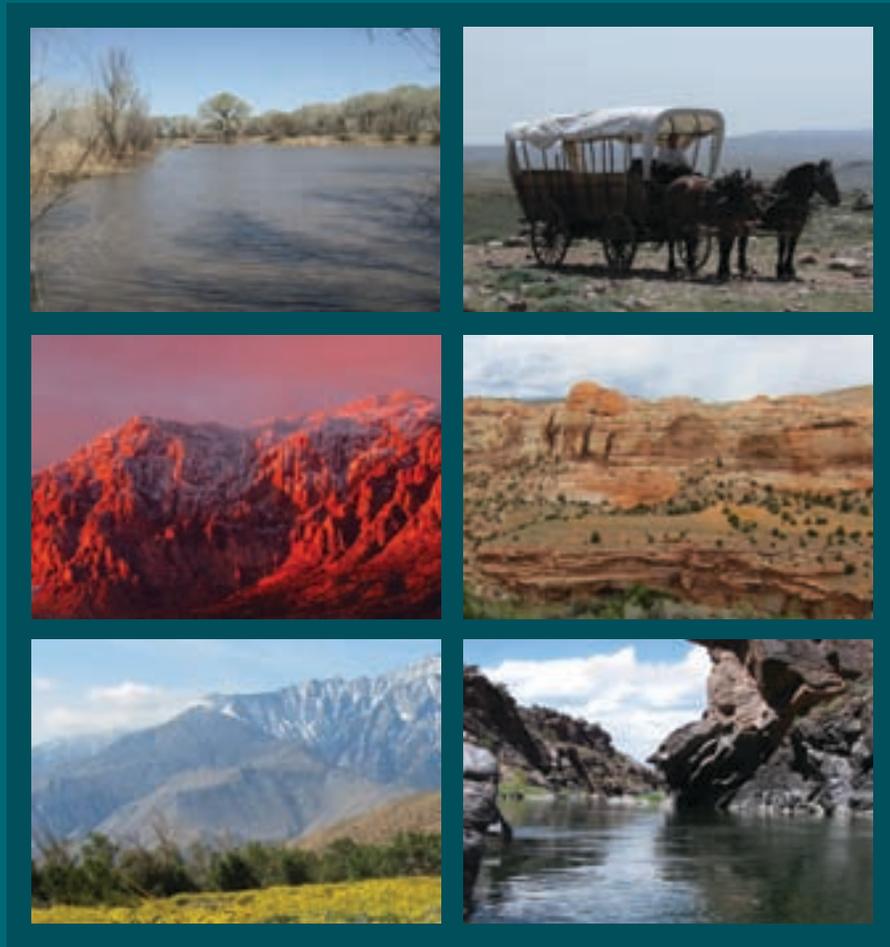


LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

A Celebration of the National Landscape Conservation System
and Its Community Partnerships



Shaping the Future of the West



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SONORAN INSTITUTE MISSION AND VISION

The Sonoran Institute inspires and enables community decisions and public policies that respect the land and people of western North America. Facing rapid change, communities in the West value their natural and cultural resources, which support resilient environmental and economic systems.

Founded in 1990, the Sonoran Institute helps communities conserve and restore those resources and manage growth and change through collaboration, civil dialogue, sound information, practical solutions and big-picture thinking.

BLM MISSION AND VISION

The Bureau of Land Management's vision is to enhance the quality of life for all citizens through the balanced stewardship of America's public lands and resources. Its mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

The BLM manages more land than any other federal agency—more than 245 million acres. This land, known as the National System of Public Lands, is primarily located in 12 western states, including Alaska. The Bureau, with a budget of about \$1 billion, also administers 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate throughout the United States.

For more information about the BLM, its history, its mission or its activities, visit www.blm.gov. For more information about the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System, visit www.blm.gov/nlcs.

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

A Celebration of the National Landscape Conservation System and Its Community Partnerships



Mountains that brush the clouds, deserts stretching to the horizon, canyons that seem to catch fire in the setting sun, rivers that still run wild: these are the landscapes of the American spirit, the wide-open spaces and breathtaking natural wonders that helped define our national character.

In June 2000, more than 850 of these special places, all public lands under the stewardship of the Bureau of Land Management, were gathered into the National Landscape Conservation System. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed into law bipartisan legislation assuring the system's long-term existence and the chance for future generations to enjoy the history and wild beauty of these lands.

The National Landscape Conservation System, which represents the conservation emphasis of the BLM's multiple-use mission, is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2010. A series of events are commemorating the system's mission to "conserve, protect, and restore these nationally significant landscapes that have outstanding cultural, ecological, and scientific values." From the haunting solitude of Southwestern deserts, through the historic pioneer trails in the prairie and mountain states, to the desolate splendor of the Alaskan tundra, the system maintains the essential fabric of America's lands.

The 27 million acres of public land also provide a variety of opportunities for outdoor recreation for millions of visitors and an important economic resource for nearby communities. If you enjoy hunting, fishing, bird-watching, mountain biking, exploring history, or simply hiking in solitude, you can find a place to enjoy yourself in the National Landscape Conservation System.

This is thanks in large part to thousands of local volunteers, who have established and joined community-based Friends groups to collaborate with the BLM, providing key support and assistance at many NLCS sites. Through their efforts, the Friends prove these are truly public lands in every sense of the word.

The six profiles that follow offer a sampling of the varied and spectacular landscapes in the system and highlight the hard work of the ordinary citizens who, through their volunteer efforts, make sure these lands remain protected and accessible to anyone who wants to enjoy some of the last, best places to experience the cultural, historic and scenic richness of America.

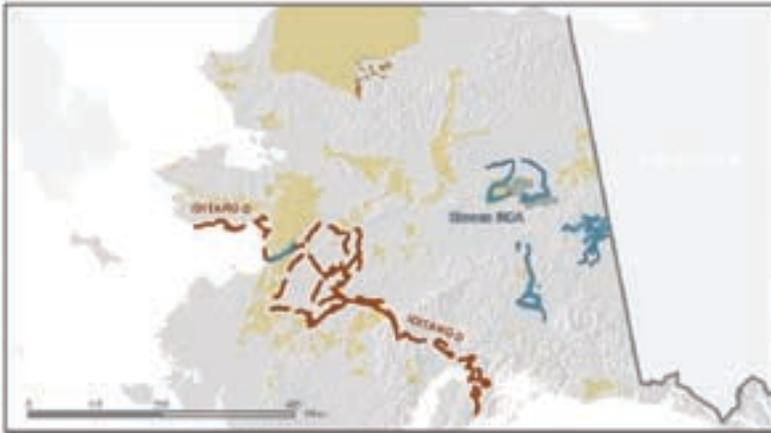
NATIONAL LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION SYSTEM NATIONAL MONUMENTS AND NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREAS



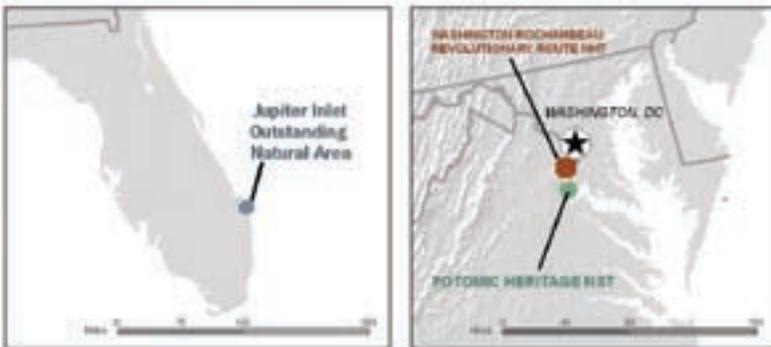
The Bureau of Land Management's National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) is a uniquely diverse system that contains some of the Nation's most spectacular and significant landscapes. Please note the following: (1) River segments are extended for context. A wider line is applied to the BLM portion of the designated Wild and Scenic River. (2) The BLM is one of several agencies responsible for the management of Scenic and Historic Trails. The BLM manages only the portions of trail that intersect BLM administered land. (3) California Coastal National Monument corridor includes islands, rocks, exposed reefs, and pinnacles within the near ocean zone (twelve nautical miles).

