technical Report held between June and September, 1988, a total of nine comments were received specifically addressing the Marble Canyon. In general, five commentators supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA and the remaining four commentators mentioned the Marble Canyon, but took no formal position on wilderness designation. Those favoring wilderness commented on the area's scenic nature and location next to the Mount Moriah unit of the Humboldt National Forest which at that time was proposed for wilderness.

The following federal agencies reviewed the EIS but expressed no specific comments on the Marble Canyon WSA: Department of Energy, National Park Service and the Environmental Protection Agency. The Fish and Wildlife Service supported the wilderness recommendation for the area and the Bureau of Mines stated that high quality limestone could occur in the WSA as well as the potential for precious and base minerals. The State of Nevada concurred with the wilderness proposal for the Marble Canyon area.