

Introduction

The upsurge in oil and gas activity on the Ashley National Forest, in particular the South Unit, has created a need to provide a culture history for the area. The South Unit has a unique and interesting archaeological record. Although it has similarities to neighboring regions, it also has fundamental differences from the Uinta Basin and Uinta Mountain record to the north and Nine Mile Canyon to the south. This review was primarily created to provide a context for contract archaeologists that may work in the area and to guide future Forest Service research.

The Ashley's South Unit is an isolated administrative unit of 202,123 acres located south of Duchesne, Utah (Figure 1). It is located in the Western Tavaputs Plateau geographic province. The South Unit is characterized by series of deeply incised ridges which gently slope to the northeast. The local terrain varies from about 7,000 feet to over 9,000 feet in elevation. The eastern end of the South Unit is drier and lower in elevation, while the more elevated western end is generally covered by mixed conifer forests. Vegetation at the lower elevations consists of sagebrush, greasewood, grasses and pinyon-juniper woodland (Figure 3), which transitions to sagebrush steppe and patches of aspen on upper elevation ridge tops (Figure 4). North facing higher elevation canyon slopes are heavily timbered with Douglas fir, aspen and Lodgepole pine (Figure 5). The understory in the aspen groves include: snowberry (*Symphoricarpos* sp.), rose, mountain mahogany, chokecherry, columbine, geranium, and penstemon. Open areas on the ridges support sagebrushes (*Artemisia tridentata* and *A. frigida*), snowberry, pedio cactus, vetch, lupine, green gentian, and penstemon.

Figure 1. South Unit in relationship to the Uinta Basin and Uinta Mountains of northeastern Utah.

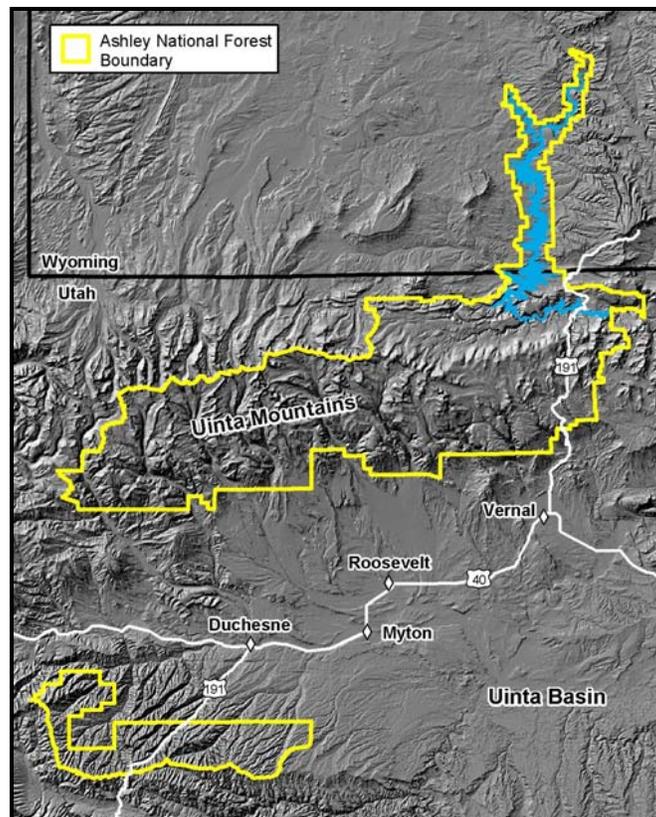
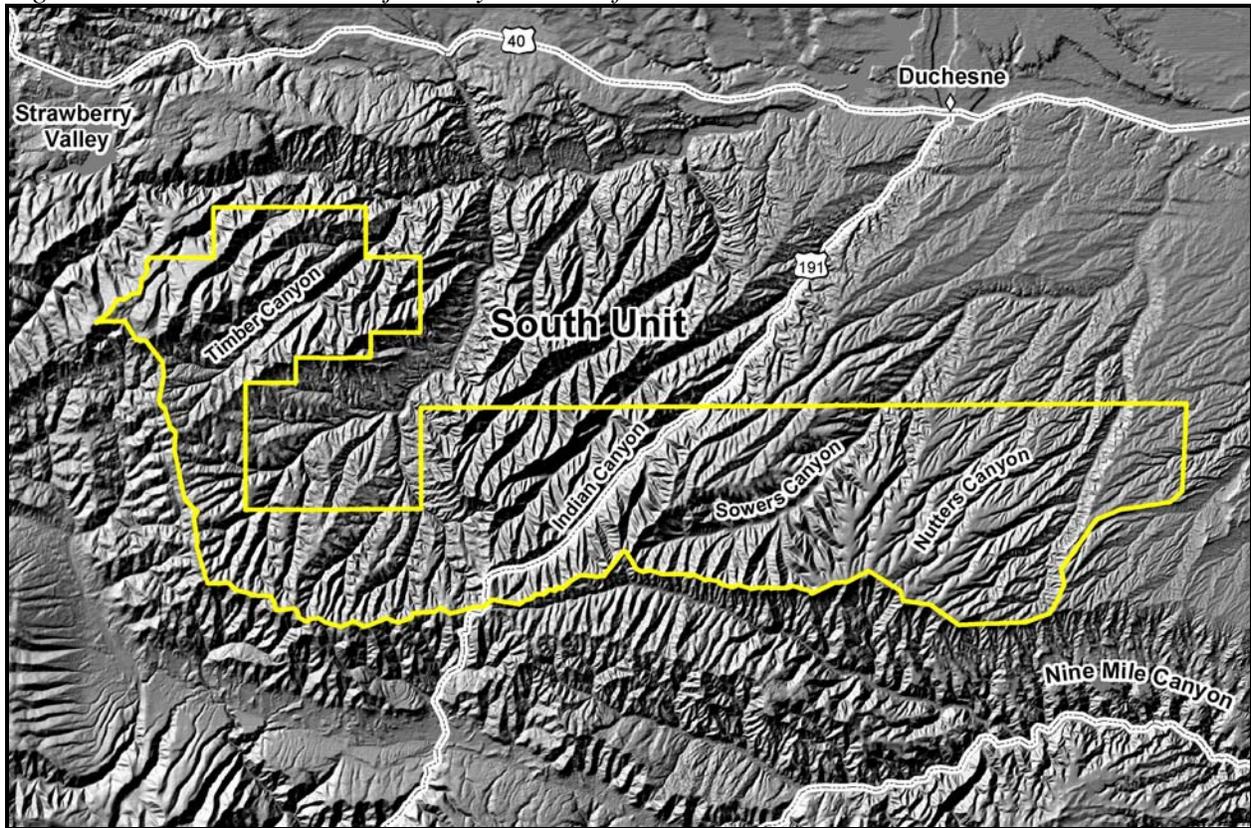


