



NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS

Dominguez-Escalante

National Conservation Area

Colorado Annual Manager's Report—Fiscal Year 2020

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

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U.S. Department of the Interior
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Dominguez-Escalante

National Conservation Area

Designating Authority

Designating Authority: Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11)

Date of Designation: March 30, 2009

Additional Designations Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Old Spanish National Historic Trail

Site Description

Known for its breathtaking and uniquely Colorado scenery, the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (D-E NCA) holds geological and paleontological resources tracing back 600 million years. There are also many cultural and historic sites located within the NCA. Today, the Ute Tribes consider these pinyon juniper-covered lands an important connection to their ancestral past. D-E NCA provides one of Colorado's most recognizable landscapes with its red rock canyons, the Gunnison River, and the picturesque Dominguez and Escalante canyons.

NCA Offerings

The D-E NCA comprises 210,172 acres of protected public lands and includes the 66,280-acre Dominguez Canyon Wilderness. The NCA was created by the 2009 Omnibus Public Lands Management Act and is managed as part of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) National Conservation Lands.

D-E NCA is a fine example of the spectacular canyon country of the Uncompahgre Plateau. The Escalante, Cottonwood, Little Dominguez, and Big Dominguez Creeks cascade through sandstone canyon walls that drain the eastern Uncompahgre Plateau. Unaweep Canyon on the northern boundary of the NCA contains globally significant geological resources. Elevations in the NCA are approximately 4,800 to 8,200 feet.

Nearly 30 miles of the Gunnison River flows through the NCA, supporting fish, wildlife, and recreational resources. The Old Spanish National Historic Trail, a 19th Century land trade route, also passes through the NCA. A variety of wildlife call the area home, including desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, golden eagle, turkey, elk, mountain lion, black bear, and the collared lizard. There are 115 miles of streams and rivers in the NCA and suitable habitat for 52 protected species of animals and plants. Local ranchers graze sheep and cattle on 16 active grazing allotments.

Communications sites in the NCA house seven towers and facilities that have been used since the mid-1960s. The types of uses at these sites include communications providers, such as Qwest Communications and other cellular providers, commercial mobile radio service providers, and Union Pacific Railroad Company. The BLM allows target shooting and gold panning in most of the NCA, and many families harvest Christmas trees in the NCA under permits issued by the BLM.

Year Accomplishments

- Travel Management Plan Implementation
- Sage Brush Habitat Treatments
- NEPA Decision on Bighorn Sheep Research Project
- Land acquisition on the Gunnison River
- Completion of Dominguez Road Crossing Improvements
- Kicked off Gunnison River Camping planning project

Future Priorities and Opportunities

- Improved hiking and equestrian opportunities on Ninemile Hill
- Reclamation of non-system routes to improve sagebrush and big game habitat
- Planning for new trails and reroutes in Cactus Park SRMA
- Gunnison River campsite designations and reservation system planning
- Bighorn Sheep research and protection
- Interpretation of the Rambo Homestead

Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area

Southwest District 2815 H Road
Grand Junction CO 81506 Phone: 970-244-3000

Unit Manager: Collin Ewing
Site Web Address:

<https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/colorado/dominguez-escalante-nca>

Map of Dominguez-Escalante NCA



1 Dominguez-Escalante Overview

Acreage

Total Acres in Unit	218,393 Acres
BLM Acres	210,172 Acres
Other Federal Acres	0
State Acres*	1,803
Private Acres*	6,418

*State and Private Acres are not part of the total unit acres

Budget

Budget Title	Code	Funding
Monuments & Conservation Areas	1711	\$594,000
Soils and Rangeland Management	1020	\$60,000
Cultural and Paleo Resources	1050	\$105,000
Water, Fisheries and Riparian Management	1160	\$53,000
Wildlife and Threatened & Endangered Species	1170 & 11705	\$122,000
Wilderness Management	1210	\$53,000
Recreation & Visitor Services	1220	\$55,000
Total Budget		\$1,042,000

Along with allocated federal funding as outlined above, Dominguez-Escalante NCA receives substantial benefit from partnership organizations such as our friends group, Colorado Canyons Association (CCA). CCA holds fundraisers, applies for grants, receives donations, and receives membership dues, which are used to further the community stewardship, education, and restoration programs in the NCA.

