



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Colorado

2023: Annual Manager's Report

Dominguez-Escalante

National Conservation Area



Accomplishments

Leave No Trace Gold Standard Site Designation

A Leave No Trace Gold Standard Site recognizes public lands that implement the highest standard of onsite Leave No Trace (LNT) programs including staff and volunteer training, educational materials, and additional resources. Before becoming a Gold Standard Site, each area undergoes a rigorous review process to gain the special status by showcasing its LNT offerings. To date, there are less than 20 sites across the nation that have received the Gold Standard designation - and only one of those is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). McInnis Canyons and Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Areas are the 2nd and 3rd BLM sites to join the ranks!

Sustainable OHV Opportunities in Cactus Park Special Recreation Management Area

The 2017 Travel Management Plan identified issues with creek crossings on the Gibbler Gulch ATV trail. In 2021 the BLM completed an environmental assessment, DOI-BLM-CO-S090-2019-0002-EA, to harden and improve 17 stream crossings to reduce sediment contribution to the stream channel. This year, the National Conservation Area (NCA) OHV Crew worked with volunteers from Western Slope ATV Club and the Forest Service's State Trail Crew to complete one trail re-route and two stream crossing stabilization projects that needed the most attention (see photo below).



Fence Construction Project

The Grand Junction Field Office (GJFO) NCA recreation staff and NCA OHV crew supplied and shuttled material and provided oversight for the Western CO Conservation Corps' construction and installation of more than 400 linear feet of buck and rail fencing. This investment substantially improved the look and feel of Sawmill Mesa Road's spiderwebbing of undesignated social trails and unruly camp sprawl. The effect made it easier for motorized recreators to stay on designated trail systems.

Business Plan

Outdoor Recreation Planners from the GJFO and Uncompaghre Field Office (UFO), in collaboration with Recreation State Leads, wrote a business plan for Dominguez-Escalante NCA (D-E NCA). The business plan meets the requirements of the 2004 Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) and plans for fees at existing and future sites and areas within the NCA. The fees generated within the NCA will be used to maintain and improve recreation opportunities at the site of collection, per FLREA.

Collaboration and Outreach

The GJFO and UFO Staff spent two days on the Gunnison River to discuss improving camp sites, new data collection techniques, and night skies. This effort is to better monitor visitor use on the river and protect resources due to the increasing number of recreationists.

BLM and Colorado Canyons Association (CCA) spent time at the Bridgeport Trailhead in the NCA to encourage responsible recreation and provide education about the D-E NCA resources and Wilderness areas. With the increased visitor-use, the BLM supplied regulation information and guidance to new visitors seeking outdoor adventures.

Fuels Mitigation and Restoration Projects

The Upper Colorado District Fuels crew implemented several fuels mitigation and restoration projects in 2023. BLM fire crews used prescribed fire to improve 44 acres in the Farmers Canyon area to protect ponderosa pine stands from high intensity wildfire and improve ecosystem function. The Fuels crew also completed mechanical treatments of 433 acres and 213 acres of hand cutting within the Farmers Canyon project area as a part of a comprehensive strategy to improve Gunnison sage grouse (GUSG) habitat. The objective was to remove pinyon and juniper in areas that have a well-established sagebrush understory and improve connectivity of the Pinon Mesa GUSG sub-population as well as restore sagebrush habitat, improve big game habitat, and lower potential for catastrophic wildfire.

In 2023, the Southwest District Fire/Fuels program managed a large wildfire for resource benefit near Escalante Canyon. Utilizing favorable containment features and aerial ignitions, firefighters on the Little Mesa Fire were able to achieve low/moderate fire effects on 3,390 acres in the D-E NCA. By facilitating the re-introduction of fire on this landscape, firefighters were able to reduce pockets of hazardous fuel loading and help re-invigorate the grass/shrub understory in sagebrush parks utilized by big game and other wildlife.



