



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

New Mexico
2021: Annual Manager's Report

Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks

National Monument



Map

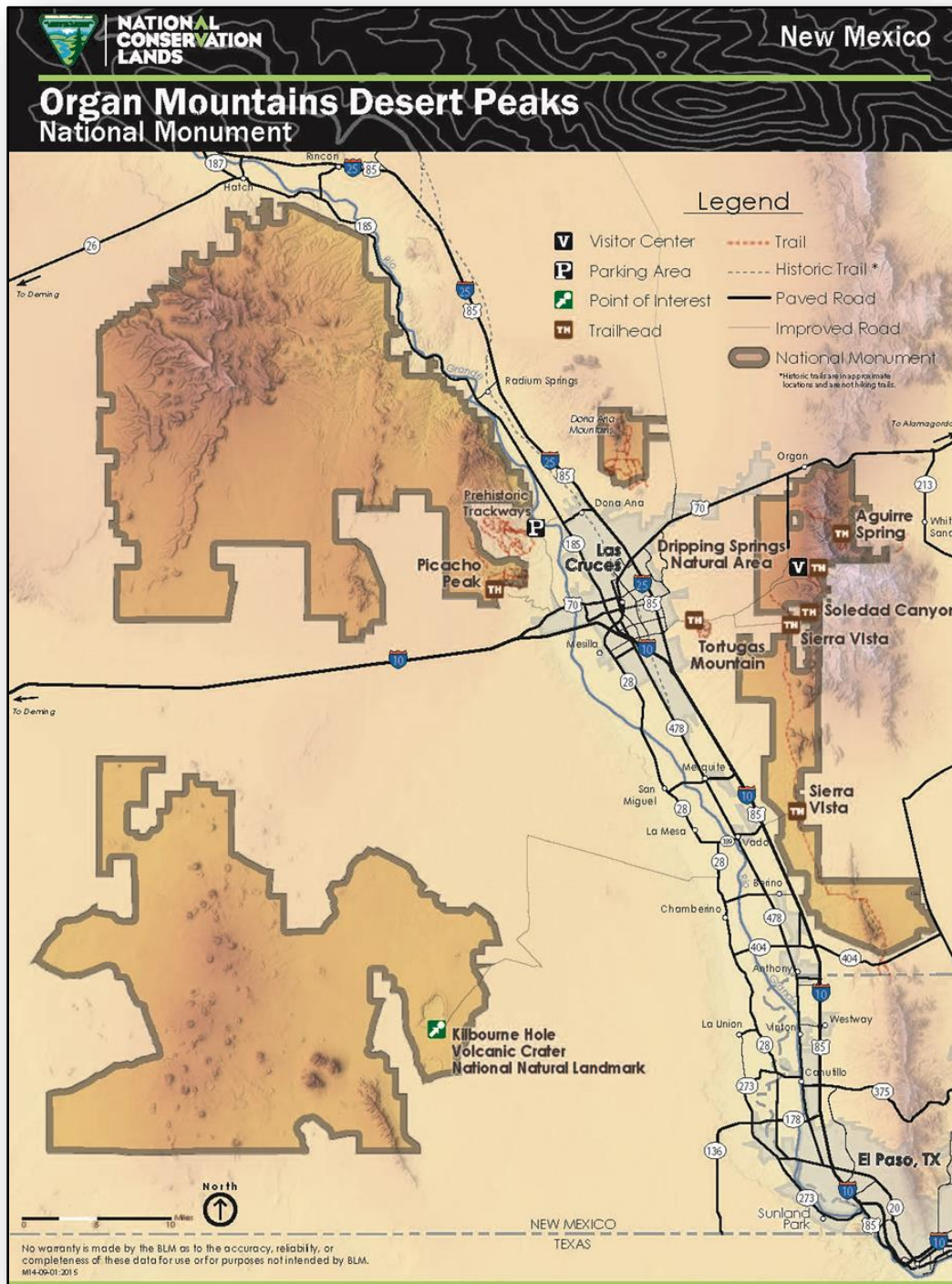


Figure 1. Map of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument.

