



Shaping the Future of the West

RED ROCK CANYON NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

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.

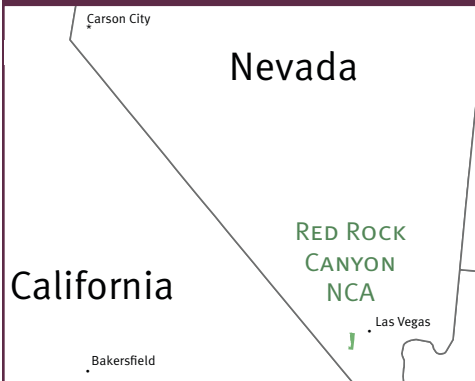
Red Rock Canyon NCA, photo by Lou Licato

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.



www.blm.gov/nlcs

Nature Next to Neon

Just outside of Las Vegas, Nevada, a city full of man-made wonders, Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area (NCA) 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. If there is a most popular gem in this collection, it's likely to be Red Rock — at

"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

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."

Her maternal air of concern is understandable. Williams and her husband, Chuck, have been active with the Friends for

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

National Landscape Conservation System:

www.blm.gov/nlcs

Other sites of interest:

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



Pat Williams, president of the Friends of Red Rock Canyon



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

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.





supportive.” REI, the recreational and outdoors equipment retailer, is 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.” ■ ■ ■



Shaping the Future of the West

www.sonoraninstitute.org
tel 520-290-0828



www.blm.gov/nlcs

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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