

Draft Existing and Desired Conditions
For
Scenery Management

USDA Forest Service
Southwestern Region
Coconino National Forest

SCENERY

Summary of Existing Condition

The Anderson Mesa Landscape Assessment area has retained most of the scenic attributes present in the area historically. Vegetative patterns have been altered significantly over the past century but the dominant patterns of the past; broad grasslands with conifer islands and stringers interspersed, are dominant today. Natural features and elements appear to be dominant over most of the area. Exceptions are the power line corridor and roads. Features associated with the history of ranching in the area; such as both historic and present ranch buildings, wire fences, and stock tanks are viewed by some as valued cultural features reflective of the areas ranching history and by others as symbols of past destructive management practices.

Affected Environment

Landscape Character Description:

The Landscape Character Description, as defined in “*Landscape Aesthetics - A handbook for Scenery Management*” (USDA Handbook #701) describes the positive scenic and cultural elements inherent to the landscape that collectively form the base for comparison of alternative management scenarios. Landscape management that tends to preserve or enhance the inherent positive scenic elements will maintain or increase the scenic integrity of the landscape and will help achieve landscape character goals. Landscape management that eliminates or obscures positive scenic elements or that introduces elements that are visibly alien to the characteristic landscape will degrade scenic integrity and thwart achievement of landscape character goals.

Landscape Character analysis is mostly concerned with long term, indirect effects of landscape management activities. The Landscape Character issue relevant to the Anderson Mesa area analysis is the extent to which changes in forest composition, such as those proposed in the EIS, will affect the inherent aesthetic qualities of the area landscape.

The landscape of the Anderson Mesa project area lies completely within the “Flagstaff Character Type” zone, a contiguous geographic area with common visual characteristics resulting from common ecological characteristics. Scenic characteristics identified for the Flagstaff Character Type in general and which occur within the Anderson Mesa project area are outlined in *Landscape Character Types of the National Forests in Arizona and New Mexico* (USDA, supplement to FSH 462).

The Anderson Mesa project area occupies 263,500 acres of the San Francisco plateau, which is part of the Colorado plateau dominated by the San Francisco Peaks. The gently sloping terrain of the mesa top is dissected by several shallow canyons that begin as shallow swales and draws atop the mesa towards the southeast edge and become deeper as they tend towards the northeast mesa edge. As the canyons become progressively deeper towards the northeast rim of the mesa, more sandstone is exposed on the canyon walls. The seasonally flowing streams in the canyon bottoms create cascades and pools during their flow seasons, with remnant pools persisting well into the drier seasons. In places, the bedrock has been sculpted by water leaving interesting and unique rock forms in the stream channel.

The canyon vegetation generally contrasts with vegetation on top of the mesa, reflecting the contrast between canyon and mesa top micro-climates. Within the canyon walls, the vegetation is often highly varied and distinct, with deciduous trees such as aspen and oak more common, that create diverse vegetation patterns that change seasonally.

The ponderosa pine forest and pinyon-juniper woodlands on the mesa top contain remnants of the historic forest condition described in early accounts of the area. Historic accounts and photos describe a relatively open grassland landscape with “stringers” and patches of mature ponderosa pine, pinyon, and juniper trees occurring where soil and micro site conditions allowed them to get established. Numerous natural and man made lakes and ephemeral ponds occur on the mesa along a strip up to about 5 miles wide extending from Marshall Lake to Long Lake, a distance of about 38 miles. The largest lakes on the mesa;

Long , Tremaine, Soldier, Soldier Annex, and Kinnikinick , are man made lakes. Marshall and Vail Lakes are the largest natural lakes on the mesa.

European settlement brought with it landscape management practices; such as intensive grazing, logging, and fire suppression, that have resulted in the present forest scenic condition. The landscape character of Anderson Mesa changed in appearance over a period that started around 1880 and continues today. In some areas open grassland has given way to encroachment of pinyon, juniper, and ponderosa pine trees. In other areas, sites that were historically pinyon-juniper woodland were “converted” into grassland by removing all the trees. Some of these sites are now reverting back to the original woodland vegetation. Many open pine park sites, dominated by large, yellow barked ponderosa pine, have been changed into sites with more dense stands of smaller, black barked ponderosa pine trees and saplings.

