



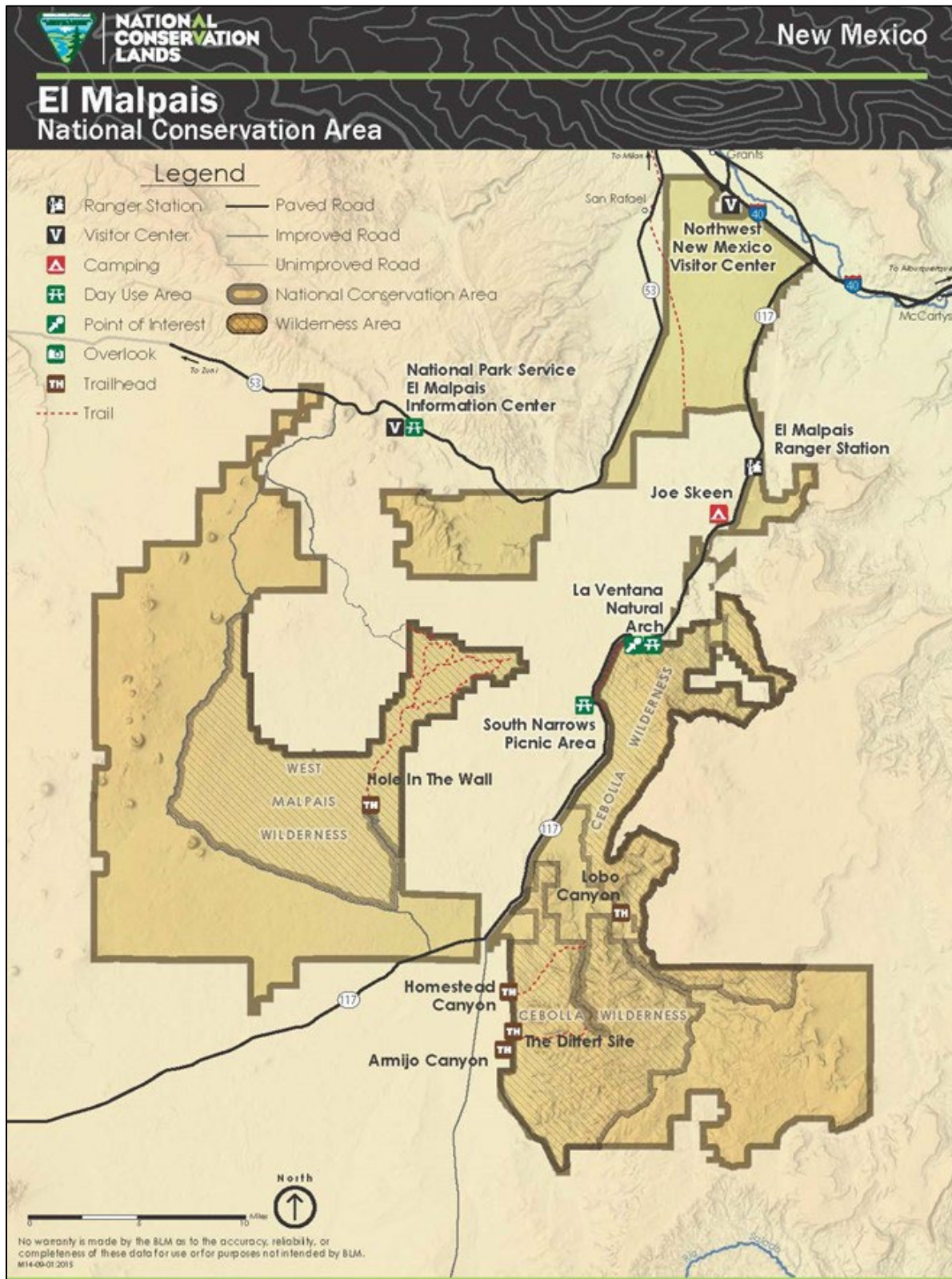
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