CONSERVE · PROTECT · RESTORE

ALASKA



FLORIDA



DESIGNATIONS



The National Landscape Conservation System includes 27 million acres of our most spectacular public lands, gathered together to conserve the essential fabric of the American spirit.

SYSTEM FACTS:

National Monuments – 4.8 million acres

National Conservation Areas and similar designations – 4 million acres

Wilderness – 8.6 million acres

Wilderness Study Areas – 12.7 million acres

National Wild and Scenic Rivers – 2,419 miles

National Scenic and Historic Trails – 6,011 miles



www.blm.gov/nlcs



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SAN PEDRO RIPARIAN NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA



Ted Mouras, Friends guide for the San Pedro NCA

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Arizona

The San Pedro Riparian NCA was established in 1988 when more than 56,000 acres along the river were placed under the stewardship of the Bureau of Land Management.



A Special Place

There is something miraculous about free-flowing water in the desert. On a blustery Saturday morning a group of visitors from around the United States are standing at the edge of the San Pedro River not far east of Sierra Vista, Arizona, and contemplating the quietly moving brown stream with a sense of awe.

Most have come to this spot for the bird-watching — the river is an internationally renowned birding site — but guide Ted Mouras, a member of the Friends of the San Pedro River, has spent the tour sharing the history of the river and the surrounding publicly owned lands. “We’ve got a lot of desert in the U.S. We’ve got a lot of riparian woodlands,” he observes. “What we don’t have is a lot of *desert* riparian woodlands. This is a special place.”

Over the next two and a half hours, Mouras makes that special place, the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area (NCA), come alive. He shares stories, not just about the profuse wildlife along the river’s banks, but of the prehistoric cultural sites that have been found nearby, the Apache bands that once raided from the mountains, the ghost towns that flourished and died, even the modern tale of the struggle to keep the San Pedro River healthy and flowing.

By the end of Mouras’s talk, the birders and everyone else are looking at the river and the landscape that extends from its tangled banks with a new appreciation. “The history, the different Native American cultures that have been here, it was fascinating,” says Cathy Uhrich, visiting with her husband, Joe, from Palos Park, Illinois.

It passes without notice amid the wildlife and scenic beauty, but the visitors are also witnessing something else important: a thriving partnership between local residents and the government stewards of the conservation area. The Friends of the San Pedro River have helped to build a series of private-public partnerships that benefit everyone and everything concerned: the unique and stunning landscape around the San Pedro River, the local communities, and visitors from all corners of the world.

"We're stewards
of the river."

- Mark Rekshynskyj, San Pedro NCA manager

A Thriving Partnership

The San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area was established in 1988 when more than 56,000 acres along the river, running from the Mexican border to the town of St. David about 40 miles north, were placed under the stewardship of the Bureau of Land Management. In 2000, the area became part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which was created to designate a collection of special areas that would be managed with an emphasis on the conservation aspect of the Bureau's multiple-use mission. The NLCS is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

The Friends of the San Pedro River was organized the year before the conservation area was established. The founders came mostly from Sierra Vista, home to the army's Fort Huachuca, and a popular retirement community. "Their motivation was simple, they love the river," said Mark Rekshynskyj, national conservation area manager. "We're stewards of the river."

Chris Long, president of the Friends, and her husband, Dwight, have been walking along the San Pedro for more than 25 years to enjoy its natural beauty and solitude. Dwight, like Mouras, first discovered southern Arizona through the military. Others, like Dutch Nagle and his wife, Pat, were drawn to the San Pedro because they were birders.

However they first fell in love with the San Pedro, the Friends have become a critical asset to the BLM. "They donate over 12,000 hours a year, which is equivalent to six full-time employees," says Rekshynskyj. "Quite honestly, we'd be sunk without them." In fact, the Friends of the San Pedro River have become the public face of the conservation area, handling almost all interaction with visitors. "We do all the walks," says Long, "all the hikes, the tours, the interpretation."

The BLM project office for the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area has only five employees, who are



Friends of the San Pedro:

www.sanpedroriver.org/fspr.shtml

BLM site for the San Pedro NCA:

www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/ncaarea/sprnca.html

National Landscape Conservation System:

www.blm.gov/nlcs





responsible for everything from administration to mending fences across more than 87 square miles of rugged country. The support of the Friends group “allows our employees to get out in the field and get our work done,” says Rekshynskyj.



Much of the Friends’ recent activity has centered on the ghost town of Fairbank, which includes a restored 1920s schoolhouse. The group has hosted a series of “Fairbank Days” that feature local music and other attractions, including historic re-enactments and an art show. “The January event drew more than 350 people,” says Long. “They just keep growing.”

The Friends of the San Pedro River also manage and staff the bookstores in Fairbank and at the main San Pedro visitor center. They help with the BLM’s annual survey of river conditions and other research, and they work with local schools to educate students about the natural and historical wonders around the San Pedro. The Friends host field trips, speak to classes and provide a wealth of materials to teachers. Over the years these have included 1,400 DVDs of riparian corridor wildlife filmed by Mike Foster, a dedicated local videographer.

Gaylyn Barkdull, a third-grade teacher at Palominas Elementary School in Hereford, Arizona, has brought her students to the conservation area three years in a row. “The kids love it. I’m always amazed at how many of them haven’t been down to the river when we live right here, and this is a great opportunity for them to learn about their area and nature,” she says. “The people who do it are volunteers, but they put a tremendous amount of effort into it.”

The Friends have built public awareness of the conservation area both locally and nationally, especially among birding groups. A

THE SAN PEDRO RIPARIAN NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA INCLUDES:

- More than 56,000 acres of public lands.
- The last perennial stretch of river in Arizona.
- More than 350 species of nesting or migrating birds.
- Eighty-plus species of mammals, two native fish species and more than 40 different amphibians and reptiles.
- The ghost towns of Charleston, Millville and Fairbank.
- The remains of the 18th-century Presidio Santa Cruz de Terrenate.
- Native American petroglyphs and late Ice Age Clovis people sites.

THE FRIENDS OF THE SAN PEDRO RIVER AT A GLANCE:

- About 150 members, including 86 volunteers.
- Provides 12,000 volunteer hours annually.
- Conducts over 200 events a year.
- Hosts thousands of visitors on tours and special activities.
- Guides field trips for around 600 schoolchildren annually.
- Provides a wealth of educational materials to area schools.





study by two University of Arizona economics professors found that just two popular birding sites, the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area and Ramsey Canyon, a nearby preserve managed by the Nature Conservancy, bring as much as \$16.9 million in tourist spending to the area each year and generate up to 590 jobs in southern Arizona.

The San Pedro, however, is an endangered resource, fed by an aquifer that also provides water for towns and farms in the surrounding area. The riparian area is subject to stress from a variety of factors, and the river's flow is greatly diminished; now only about 22 miles flow year-round.

But that challenge has spurred another public-private partnership, this time between 15 different entities, including the BLM, other federal, state and local agencies, an investor-owned water utility and local environmental groups. The Upper San Pedro Partnership is working to balance the demands for water in the area while halting the drawdown of the aquifer. "The partnership is to save the river," says Rekshynskyj, "utilizing a whole range of methods."

There are many reasons to treasure the San Pedro. The river, one of the few in the United States to flow from south to north, has the last stretches of perennial stream in Arizona. Once there were several such rivers, but as the state's population has swelled and demand for water has increased, all but the San Pedro have become intermittent.