Current Areas of Focus

The BLM continues to make implementation of the NCA's travel management plan a top priority. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, the BLM continued signing the route system. The NCA's off-highway vehicle (OHV) staff spent this season installing approximately 55 signs, continuing lay out of proposed Ponderosa loop - a 50 inch trail, worked with NCA staff and Western Colorado Conservation Corps (WCCC) constructing "buck and rail" fencing to delineate motorized use area from non-motorized, completed rock work and realignment of Trail 15, and removed large, abandoned vehicles and trash from sites throughout the NCA's motorized area. In the spring and fall, the crew removed noxious weeds from staging, camping, and parking areas. The BLM collaborated with volunteer groups to find solutions to potential trail issues. Another focus within the NCA is sage brush habitat rehabilitation. Over the year, the BLM rehabilitated 13.6 miles of routes in the Gibbler Area of the NCA.

Planning and NEPA

Colorado Parks and Wildlife Bighorn Sheep Study

Throughout the NCA, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) conducts research to better understand the nature of bighorn sheep populations. This research provides valuable insight about the species' characteristics such as interactions with domestic livestock, habitat selection and use, and population dynamics, among others. Bighorn Sheep monitoring includes capturing and collaring bighorn sheep using a variety of methods including helicopters and drop nets. Beginning in the winter of 2020/2021, CPW will expand the scope of the bighorn sheep study throughout the NCA. This expanded study hopes to gain valuable information about the human impacts on sheep. Staff working in the NCA from both the Grand Junction and Uncompahgre Field Offices completed an Environmental Assessment and plan to work with CPW for future bighorn sheep research. BLM contributes funding to CPW for this project.

Special Recreation Permits

BLM completed necessary analysis and issued several Special Recreation Permits in 2020. Those include:

- two for guided river trips on the Gunnison River,
- one for guided Stand Up Paddle board trips on the Gunnison,
- two for guided OHV trips in Cactus Park,
- one for backpacking in Dominguez Canyon Wilderness,
- one for geology/paleontology tours in Cactus Park, Ninemile Hill, Escalante Canyon, and the Hunting Grounds,
- two for guided climbing trips in East Creek and DCW, and Escalante Canyon

Gunnison River Campsite, Permit and Reservation system outreach

In May 2020, BLM implemented a decision from the D-E NCA Resource Management Plan to require overnight boaters on the Gunnison River, from Delta to Whitewater, to obtain a camping permit. The free, self-issued, permit is available at boat launches with extensive information about the permit and planning efforts to designate and reserve campsites. Staff spent over 50 days engaging with visitors at the boat ramps. As a result, we received great feedback, ideas, and information from the boating community

that will inform these future planning efforts.

Riparian Restoration

BLM completed restoration planning for areas along the Gunnison river. Restoration efforts include removal of invasive tamarisk and secondary weeds such as Russian knapweed. The removal is done in a phased approach as directed by the D-E NCA Resource Management Plan, with native plant seeding based on condition of remaining vegetation of treated areas.

East Unaweep Abandoned Mine Mitigation

BLM completed planning for mitigation of physical safety hazards related to abandoned mine sites in the East Unaweep Canyon corridor. There are two sites within the NCA that require a grate or earth backfill closure, and one site within the NCA requiring maintenance of additional cement closing of an opening under the existing grate. According to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the mines on the NCA side are too small to represent anything beyond an occasional overnight roost site for bats.

Staffing

Permanent NCA staff consists of an NCA manager, an ecologist/science coordinator, a law enforcement officer, an archaeologist, a National Conservation Lands Specialist, a career seasonal OHV Ranger, and a Supervisory Park Ranger. All permanent staff are shared with the McInnis Canyons NCA.



In FY 2020, seasonal staff included an archaeological technician, an intern for the Old Spanish Trail and D-E NCA, three Off-Highway Vehicle Trail Crew members, and two Park Rangers.

The GJFO and UFO staff supports the NCA's Special Recreation Permit administration, facilities maintenance, and other programs, primarily in the areas of visitor services and contact; geology and paleontology; archaeology; realty; range management; wildlife biology; ecology; weed management; geographic information systems (GIS); and soil,

water, and air quality.

The BLM partners with CCA to hire an NCA Lands Program Director, NCA River Programs Director, a volunteer coordinator, and two AmeriCorps VISTAs who develop and implement volunteer stewardship and youth education programs for the McInnis Canyons and Dominguez- Escalante NCAs.

