



FOR LAND'S SAKE

Walnut Canyon National Monument is one of Northern Arizona's points of pride, but the scenic, ecological and archaeological splendor of the canyon goes beyond the monument boundaries. What surrounds the gorge is equally impressive, which is why a coalition of Flagstaff citizens is lobbying Congress to protect the land by designating it a national conservation area. **By Annette McGivney**

SPECTACULAR CANYON COUNTRY is not far from the mountain town of Flagstaff. The Grand Canyon is just 90 miles away; Sycamore and Oak Creek canyons are a mere 20 miles. But the scenic gorge closest to the hearts — and homes — of many Flagstaff residents is Walnut Canyon. ¶ Located just 5 miles southeast of downtown Flagstaff, Walnut Canyon meanders through wild country that harbors sparse roads and rare stands of old-growth ponderosa pines, as well as a rich riparian area filled with the canyon's namesake Arizona walnut trees. Pronghorns roam the open, grassy plateaus of Campbell Mesa and Anderson Mesa, which flank the canyon. And tucked away in Walnut's 400-foot-tall cliffs are dozens of ancient archaeological sites. The most substantial cliff dwellings are protected in the 3,580-acre Walnut Canyon National Monument, but the scenic, ecological

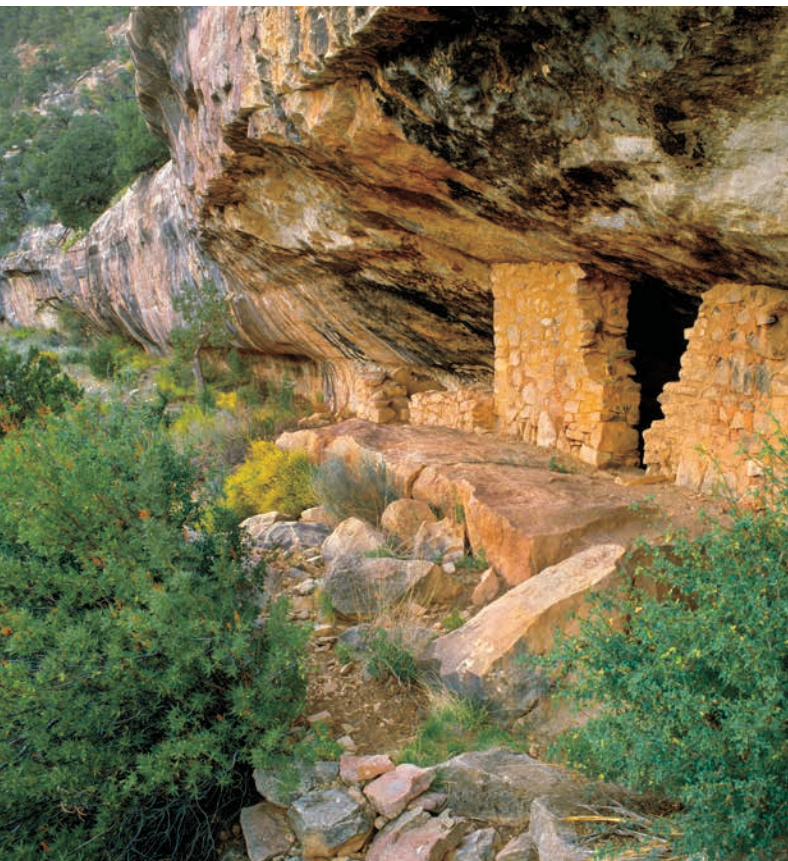
An agave stalk blooms on the rim of Walnut Canyon near Flagstaff. Several hundred Flagstaff residents are pushing for increased federal protection for the canyon. **■ TOM BEAN**

and archaeological resources of the canyon extend well beyond the park boundaries.

The fact that a large part of the Walnut Canyon drainage is located within Flagstaff's city limits is both a blessing and a curse. A network of trails through the canyon and on Campbell Mesa is a favorite playground for hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians. But as the city of 65,000 residents continues to expand, the prospect of losing part of this backcountry oasis, located almost entirely on the Coconino National Forest, to a land exchange or sale to developers is an ever-increasing threat. That's why several hundred Flagstaff residents have been fighting for more than a decade to get increased federal protection for their beloved canyon.

"This is Flagstaff's canyon. It is a unique and special place that is a recreation resource for the whole city," said Flagstaff resident Ralph Baierlein, who is spearheading the grass-roots

"The continued effort to protect the study area shows how much people love this place," said Mike Elson, a Coconino National Forest district ranger. "It is valuable to a lot of people for a lot of different reasons."



movement to protect Walnut Canyon.