New Mexico
2023: Annual Manager's Report

El Malpais National Conservation Area



Map



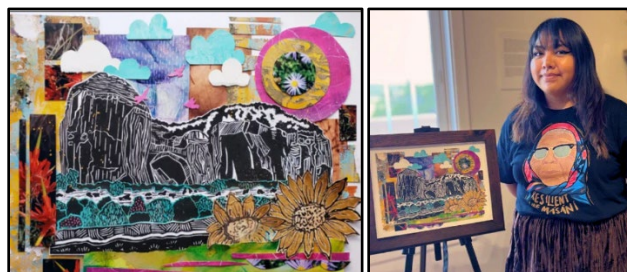
Accomplishments

In FY23, the Public Lands Interpretive Association (PLIA) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Rio Puerco Field Office (RPFO) continued inviting artists from surrounding communities to participate in the El Malpais Community Art Program. The call for art expanded to include mixed media, fiber, and sculpture. All of the art highlights the history of place and culture of the El Malpais National Conservation Area (Conservation Area). By continuing to celebrate local artists while highlighting the area and its communities, generations of visitors will be able to connect to the art and land. Through this project, BLM hopes visitors gain a better understanding of El Malpais and its surrounding communities, while relating to the culture and history of this unique New Mexico Landscape.

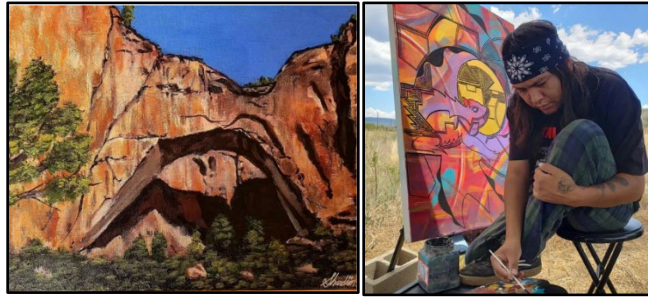
A third round of art submissions went through El Malpais' panel of art and museum professionals, PLIA representatives, and RPFO representatives. They reviewed many new submissions and selected the next round of artists: Tasha Nez, Shandiin DeGroat, and Armond Antonio. Their art was chosen due to its beautiful connection to El Malpais' cultural importance and beautiful scenery and is featured within the Ranger Station along with the newly renovated interpretive displays.

These three featured artists were added to the growing collection of art at the Ranger Station. Tasha Nez, Shandiin DeGroat, and Armond Antonio were featured at the August 5, 2023, El Malpais Community Art Show. Visitors, staff, artists, and their families gathered for a celebration of the beautiful art hung permanently in the Ranger Station. Currently featured in the Ranger Station is art from Christian Bigwater, Marissa Irizarry, and Nathan Chavarria, Tasha Nez, Shandiin DeGroat, and Armond Antonio. The Community Art Program will continue in FY24, featuring more artists from the local communities.

Community Art Projects:



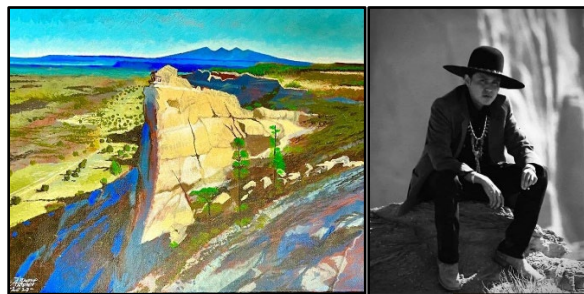
"La Ventana Arch" by Tasha Nez



"La Ventana Natural Arch" by Shandiin DeGroat



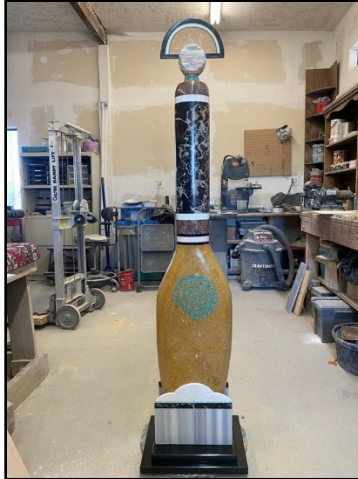
"Gifts from the Malpais" by Vicki Conley