The river supports a remarkably rich ecosystem, including towering cottonwoods, bushy mesquites and wild sunflowers. More than 350 bird species either nest in or migrate through the corridor. Animal life proliferates; there are more than 25 species of bats alone,

"There's just value in beauty. You walk these trails, you've got the water, you've got the birds singing, the cottonwoods. It's just a beautiful place."

- Chris Long, president of the Friends of the San Pedro River

along with beaver, whitetail deer, bobcats and the occasional mountain lion. The river is even home to the white-nosed coati, a tropical relative of the raccoon found as far south as Argentina.

Humans have been part of the ecosystem for at least 13,000 years. The Friends lead cultural tours to four different locations: Fairbank; Murray Springs, a site inhabited by the late Ice Age Clovis people; the remains of the Presidio Santa Cruz de Terrenate, a Spanish fort established in 1776; and the Millville/Petroglyph Trail, which takes in Native American rock carvings and the ruins of several silver mills built during a 19th-century mining boom. "San Pedro has always been known as a birding place," says Chris Long, "but we also want people to know it as a place of history."

That history is ongoing, and the Friends of the San Pedro River are an important part of the current chapter. The benefits of the partnerships they have forged are manifold: economic, educational and environmental. But in the end, the organization's members seem equally driven by a different measure of worth. "There's just value in beauty," Chris Long says, standing beside the river. "You walk these trails, you've got the water, you've got the birds singing, the cottonwoods. It's just a beautiful place." ■■■

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Writing, Reed Karaim, Tucson, AZ
Production, Ian Wilson, Tucson, AZ
Photography, Ian Wilson, Tucson, AZ
Design, Teri Bingham, Tucson, AZ
October 2010

SANTA ROSA & SAN JACINTO MOUNTAINS NATIONAL MONUMENT



The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument rises beyond a field of brittlebush in the Coachella Valley in southwestern California.

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

California

The 280,000 acres that make up the monument include publicly owned lands managed by the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service, tribal lands controlled by the Cahuilla Indians, and state lands administered by several different California agencies.



Monumental Beauty

On a spring morning the vista from the Frank Bogert Trail in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument can take your breath away. It starts with the bright-yellow brittlebush blooming on the side of the trail, opens up to the red tile roofs of Palm Springs in the valley below, then stretches to encompass stark desert hills that quickly become mountains, ending with towering, snow-capped peaks framed in blue.

“Too bad there’s no view, huh?” says Buford Crites, president of the Friends of the Desert Mountains, standing at the trailhead.

The Friends group, which provides support to the monument through a range of activities, is the main reason the trail opened this past May. The Bureau of Land Management’s acquisition of this vast acreage in 1987 was due in large part to the Friends’ efforts and commitment to establish the national monument. It’s one of many land acquisitions for the monument that the Friends have facilitated since the group’s inception.

Their work has made the Friends of the Desert Mountains an important partner in the operation of a national monument that depends on a set of relationships as complicated as the breathtaking landscapes within its boundaries. The 280,000 acres that make up the monument include publicly owned land managed by the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service, tribal lands controlled by the Cahuilla Indians, and state lands administered by several different California agencies.

The monument also has privately held property within its borders, and in the Coachella Valley immediately below are many communities with vested interests in how it’s managed. “Only about 60 percent of the land within the monument is actually federally owned,” says Jim Foote, national monument manager, “which means it can require a fair amount of collaboration to get things done.”

But the partnerships forged over the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument are also a source of strength, bringing the talents and resources of a range of public and private organizations together to support an area of tremendous beauty and significance.



“ Only about 60 percent of the land within the monument is actually federally owned, which means it can require a fair amount of collaboration to get things done.”

- Jim Foote, national monument manager

The winners are both visitors and local residents. The Frank Bogert Trail provides one example. Bogert was a longtime mayor of the city, a community booster and an avid horseman. When the land became available, the Friends of the Desert Mountains saw a way to help the monument while honoring Bogert. The trailhead is only a short walk from the edge of Palm Springs and is intended for both hiking and equestrian use, benefiting nearly everyone in the community. “This is going to get a lot of use,” Crites says with satisfaction.

The monument is part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which was created to bring into one system a collection of specially designated areas to be managed with an emphasis on the conservation aspect of the BLM’s multiple-use mission, and which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Foote believes the monument’s inclusion in the system has been important in building a sense of common identity among its many stakeholders.

But the heart of making it work, he says, is establishing relationships that build trust. “We talk a lot,” Foote acknowledges. “What makes it easy is we all get along.”

Astonishing Natural Wonders

The Coachella Valley is best known for its connection to old Hollywood, the world of Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope and other stars who frequented Palm Springs and neighboring communities. It first entered the national consciousness as a sun-streaked retreat for the rich and famous, a man-made Eden of manicured lawns, carefully pruned palm trees, golf courses and dry martinis served on the veranda at sunset.

But the '50s snapshot can obscure the area’s astonishing natural wonders, which are an increasingly popular attraction. The valley is one of the driest places in the United States, averaging only 2½ inches of rain annually on its eastern end. While the valley floor sits below sea level, on its southwestern rim the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains rise to nearly 11,000 feet. On a clear day they hang over the palm-topped valley with a hypnotic clarity, snow-capped nearly all year, so steep they seem pushed straight up out of the earth.





Buford Crites, Friends of the Desert Mountains president, on Santa Rosa Mountain in the national monument

That's not far from true. The San Andreas Fault runs through the area and the mountains are the result of two of the earth's tectonic plates pushing hard against each other. Their vertiginous slopes change dramatically as you climb: sand dotted with agave and cactus, palm oases tucked in high canyons, pine forest and, finally, a windswept landscape of grass and granite above the timberline. About 30 rare or endangered species live within the monument, including Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep, the desert slender salamander and least Bell's vireo, a small gray songbird that nests in the Santa Rosa Mountains.

"It's a fascinating place to live," says Crites, who's called it home for more than 30 years, "so very different from anywhere else in the United States."

But the natural splendor of the area is under pressure. According to the Friends of the Desert Mountains, 19,000 new residents move into the Coachella Valley every year, and 3.5 million tourists and conventioners visit. The Friends were born after a fight over a hotel built on a hillside above the city of Rancho Mirage. That battle was lost, but, Crites says, "it was a wake-up call."

The Friends have been involved in the purchase and conservation of more than 40,000 acres since, using private and public grants, money available through California green space bonds and corporate and individual contributions. The group works with federal and state agencies and the tribe to identify land that would benefit the monument. Crites points out that the Friends have been very successful over the years in identifying and facilitating the acquisition of land parcels to be added to the monument.

The Friends also work closely with the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, a state agency established in 1991 to protect the natural and cultural resources of the Coachella Valley. The conservancy is another example of the working partnerships that are a hallmark of the area. Its 21-member governing board includes representatives of all the agencies operating in the monument and every city in the valley.

Over the years the conservancy has preserved more than 48,000 acres. Bill Havert, executive director, says the success springs from a recognition that it's better "if we all get together and get it done, rather than worry about whose problem it is." The Friends of

SANTA ROSA & SAN JACINTO MOUNTAINS NATIONAL MONUMENT FACTS:

- Established by an act of Congress in 2000.
- Includes 280,000 acres of state, federal and tribal lands.
- Mount San Jacinto reaches an elevation of 10,834 feet.
- Indian Canyons include what is said to be world's largest fan palm oasis.
- About 30 rare or endangered species live within the monument borders.
- Has important cultural sites for the Agua Caliente Cahuilla Indians.