The conservation effort began in earnest in 2002, when Flagstaff citizens banded together and petitioned Northern Arizona's congressional delegation to protect Walnut Canyon National Monument from the threat of encroaching urban development, as well as exempt the larger canyon drainage from land exchanges. The National Park Service was also interested in establishing a buffer around the monument, and the U.S. Forest Service was concerned about impacts to lands it managed along Flagstaff's urban interface.

From 2000 to 2010, Flagstaff's population grew by nearly 25 percent, and housing developments expanded all the way to the national-forest boundary along Campbell Mesa, as well as along parts of the Walnut Canyon drainage. As a result of continued public pressure and petitions from the Coconino County Board of Supervisors and the Flagstaff City Council, Congress in 2009 authorized a special study of the lands surrounding Walnut Canyon National Monument. The study area encompasses nearly 28,000 acres of federal, state and private land, including Walnut Canyon, several side canyons and Campbell Mesa. The goal of the study was to investigate management options for the area, including expanding the monument and converting it into a national park.

Carried out jointly by the Forest Service and the Park Service, the four-year study involved extensive surveys of the area's archaeological, ecological and recreational use, along with input from Flagstaff residents and Native American tribes. The results of the study were released in January 2014. While the agencies determined that the large swath of Forest Service land did not meet the strict guidelines required for national-park designation, it did meet the criteria for a national conservation area.

According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, "national conservation areas are designated by Congress to conserve, enhance, protect and manage public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations." Public lands that meet the criteria for a conservation area contain "exceptional scientific, cultural, ecological, historical and recreation values." There are currently three national conservation areas in Arizona: San Pedro Riparian, Gila Box Riparian and Las Cienegas.

The designation for Walnut Canyon would prevent future development of the land while maintaining current access and uses. And, perhaps just as important to Flagstaff residents, it would elevate the status of the Walnut Canyon study area to something special.

"The continued effort to protect the study area shows how much people love this place," said Mike Elson, a Coconino National Forest district ranger. "It is valuable to a lot of people for a lot of different reasons."

However, an act of Congress does not come easily. And while the Forest Service and the Park Service are tasked with managing the land, they do not lobby politicians for protective designations. So the loose-knit, grass-roots coalition of people who love Walnut Canyon is taking the fight from Flagstaff to Washington, D.C. Even if the study area does not meet national-park standards, it is a crown jewel for Flagstaff. And if the activists get their way, it will soon be called Walnut Canyon National Conservation Area.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Most of the ancient dwellings in Walnut Canyon were inhabited by the Sinagua people, who farmed in the area between A.D. 600 and 1400. GEORGE H.H. HUEY

ABOVE: Elk graze in a meadow in Fay Canyon, which is within the nearly 28,000-acre Walnut Canyon study area. TOM BEAN

RIGHT: The Sandys Canyon Trail winds around old-growth ponderosa pines in the study area. TOM BEAN



PHOTOGRAPHER TOM BEAN, a frequent *Arizona Highways* contributor, and writer Susan Lamb live on a 10-acre parcel within the Walnut Canyon study area. The married couple are among the hundreds of Flagstaff residents who find refuge in the nascent national conservation area nearly every day and are fighting to protect their favorite place. On a crisp morning in October, I accompanied them on their usual stroll.

"I like to roam through here," Bean said as we walked across an open, forested area. It's about a quarter-mile from the couple's backyard and is populated by majestic stands of mature ponderosas. "I call it the tree temple."

We dropped down into Skunk Canyon, and the musky smell of dogwoods, for which the place is named, filled our nostrils. In addition to the parts of Walnut Canyon not already part of the national monument, the study area encompasses the major side drainages of Skunk, Fay and Cherry canyons. While the main canyon cut by the ephemeral Walnut Creek contains a habitat similar to other riparian areas in Northern Arizona, the microclimates in the side canyons host a unique mix of plant species. As we made our way down Skunk Canyon, Lamb pointed out that we were in an ecological transition zone. On the north-facing canyon slope, mature Douglas firs were thriving in perpetual shade. But amid rocks on the south-facing canyon walls, bright-green agaves basked in the autumn sun.

"It's like the Pacific Northwest here because of the diversity

of species," Lamb said. "I've discovered wild strawberries and grapes in this canyon, and also columbines and lilies during the wet season." She pointed to a jagged limestone ledge along the cliff face: "During the monsoon, a hanging garden grows there."

When you hike in a place nearly every day for 20 years, as Lamb and Bean have, you get to know the land on an intimate level and witness its subtle shifts through the seasons. Lamb said Skunk Canyon is her favorite part of the Walnut drainage because of its abundance of wildflowers. She keeps a flower almanac of what she encounters in the study area; it now numbers 200 species.