2 Programs and Accomplishments

General Accomplishments

Over the past decade, NCA staff and partners completed key projects. These projects were only possible through their hard work and dedication. Included in this report are the details of the projects and associated NEPA work, outreach, and education events that have happened over FY 2020. The NCA's major accomplishments to date include:

- Education Videos
- Gunnison River Planning
- Travel Management Implementation

General Accomplishments Table

	Number of Visitors	Education Participants	Interpretative Participants	Visitor Center/Contact Station Visits	Hours of Volunteers	Active SRPs			
TOTALS	118,812	855	6	8,719	15	24			

Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

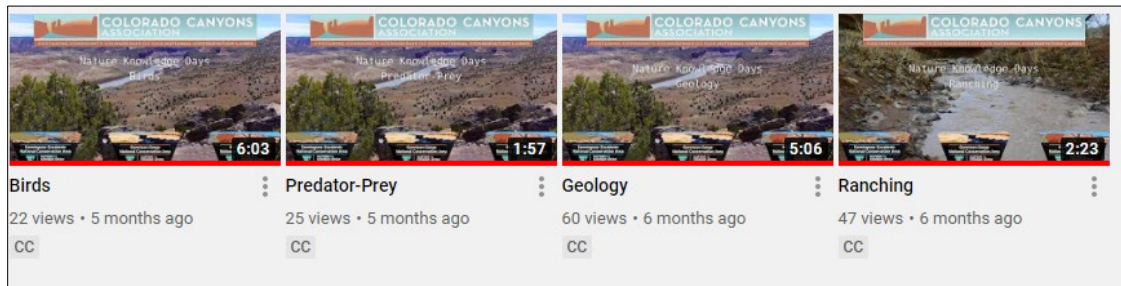
Tabling Outreach

The BLM and CCA staff spent time at the Bridgeport Trailhead in the NCA to encourage responsible recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff discussed local guidance on wearing masks when passing other hikers and practicing social distancing. Additionally, with the increased visitor-use, the BLM supplied regulation information and guidance to new visitors seeking outdoor adventures.

Educational Videos

When COVID-19 changed the needs of school programming and cancelled spring education events, which typically engages over 1,000 students out on the land, BLM staff took the opportunity to provide online education content. To provide a virtual field trip, BLM staff partnered with staff at Colorado Canyons Association, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and others to film short videos that could be shown in classrooms. Totalling over 839 views and counting, these videos cover a range of topics that would be

typically be part other field trips. The videos filmed in D-E NCA cover information about local lizards, cacti, geology, the Homestead Act, and more. Colorado Canyons Association uploaded the series of videos to YouTube, reaching a global audience. BLM staff translated the video subtitles to Spanish, so the videos could be viewed by Spanish speaking community. They can be found [here](#).



Hilltop Discovery Residential Youth Services Hike

The BLM and CCA taught students from Residential Youth Services who houses at-risk students, a majority of whom had been recently released by the Department of Youth Corrections. Educational opportunities were available on the Leave No Trace principle of “leave what you find” while interacting with the fossils on the trail, why leaving artifacts and fossils in place is important as well as how to differentiate between fossils, archaeological remains, and rocks through direct field identifications. Lesson plans included how the environment of Colorado was different in the past and how ancient earth forces have shaped the Grand Valley as they see it today. Students also learned about government and non-government careers in the outdoors on our shared public lands. Students studied and explored their environment through illustrations and journaling. Additionally, hikes focused on map reading and students assuming leadership roles in navigation of routes.

Hilltop Youth River Trip

In the fall of FY20, CCA and the BLM took eight students from the Residential Youth Services Program of Hilltop on a Gunnison River rafting trip through the D-E NCA. For many students, this was their first time leaving the Hilltop Campus in over a year and their first recreational experience exploring local public lands. For the students, a day on

the river is an immeasurable reward for their commitment to their schoolwork and self-improvement. Students rafted 3 miles down the Gunnison River from Escalante to Bridgeport.

The Nature Connection River Trip

In FY20, the Nature Connection, in partnership with the BLM and CCA, guided students from Hotchkiss High School down the Gunnison River in D-E NCA. Students camped in Dominguez Canyon while instructors taught desert ecology, local history, and river safety along the 13-mile river trip.