THE FRIENDS OF THE DESERT MOUNTAINS AT A GLANCE:

- Number about 200 members.
- Have preserved more than 30,000 acres since 1987.
- Work with federal, state and tribal agencies on land conservation.
- Helped secure land for the monument Visitor Center.
- Provide volunteers for the Visitor Center, hikes, festivals and other activities.
- Teach lessons that integrate nature studies and healthy living skills in local schools and lead field trips to the monument.

Friends site for the monument:

www.desertmountains.org/monument.html

BLM site for the monument:

www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/palmsprings/santarosa.html



the Desert Mountains is not a member of the conservancy, but Havert says the group has played a critical role in land conservation.

Another key partner is the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. “The tribe was one of the founding members of the national monument,” says Margaret Park, tribal director of planning and natural resources. “We agreed to put our Indian Canyons into the monument. We still manage those lands independently, but in close cooperation with the BLM and Forest Service.”

The tribe collaborates on a host of activities, from surveying cultural resources to providing mapping data for an interactive computer display at the Visitor Center. The tribe also works with the Friends of the Desert Mountains on land acquisition. The tribe’s ancestral lands were fragmented in the 1860s when the U.S. government granted the Southern Pacific Railroad the odd-numbered sections of land along its right-of-way. When the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation was created, this meant part of it was a checkerboard. “The intent is to consolidate tribal lands by swapping them out over time,” says Park. “The Friends have been very helpful in that process.”

“We agreed to put our Indian Canyons into the monument. We still manage those lands independently, but in close cooperation with the BLM and Forest Service.”

- Margaret Park, tribal director of planning and natural resources,
Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians

Partnerships in Action

The national monument contributes significantly to the economy of an area where tourism is key. The Indian Canyons alone draw about 120,000 visitors a year, while the aerial tramway to the top of Mount San Jacinto records 400,000 passengers annually. A survey by the city of Palm Desert found that people who enjoy the outdoors were the fastest-growing subset of visitors.

The Friends, as the nonprofit support group for the monument, provide volunteers and other assistance for a variety of activities. “Purchasing inholdings from a willing seller is huge,” says Foote, the national monument manager. (Inholdings are the tracts of privately owned land that lie within the boundaries of publicly owned or protected areas.) “But they also help with our visitor programs, our education programs. These kinds of support roles are critical. We don’t have the resources for the staff that would be necessary without the help of the Friends.”

The Friends not only staff the monument’s Visitor Center, the group worked with a local government to donate the land on which it was built. In fact, the Visitor Center embodies the approach that has allowed the monument to prosper. “The city of Palm Desert gave them the land. The water district gave them the right-of-way. A local architect donated his work. Another company that did the road paving donated their work. The landscape architect didn’t charge. A number of organizations donated all the plants,” says Crites. “It’s a great example of partnerships in action.” ■■■

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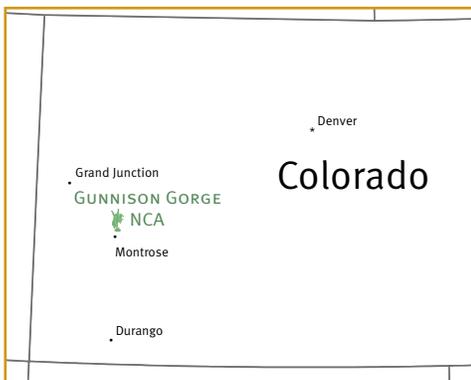
GUNNISON GORGE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

Gunnison Gorge NCA, Colorado

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Colorado

Created by an act of Congress in 1999, Gunnison Gorge NCA encompasses about 62,844 acres along a stretch of the Gunnison River on Colorado's Western Slope. Gunnison Gorge NCA attracts more than 90,000 visitors a year.



Hypnotized by Nature's Beauty

Rafting down the Gunnison River on a summer afternoon is a hypnotic experience. The swift ripple of the river, the bands of color in the sandstone cliffs, the flocks of swallows swooping low over the water, all repeat themselves in an ever-changing yet endlessly repeated pattern that takes you far from the clamor of modern life.

"This is my Zen," says Ryan Mathis, a Bureau of Land Management river ranger, as he paddles two guests along a stretch of the river in the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area, 62,844 acres of public lands on Colorado's Western Slope. "I love getting out here."

So do lots of other people. The conservation area, which includes a wilderness area with a spectacular double canyon system of black granite and red sandstone, is a recreational paradise for the residents of western Colorado and visitors from all over. "We've got all kinds of use," says Mathis, "everything from rafting to hiking to off-road motorized use to mountain biking to fishing. If you can do it on public lands, it's pretty much happening here."

Created by an act of Congress in 1999, the conservation area gets about 90,000 visitors a year. "That's a lot for an area of this size," notes Karen Tucker, national conservation area manager. "We've had a steady increase, year after year."

But if Gunnison Gorge is an example of the many different ways Americans find to enjoy their publicly owned lands, it's also an example of how engaging outdoor enthusiasts and their organizations in the conservation of those lands can promote a private-public partnership that improves the experience for everyone.

The BLM has encouraged the development of the Gunnison Gorge Friends Network, which taps into the willingness of the different groups who enjoy the conservation area to support it. Last year, volunteers contributed more than 3,000 hours in Gunnison Gorge to stewardship, restoration and improvement projects. "They make all the difference in the world," says Tucker. "They come in here with very little fanfare

"We share the same goals. We want to see this river treated right so we can all continue to use and benefit from it."

- Ben Olson, manager of Black Canyon Anglers

and assist with all kinds of things. The bottom line is, without them, a lot of these projects wouldn't get done."

Gunnison Gorge is part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which was created to designate a collection of special areas among BLM-administered lands to be managed with an emphasis on conservation under the Bureau's multiple-use mandate, and is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. The system includes lands of great scenic beauty, rare plants and animals, unique ecosystems and important cultural and historic sites.

The lands also provide an economic livelihood for many Americans while providing enjoyment for many more. Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area, for example, has 11 different grazing allotments for sheep and cattle ranchers who agree to make sure the livestock don't get too close to trailheads and other recreational sites.

Still, the heart of the Gunnison Gorge experience for most visitors is recreation. Roughly two-thirds are riders of motorcycles or all-terrain vehicles taking advantage of the Flat Top-Peach Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area, which provides areas where off-roaders can head through scenic adobe badlands and wooded areas of pinyon and juniper. The extent of off-highway vehicle access, included in the federal legislation that established Gunnison Gorge, is unique to the conservation area.

Gunnison Gorge also includes trails popular with mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers. The conservation area is open to both big and small game hunting, and it's a fisherman's dream, officially designated a Gold Medal Trout Stream by the Colorado Wildlife Commission. "This is the number-one fishing stream in Colorado. We have more than 7,000 trout per mile," proclaims Leroy Jagodinski, a longtime outfitter and BLM partner.

Fishing and rafting on the Gunnison are partly controlled by a commercial allocation system that limits the number of people outfitters can have on the river at any given time. Private groups can put in on their own at designated access spots, but must sign up to use BLM camping sites.





Ryan Mathis, BLM river ranger

The outfitters work closely with the BLM to see that the rules are being followed along the river. “We share the same goals. We want to see this river treated right so we can all continue to use and benefit from it,” says Ben Olson, manager of Black Canyon Anglers, one of the premier outfitters in the conservation area. Black Canyon provides one- to three-day fishing and rafting expeditions and employs 22 guides along with staff at its secluded ranch along the Gunnison.

Elevating the Experience

“It’s just a ‘friend’ relationship as much as anything,” says Olson about working with Mathis and other BLM employees. “Every time we see each other, we stop and talk.”

The personal connections built between the government stewards of Gunnison Gorge and local residents clearly play a role in the public-private partnership that supports the conservation area. Jody Brown, a carpenter from the town of Olathe, has volunteered for weed control, tree planting, campsite cleanup and many other projects. When asked to explain his dedication to Gunnison Gorge, he says, “I got a buddy that’s a river ranger, Rooster. We’ve been friends 25 years or so. He’s the real deal when it comes to being a naturalist.”

