



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

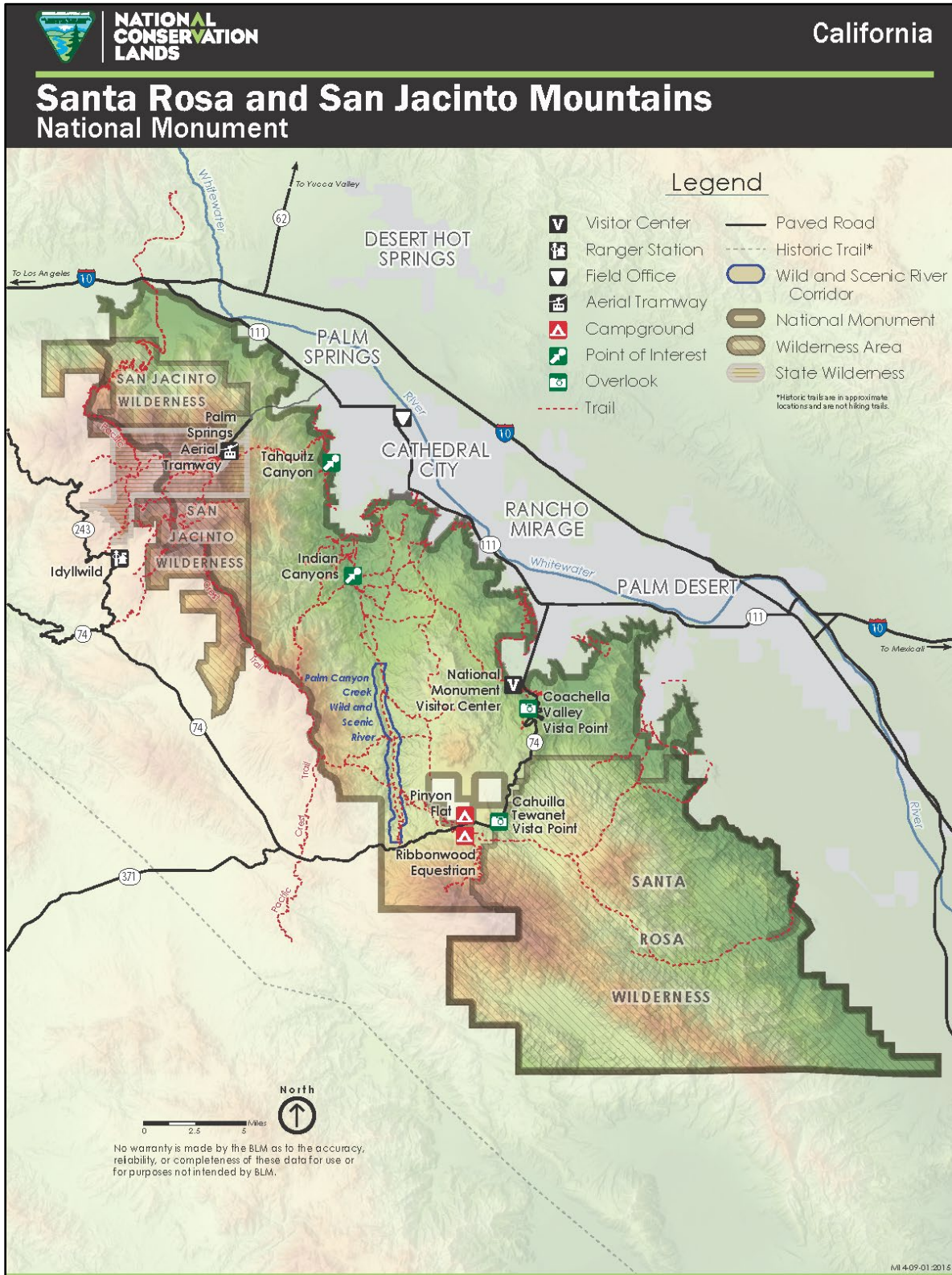
California
2022: Annual Manager's Report

Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument had many accomplishments this year, despite challenges presented by COVID-19. On March 11, 2022, the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center reopened to the public after being closed for nearly two years. Due to staffing limitations and a decrease in volunteer support, the visitor center was only able to open Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. With the reopening of the visitor center, the public was welcomed back with new interpretive exhibits on a variety of wildlife species, new fans installed on the patio and upgrades to the restrooms with touch free facets and soap dispensers.