Accomplishments

The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument (Monument) was funded in late FY21 to initiate the Monument's resources management plan and environmental impact statement (RMP/EIS). A contract was awarded to EMPSi: Environmental Management and Planning Solutions, Inc. in late September and commencement of this plan began in early FY22, with participation from tribes, cooperating agencies, and the public in various phases throughout the process. The Monument hired two 1039 seasonal park rangers to support increased public visitation.

The Monument had many accomplishments this year, despite challenges presented by COVID-19. Monument staff monitored over 546,000 acres of wilderness, over 2,000 acres of recreation areas, and 50 miles of recreation trails. Working with the Southern New Mexico Trail Alliance, they also maintained 17 miles including work on the Sierra Vista Trail and La Maria Trails. Park rangers also signed 50 locations along the boundaries of the Monument. These signs marked wilderness areas and what activities are allowed within them.

Monument staff worked with contractor Logan-Simpson to complete the Monument's travel and transportation inventory. The inventory covered approximately 496,330 acres of the Monument and will be used for the Monument's travel and transportation plan once the RMP process is complete. The Monument also completed a contract with Short Elliott Hendrickson, Inc. for the Dripping Springs Natural Area (Dripping Springs) building remodel. The contract addressed repair and remodel needs for the exterior and interior of the visitor center that will accommodate a larger visitor area as well as new interpretive and educational exhibits that will feature the four units of OMDPNM and incorporate exhibits for the Prehistoric Trackways NM. A New Mexico Conservation Corps wilderness character crew surveyed the 10 new wilderness areas' character to establish baseline monitoring data. The data will be used in future planning and monitoring efforts.

Throughout 2021 OMDPNM also accomplished several projects for the benefit of visitors and the resources. Projects included: publishing nine new brochures that contained information about National Recreation Trails, geology, history, wildlife, camping, and plants in the Monument (these brochures were also published throughout BLM webpages), installation of post and cable barriers on a stretch of boundary road along the Organ Mountains Wilderness Area to prevent motorized encroachment, and the purchase of six information kiosks for the developed recreation sites.



Figure 2. Mount Riley from East Potrillos Mountains Wilderness. BLM photo.

Eleven acres were proactively surveyed for paleontological resources within the Monument by the Monument paleontologist, primarily in geological layer of the Plio-Pleistocene Camp Rice Formation in Box Canyon near Picacho Mountain (in the southeastern portion of the Uvas/Robledo unit). One definitive vertebrate bone fragment was discovered, and potentially some micro vertebrae bones as well. Fossils have been rare in this portion of the Camp Rice formation, the fragment being the first evidence in Box Canyon. A smaller survey in the North Franklin Mountains (southern portion of Organ Mountains Unit) identified poorly preserved marine invertebrates. Five localities were revisited for monitoring with repeat photography. Three of these were known localities in the “Abo Tongue of the Apache Dam Formation” exposed in an old quarry just south of PTNM in the Robledo Mountains, and the other two were west of PTNM in or near the Robledo Mountains Wilderness Area boundary. All were in stable condition and experiencing normal amounts of natural erosion.

The Monument and New Mexico State University are working to develop a National Register of Historic Places nomination for Van Patten’s Mountain Camp/Dripping Springs located within Dripping Springs. The historical structures on site are related to a hotel and health resort that operated at the turn of the 20th century. This historic property is one of the most visited sites within the Monument. Successfully being on the National Register will increase access to funding and grants for stabilization, remediation, and

preservation. Having the property listed may also help to foster community pride in the history of the local area and promote heritage tourism in southern New Mexico. A nomination is expected to be completed during FY22.

As part of the wider BLM push to populate the National Cultural Resources Information Management System, the Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands was contracted to scan and digitize cultural records associated with the Monument and Las Cruces District. Over 13,000 documents were scanned over the course of the contract period. This figure represents nearly all cultural site forms and reports produced between 1976 and 2011. Digitized documents will assist cultural staff by providing increased workflow efficiency, allowing for management purposes, and allowing easier data integration with other digital systems (i.e. GIS). Having these documents digitized is especially practical in the continued age of telework and considering the increasing importance of digital access.