"El Malpais" by Armond Antonio



"Tribo-Electricity" by Walter Torres



"Rain Spirit" by Cliff Fragua



Wall mural by Aaron Stromberg



Wall mural (work in progress) by Margarita Paz-Pedro

Volunteers

In FY 23, the Conservation Area hosted a small volunteer program. The volunteers' hard work and efforts contributed to memorable experiences for visitors. Volunteers worked on trails, facility maintenance, and vegetation removal in the recreation sites and the Ranger Station.



**Conservation Area Volunteers with Park Ranger at
La Ventana Natural Arch**

The Conservation Area would like to highlight one volunteer, Kimberlee Arce, who contributed 437 hours in the summer of 2023. She displayed a high degree of integrity, responsibility, ambition, and leadership. Her care for the public lands and the visitors was exceptional. Her role as a volunteer was instrumental in meeting some of the goals for the Conservation Area in FY23. Special projects included organizing the interpretive shed, an inventory of all the interpretive items, updating local campground information, and creating volunteer and events flyers. She also prepared an interpretive geologic-event outline for the Ranger Station. She was a great asset and is an example of the great volunteers working in the Conservation Area.



Volunteer working at the Narrows Picnic Area

On September 23rd, 2023, a National Public Lands Day Event was held at La Ventana Arch in the Conservation Area. There was a good turnout, with 14 volunteers lending their support. Volunteers coming from Albuquerque, Zuni, Laguna, Grants, Pine Hill, and San Rafael contributed their time and effort to the cause. Their tasks primarily centered around trimming, cutting, and removing weeds and grass in the parking lot, picnic area, and trail.



**Public lands day event with a group photo at La Ventana Natural Arch.
Volunteers raking and mowing at La Ventana Natural Arch**

Challenges

The Conservation Area's visitor use management and facility maintenance needs have changed in the past few years due to increases in visitation. To prevent resource degradation, more field staff are needed on the ground. RPFO is experiencing difficulties in filling key positions due to the remote location of the Conservation Area. Unfilled positions include a supervisory park ranger and seasonal park rangers. Park Rangers play an important part in conducting stewardship outreach with the public. Resource damage like off-road driving and user-made campsites are increasing within the wilderness areas of the Conservation Area. Interpretive programs were minimized throughout the past three years due staffing shortages.



Visitors enjoy a Ranger Led Hike to Lobo Canyon Petroglyphs

Visitors

In FY23 the El Malpais NCA Ranger Station was open three days per week (Friday through Sunday). The Ranger Station received 2,757 visitors. The Conservation Area received 5,436 visitors. Visitation statistics are collected through a variety of methods, including with numbers collected from the National Park Service's El Malpais Visitor Center and El Malpais' special recreation permits. Recreation staff also installed new vehicle counters in FY21 and FY22.

Visitation in the Conservation Area is steady throughout the year with the highest overall use from spring to summer. Elk and pronghorn hunting are popular with open seasons from August through December. BLM expects visitation to the Conservation Area will continue to increase over the years due to increased popularity and overall increased interest in outdoor activities.



