

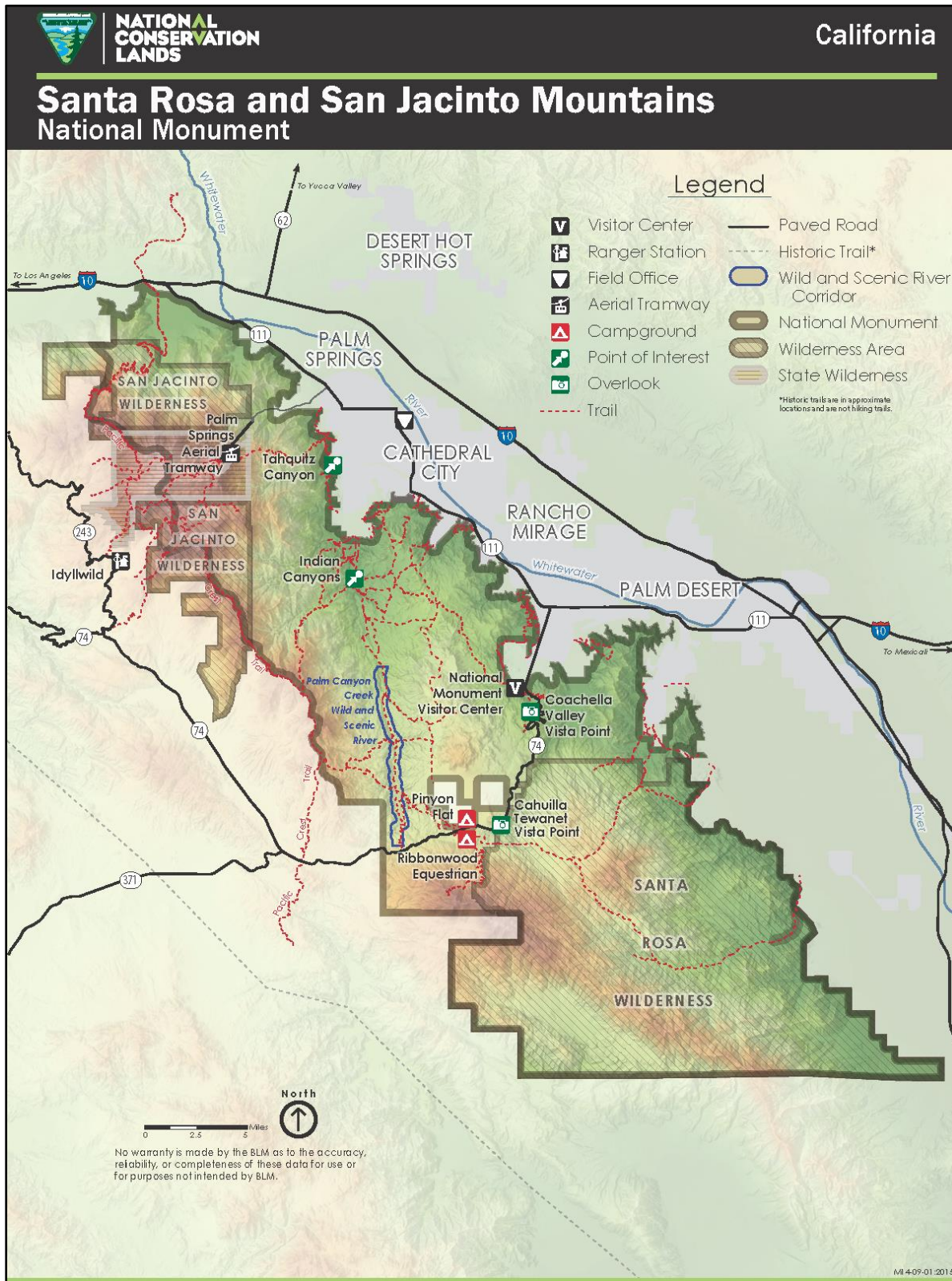
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

California
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

2023 was an exciting year for the Santa Rosa and Jacinto Mountains National Monument (Monument). The visitor center hours of operation were expanded from three to five days a week beginning January 2023, making it possible for monument staff to better serve the public, improve sanitation, and provide more information about responsible recreation. To meet the growing needs of staff and volunteers, the visitor center patio was partially converted into an outdoor education classroom that can host groups of up to 70 people. This space has been greatly utilized for various trainings and lectures this season and has a large drop-down projection screen, noise blocking and light darkening curtains, and a new transportable AV system.