Jr. Ranger Program Development

Throughout the spring and summer of 2020, the AmeriCorps VISTA staff who is employed through an assistance agreement with CCA, developed a Jr. Ranger program for D-E NCA. Participants must complete a variety of activities and submit their responses to receive a Jr. Ranger patch. The funding for the patches came from a Leave No Trace grant. The program went through evaluation by area specialists to be as relevant and factual for students as possible. The program will release the online and print versions in FY2021.



Grazing

BLM authorizes 12 grazing permits in D-E NCA over 16 allotments which cover 206,000 acres. The NCA provides sheep and cattle ranchers forage for 14,000 animal unit months' each year.

Paleontology

In FY2020, BLM conducted two photogrammetry digital collections of paleo resources in the NCA. Images were taken of paleo localities in Cactus Park that were identified by paleontologists in a previous survey. Locations showed traces of animals moving in an aquatic environment (i.e. swim tracks). The BLM submitted the images to the National Operations Center for processing, which will take place in FY21. This did not require additional funding. Hopefully, this will result in several potential publications, as the swim tracks are quite unique in the world, let alone in D-E NCA.

Partnerships

The NCA staff work closely with a wide variety of partners to promote multiple-use and protection of the public lands within the NCA.

Colorado Canyons Association

CCA is the Friends group to the local National Conservation Areas. In FY 2020, CCA helped BLM staff host river cleanups, trail monitoring classes, and educational trips for local youth. In addition, CCA provided crucial assistance in visitor services for the NCA at the BLM office, organizing volunteer projects, restoring habitat along the Gunnison River, and creating awareness in the communities surrounding the stewardship and management of the NCA.



AmeriCorps VISTA

In 2020, the BLM and CCA proudly hosted an AmeriCorps VISTA intern for McInnis Canyons NCA. In September of FY 2020, Alice Corcoran renewed her AmeriCorps service. During her term, Alice engaged multiple communities on education of public lands while assisting in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math programming. Other projects included hosting and assisting with community outreach events, developing online educational content and creating the D-E NCA Jr. Ranger program. Alice completed these projects, among many others, to help build the ability and reach of CCA and the BLM.



Colorado Mesa University

D-E NCA staff partnered with Colorado Mesa University (CMU) for a variety of projects. The NCA hosted several student interns from CMU's Environmental Science Program. The CMU interns completed Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring studies, while conducting plant inventory, rare plant monitoring, visitor information services, wilderness monitoring, and assistance with archaeological inventory and data recovery. The CMU interns also staffed the BLM office's front desk while assisting with visitor services.



Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC) partnered with the BLM for the acquisition of the Hallock Homestead and Meridian Junction parcels. These acquisitions enable the BLM to protect key inholdings and improve access to recreation opportunities along the Gunnison River in Dominguez-Escalante NCA. WRC initiated discussions with private landowners, contracted the appraisal for the Hallock Homestead Property, and conducted preliminary due diligence for the acquisitions. The private landowners sold the properties to WRC for conveyance to the BLM, subject to the federal appraisal process, valuation, other due diligence, and availability of funding.



The Nature Connection

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



Other Partnerships

D-E NCA also closely collaborated with the Interpretive Association of Western Colorado, Rivers Edge West, CPW, Museums of Western Colorado, Denver Botanic Gardens, and Colorado State University on educational and scientific projects.

Recreation and Visitor Services

OHV Crew Grant

The NCA OHV Crew worked for eight months of 2020, completing multiple trail and staging area projects. The crew maintained and installed approximately 55 signs while updating inventory for the entirety of the NCA's motorized areas. The crew continued layout of proposed 50" Ponderosa loop trail, worked with NCA staff and WCCC constructing "buck and rail" fencing to delineate motorized from non-motorized areas, completed rock work and realignment for trail 15, and removed large, abandoned vehicles and trash from sites throughout the NCA. The crew worked with volunteer groups on three separate occasions constructing new trail and conducting clean-ups. The OHV staff made approximately 350 public contacts with visitors in D-E NCA while encouraging Leave No Trace and Stay the Trail ethics, as well as OHV etiquette and enforceable regulations.



Gunnison River Camping

This year, the BLM implemented a permit system for camping. The permit system was developed to gather information for planning designated campsites and a reservation system. Currently, the BLM plans to begin that project in the fall of FY21.