Additionally, a second gate was installed in December of 2021 between the visitor center and the Randall Henderson trailhead parking lots which greatly improved public access. This new gate allows visitors to access trails, picnic areas and wildlife viewing areas every day of the week, not just when the visitor center is open. The gate has also remedied an on-going safety issue, as in the past, visitors would park across Highway 74 and cross the road to access the trails or facilities whenever the visitor center was closed.



Challenges

Increases in the creation of unauthorized trails across the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument (the Monument) have continued. Even though the Monument has over 280+ miles of designated trails open to hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians, there are just as many miles, if not more, of unauthorized trails. Some of the trails built for mountain bikers have seen the most damage to resources in the upper to mid-elevations of the Monument and include installations of wooden platforms and large depressions dug out to create jumps parallel to existing designated trails creating safety hazards as well.

Another challenge this season were the major storm blow outs to the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail segment in the Snow Creek area. Storm run-off from the San Geronio River is cutting across this stretch of the trail and causing hikers to cut multiple new trails to avoid a few areas with massive erosion and deep cuts in the soil bank. Past remediation work to stabilize these drainage areas has not been effective. The area is also seeing heavy invasive species infestations which is fuel for wildfires. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had plans to conduct an inventory of this National Scenic Trail segment this season but was not able to do so due to staffing issues so will attempt to complete this inventory in fiscal year 23.



Visitors

Visitation at the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument increased greatly this season; the peak season was November – May. More than 45,000 visitors hiked trails, visited our resident desert tortoise’s enclosure, enjoyed picnics, watched wildlife and gathered information from the visitor center. Across the greater span of the Monument, over one million visitors enjoyed various entry ways and trails across the entire mountain range. Staff will be gathering trail counter data to get a better understanding of trail usage, but anecdotal observations appear to show an increase in recreation.

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument is a popular destination for recreation, observing wildlife, and auto touring on the Palms to Pines Scenic Drive. Numerous public education programs, including guided hikes, continue to be well attended by visitors and locals. With special events taking place at the visitor center area during the busy season, both parking lots were typically full and overflowing (total of 52 parking spaces available). Outreach and education programs offered this season returned to in-person events, outdoors and for smaller groups to lessen risks with COVID-19.



Partnerships

The Friends of the Desert Mountains (FODM) continue to be the primary non-profit partner of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. Support from FODM includes trail maintenance, invasive plant removal, education and outreach, clean-up events, visitor services, community science research and special events like the annual Coachella Valley Wildflower Festival. Nearly 120 volunteers contributed over 9,050 hours leading a variety of programs this season. FODM grew to a team of eight staff this past season including a new volunteer manager, Spanish translation specialist, and an indigenous community liaison.

In addition to FODM, other local, state, federal, Tribal and NGO partnerships with lands and interest in the Monument continue to be critical partners. BLM staff are engaged in a variety of coordination meetings for special projects, trails management, and various working groups with a nexus to the Monument. A new partner, Oswit Land Trust, has been purchasing properties within the San Jacinto Mountains to protect beautiful lands within the Monument from development. We anticipate more opportunities to engage and collaborate with Oswit in the future on education and stewardship programs.



Science

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument continues to benefit from a variety of community science projects thanks to volunteers and partners. A new project launched in the spring of 2022, supported by researchers from University of California Riverside involved inventorying and monitoring a population of federally endangered Coachella Valley milkvetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *coachellae*). Over 100 acres of sand dune habitat were monitored during the blooming season and a total of 242 individual plants were inventoried, including a rare white flower morph of the species that had not been noted in any records. The population appears stable despite invasive species and OHV issues noted across the habitat.

Another on-going community science project is the use of iNaturalist to record biodiversity of flora and fauna within the Monument. Numerous research grade observations including special status species, such as the federally endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*) have been documented through this research tool. Nearly 2,700 species have been recorded within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument with over 2,000 observers contributing data which is greatly helping to highlight new species found within the Monument.