After several miles, we dropped into the broad corridor of Walnut Canyon, where the 400-foot-tall sandstone-and-limestone monolith of Fisher Point glistened white against the blue sky. Stands of aspens on the canyon floor shimmered gold in the midday sun. Just east of the point, Walnut Canyon

squeezes down into a narrow section, several miles long, that harbors giant old-growth ponderosas, thickets of poison ivy and caves at the bases of canyon walls. We made a brief detour into the narrows and then hiked south on the Arizona Trail, which follows the meandering path of Walnut Creek.

“This is everybody’s backyard,” Bean said. “This trail is well used by hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders.” On the weekday we were there, though, we encountered only one cyclist and two other hikers.

We ventured off the trail and scrambled up a steep scree slope to reach a cliff face where a pictograph panel attests to the long human history in Walnut Canyon. According to archaeological surveys done for the federal study, most rock-art sites and cliff dwellings found in Walnut Canyon are from the Sinagua culture, which farmed in the drainage between A.D. 600 and 1400. However, some artifacts are estimated to be far older and date back to prehistoric hunter-gatherer cultures. The Hopi Tribe claims ancestral ties to the sites in Walnut Canyon, and the Navajo Nation, as well as 11 other Southwestern tribes, also reports cultural connections to the study area.

Bean, Lamb and I pondered the possible meaning of the human stick figures that seemed to float ethereally across the salmon-colored sandstone. Some looked like they could have been painted yesterday, while others had almost faded into oblivion.

As we slid back down the scree slope toward the trail, a mountain biker threaded his way between trees along the canyon bottom.

“People have been using this canyon for more than 9,000 years,” Bean said.

IN THE LATE 1990s, Baierlein, the Flagstaff activist, and his wife were looking for a place to retire. After a long career as a physics professor for Harvard and Wesleyan universities, Baierlein “wanted to live in a place with blue skies.” After a 1996 visit to Flagstaff, he and his wife were sold. They bought a home in the Country Club neighborhood adjacent to Campbell Mesa and the northwestern part of Walnut Canyon. Soon after moving in 1999, Baierlein became concerned about development threats to his new stomping grounds and joined efforts to protect the area.


“I’ve been working on this, one way or another, for 14 years,” Baierlein, 78, said as we set out from the Campbell Mesa Trailhead on an unseasonably warm afternoon in January. I had joined Baierlein for his regular hike on the mesa’s 13-mile trail system. In two days — after years of Baierlein’s persistent, yet diplomatic, prodding — the Flagstaff City Council would finally vote on a resolution to support protecting the study area. As we traipsed through mud turned to goo by the afternoon sun, the mild-mannered professor felt the gravity of the upcoming vote. It was the final hurdle before the proposal for a national conservation area could be sent to Congress. “All the sides have had their say,” he said of the protracted battle. “Now we’re in a much stronger position to get a bill passed.”


Baierlein has seen elk, deer, bobcats, pronghorns and javeli-

Walnut Canyon’s sandstone cliffs protect stands of aspens and Douglas firs below Fisher Point.
TOM BEAN





LEFT: Fog and mist shroud the pines of Walnut Canyon near the Sandys Canyon junction.  TOM BEAN

BELOW: Lewis flax blooms amid blue grama grass in Fay Canyon after a monsoon storm.  TOM BEAN



At the top of a grassy knoll, we paused to catch our breath. The snow-covered San Francisco Peaks sparkled to the north. To the south, Walnut Canyon dropped away into folds of sandstone. Baierlein pointed to a log on the ground: “My wife and I usually stop and sit here and admire the view.”

nas during his Campbell Mesa hikes. He also likes to ride his horse through the northern end of the study area. “I’ve seen this area improve greatly over the last decade,” he said. “Now, there is a nice trail system. It used to be covered with tracks from trucks and trash from partygoers.”

We ventured off the trail because Baierlein wanted to show me an old sign that he found amusing. It reads: “No sheep grazing.” During the first half of the 20th century, Campbell Mesa was a major thoroughfare for driving sheep. It then became a playground for off-road driving. Now it is closed to motorized vehicles and traveled by hikers, mountain bikers and dog walkers.

Back on the trail, Baierlein pointed out places where he often sees potsherds. As we gained elevation, the juniper scrub forest opened up to a spacious meadow. At the top of a grassy knoll, we paused to catch our breath. The snow-covered San Francisco Peaks sparkled to the north. To the south, Walnut Canyon dropped away into folds of sandstone. Baierlein pointed to a log on the ground: “My wife and I usually stop and sit here and admire the view.”

The City Council would vote 5-2 in support of the resolution asking Congress to designate the study area a national conservation area. Next on Baierlein’s agenda was contacting members of Arizona’s congressional delegation to see if they would sponsor a bill on behalf of the people who love Walnut Canyon. But on this day, as on so many days over the past 15 years, he was enjoying the view from his neighborhood sanctuary.

“This kind of openness,” he said, “is really wonderful.”

For more information on Walnut Canyon National Monument, call 928-526-3367 or visit www.nps.gov/waca. 