Ninemile Hill Fencing

Western Colorado Conservation Corps recently installed 2,000 feet of buck and rail fencing and 500 feet of post and cable along the Ninemile Hill road to implement travel management decisions and protect the recreation opportunities in the area.

Gibbler Wildlife Closure

In FY20, the BLM implemented the Gibbler seasonal wildlife closure. West Slope ATV Association installed 18 gates that support the winter closure. Backcountry Hunters and Anglers helped ensure the winter gates were locked. Monitoring the area indicates successful compliance of the closure.

Dominguez Road Crossing

Last year, the NCA staff completed the necessary environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to install an improved crossing along Big Dominguez Creek near Dominguez Campground. Over the years, flooding along the creek increased the water level on Dominguez Road at the campground. This crossing provides access between Dominguez-Escalante NCA and Forest Service lands on the Uncompahgre Plateau. This area is used by hunters, off-highway vehicles, cyclists, and ranchers. In 2019, the BLM secured funding for the materials and in the summer of 2020, Mesa County installed articulated concrete mattress blocks (ACBM) along the crossing, improving footing to ensure the roadway would be more passable during high water events.



Public Access

Hallock Homestead Acquisition

The BLM Grand Junction Field Office recently acquired the Hallock Homestead property in the NCA. The 134-acre property stretches for one mile along an sandy bench of the Gunnison River. In FY17, the Land and Water Conservation Fund approved the funding required for BLM to acquire the parcel. This acquisition will ensure continued protection of the recreational setting for boaters along a 24-mile stretch of the Gunnison River, as well as other riparian, scenic, and recreation values.



Volunteers

Education Videos

Volunteers from CPW, Museums of Western Colorado, and the community made the creation of CCA and BLM's educational videos possible for the public to receive outdoor education virtually during the pandemic. To read more on the videos, please see the 'Education, Outreach, and Interpretation' section of this document.



Bridgeport Tabling

During the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM and CCA encouraged approximately 578 trail users to recreate responsibly at popular trailheads within D-E NCA. Staff relayed proper guidance for recreation during the pandemic, including social distancing when trailheads are crowded. Additionally, with the increased visitor-use of outdoor spaces, BLM staff provided knowledge of regulations to follow while on the trail and in the wilderness.

Adopt-A-Trail

Volunteers adopted a trail within the NCA which they monitored and cleaned throughout the year.

Prescribed Burns

The Tabeguache project

The Tabeguache project was a 112-acre mastication project that improved sage grouse habitat and reduced hazardous fuels.

The Gibbler Prescribed Burn

The Gibbler prescribed fire burned close to 2,000 piles created from thinning around Ponderosa Pine trees. The fire program implemented this project to help restoration and create a fire adaptive ecosystem.



3 Science

Science

Photogrammetry Documentation

In 2020, D-E NCA continued a 2019 project of photogrammetry documentation of rock art sites. Photogrammetry provides a unique and cost-effective way to fully document and preserve rock art visually. Photogrammetry produces three-dimensional products and provides opportunity for tribal members, who are unable to visit the sacred sites, to experience in a digital format. These images can be used in interpretation and in classroom, museum, and online settings to providing education and outreach opportunities. NCA cultural resource staff collaborated with people outside the program to complete the photogrammetry process at several sites. Attendees included the BLM Grand Junction Field Office paleontologist and Visitor Services staff members. NCA staff hosted a photogrammetry training day with members from the Colorado National Monument's cultural resource program, local landowners, and BLM livestock permittees who were interested in the project. BLM National Operation Center and Colorado State Office staff contributed by processing the photos into final products.

Rangeland Monitoring

The BLM monitors rangeland to evaluate impacts of grazing operations. Pasture and rangeland monitoring is a systematic, structured approach to tracking changes in plant communities over time through the collection of data using various scientific monitoring protocols. These methods include compliance checks, utilization studies, and nested frequency. Rangeland monitoring is important in evaluating the effects grazing has on public lands. Use was monitored 15 times, compliance checks were performed 13 times.

eDNA and Disease Studies Of Amphibians

Since 2019, USGS and CMU, MCNCA and D-E NCA partner to collect water samples, testing for traces of non-native bullfrogs and native sensitive amphibian species along with disease. This is an ongoing project.