Figure 2. South Unit with major canyons identified.



The South Unit lies on the West Tavaputs Plateau. There seems to have been considerable confusion about the aerial extent of the Tavaputs. Barton (1998:4) and others (e.g. Spangler 1995) include the Roan and Book Cliffs in the Tavaputs. “The southern rim of the Uinta Basin is formed by the Tavaputs Plateau, named after a Uintah Ute chief. The Tavaputs Plateau extends from the Wasatch Mountain Range in a generally southeasterly direction for about 200 miles. A significant part of the Tavaputs Plateau is the Book Cliffs mountainous region.” However, others (e.g. Stegner 1994, Chronic 1990:22) seem to separate the Roan and Book Cliffs from the Tavaputs. The most recent geologic and geographic maps all tend to identify the Roan and Book Cliffs separate from the Tavaputs. However, none other than John Wesley Powell seems to lay this question to rest as he describes the area between the Uinta Basin and Price as the Tavaputs Plateau.

The Tavaputs Plateau is one of the stupendous features of this country. On the west it merges into the Wasatch Mountains; on the north it descends by wooded slopes into the Uinta Valley. Its summit is forest-clad and among the forests are many beautiful parks. On the south it ends in a great escarpment which descends into Castle Valley. This southern escarpment presents one of the most wonderful facades of the world. It is from 2,000 to 4,000 feet high. The descent is not made by one bold step, for it is cut by canyons and cliffs. It is a zone several miles in width which is a vast labyrinth of canyons, cliffs, buttes, pinnacles, minarets, and detached rocks of Cyclopean magnitude, the whole destitute of soil and

Figure 3. Pinyon-juniper covered canyon slope in eastern end of South Unit.



Figure 4. Upper elevation sagebrush steppe near Anthro Mountain.



Figure 5. Mixed conifer and aspen at higher elevations.



vegetation, colored in many brilliant tones and tints, and carved in many weird forms, - a land of desolation, dedicated forever to the geologist and the artist, where civilization can find no resting-place” (Powell 1895:18).

Based on this early definition then, the Book and Roan Cliffs are features of the Tavaputs and the South Unit would be the northwestern corner of the Tavaputs Plateau. A steep escarpment marks the south end of the South Unit and creates a convenient and prominent boundary. This escarpment marks the edge of the Duchesne River drainage and was used by President Lincoln as the boundary of the Uintah Indian Reservation (Figure 6).

Contractors and archaeological researchers often encounter projectile point types and features in northeastern Utah they are familiar with from other areas. They often mistakenly assume that the cultural history of the Uinta Basin and Tavaputs are identical to the cultural area with which they are most familiar with and rely exclusively on data from that region for comparative purposes. However, “the Uinta Basin region, located in a transition zone between the Great Basin, northern Colorado Plateau and northwestern Plains, may have been exploited by groups with cultural affinity to all three regions” (Spangler 2002:260). The degree of cultural influence from outside areas also seems to have waxed or waned at individual sites during particular periods of time (e.g. Leach 1967, Johnson and Loosle 2002, Spangler 2002). Researchers need to compare and contrast their results with multiple regional summaries and not rely on a single cultural area for comparative material.

Spangler (2002, 1995) has provided exhaustive reviews of previous research, theoretical approaches, comparisons of culture histories, a review of the environmental history, and discussion of sites types in northeastern Utah. This report will not duplicate these earlier overviews, instead this review will focus on the Ashley’s South Unit and only briefly mention the extensive material covered by Spangler. Some of the more significant sites and cultural

Figure 6. View from edge of escarpment that marked edge of reservation and current Forest Boundary, looking south towards Nine Mile Canyon.



landscapes on the South Unit are just briefly mentioned by Spangler. This overview will primarily attempt to address the data gaps and differences or disagreements from these earlier summaries. The first section will provide an overview of the sites the Forest Service has recorded on the South Unit and summarize them graphically and verbally. The second section on Culture History will be a brief overview of the suspected prehistoric cultural sequence for the South Unit based on excavations and documented sites compared to suggested sequences for the region. The third section is a review of the ethnographic data collected by Forest Service employees and from the literature that is applicable to the site types recorded in the area under consideration. The fourth section will be a historical overview as it applies to the South Unit. The final section is a discussion of the data gaps and research questions that should be addressed with future research projects and data collection.