“Rooster,” as everyone knows him, is Bruce Barnhardt, a longtime BLM employee. The Bureau has only three full-time employees dedicated to the conservation area. Although the agency adds seasonal staff during the summer, volunteers are critical for many projects.

The most recent trail being constructed in the conservation area is the 22-mile Sidewinder Trail, which will be open to mountain bikes, motorized dirt bikes, equestrians and hikers. A recent trail-building day brought helping hands from all the user groups. “We weren’t prepared for the number of volunteers that showed up,” Mathis says. “They were excited to be helping. They hammered out about two and half miles of trail in no time.”

Members of the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association have been involved in clearing and maintaining several trails, including the Sidewinder. Bill Harris, an association board member, had just returned from an evening trail-building session

GUNNISON GORGE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA AT A GLANCE:

- Nearly 63,000 acres on Colorado’s Western Slope.
- Includes a 17,784-acre wilderness area.
- Roughly 90,000 visitors annually.
- Gold Medal trout fishing.
- Challenging whitewater, and scenic flat water boating.
- Popular with four-wheelers and dirt-bike riders.
- Equestrian, hiking and biking trails.

THE GUNNISON GORGE FRIENDS NETWORK:

- Provided 3,000 volunteer hours last year.
- Includes off-road, fishing, hiking, equestrian and other user groups, along with outfitters, guides, landowners and other local volunteers.
- Builds, maintains and monitors trails.
- Participates in environmental education, safety, and resource protection and enhancement efforts.
- Among the volunteers are members of local and national environmental groups, including the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society and the Colorado Environmental Coalition, and sporting groups; they assist with landscape-level planning and improvement projects such as efforts to enhance protection of sensitive species like the Gunnison sage grouse.

BLM site for Gunnison Gorge NCA:

<http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/ggnca.html>



when he spoke about why he volunteers on Gunnison Gorge. “I just view it as a chance to give back,” he says. “This evening out there we had a sunset that just knocked your socks off. It’s a great place to go for a ride. We need to maintain that and make sure it’s protected and respected.”

The Western Slope 4-Wheelers are one of several off-terrain vehicle groups active in the conservation area, where the group has adopted the Wave and Eagle roads and helps police them. Ken Emory, land use officer for the group, says it’s just part of being good stewards of lands the four-wheelers enjoy. But it’s clear the group’s dedication goes beyond self-interest. “Whatever Karen (Tucker) needs,” Emory says, explaining the organization’s approach to volunteering. “If she has an extra project she needs a little help with, we try to help out.”

Many organizations take the same approach. Students from Western Wyoming Community College have served as scientific investigators and cultural stewards of an important rock art site. Equestrian groups volunteer for different projects. Gunnison Gorge and Grand Valley Anglers, local chapters of Trout Unlimited, “have assisted on (National Park Service) Land and Water Conservation Fund projects, grant applications and environmental education projects with local schoolchildren, and they’ve volunteered nonstop on rainbow trout recovery efforts in the Gorge with our partner, the Colorado Division of Wildlife,” says Tucker.

“This evening out there we had a sunset that just knocked your socks off. It’s a great place to go for a ride. We need to maintain that and make sure it’s protected and respected.”

- Bill Harris, member of the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association

The conservation area is home to a variety of wildlife, ranging from mountain lions to river otters. The river’s rugged sandstone cliffs hold prehistoric petroglyphs and pictograms from Native American cultures. Parts of the river are less traveled even in high season, and the wilderness area includes backcountry where a sense of untouched nature prevails. Even with its growing popularity, the conservation area is still a place where it’s possible to escape the rush of modern existence.

In other parts, it’s also a place where you can enjoy some of the rushes of modern life: four-wheeling, riding a dirt bike or mountain bike down a steep trail, fighting a rainbow trout at the end of a fishing line, rafting through a churning stream.

Maintaining the balance between the two is the work of the BLM staff and the many volunteers they work with. It’s a partnership fed by a shared appreciation of the Gunnison Gorge’s natural resources, but perhaps even more importantly, a deeply felt sense of community. “I’ve enjoyed this country most of my life,” says Brown. “I just had my first grandson born, and I would like him to enjoy this place as he’s growing up. If we don’t give back to it, I just worry it won’t be here for future generations.” ■■■

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RED ROCK CANYON NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA



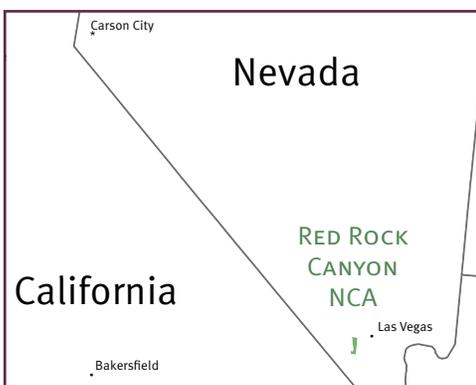
Red Rock Canyon NCA, photo by Lou Licato

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Nevada

Red Rock Canyon NCA is a 200,000-acre conservation area located just beyond the edge of Vegas's burgeoning sprawl.

The conservation area's proximity to Las Vegas means it receives millions of visitors a year. Protecting this majestic landscape and its wildlife requires an active partnership between the BLM and local citizens' groups.



Nature Next to Neon

Just outside of Las Vegas, Nevada, a city full of man-made wonders, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area performs the most wondrous trick of all. It makes the city disappear. The 200,000-acre conservation area is just a few miles from the edge of Las Vegas's burgeoning sprawl, but amid its spectacular landscape the city seems a distant neon mirage.

In the canyon, scenic overlooks provide a view of surreal stone knolls that are actually petrified sand dunes created over many millions of years, hiking trails lead back to prehistoric petroglyphs and narrow canyons shelter a wealth of wildlife, including the desert tortoise, bighorn sheep and even wild burros. Dusk fills the striated cliffs with color and the stars rise above the canyons as if civilization were a hundred miles away.

But protecting this public land and its native wildlife is a highly involved task, requiring an active partnership between local citizens' groups and the Bureau of Land Management. The conservation area's proximity to Las Vegas means it receives millions of visitors a year, and handling those throngs while preserving the canyon is the work of the BLM; the Friends of Red Rock Canyon, a volunteer organization; and the Red Rock Canyon Interpretive Association, which handles the fee booths, the gift shop, and interpretive hikes and tours.

The three-part division of labor is somewhat unusual among public lands, but it reflects the volume of traffic at Red Rock Canyon. "The Friends and the Interpretive Association are vital to the visitor appreciation and understanding of this place," says Mark Tanaka-Sanders, former manager of the national conservation area. "Without their help there's no way the three rangers that are here could reach those millions of people."

Red Rock Canyon is part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. The system was created to designate a collection of special areas among BLM-administered lands that would be managed with an emphasis on the conservation aspect of the Bureau's multiple-use mission.

"This is a unique place. It's a wonderful, wonderful natural area that's within five minutes of Dunkin' Donuts and Albertsons."

- Mark Tanaka-Sanders, former NCA manager

If there is a most popular gem in this collection, it's likely to be Red Rock — at least as defined by number of visitors. Last year about 1.2 million people came through the gates that lead to the Visitor Center and the main scenic drive. But Tanaka-Sanders notes there are other entrances into the conservation area, and he believes the actual volume of visitors is nearer to 4 million.

"The word *unique* gets overused," says Tanaka-Sanders, "but this is a unique place. It's a wonderful, wonderful natural area that's within five minutes of Dunkin' Donuts and Albertsons. The economic, the social, the cultural benefits it brings to a big metropolitan area are really impossible to calculate."