Climate Impacts

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument landscape continues to show impacts of elevated annual temperatures and increased drought conditions across the Peninsular Ranges. Many species of the hotter and drier Colorado Desert are facing an uncertain future which they must either endure and adapt, shift their distributions, or perish.

Researchers with University of California Riverside's Center for Conservation Biology (UCR) were awarded a BLM National Conservation Lands Management Studies Support Program financial agreement to conduct aridity studies in the Monument. This year their research focused on the common chuckwalla lizard (*Sauromalus ater*) and some of its primary plant food sources and the single leaf pinyon pine (*Pinus monophylla*). Through their efforts, new habitat models were created for these species, highlighting short-term and long-term climate refugia where these common species will most likely persist in the future should these climate trends continue. The report also addressed restoration efforts and fire management needs, especially for species like the pinyon tree, which has 100 percent die-off from wildfire events. Based on the UCR models, restoration efforts are recommended for areas where the species will persist in the future, as current habitat will not likely support these species in the long-term.



Climate Resiliency

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument includes dual aridity gradients. Increases in elevation correlate with increases in precipitation, and there is an east to west gradient with the western portion of the Monument being less arid than the eastern region. Overall, the Monument has a better opportunity of sustaining native species for the foreseeable future than areas lacking topographic diversity.

UCR's aridity studies in the Monument identified invasive weed species to be a factor negatively impacting native species across the landscape. One species of concern noted in their final report is the non-native, cape needle grass (*Stipa capensis*). Where this invasive plant is present, species such as chuckwallas and their food plants were largely absent from the area. Eradicating invasive species, such as cape needle grass, fountain grass and others will be a critical element to retaining climate refugia for numerous species across the Monument's diverse landscape. Prioritization of these climate refugia areas will provide species with their best chance of persistence in the face of climate change. The BLM is currently working on a programmatic NEPA document to treat a variety of weeds within the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office, including lands in the Monument. Once this document is completed, areas identified by UCR as climate refugia will be targeted for treatment.



Social and Environmental Justice

In collaboration with our partner, Friends of the Desert Mountains (FODM), new plant identification tags are being developed for the only accessible trail within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument – the Ed Hasteley Garden Trail. The trail is located at the visitor center and current plant tags are only noted in English, but plant tags will be revised and translated into Spanish and Cahuilla to promote a more inclusive educational component, as well as acknowledge the Monument’s indigenous people who first occupied the area. It is anticipated the plant tags will be completed and put in the ground in spring of 2023.

Staff and volunteers are working regularly to improve the Ed Hasteley Garden Trail. Many plants along the trail died during the pandemic and some major brush removal has occurred. As the dead brush is cleared, new native Colorado Desert plants have been added along the trail to showcase the diversity of native plants of the region. The ongoing project will greatly improve the value of the trail as a resource for planting native species in support of pollinators. The improvements will also provide better opportunities for interpretive visits and wildlife watching for all visitors once completed.



Events

Monument staff participated in Latino Conservation Week events in July 2022. The Monument manager for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument collaborated with Oswit Land Trust and Coachella Valley Conservation Commission staff to lead a guided hike in Oswit Canyon in the Monument. Staff from all three organizations shared personal stories about the importance Public Lands played in their lives growing up and shared how these early connections played a major role in the career paths each one took. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to socialize with all leaders while enjoying a special night hike and learning about some of the unique history of the region.

Other notable events for the year included a special Earth Day stewardship event in collaboration with FODM, Subaru, SoCal Gas, and Apple staff and families. In honor of the special day, participants helped remove hazardous fuels around the visitor center, picked up trash along the trails and performed maintenance work on the Randall Henderson Trails (trimming back overgrown vegetation and putting a fresh coat of paint on all the posts that correlate to the trails interpretive brochures). Over 40 cubic yards of dead vegetation was also removed.



Words from the staff

Fiscal year 2022 was rewarding with the reopening of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center and working on a handful of projects behind the scenes. One of the projects highlighted the Monument's on-going community science program as part of a new BLM case study video series. The series will highlight research projects, including climate change studies, monitoring of a "new" population of desert tortoise in the Santa Rosa Mountains, and an on-going study that looks at Peninsular bighorn sheep activity along trails. We look forward to seeing the final video series and continuing to grow this invaluable community science volunteer program that provides us with research to help guide our management of this special place.





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