Gunnison River Campsite Designation and Permit System

BLM planning efforts to manage camping and designate campsites in the Gunnison River Special Recreation Management Area continued through fiscal year 2023. A preliminary proposed action was publicly scoped from November 15 to December 15, 2021. This public scoping yielded over 100 unique submissions which have since helped shape the proposed action. Final survey and monitoring efforts were performed in May and June of 2022. A comment period on the proposed action was held from June to July in 2023 which yielded only seven comments concerned with the nature of the reservation system. The Decision Record supporting the proposed action was signed October 5, 2023. The 2024 boating season will see some implementation from the plan, but the reservation system will not be live until the 2025 boating season.

Rivers Edge West and BLM Riparian Restoration Coordinator Partner Position

Rivers Edge West (REW) and BLM collaborated to create a Restoration Coordinator partner position to protect the natural qualities of D-E NCA by removing invasive species that have displaced native vegetation and altered ecological processes in the riparian zone. The Restoration Coordinator has been working alongside BLM staff to restore native flora along the Gunnison River for the benefit of wildlife and recreationalists.

REW secured funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to protect Wilderness characteristics along the Gunnison River through invasive species removal projects, maintenance, and monitoring. These projects are funded for five years, with on-the-ground work beginning in 2024. The Restoration Coordinator and BLM staff collaborated to prioritize sites for the project implementation.

REW and BLM staff partnered to conduct vegetation monitoring along the Gunnison River in D-E NCA. REW provided two trained interns that monitored over 100 acres of riparian habitat and mapped the location of invasive species. The Restoration Coordinator worked with BLM staff to provide logistical support to transport the monitoring interns to the sites. Data from this effort is being used to direct future vegetation treatments to meet resource management objectives.

Jr. Ranger and Agents of Discovery Program Development

Colorado Canyons Association (CCA) and BLM released the D-E NCA Junior Ranger program and launched the Agents of Discovery program in 2021. Participants must complete various activities and submit their responses to receive a Jr. Ranger patch. As of 2023, 281 students have participated in D-E NCA's online Junior Ranger program. The funding for the patches came from a Leave No Trace (LNT) grant.



Challenges

Increased recreation use has come with increased demand for campsites. Users are creating new campsites in Escalante Canyon, damaging vegetation and archaeological sites. The GJFO in conjunction with the UFO has come up with a draft proposal for a Business Plan which includes new campsites, facilities, and a reservation system within the Escalante Canyon and other popular areas within D-E NCA. These new sites and facilities may have fees established to better improve their future maintenance and support. Before the BLM can implement a fee as described in the business plan, a notice must be published in the Federal Register.

Visitors

Dominguez-Escalante NCA is a popular destination for a broad array of recreation activities. In addition to hiking and equestrian recreation in the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, BLM stewards seven recreation management areas in D-E NCA:

- **Cactus Park**, which provides rich opportunities to motorized vehicle enthusiasts to experience the backcountry. Miles of trails within the NCA provide access to the Uncompahgre National Forest, which manages a successful multi-recreational trail system.
- **Gunnison River**, specifically the relatively flat stretch of river between Escalante Canyon and the mouth of the Dominguez Canyon, which is attracting increasing numbers of commercial and private boaters with its unprecedented views of stunning red-rock canyons and wildlife viewing opportunities. Nearly 30 miles of the river flow through the NCA.
- **Escalante Canyon** includes the Potholes Recreation Area, popular with extreme kayakers in the spring and picnickers in the summer. Restrooms and picnic tables are available for day-use recreation as well. A 15-mile county road offers visitors a trip back to pioneer days through Escalante Canyon's "Red Hole in Time" popularized by local author Muriel Marshall. The road provides easy vehicle and viewing access to historic cabins and trails, rock walls with early settler and Native American inscriptions, and spectacular geologic formations.
- **Sawmill Mesa** is immediately adjacent to the town of Delta and provides critical motorized links to the Uncompahgre National Forest which is popular for hunting in the fall and 4-wheel drive, ATV, and mountain bike access in spring, summer, and fall.
- **Hunting Grounds** which are rich in cultural heritage resources and a popular location for dispersed recreation. The area was the traditional hunting ground for Ute and Fremont people that migrated and hunted through the region. The area provides valuable opportunities for many different forms of recreation, particularly OHV and horseback riding.