Those benefits may be hard to quantify, but Red Rock Canyon's worth can be measured in the dedication and the passion of the people who've come together to help preserve it.

Maternal Love from Volunteers

Willow Springs is a small oasis not far off the main scenic drive in the canyon. A spring-fed creek meanders between vertical sandstone walls and through towering cottonwoods and leafy willows. A shaded picnic area seems created for contemplation and relaxation.

But Pat Williams, Friends of Red Rock Canyon president, isn't relaxing. "Oh my," she says. "Do you see that?"

A vandal has pulled out one of the posts that helps fence the picnic area. A short distance away Williams spots something that deepens her frown. The wind has blown down a large cottonwood branch. "That's terrible," she says. "We'll need to get a crew out here."



Friends of Red Rock Canyon:

<http://www.friendsofredrockcanyon.org/>

Red Rock Canyon Interpretive Association:

<http://www.redrockcanyonlv.org/>

BLM site for Red Rock Canyon NCA:

http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/lvfo/blm_programs/blm_special_areas/red_rock_nca.html

Other sites of interest:

<http://www.redrock.org/>





Her maternal air of concern is understandable. Williams and her husband, Chuck, have been active with the Friends for more than a decade. Last year, she volunteered 2,300 hours at Red Rock, which averages out to more than 43 hours a week. The amount of time Williams puts in is exceptional, but her dedication is hardly unique. The Friends of Red Rock Canyon has 118 volunteers who work in the conservation area. In fiscal 2009 they totaled 26,500 volunteer hours, providing the equivalent of 15 additional full-time employees.

The organization also hosts “Make a Difference Day,” which drew 425 people last year who completed 22 projects, fixing trails, fences and other bits of infrastructure, and planting 60 trees at the Red Rock Campground before knocking off to enjoy a barbecue lunch thrown by the Friends.

The place clearly gets under your skin. On the desk of Jim Sudduth, a college-age intern coordinating volunteer services for the Friends, there’s a photo of a small boy working a cleanup detail. The boy is Sudduth at age nine. A native of Las Vegas, he’s been volunteering almost since he can remember. Friends volunteers serve as site stewards, clean up trash and graffiti, clear brush on trails, staff the information booth at the Visitor Center, assist with research and more.

Sudduth draws on his past experiences as he coordinates activities. “You want to get good things done for the canyon,” he says, “but you also want them to have fun, so they’ll have good memories of their experiences and remain committed to the canyon.”

The metropolitan area’s connection to Red Rock Canyon is clearly strong. Besides the volunteers, the conservation area benefits from the support of several major companies based in Las Vegas, including the Howard Hughes Corporation, which worked with the Friends to provide a buffer zone from encroaching development.

“They’ve been one of our enduring partners,” says Williams. “If we have a need, I can call them and they’ve generally been very supportive.” REI, the recreational and outdoors equipment retailer, is



RED ROCK CANYON NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA INCLUDES:

- Nearly 200,000 acres of public lands just outside Las Vegas.
- An estimated 4 million visitors or more a year.
- Hiking, horseback riding, jeep tours, picnicking and other recreational opportunities.
- Wild burros, rare animal and plant species and abundant desert wildlife.
- Rock art, roasting pits and other cultural artifacts from prehistoric native peoples.

FRIENDS OF RED ROCK CANYON AT A GLANCE:

- Began in 1984 to assist BLM through volunteer efforts.
- Provides over \$100,000 annually to support activities at Red Rock.
- Has 118 volunteers who totaled 27,500 hours in the canyon last year.
- Sponsors “Make a Difference Day” and other cleanup and improvement projects.
- Pays for transportation for kids from at-risk schools to visit the canyon.
- Sponsors annual Red Rock Canyon photo and art contests.



another partner, co-sponsoring Make a Difference Day and financially supporting several other projects.

Red Rock Canyon provides direct economic benefits to several local businesses. A dozen or so commercial permittees provide jeep tours, horseback trail rides and other activities for visitors. While most tourists come to Las Vegas for a different experience, the natural splendor of Red Rock Canyon does provide an additional attraction. “This is the Las Vegas beyond the neon,” Tanaka-Sanders says. “This is the natural Las Vegas, and when people have had enough of the other, this is where they can escape for a day or half a day.”

Should those guests go on an interpretive hike or shop at the Visitor Center’s large gift shop, they will be interacting with employees of the Interpretive Association. The Friends group was created in 1984 to help manage the conservation area with the BLM, but in 1988 the Bureau decided it wanted a nonprofit organization dedicated to environmental education. The Friends lent the association \$10,000 to get started.

Today, the association’s 38 employees “handle 95 percent of all the interpretive, environmental education and classroom programs,” says Athena Sparks, director of interpretation for the association. One of the big hits among schoolchildren has been Mojave Max, a desert tortoise living on the Visitor Center grounds who serves as the conservation area mascot. For the past decade, children have participated in a contest to guess when Max will emerge from hibernation each year. “We get thousands of entrants,” Sparks says, “and the winner’s whole class gets a field trip to the conservation area.”

“This is the natural Las Vegas, and when people have had enough of the other, this is where they can escape for a day or half a day.”

- Mark Tanaka-Sanders, former NCA manager

Gift shop revenue funds the interpretive staff as well as programs and customer services. Sparks believes the proceeds could reach \$2 million this year. With the annual federal appropriation for the conservation area at about \$151,000, that support is critical. The revenues help support a state-of-the-art visitor center that includes video displays, a desert tortoise habitat area and an interactive outdoor museum.

Red Rock Canyon’s oddly striped cliffs of red, gray and tan are the result of the Keystone Thrust, an unusual fault line in which sandstone from one geological age pushes up against limestone from another, resulting in a captivatingly jumbled terrain.

On any given day, BLM staff, Interpretive Association employees and Friends volunteers can be found working in the conservation area. It might sound like a similar recipe for chaos, but instead it has allowed Red Rock Canyon to flourish. “I think that comes from understanding our roles,” says Sparks. “We support each other in our missions because they’re complementary.”

In the end, Williams adds, everyone is united by a commitment to Red Rock Canyon and the rewards of spending time there. “It’s kind of like the magical quicksand out here,” she says. “The more you give, the more you get from it.” ■ ■ ■

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GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

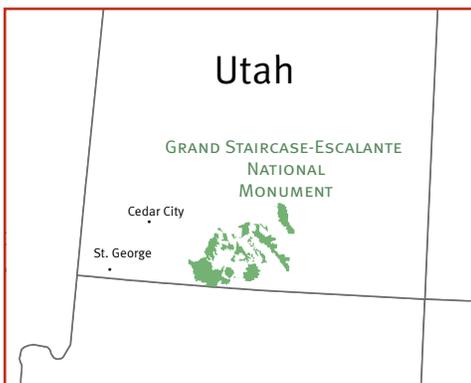


Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Utah

Established in 1996, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is 1.9 million acres (larger than Delaware) of multi-hued canyons, surreal rock formations and limitless vistas located in southern Utah.



Walk Through 100 Million Years

What does 100 million years of history look like? In Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument it's breathtaking. The monument is 1.9 million acres of multi-hued canyons, surreal rock formations and limitless vistas in southern Utah. It's the kind of western landscape that shifts your perspective, causing you to see the size and wonder of the natural world anew.

It's also one of the great treasure troves of fossils in the United States, with exposed layers of earth that go back millions of years. On a windy morning, a team from the Denver Science Museum is working along a steep ridge, brooming away the dirt in search of specimens.

"Here's something," says Greg Walth, a Colorado University student on the team. The delicately veined imprint of an ancient leaf, rust-colored, stands out on the stone surface he has just brushed clean. The lines are so crisp the leaf looks like it could have fallen last week.