Presently; insect infestations are creating dramatic changes in vegetative pattern. Areas recently dominated by ponderosa pine or pinyon pine stands are experiencing mortality that will change many areas from forest or woodlands into grasslands.

Existing Landscape Character:

The change in landscape character over the past century contrasts snapshots of two different characteristic landscapes; one that evolved for thousands of years and one that has come into dominance fairly recently. The contrast in the appearance between the two represents a range of variability in both ecological processes and in the resultant scenic values of the area. The Anderson Mesa Landscape Assessment area has retained most of the scenic attributes present in the area historically. Vegetative patterns have been altered significantly over the past century but the dominant patterns of the past; broad grasslands with conifer islands and stringers interspersed, are dominant today. Natural features and elements appear to be dominant over most of the area. Exceptions are the power line corridor and roads.

Features associated with the history of ranching in the area; such as both historic and more modern ranch buildings, wire fences, and stock tanks are viewed by some as valued cultural features reflective of the areas ranching history and by others as symbols of past destructive management practices. Whatever the perspective of the viewer, such features are generally subordinate to the natural appearing landscape that is dominant throughout most of the area.

Past management has altered the vegetative pattern of the ponderosa pine sites from the more desirable open pine stands with more big trees to the present less desirable condition with more dense stands of smaller trees. Even though the resulting landscape looks unaltered and natural to the casual observer and meets the original scenic objectives (VQOs) set forth in the Forest Plan, the existing scenic condition sometimes falls short of the potential scenic values inherent in the historic ponderosa pine forest with its open parks dominated by large yellow barked trees.

The canyons which occur in the area are mostly not accessible to motorized vehicles and are often difficult for pedestrians to negotiate. The canyon vegetation is more diverse and not as fire dependent as the ponderosa pine forests which occur on top of the plateaus between the canyons. The resulting appearance of the canyons is generally primitive with little evidence of human activity and influence and with vegetation that probably looks very similar to what it has looked like since people first arrived in the area. The existing scenic condition of the area canyons probably comes close to meeting the full potential for scenic quality inherent to such canyon settings within the Flagstaff landscape character type.

Existing Scenic Condition:

Scenic Integrity is a measure of the degree to which a National Forest landscape is visually perceived to be “complete” and “natural” in appearance. Scenic Integrity analysis is used primarily to address the visible effects of human activities on the landscape and especially short term effects resulting from management and other activities. Issues affecting scenic integrity on Anderson Mesa include the results of management activities such as cattle grazing and to a lesser extent logging, recreation facilities and activities, utility corridors and sites (ie. the power line corridor and the observatory), and both “system” and “non system” roads and trails.

Overall; the landscape within the analysis area appears slightly altered but with the natural appearing landscape dominant. This equates to a moderate to high level of scenic integrity. Exceptions to this include the power line corridor and the N.P.O.I observatory site that equate to a low level of scenic integrity. The power line is dominant for viewing positions within the line corridor and close to the corridor, especially where the power line and towers are seen with the sky as the background. The NPOI facility is only dominant from viewing positions within are close to the facility, so the effect to scenery is limited.

Desired Landscape Condition:

The desired landscape condition would be one where vegetative pattern and composition appeared to be totally natural and unaltered. Evidence of management and visitor activities would be minimal and subordinate to natural appearing landscape elements. Roads and trails would not dominate any portion of the landscape but would be limited to that necessary for access to the area. Vegetative patterns would reflect those occurring in an unmanaged landscape to the extent possible.

Desired Scenic Condition:

The desired scenic integrity level would be the highest possible given the level of management and access necessary to meet area goals. Evidence of management and use of the area would be subordinate to the natural characteristics of the area if they were visible at all. Facilities deemed necessary for management of the area would be subordinate for elements of line, form, texture and color to those occurring naturally in the landscape.