The following are FY21 accomplishments related to livestock grazing in the Monument:

- Continued management of 38 grazing allotments (Table 1).
- 68 grazing bills were issued on time for 38 grazing allotments that exist wholly or partially within the Monument. This includes actual use, quarterly, bi-annual, and annual billing.
- Five compliance inspections were completed to ensure cattle grazing was being managed appropriately by the permittees.
- Completed NEPA review and sign off on 19 projects for range, weeds, and vegetation.
- Completed two grazing transfers that included the Akela South, and Angostura Allotments.
- Working on two grazing transfers that include the Doña Ana Mountains, and Las Uvas Mountains Allotments.
- Completed long term range monitoring for three Monument allotments (Drippings Springs, Baylor Canyon, and Saddle Mountain Allotments) for future permit renewals. Estimated dates for EA and Decisions are yet to be determined.



Figure 3. Magdalena Peak looking southwest across the Monument. BLM Photo.

Challenges

Increased visitation and recreation to the wilderness areas in the Monument has caused some vehicle encroachment and surface damage. Monument staff have increased their presence in these areas. They have updated or installed more signage of wilderness boundaries. Wilderness area maps have also been uploaded on BLM webpages to inform the public on how to visit wilderness areas responsibly.

Since the start of the pandemic, it has been reported by many permittees that OHV use has increased within Monument allotments. This use has caused issues for permittees' fences getting vandalized and gates being left open. Permittees have indicated increased difficulties in managing livestock in these areas.

Increasing visitation and recreational use within to the Monument over the past year has continued to degrade the quality of cultural resources in certain areas. The historic structures at Dripping Springs are frequently the target of vandalism that requires careful remediation by BLM staff and/or volunteers to not adversely impact the historical elements of the structures. Increased recreational use at Peña Blanca such as camping and bouldering within the area's prehistoric rock shelters continues to impact their cultural resource values. In response to these ongoing issues, increased monitoring of vulnerable cultural resources has been implemented.

The ongoing Covid Pandemic added additional challenges for Monument staff to provide frequent educational and outreach programming to the public. This challenge was tackled by offering programs through virtual platforms, generating educational social media posts, and conducting in person programs that were planned in accordance to Covid-19 safety protocols per the Centers for Disease Control.

Visitors

Despite ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, the Monument’s visitation increased in 2021 to an estimated 662,445 visits. Visitation to the Monument’s developed recreation sites also saw an exponential growth during 2021 (Table 2 and Figure 2). Throughout 2021, the Monument continued to offer educational and interpretive resources on public lands by sharing video and written content on social media. During patrol duties, park rangers continued to search for opportunities to educate the public on outdoor ethics, regulations, upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, and the natural, cultural, and recreational resources of the area.

Table 1. Visitation to OMDPNM’s developed recreation areas.

Fiscal Year	Aguirre Spring Recreation Area	Dripping Springs Natural Area	Totals
2014	25,035	23,143	48,178
2015	20,285	30,974	51,259
2016	30,000	77,113	107,113
2017	32,255	85,044	117,299
2018	31,180	105,298	136,478
2019	59,275	115,360	174,635
2020	60,279	118,028	178,307
2021	89,611	172,542	262,153

