In the heart of one of the world’s best known archaeological areas, the Mesa Verde region of the northern San Juan River drainage, lies Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. The area is famous for the spectacular cliff dwellings found in Mesa Verde National Park, but the park is less than one percent of the larger region.

Canyons of the Ancients lies to the northwest of Mesa Verde National Park in an area early European explorers called, “The Great Sage Plain.” That plain, so deceptively featureless from a distance, is composed of nearly level uplands, capped with fertile soils, dissected by hundreds of deep, rocky canyons. The new monument encompasses an area shaped roughly like a right triangle. The (southern) base of the triangle lies just north of McElmo Creek, the western edge is the Colorado-Utah border, and the diagonal that forms the east side of the triangle is a jagged interface of public and private land that lies just west of Highway 666 between Cortez and Dove Creek, Colorado.

The purpose of the monument, as stated in the proclamation, is to protect the cultural and natural resources located within its boundaries – an area with the highest known density of archaeological sites in the United States. The State Historic Preservation Office data base reveals some 6,000 recorded sites within the monument, with site densities as high as 100 sites per square mile in some areas. Only a portion of the monument has been surveyed. Thousands of additional sites would undoubtedly be identified with a full inventory.

Humans were present in the monument as early as the Paleoindian period; however, evidence of occupation during this period is limited to three sites. Archaic period hunter-gatherers also occupied the monument, and 80 sites dating to this interval have been recorded. The vast majority of sites within the monument were created by ancient pueblos. The introduction of corn farming to the area likely occurred sometime in the first millennium B.C., although population was sparse until the seventh century A.D. Puebloan occupation of the monument increased dramatically at this time and flourished until the end of the thirteenth century. During this interval, pueblos constructed thousands of homes and left behind a myriad of sites, including large villages, small hamlets, fieldhouses, granaries, shrines, and rock art panels.

These seven centuries of intensive use occurred during two distinct cycles of occupation, the first dating between approximately A.D. 600 and 900 and the second between A.D. 950 and 1300. Remarkably, the two occupational cycles share many characteristics. Both began with low population density and ended with high population density; they began with dispersed settlement and ended with the formation of large, aggregated villages;
and both cycles ended with migrations that left the region largely or completely depopulated.

The archaeological sites most visible today are those dating to the thirteenth century. A shift in the location of residential settlement from upland settings to canyon environments occurred during this time. Communities also changed at this time from clusters of small farmsteads scattered over several square kilometers, to villages where hundreds of people lived cheek by jowl. The largest villages in the region, some containing more than 500 structures, are found within the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. The preservation at these villages is extraordinary, often including standing buildings that are several stories in height. Well-preserved cliff dwellings - sometimes with intact walls, doorways, and roofs - are found where suitable alcoves are present. Most numerous by far are the thousands of small sites found in open settings. At all of these sites the ground surface is littered with broken pieces of corrugated gray ware cooking pots, broken pieces of white ware bowls and jars that are decorated with elaborate designs executed in black paint, and a variety of stone tools.

This wealth of material culture has attracted scholars to the monument for over a century. Their research has played an important role in the development of American archaeology as a professional discipline and in the creation of an enhanced awareness of archaeology among the general public. The earliest scientific study of the area's archaeology was by William H. Holmes and William H. Jackson in the 1870s. Lewis Henry Morgan visited the McElmo valley in 1878, and his maps and interpretations appeared in the 1881 publication, *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigines*. At the turn of the century, T. Mitchell Prudden conducted archaeological investigations that documented the basic residential unit used by puebloan households. In 1907, Sylvanus Griswold Morley, Alfred Vincent Kidder, and John Gould Fletcher were recruited by Edgar Lee Hewett to conduct a survey in the McElmo drainage, and Morley returned in 1908 to excavate Cannonball Ruin. Jesse Walter Fewkes also conducted a reconnaissance of the area, reporting his findings in 1919. Collectively, this early research did a great deal to raise public awareness about the need to preserve and study archaeological sites. As a result, the General Land Office set aside the Goodman Point ruins in 1889. This was followed by the adoption of the Antiquities Act and the creation of Mesa Verde National Park in 1906.

The work of Paul Martin in the 1920s and 1930s signaled a new era for archaeological research in the area. His report on the excavations at Lowry Ruin set a new standard for archaeological documentation and interpretation. However, it is the research of recent decades that has exponentially increased our knowledge of the ancient history of the monument. Most of this research has been cultural resource management projects conducted in conjunction with energy development within the monument. In addition, long-term research in the monument by the Crow Canyon Archaeological Center was initiated in 1983, and continues to the present. Among the many achievements, this collective research has outlined the basics of household and community organization, documented the presence of conflict and warfare, reconstructed the general configuration of the regional settlement system, and produced detailed reconstructions of both the paleoenvironment and the subsistence economy.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will begin working on a long-term management plan for the monument sometime in 2001 and will ensure participation by Native Americans and members of the local community. Ultimately, this plan will guide activities such as conducting site assessments, identifying preservation needs, and addressing any impacts to the archaeological resources. The monument designation should provide better funding for protecting and interpreting the irreplaceable cultural and natural resources located within the monument. In 2001, expanded funding will include the establishment of several new positions, including a manager, an archaeologist, and a law enforcement officer. The BLM's Anasazi Heritage Center, near Dolores, Colorado, will provide information to visitors and researchers interested in learning more about the monument.