The monument was one of two sites in Bureau of Land Management, California, to conduct Visitor Satisfaction Surveys this year, a great accomplishment undertaken by all the staff who took the time to train and implement the protocol to administer the standardized surveys. Surveys were administered at the Visitor Center and at some of the trailheads within the monument. Results are eagerly awaited and will be made available sometime in 2024. The last time the monument conducted this survey was in 2014 so it will be interesting to compare the results from the two reports and see if and how values have changed over time.



Challenges

Increased visitation at the Monument Visitor Center and vicinity created a few challenges in FY 23 season. During the peak visitation season, between November and April, the two visitor parking lots are regularly overflowing with visitors parking along the driveway or sometimes parking off the pavement on top of vegetation. There was an increase in visitors parking along Highway 74, adjacent to the visitor center, requiring visitors to cross the busy road to gain access to the visitor center area. With more visitors and only two public restrooms, staff and partners noticed more sanitation issues around the buildings and many “charmin lilies” left behind across the visitor center and the trails nearby.

Another growing challenge in 2023 year is maintenance of the visitor center and associated facilities. The main visitor center and administrative offices have had numerous roof leaks after rain events, the solar panel system is non-operational, multiple doors are breaking, there are huge cracks in both parking lots and additional structural issues with the aging facility. Staff have worked to remedy as many of the maintenance issues as possible, but some of the larger problems are waiting on deferred maintenance funds to be remedied.



Visitors

Visitation continues to rise at the Monument Visitor Center Campus (Campus) as more people come to recreate, picnic, visit the desert tortoise enclosure and participate in special events like yoga, lectures, and art fairs. The monument had over 81,060 individuals visit the Campus this year, and many of whom explore the facilities or recreate on their own without coming inside the visitor center. 18,500 of the Campus visitors, bring their friends and family to visit. It has been great to see more visitors come with their families and more youth get excited to share their discoveries with visitor center staff or post their wildlife sightings on the monthly wildlife sightings board.

Unfortunately, due to staffing challenges, monument staff were not able to gather trail counter data for the season, however, now have more than a dozen trail counters in place across the 77 designated trails within the monument. Staff will collect this data at the start of the new year. Collection of this data is helpful to understanding recreational use patterns in some of our busier trails.



Partnerships

The Friends of the Desert Mountains (Friends) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that continues to be the primary non-profit support partner for the Monument. Friends' volunteers provide the Monument support with visitor services, stewardship, education and community science programs, and projects on federal lands within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains. The monument was fortunate to have an astounding 152 volunteers contribute 6,774 hours in support of the monument this year.

On August 16, 2023, the BLM honored volunteers at the 27th annual Making a Difference National Volunteer Awards ceremony. As part of the ceremony, one of the monument volunteers, the extraordinary Ada Nuckels, was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award. She has been a dedicated volunteer in the monument since 2010 and has given more than 12,000 volunteer hours to date. She is the monument's most active volunteer and has worked in every program, leading guided interpretive hikes, supporting youth education programs, working at the Gift Shop at the visitor center, supporting community science projects, eradicating weeds, and assisting with many behind the scenes needs for special events and programs.



Science

The monument's Community Science volunteer program has continued to support ongoing research efforts across the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains. These staff-led studies have focused on bioblitz's, federally endangered Coachella Valley milkvetch inventories, and a new insect collection for sand dune habitats. As a result of last year's efforts, 250 acres of wildlife habitat were monitored and over 500 special status species were inventoried, including special status species such as Coachella Valley flat-tailed lizard (*Uma inornata*), Coachella Valley milkvetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *coachellae*), Peninsular bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis nelsoni*), and Mojave Desert tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*).

While leading an evening bioblitz event in the summer of 2023, volunteer community scientists were able to explore a sand dune ecosystem at the base of the San Jacinto Mountains and document a variety of species including a desert sidewinder, zebra-tailed lizards, side-blotched lizards, stinkbugs, white-tailed antelope ground squirrels, and desert kangaroo rats. One participant even found a partially buried Coachella Valley flat-tailed lizard, which is a federally threatened species and very rare to see. These lizards are only found on sand dunes in the Coachella Valley and can be seen "swimming" through the sand as part of its camouflage.