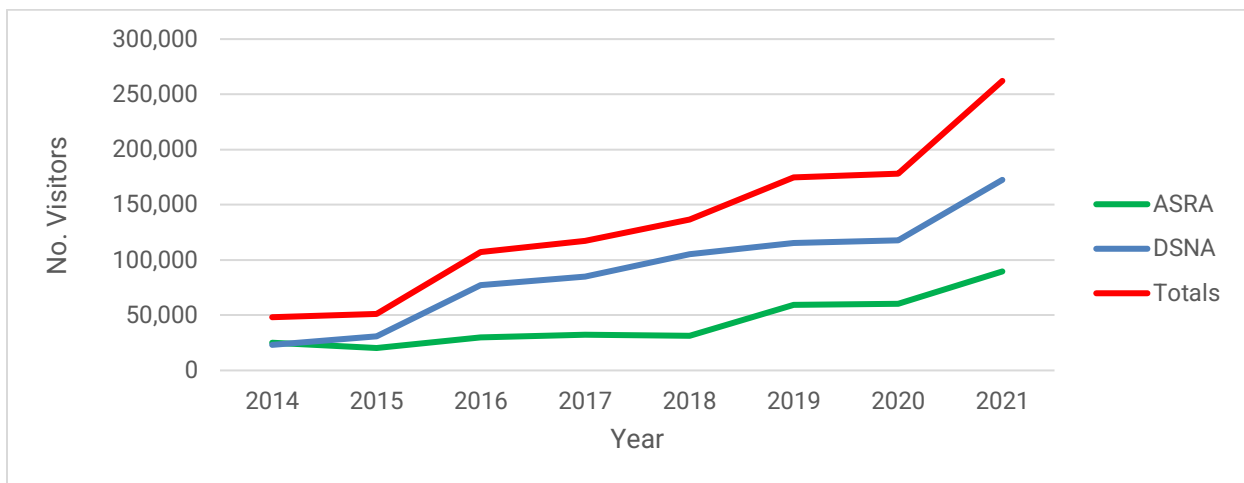


Figure 4. Number of visitors at Aguirre Spring Recreation Area (ASRA) and Dripping Springs Natural Area (DSNA) 2014-2021.

Partnerships

For FY21, the Friends continued to work closely with BLM staff in providing outreach and educational services to the visiting public. Events and programs included an Artist in Residence program in September that hosted a local artist to live and work on the Monument. The Artist in Residence program educates and promotes the appreciation, protection, and preservation of natural and cultural resources on public lands. The residency provided an artist and the public an opportunity to interact and to enhance the understanding of public lands through the unique qualities an artist's eye can capture with art events on and off the Monument. The Friends group aided with Every Kid Outdoors Program by providing transportation funds to cover school costs and the running of a 4-day summer camp. BLM staff and the Friends group partnership grew significantly with the startup of a docent program. Volunteer docents are trained and ready to lead interpretive hikes on the Monument. The docents received National Interpretive Association's Certified Interpretive Guide training and will volunteer for both the Friends Group and the Monument. The docents are expected to lead interpretive hikes on a regular basis for FY22.

Science

The Monument's science plan was completed in FY20. For paleontology, eleven acres were proactively surveyed within the monument by the monument paleontologist, primarily in the layers of the Plio-Pleistocene Camp Rice Formation in Box Canyon near Picacho Mountain. One definitive vertebrate bone fragment was discovered, and potentially some micro vertebrate bones as well. Fossils have been rare in this portion of the Camp Rice, the fragment being the first evidence in Box Canyon. A smaller survey in the North Franklins identified poorly preserved marine invertebrates.

Climate Impacts

The diverse environments of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument increasingly show impacts of changing climatic conditions including an increased temperature over the course of the last century, a reduction of annual spring precipitation, and an increase in the severity of multiyear droughts. Changing climatic conditions on the Monument are anticipated to decrease grazing resources for livestock, threaten the viability of the Monument's flora and fauna ecological diversity, and increase the severity of wildfires over time.

Climate Resiliency

In February of 2021 the BLM fire management crews held a prescribed burn of a 50-acre area within Dripping Springs Natural Area. Prior to the prescribed fires, BLM fire managers coordinated with the New Mexico Environment Department and followed all air quality regulations.



Figure 5. Prescribed burn at Dripping Springs Natural Area.

Social and Environmental Justice

The Monument is in the preliminary stages of developing a Socioeconomic Baseline Report. Monument staff are including English and Spanish text on informative and interpretive panels throughout the Monument. The Monument collaborates with local, non-governmental groups who focus on interpretive and educational efforts for underserved communities.

Events

Throughout 2021, the Monument permitted eight recreation events including a competitive trail run, cycling race, bikepacking, equestrian ride, photo workshops, and climbing trips.

For International Archaeology Day, a series of educational videos were made that highlighted the history of Dripping Springs Natural Area. Viewers were able to watch a virtual tour of places like La Cueva, the Modoc Mill, the Cox/Hayner Ranch, and the Dripping Springs resort. BLM collaborated with the City of Las Cruces' Branigan Cultural Center to produce educational kits for kids. A virtual panel with professors, Indigenous scholars, and the Monument's archaeologist Garrett Leitermann, was hosted by the Branigan Cultural Center. The panel had over 200 viewers and included exciting discussions about intersections and common ground found amongst western science and Indigenous knowledge.

Monument staff conducted over 40 outreach events. These events include guided hikes, field trips, bird banding demos, volunteer clean-ups, and presentations. The programs were designed to educate visitors on geology, cultures, and resource protection.



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Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks

National Monument

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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/blmnewmexico/albums/72157644381238958/>

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