Pollinator Studies

Presidential Memorandum- Creating a strategy to promote the health of honeybees and other pollinators directs the BLM to research if sagebrush restoration impacts pollinators and their habitats. The NLCS Management Studies Support Program funds the research of if public land activities effect pollinators and their habitats. This is an ongoing project.

Shrub Islands of Opportunity for Arid Rangelands Conservation
Restoration to salt desert and sage brush systems are difficult. Research in these systems build off past research and provides land managers practical tools for success of these critical habitats.



Sheep/Recreation Studies

In partnership with Colorado Parks and Wildlife and New Mexico State University this project will seek to understand some of the effects of recreation activities on bighorn sheep in D-E NCA.

Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring

BLM collected baseline Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring data. Staff are incorporating Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring into NEPA documents and field office level decisions. The Grand Junction Field Office's Assessment, Monitoring, and Inventory (AIM) crew read one AIM plot in the D-E NCA this summer. The AIM crew's data informs the BLM of the overall condition of the land which the BLM will use in Land Health Assessments.

Gunnison Gravels Fence and Road Rehab Project

In 2020, BLM completed construction of a fence and decommissioning of closed routes to protect the Gunnison Gravels Area of Critical Environmental Concern and Gunnison sage grouse habitat. There is no sign of public bypassing the erected fence or damaging rehabbed routes. Depending on moisture received, we should see some good revegetation efforts in the spring.

Research Projects by Students

CMU student Ryan Mumby, as part of his degree, completed a research project on geophysics. Ryan's research entailed geophysics (magnetics) surveys on the south side of the canyon. These surveys examined if the technique would identify subsurface structures. Ryan identified a tendency where magnetics dropped on the upthrown side of the fault, which suggests the Precambrian material has a lower magnetic signature than the Mesozoic sediment. This could indicate that ore forming fluids would also have a tendency towards magnetite destruction. Ryan's study also helped pave the way for future studies by other students, showing that the technique is viable, although it works better in places where the vegetation is lower to the ground (no trees), since the device is an antenna that tends to catch on tree branches.

Another research project was completed by an OU student on Burro Canyon Formation on 9 Mile Hill near the radio towers.

Bighorn Sheep

The BLM and CPW collaborated with New Mexico State University researchers to initiate a multi-year study of bighorn sheep and recreation conflict. In December 2020, GPS equipped collars are scheduled to be placed on 30 sheep. As the year progresses, field crews will be monitoring recreation activity throughout the NCA to compare human use types, frequency, and location relative to bighorn sheep activity patterns.

Nesting Monitoring

BLM UFO Wildlife staff monitored five historic nest sites in the NCA planning area. Nesting and subsequent fledging of an active Golden Eagle nest (photo below) was confirmed in the Negro Gulch area. Raptor monitoring data is stored in a statewide GIS raptor database and data shared with Colorado Parks and Wildlife.



4 Resources, Objects, Values and Stressors

Natural Resources including Biological and Environmental Values

Natural and cultural resources are among the 14 purposes of Dominguez-Escalante NCA listed in its enabling legislation. The NCA enjoys an extraordinary abundance of these resources, including an array of rare and common plant and animal species as well as prehistoric and historic sites and artifacts. The NCA's natural and cultural resource management staff focuses on clearly communicating the importance of conserving and protecting NCA values and expanding the BLM's understanding of NCA resources through assessment, inventory, and monitoring.

Natural and Cultural Resources Status and Trend Table

Resource, Object, or Value	Status	Trend
Cultural (includes archaeological and historical)	Good	Stable
Vegetation	Good	Stable
Wildlife	Good	Stable
Riparian	Varies depending on species	Unknown



Natural and Cultural Resources Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Resources, Object, or Value	Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY 2020
Cultural (includes archaeological and historical)	210,000	43,2639	3,503	28
Vegetation	210,000	210,000	191,383	20,000
Wildlife	210,000	210,000	210,000	450
Riparian	210,000	179,218	3,330	3 Miles

Stressors Affecting Natural Resources

Stresses on natural and cultural resources and values include anthropogenic wildland fire, invasive plants, recreational use, improper livestock grazing and domestic livestock diseases, loss of habitat, habitat fragmentation, air pollution, non-native animals, water pollution, theft, surface disturbance, and vandalism.