Climate Impacts

The Monument worked with University of California Riverside’s Center for Conservation Biology (UCR) on a new research study entitled, “Current and Predicted Responses of Common Chuckwallas, their Food Plants, and Single-leaf Pinyon Pines to Increasing Aridity within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto National Monument”. As a result of the study, UCR provided the Monument with habitat suitability models for current and future habitats for these species based on increases of aridity.

Many stands of single-leaf pinyon pine were killed in the Flats Fire, a wildfire event that occurred in the Santa Rosa Mountains several years ago. This species does not resprout after wildfires and recovery is limited to active restoration activities/ Utilization of the models to target areas where the species is expected to persist in the future will help sustain the species in the long run. “With the large area of potential habitat loss, coupled with relatively narrow bands of potential refugia, the modeled future distribution of pinyon pines within the Monument indicates that this species could be severely impacted by an increasingly arid future” (from the study). As a culturally significant species, ensuring that the species persists is an important value for the people of the Cahuilla Nation, as well as for wildlife that depend on the species.



Climate Resiliency

Increased temperatures and decreased rainfall in the Santa Rosa Mountains has led to more plant die-off in the vicinity of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center. Staff, volunteers, and partners have worked to remove dead and overgrown vegetation that is a fire hazard to facilities on site. Invasive species such as Sahara mustard, schismus, and other grasses are being eradicated from sites and facilities as the dried material can also become a fire hazard. Some of the invasive grasses are growing so dense around the visitor center grounds that you cannot see the soil. As a result there are not as many wildflowers as there have been in the past. This is a growing issue.

As the dead and unhealthy/non-native plant materials are removed, new native desert plants are planted on site to showcase the native diversity of the area and increase habitat for pollinators such as the Monarch butterfly. This work is being expanded beyond the Ed Haste Garden Trail and includes other paved paths around the Campus.



Social and Environmental Justice

In the summer of 2023, the BLM and US Forest Service (USFS) staff met out on the Palm Canyon Trail with some of the staff from the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians (Agua Caliente) to hike together and discuss some concerns related to resources in the area. Some recreationists have built unauthorized trails on culturally sensitive areas off the designated route, including installations like jumps and ramps that are used by mountain bikers. The monument staff and leadership will have more engagement with Agua Caliente about these challenges, and how the BLM and USFS can better manage this popular and sensitive trail corridor, and plan to start work on a related Co-Stewardship Agreement in the start of the new fiscal year.

The Palm Canyon Trail is within a designated wild and scenic river corridor (in the USFS-managed portion of the monument) located in the heart of historic Cahuilla territory and has been a resource for Native Americans for over two millennia. There are many Native American sites along the entire portion of the canyon.



Events

One of the most popular programs of the season was the “Scary Desert Creatures” program. This unique summer program was held up at the monument visitor center and participants were treated to a slide show, counting down the “scariest” desert creatures while learning some fun facts and natural histories of each species. At the end of the slide show, visitors went on a short walk around the visitor center in the dark and were able to see some of the species, such as scorpions, tarantulas’ mice ,and bats, in the wild!

The Monument also hosted an annual National Public Lands Day event in November of 2022, in the mid-elevations of the Monument, along the upper portion of the Dunn Road Trail. Thirty-five participants came out to lend a hand and repaired 560 feet of fence line, passively restored 900 feet of an illegal off-highway vehicle (OHV) route, installed new informational carconite signs along the Dunn Road Trail, and removed two trailer loads of trash and tires from the landscape. The event was supported by two fantastic partners: Friends of the Desert Mountains and the Southern California Mountains Foundation’s Urban Conservation Corps.



Words from the staff

This has been another exciting year at the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. As visitation has continued to increase at the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center Campus, we are looking forward to beginning the Master Planning process with the BLM Engineering staff out of the National Operations Center (NOC) in the upcoming year. This will greatly help us to meet the needs of the public, while building in capacity for our staff and volunteers that work out of the space, especially with regards to safety and growing needs.

I especially want to thank my wonderful BLM and USFS staff that have worked so hard this year to make this season a success with serving more visitors out at the Visitor Center and out on the trails.

Kindly,

Danielle (Dani) Ortiz
Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Manager





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Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains

National Monument

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