- **Ninemile Hill:** As a result of its proximity to the Grand Valley, this area is valued for its easily available recreation opportunities for nonmotorized recreation. This is a popular area for relatively unimproved exploration via hiking and horseback riding. The Tabeguache trail, a long-distance mixed-use trail popular with mountain bikers, motorcycle riders and jeep enthusiasts, also runs through the Ninemile Hill area.
- **East Creek:** Unaweep Canyon is on the northern boundary of the NCA. The canyon is unique because it has drainages running east and west out of the canyon. East Creek is the eastern drainage that runs along Highway 141 which is designated by the state of Colorado as the Unaweep-Tabaguache Scenic Byway. Scenic auto touring, bouldering, and multi-pitch climbing occur along East Creek.



Partnerships

Colorado Canyons Association

CCA is the Friends group to the local NCAs, including McInnis Canyons, Dominguez-Escalante, and Gunnison Gorge NCAs. In FY 2023, they helped BLM staff host river cleanups, trail monitoring classes, and educational trips for area youth. CCA provided crucial assistance in visitor services for the NCAs at the BLM office, organizing volunteer projects, and creating awareness in the community surrounding the stewardship and management of McInnis Canyon NCA (MCNCA).

Colorado Mesa University

D-E NCA staff partnered with Colorado Mesa University (CMU) for a variety of projects. D-E NCA hosted several student interns from CMU's Environmental Science Program. The

CMU interns completed Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring studies, while conducting plant inventories, rare plant monitoring, and visitor information services.

Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC) partnered with the BLM for the acquisition of the 26.32-acre Meridian Junction parcel which is a private in-holding within the NCA boundaries. This acquisition enables the BLM to consolidate public land ownership, enhance conservation stewardship opportunities, and increase potential outdoor recreation opportunities along the Gunnison River in D-E NCA. WRC purchased the parcel at auction, contracted the appraisal, and conducted preliminary due diligence for the acquisition. WRC has partnered with the BLM since the creation of D-E NCA in 2009 to acquire inholdings of private land from willing sellers along the Gunnison River.

The Nature Connection

The BLM's partnership with The Nature Connection has allowed BLM programs and services to reach communities they otherwise might not. Due to The Nature Connection's familiarity and connections with school districts a considerable distance away from the NCA, outreach to these areas has increased exponentially because of this partnership. The Nature Connection has helped increase students' access to and participation in the NCA, especially on rafting trips, while introducing students to what the BLM does to manage public lands.

Mesa County

BLM has established an assistance agreement with the Mesa County Trails Program, and Mesa County also completes important road maintenance projects in DENCA.

Rivers Edge West

BLM has established an assistance agreement with Rivers Edge West (REW) to fund a Riparian Restoration Coordinator partner position that will collaborate with BLM staff to implement riparian restoration activities on BLM-managed lands and oversee monitoring. REW also provides funding and resources to the BLM to accomplish restoration projects and monitoring.

More Great Partners

D-E NCA benefitted from strong partnerships with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado State University, Colorado West Land Trust, The Conservation Fund, Western Colorado Conservation Corps, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Grand Mesa Backcountry Horsemen, Western Colorado Climbers Coalition, Motorcycle Trail Riders Association, Museums of Western Colorado, and School District 51.