Water Resources

One of the 14 purposes of the NCA listed in its enabling legislation is “the water resources of area streams, based on seasonally available flows, which are necessary to support aquatic, riparian, and terrestrial species and communities” (Section 2402 of the Omnibus Act). There are 115 miles of rivers and streams in the NCA, including the Escalante, Cottonwood, Little and Big Dominguez Creeks, and 30 miles of the Gunnison River. These aquatic resources support an abundance of fish, wildlife, and recreational opportunities as well as the existing water rights of neighboring landowners. BLM staff work to expand the understanding of water resources through assessment, inventory, and monitoring. In FY20, the BLM visited two water quality sites, one on the Big Dominguez and one on the Little Dominguez.

Water Resources Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good Overall	Stable and improving

Water Resources Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY 2020
210,000	210,000	115 miles	26 miles

Stressors Affecting Water Resources

Invasive aquatic plants, diversion, erosion, recreational use, livestock grazing, and air and water pollution may affect water resources.



Recreational Resources including Wilderness and Scenic Values

Recreation is listed as one of the 14 purposes of the NCA in its enabling legislation, and visitors to the NCA can participate in an exceptionally wide variety of recreational activities, including hunting, hiking, boating, horseback riding, OHV travel, rock climbing, wildlife viewing, and camping. Visitors can also enjoy a broad range of recreational settings, including remote wilderness, riparian wetlands, and culturally or historically significant sites.



The BLM's recreation staff assists in planning and managing recreational resources and facilities in a manner that conserves National Conservation Lands and NCA values. Thus, roads and other facilities are built only when necessary for public health and safety, for exercise of existing rights, to minimize resource impacts or to otherwise further the purposes for which the NCA was designated. Recreation

staff members actively engage stakeholders through land-use planning to help identify existing and potential uses that are compatible with the legislated purposes of the NCA. The BLM practices a community-based approach to providing recreational services that

are consistent with the purposes of the NCA and the socioeconomic goals of nearby communities.

Congress designated the 66,280-acre Dominguez Canyon Wilderness in 2009 under the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009. The Wilderness is located completely within the Dominguez-Escalante NCA. The BLM is committed to protect wilderness areas in such a manner as to preserve wilderness character, as well as effectively manage recreational, scenic, scientific, education, conservation, and historic uses permitted under Section 4(c) and 4(d) of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

The Dominguez Canyon Wilderness displays an array of ecosystems, ranging from upper Sonoran piñon-juniper desert along the Gunnison River, to Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine to aspen at higher elevations. Dominguez Canyon Wilderness consists of two major canyon systems, Big Dominguez and Little Dominguez. The canyons drain the northeastern corner of the Uncompahgre Plateau. Little Dominguez is the longer of the two at 12 miles in length. The two canyons join just over a mile before their confluence with the Gunnison River.

The area has outstanding geological features, spectacular scenery, ecological diversity, two cascading mountain streams, and opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The area contains large mesas which are dissected by deep red slick-rock canyons and arroyos. The area also provides valuable wildlife habitat for desert bighorn sheep, deer, elk, mountain lion, black bear, and wild turkey.

The Dominguez-Escalante NCA Resource Management Plan's goal is to preserve, protect, or enhance the qualities of wilderness character in the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness. BLM has the responsibility to continue monitoring wilderness character and monitor any changes helps determine how stewardship decisions influence trends and prioritize actions.

The practice of Visual Resource Management in BLM land-use planning inventories the character of a landscape according to the four basic visual elements of form, line, color, and texture. The management goal of scenic resources in Dominguez-Escalante NCA is to protect the open spaces, natural aesthetics, and scenic vistas that are considered a social, economic, and environmental benefit. The entirety of the Dominguez-Escalante NCA is managed with Visual Resource Management Class I and Class II objectives, which are the most protective management classes. Any changes to the characteristics landscape in the NCA should be low and not attract attention.