Ian Miller, the museum's curator of paleontology and chair of earth sciences, nods. The team's focus was plant fossils — paleobotany — and they had already uncovered several. "People have been looking at dinosaurs here for 15 years," Miller says, "but nobody's been looking at the plants. There's a lot of them."

Standing to the side of the dig, Steve Roberts, president of the Grand Staircase Escalante Partners, smiles with quiet satisfaction. The small town of Escalante on the edge of this vast swath of public land might be as remote as any spot in the continental United States, but the Partners see an economic opportunity in the increased scientific research going on at the monument.

"This could be one of the keys to the future here," Roberts says. "If you can help make science and the arts the focus of this town, it will really help the economy."

The Partners are the official citizens' support group for the national monument, organized to increase awareness of the BLM-administered lands and to assist with

“The monument *is* our business.”

- Steve Roberts, president of
Grand Staircase Escalante Partners

interpretive and educational programs. The organization’s job hasn’t always been easy. The monument was highly controversial when President Clinton first created it in 1996, sparking a surge in anti-government sentiment in the region.

That sentiment hasn’t disappeared, but Roberts and several other residents believe it has mellowed as businesses have seen the benefits of an upswing in visitors, from the United States and Europe, who make the long trek — five hours’ drive from either Las Vegas or Salt Lake City — to experience Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

“I think the feeling is changing,” says Susan Nelson, who owns a rock shop in Escalante. “I think people are beginning to see its value to the area.”

“It’s a unique American commodity, this kind of wilderness,” adds Dana Waggoner, who with her husband, Dennis, is one of Roberts’ partners in a café and outfitter’s store.

The monument is part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. The system was created to bring together a special collection of areas among the lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, to be managed with an emphasis on the conservation aspect of the Bureau’s multiple-use mission.

Other uses of the land in Grand Staircase-Escalante, such as grazing and recreation, are allowed where they are compatible with the goals of conservation and protection. All the uses are important, and all contribute to the local economy, but as Roberts and other Partners look to the future, they see increased opportunity in the monument’s rich cultural history, the beauty of its wilderness and that scientific treasure trove buried within its rugged landscape.

Wilderness as a Commodity

In the toughest economy in decades, Escalante saw solid growth last year, and the town’s short main street is lined with



BLM site for the monument:

http://www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/fo/grand_staircase-escalante.html

Grand Staircase Escalante Partners site:

<http://www.gsenm.org/>

Other informative sites:

http://www.utah.com/nationalsites/grand_staircase.htm

<http://www.gsenmschool.org/>



motels and eateries. Even early in the summer, Utah State Highway 12, a National Scenic Byway that becomes the main street, is dotted with RVs slowly cruising the captivating landscape. Local residents say the trip is popular with Europeans, particularly Germans.

The Partners, which count about 200 members, coordinate the monument's volunteers and staff the information desks at the visitor centers. They've taken an active role in a native plants restoration project and other scientific endeavors. The group publicizes events on the public lands, hosting a website that features a monthly calendar of "walks and talks."

"They're pretty vital for our operations," says Rene Berkhoudt, national monument manager. "They handle a lot of interpretive, environmental education for us, and they've really augmented our science program. There's no doubt they enhance our ability to do things on the monument."

But the Partners also have focused on boosting the economy of the surrounding area. "The monument *is* our business," is how Roberts describes it, and the group has found innovative ways to make that connection benefit Escalante and other local communities.

The organization works with local outfitters to make sure they have information about opportunities on the sprawling monument. The Partners also co-sponsor one of the town's big tourist draws: the Escalante Canyons Art Festival/Everett Ruess Days, named after a noted 20-year-old writer and artist who disappeared in the rugged canyon country outside Escalante in 1934.

A couple thousand people attended the celebration last year and more than 100 painters entered the art contest. "It's really grown, and I think it's helped people to see the benefits of what we have here," says Roberts.

It also provides an example of how the Partners have brought together residents with very different perspectives. Arnold Alvey was a boy of six when Ruess came through Escalante, and remembers meeting him. Alvey grew up in a rural culture that centered on ranching and the Mormon church. He spent years breaking horses and remains a fiercely independent westerner, with little good to say about the federal government.

But when Roberts was trying to start the arts festival, Alvey showed up at the first meeting and offered critical support in the face of public skepticism. Although the two men might disagree on a few things, they've become good friends, united by their love for Escalante and their determination to look forward.



GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE NATIONAL MONUMENT INCLUDES:

- 1.9 million acres, larger than the state of Delaware.
- Significant dinosaur and prehistoric plant fossil digs.
- Important pioneer and prehistoric cultural sites.
- Canyons of the Escalante, Grand Staircase and Kaiparowits Plateau regions, and significant ecosystems.
- Hiking, hunting, biking and other recreational opportunities.

GRAND STAIRCASE ESCALANTE PARTNERS AT A GLANCE:

- About 200 members.
- Works with local businesses to promote economic activity.
- Awards small grants to encourage scientific research.
- Coordinates volunteer projects on the monument.
- Provides educational and interpretive tours.
- Staffs the visitor center information desks.



Steve Roberts, president of Grand Staircase Escalante Partners



And Alvey has become a supporter of the Partners. “There’s no need to be hanging on to something we haven’t got anymore,” he says. “This is what we got. I think anything we can do to benefit this little valley, let’s give it a shot.”

The Partners have sought to celebrate the area’s cultural heritage. The Hole-in-the-Rock site where Mormon pioneers labored to get their wagons down an extremely sheer slope is on the national monument, and the Partners are supporting efforts to create a cultural museum on that end of town that would explore and commemorate the Mormon connection.

The organization has also worked with the BLM on establishing a Science Field Center in the agency’s offices on the edge of Escalante. The center provides lab and work space for visiting researchers, including special storage facilities for plant and geological samples. “They could come in here and basically set up base camp,” says Drew Parkin, BLM field station manager.

Roberts sees the cultural museum and the science center as economic bookends. “You’re attracting people to the area,” he says. “Some might like the science, some might like the cultural heritage, some might like both.”

Parkin hopes the field center will allow researchers to stay longer and conduct more extensive studies. To encourage research, the Partners recently established a fund to provide modest grants to scientists who would like to work in the area. “It’s not just that it will help with job creation,” says Roberts, “but that it could also help the educational opportunities for local kids.”

“You can walk through 100 million years of time out there. It’s really an amazing place.”

- Ian Miller, professor of earth sciences, Colorado University

Providing an example of the possibilities, the Denver Museum team was planning to broadcast live from its dig to school classrooms across the United States. The interactive video would allow Miller and other members of the team to answer questions and show children the fossils they had discovered.

Miller believes the monument presents a rare opportunity for education. “You can basically walk through 100 million years of time out there,” he says, pointing to a rugged area known as the Blues. “This is the only place in North America where it’s all in a stack, exposed like that. It’s really an amazing place.”

More than 75 years earlier, when Ruess, the young painter and writer, first came across the wild landscape of Grand Staircase-Escalante, it so enflamed his imagination he wrote, “I have seen almost more beauty than I can bear.”

Those two perspectives, one from a scientist, one from an artist, capture the awe the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument inspires on many levels. It’s why the Partners look at the monument and see not only natural wonders but a more prosperous future for local residents. “Let’s take advantage of what we have here,” says Roberts. “I really believe we have a chance to create something special.” ■ ■ ■

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NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS INTERPRETIVE CENTER

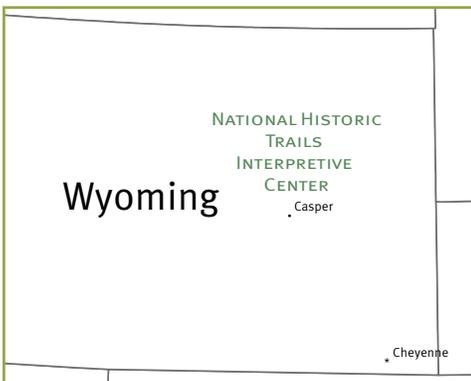


Historic Wells Fargo & Company six-horse stagecoach on display at the Interpretive Center

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

Wyoming

Opened in 2002 and located in Casper, Wyoming, on a grassy hill overlooking the North Platte River, the Interpretive Center sits at the nexus of the historically famous Oregon, California and Mormon Pioneer trails and the route of the Pony Express.