Science

Pollinator Studies

A Presidential memorandum dated June 20, 2014, creates a strategy to promote the health of honeybees and other pollinators directing the BLM to research whether sagebrush restoration impacts pollinators and their habitats. The National Landscape Conservation System Management Studies Support Program funds research on public land activities effect pollinators and their habitats. D-E NCA created a strategy to promote the health of honeybees and other pollinators; this is an ongoing project.

Shrub Islands of Opportunity for Arid Rangelands Conservation

Colorado State University is performing important research in D-ENCA to determine how sagebrush islands can aid arid rangeland conservation. Restoration of salt desert and sage brush systems is difficult. Research in these systems builds off past research and provides land managers practical tools for success of these critical habitats. This is an ongoing project.

Climate Impacts

Drier, warmer conditions can affect restoration response, for example after a fire, trail construction, or other disturbance. Water availability in canyons can also be affected by less snowpack, and warmer and drier periods, which may affect wildlife that depend on these areas.

Climate Resiliency

Ongoing research is being conducted and used to improve climate resilience. In partnership with Colorado State University and the Upper Colorado Native Plant Center, past research on appropriate native species seed mixes and restoration techniques in salt deserts has been used to inform seed mixes in road reclamation and fuels treatments. Additionally, in partnership with Colorado State University, ongoing research will further inform improved seed mixes in sagebrush and salt desert habitats, and improved seed mixes for pollinators. Ongoing research on amphibian use of canyons in partnership with US Geological Survey, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and Colorado Mesa University will inform habitat, and population management, especially invasive bullfrog management.

Social and Environmental Justice

BLM works with CCA and community partners like the Riverside Education Center, Dual Immersion Academy, and Mesa County Partners to help remove barriers underserved youth may face when visiting and recreating on public lands. These partnerships provide the opportunity for the BLM to host students in a safe and supportive outdoor classroom setting where they can develop new skills and learn about natural and cultural resource management. These partnerships provide hundreds of students with new experiences, such as place-based learning, hiking, rafting, and camping. While gaining new knowledge, experiences, and skills, students also learn about potential careers in public land management and understand that public lands are for all Americans.



Events

Education, Outreach, & Interpretation

The BLM has partnered with CCA for over a decade to turn our NCAs into outdoor classrooms for thousands of students and foster a deeper connection between visitors and the land through education, outreach, volunteer opportunities, and stewardship programs.

The education programs provide local K-12 students and the public to have the opportunity to connect to the outdoors by learning about a variety of topics in a hands-on, exciting, and standards-based way. In 2018, the river education program was

developed. This program expansion provides unique and meaningful river education experiences for hundreds of students each year. Local students get to float the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers on day-long and overnight rafting trips. This unique experience allows students to connect to their public lands in exciting ways. In 2023, BLM and CCA co-sponsored 10 education trips reaching 307 students, for a total of 2,678 hours spent with students in D-E NCA.



From hikes and lectures to rafting trips, BLM and CCA's co-sponsored outreach program focuses on the scientific significance and cultural heritage of the NCAs. By educating the community about the importance of our NCAs, BLM and CCA hope to foster a deeper connection between visitors and the land. In 2023, 172 community members participated in the 11 programs that were offered.

BLM and CCA hosted a National Public Lands Day event in Escalante Canyon. Eight volunteers cleaned up Potholes Recreation Site; 28 user-created fire rings were dispersed, and micro-trash and glass shards were removed. CCA, BLM, Western Colorado Climbers Coalition and Thunder Mountain Wheelers held several events at the Bridgeport Trailhead and Escalante staging area. Staff and volunteers talked to recreationists and discussed Leave No Trace principles, including being considerate of others. Additionally, with the increased visitor-use, the BLM supplied regulation information and guidance to new visitors seeking outdoor adventures. Other events that took place in 2023 included a hike with the Hilltop Residential Youth Services program, a volunteer river cleanup, a river trip with North Fork Elementary students, a LNT Master Educator backpacking trip in the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, several adopt-a trail events, and educational webinars on sensitive native fish and the history of the railroads in the west.



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