Visitors enjoy an early morning hike at La Ventana Arch

Partnerships

Partnership continues to strengthen with the staff of neighboring El Malpais National Monument (Monument) which is operated by the National Park Service (NPS). Partnership and collaboration with the NPS include working on shared sign plans, interpretation projects, and a reroute of the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (Trail) traverses the Conservation Area and the Monument for more than 40 miles. This Conservation Area section of the trail, which is approximately 20 miles long, winds among the Chain of Craters and passes through piñon, juniper, ponderosa pine, and a variety of shrubs and grasses. A large majority of visitors bypass this section by using Highway 117 as a more direct route to hike north into Grants. For the past several years, the New Mexico State Office and RPFO have worked on a land exchange with Acoma Pueblo to facilitate a more direct route for the Trail hikers near Grants, NM. This exchange is in line with the Trail's mission to keep hiker routes off highways. The BLM, the Trail administrator, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition, NPS, the State of New Mexico, and local US Forest Service districts are coordinating routes, improvements, easements, and acquisitions in the area.

El Malpais National Conservation Area Community Art Program

In FY23, the Public Lands Interpretive Association (PLIA) and the Bureau of Land Management Rio Puerco Field Office (RPFO) continued inviting artists from surrounding communities to participate in El Malpais Community Art Program.

Visitor Guide

A Visitor Guide was printed and made available to the public in August 2023. The guide provides safety information, recreation opportunities, resource information, and tribal perspective. This was completed under an agreement with the PLIA that was initiated in FY22.



El Malpais NCA Visitor Guide

Science

In 2019, RPFO completed the El Malpais Science Plan which guides the direction and priority of scientific research in the Conservation Area. The 5-Year Update on Wilderness Character Monitoring began in FY22 for West Malpais Wilderness and Cebolla Wilderness. The West Malpais Wilderness 5-year update was completed in FY22, while the Cebolla Wilderness update continues.

Climate Impacts and Resiliency

In 2016, a study was completed in the neighboring El Malpais National Monument by Henri Dee Grissino-Mayer with the purpose reconstructing climate for the El Malpais region from long-lived trees and remnant wood, reconstructing the fire history of forests in the El Malpais, and investigating short-term and long-term relationships between wildfire and climate. The conclusion of this study was that the “presettlement fire regime emphasizes that the current absence of fire in the monument exceeds the historical range of variability established for the pre-settlement period. Unless effects of past human related disturbances are mitigated, fire regimes of El Malpais will continue to favor high-intensity, catastrophic fires.”



El Malpais' Scenery

In 2019, a study was done to determine the “Ponderosa pine resilience to climate change” (Chavez 2019). The study found that ponderosa pine resilience is low. It is possible that current thinning treatments have increased deeper soil moisture to a point where ponderosa pine survival is facilitated, but the impact of thinning treatments in the future remains uncertain. Small changes can significantly alter the projection of ponderosa pine resilience. Therefore, a monitoring program is recommended to obtain measured meteorological, soil moisture, and soil water potential data in Cebolla Wilderness Area. This data would improve the BLM’s understanding of soil moisture changes and projections for ponderosa pine resilience as the climate changes.

Future studies should be supported within the El Malpais to understand climate impacts and resiliency.

Social and Environmental Justice

A Visitor Satisfaction Survey at La Ventana Natural Arch Recreation Area, Joe Skeen Campground, and the El Malpais Ranger Station Recreation Site was completed in 2019 which gave a glimpse at the demographics of visitors to the Conservation Area. BLM is making a national effort to provide Field Offices with more support and training on identifying the Conservation Area's impacts on communities.

Events

National Public Lands Day

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Group photo at La Ventana Arch

Words from the Staff

Dear Friends of the El Malpais National Conservation Area,

The Bureau of Land Management, El Malpais staff, and our partners at PLIA look forward to continuing the Community Art Program in FY24.

Staff continues to update and create new interpretive materials for our visitors. Park rangers continue to strive for excellence through their on-the-ground visitor interactions and continue to strengthen communication with partners. The Conservation Area staff look forward to welcoming two seasonal interpretive park rangers to continue to enhance outreach efforts.

Thank you for being stewards to your Public Lands!





NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

El Malpais

National Conservation Area

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