A Nation's Character Forged by Trails

All roads may once have led to Rome, but in the mid-1800s on the North American continent, all trails seemed to lead to a stretch of the North Platte River in the wilds of what would become Wyoming.

The Oregon Trail, the California Trail, the Mormon Pioneer Trail, even the Pony Express route all traveled along the river to the location of present-day Casper, Wyoming. From 1830 to 1870, nearly half a million people ventured west down the trails in a vast migration that would transform the United States. Today, the story of those trails and the perseverance it took to cross them is told in the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center in Casper, established through an innovative public-private partnership that comes with a tale of determination all its own.

The Interpretive Center, which gets about 25,000 visitors a year, opened its doors in 2002 as one of the premier cultural museums in the region. Built on a grassy hill overlooking the North Platte River, its exhibit halls include multi-media and interactive displays that bring to life the history of the American West: not just the pioneers, but also the Native Americans who were present before they arrived.

A local nonprofit foundation, the Bureau of Land Management and the city of Casper worked together over many years to get the center built. "This facility never would have happened without the partnership," says Mike Abel, director of the Interpretive Center. "No one entity had the ability to make it happen on their own."

The trails center supports the four historic trails that are part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. The system was created to gather the most treasured BLM-administered lands and properties into one collection and manage them in a way that would conserve the essence of America's spirit.



“The story we’re telling is bigger than this building. There are so many great sites just a drive from this center.”

- Mike Abel,
Interpretive Center director

For many visitors the center serves as an informational gateway to exploring part of that fabric, the historic trails themselves. More than 340 miles of those trails can still be found in Wyoming on public lands under the BLM’s stewardship. Other landmarks, such as Independence Rock, where hundreds of settlers carved their names or short messages to record their passage, are on state lands accessible to the public.

“The story we’re telling is bigger than this building,” says Abel. “There are so many great sites just a drive from this center. By coming here you can start to get a picture of what it was really like to be an immigrant on those trails, why they were so important and what people were trying to do. Then you can broaden your experience by going out to a trail site and learning more about this history.”

Pulling Together to Preserve History

For other visitors, especially families with young children, a visit to the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center alone provides an enriching and complete experience. The facility’s seven different exhibit halls include a chance to simulate a river crossing in a covered wagon, feel what it was like to ride in a stagecoach and even push a handcart down a trail as did thousands of Mormon settlers.

“The kids love the covered wagon in the Oregon Trail exhibit, which has hydraulics under it and really gives you the feeling of what it was like to cross a river. That was one of the most dangerous things the immigrants had to face,” says Mary Kalbfleisch, a retired teacher who has been volunteering at the center since it opened. “Another thing they like a lot is the handcart in the Mormon exhibit. Walking behind it, you get a little sense of how hard it must have been to make that journey.”

Another exhibit, “The Way of the People,” lets guests hear the perspective of Native Americans in their own voices. “The U.S. Looks West” traces the routes of the missionaries, explorers and mountain men who first explored the lands and discovered the trails the settlers would later follow.

For Casper, the center is both a chance to promote its role as a historic crossroads and an important economic asset. “We’re proud of our heritage,” says City Manager Tom Forslund. “We get a lot of people who come through Casper on their way to Yellowstone, but before this they usually didn’t stop for much more than gas. We thought this might get them to spend a little more time in Casper.”





Aaron McCreight, CEO of the Casper Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, believes it has made the city more of a destination. The links that provide information on history and the Trails Interpretive Center are among the most popular on the Visitors Bureau website, he says, and his own experience shows the center is making travel itineraries globally. “I can’t tell you how many groups I’ve gone up the hill to welcome to town,” McCreight says, “from Italy and Japan, from all over the world.”

Yet the trails center’s story begins locally, with the determination of one woman.

Vision and Determination

Edna Kennell believes it was 1986 when she saw a story in the *Casper Star-Tribune* about the possibility that a center interpreting the nation’s western pioneer trails might be built — in Omaha, Nebraska.

That didn’t sit right with Kennell, who believed the history of the Casper area, where the trails crossed the North Platte before branching off in different directions, made it the better choice. Kennell organized a local trails committee to promote the idea of building an interpretive center in Casper.

But nothing happened quickly or easily. “They worked for 15 years on this project,” says Holly Turner, executive director of the National Historic Trails Center Foundation, which the committee became. “There was a group of people here who loved the history of the area and the trails, and it was their drive that made this happen. They wouldn’t give up.”

The effort took a huge step forward in 1992 when the BLM committed to providing \$5 million of the estimated \$10 million cost of the center.

NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS INTERPRETIVE CENTER AT A GLANCE:

- Located in Casper, Wyoming.
- Attracts about 25,000 visitors annually.
- Includes seven exhibit halls covering the history of western settlement.
- Features a 100-seat theater.
- Provides directions to accessible historic trails segments around Wyoming.
- Features a regular schedule of speakers, historic re-enactments and other special events.

BLM site:

www.blm.gov/wy/st/en/NHTIC.html

Casper Visitors Bureau site:

<http://www.casperwyoming.info/mustseetrails.php>



The city of Casper also signed on, agreeing to make 10 acres of land available for the building. In 1994, city residents expressed their support for the trails center by voting in favor of a one percent sales tax that included money to construct exhibits.

The foundation, the city and the BLM formed a partnership that continues to this day. It took further action at both the state and federal levels to fully fund the center's construction, but that private-public partnership was what moved the idea from dream to reality.

Many of those involved say Kennell's resolve brought it all together, but she believes the credit deserves to be shared. "The BLM, private citizens, elected officials, they all had a hand in it," she says. "It was a 'we' that did this, not an 'I.'"

Today the BLM manages and maintains the Interpretive Center and provides the professional staff. The foundation raises money for exhibits, and plans and maintains them in collaboration with the BLM. Although the city of Casper remains a partner, its involvement in the center's day-to-day operation has receded.

“There was a group of people here who loved the history of the area and the trails, and it was their drive that made this happen. They wouldn't give up.”

- Holly Turner, executive director of the National Historic Trails Center Foundation

Still, the community's continuing commitment to the center is expressed many ways, including the long hours logged by the 50 or so volunteers who greet guests, serve as docents and staff the admissions desk and bookstore. "They make all the difference in the world," says Abel. "We couldn't do the things we do without them."

As many as 4,000 schoolchildren visit the center annually, and guiding those tours and others gives the volunteers a critical role in the center's educational mission. Herman R. Wolter, a Casper native who's volunteered at the center since the beginning, also finds particular satisfaction in serving as a docent in the "U.S. Looks West" exhibit, which captures the story of westward expansion from 1804 on. "There's a map that lights all these trails," he says, "and you can really see how they helped open up the West. You can see the country expanding from coast to coast."

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Writing, Reed Karaim, Tucson, AZ
Production, Ian Wilson, Tucson, AZ
Photography, BLM
Design, Teri Bingham, Tucson, AZ
October 2010

The significance of the larger story told by the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center helps to explain the dedication of all the partners who've made it a success. In the end, the history explored at the center isn't just about the pioneers who traveled down often dangerous paths to make a new life, it's about the national character forged along those trails.

"It's us," says Abel. "It's who we are." ■ ■ ■



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Shaping the Future of the West

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www.blm.gov/nlcs

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