Recreation Status and Trend Table

Resource, Object, or Value	Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Recreational	Good	Stable
Wilderness	Good	Stable

Scenic	Good	Stable
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Recreation Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Resource, Object, or Value	Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY 2020
Recreational	210,171	3,746	194,352	123,072
Wilderness	210,000	210,000	66,280	66,280
Scenic	210,00	210,000	210,000	210,000

Stressors Affecting Recreational Resources

Recreational resources and values may be adversely affected by any of the stressors that affect natural and cultural resources, because recreational visitors to the NCA often go there expecting to see pristine habitat, healthy wildlife, or undamaged rock art. Recreational use itself can damage recreational resources where some recreational user experiences are negatively impacted by other forms of recreation. Right-of-way proximity and air pollution may also threaten the integrity of the recreational experiences.

Wilderness resources and scenic values may be adversely affected by any of the stressors that affect other resources within the NCA, with visitor use causing the greatest negative effects on wilderness character. Visitor use itself can damage the resource, especially with increased use due to local and regional population growth.

Scientific, Geological, and Paleontological Resources

The geological and paleontological resources of the NCA are listed in the NCA's enabling legislation among its purposes, and these resources are exceptionally abundant in the NCA. Scientific study of these resources benefits the scientific community as a whole and effectively informs the BLM's NCA management. The NCA staff works to identify research needs, encourage science partnerships and citizen science, and incorporate scientific results into management, decision-making, and outreach.

BLM staff members promote the NCA to universities and research institutions as an outdoor research destination, educational laboratory, and potential demonstration center for emerging technology and innovative management practices. In turn, academic institutions, aware of the unique and valuable resources in the NCA, seek out partnerships with the BLM to conduct scientific research and education in the NCA.

Scientific, Geological, Paleontological Status and Trend Table

Resource, Object, or Value	Status	Trend
Scientific	Good	Stable
Geological (Precambrian to Quaternary rocks)	Good	Very Stable
Paleontological (Scientifically important vertebrate fossils)	Good	Stable and Improved (more sites found every year)

Scientific, Geological, and Paleontological Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Resource, Object or Value	Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY 2020
Scientific	210,000	90,007	210,000	100
Geological	210,000	210,000	126,000	350
Paleontological	210,000	158,150	1,507	50

Stressors Affecting Scientific, Geological, and Paleontological Resources

Anything that affects geological, cultural, paleontological, biological, or wildlife resources affect scientific resources. Geological and paleontological resources are primarily affected by theft and vandalism.

Education

Educational resources are cited as one of the 14 purposes of the NCA in its enabling legislation, and we strive to provide programming related to of all the other resources in the NCA, which are all suitable as subjects for interpretive and educational activities.

The BLM strives to provide young people with opportunities to engage in recreation, practice stewardship, and learn about NCA resources and land management. BLM staff members seek out partnerships with local schools and educators to help them interpret National Conservation Lands and NCA values. The BLM provides interpretive and educational materials to NCA users through the GJFO, UFO, and the NCA websites.

Education Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	Stable

Education Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY 2020
210,000	210,000	210,000	1,000



Stressors Affecting Education

Virtually all NCA resources can be considered educational resources and are susceptible to vandalism. Interpretive signs, kiosks, and cultural sites are especially susceptible to vandalism. COVID-19 has added additional stress, with classes not being able to be held outdoors. Luckily, the team has been able to adapt as best as possible.

5 Summary of Performance Measure

Resources, Objects, and Values Status Summary Table		
Resource, Object, or Value	Status	Trend
Cultural	Good	Stable
Natural	Good	Stable
Wildlife	Good	Stable
Riparian	Varies depending on species or habitat	Unknown
Water Resources	Good	Stable
Recreational	Good	Stable
Wilderness	Good	Stable
Scenic	Good	Stable
Geological	Good	Very Stable
Paleontological	Good	Stable and improving (more sites found every year)
Scientific	Good	Stable
Educational	Good	Stable

6 Manager's Letter



NCA Manager
Collin Ewing

During the development of the RMP for D-E NCA, a big topic of conversation was how to manage the Gunnison River Recreation Area. During many of the over 40 public Advisory Council meetings, which were all open to the public and well attended, we heard many public comments about the need for changes to the management of river trips. The lower Gunnison River through the NCA has traditionally been a permit free experience where camping is allowed anywhere. Canoeists and rafters tend to congregate at the mouth of Big Dominguez Canyon due to good shade and great hikes into the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness. This has resulted in user conflicts and damage to resources. A past BLM archaeologist once told me “once a good campsite, always a good campsite” meaning if people like to camp there now, there’s a good chance people have been camping there for millennia. This is certainly true at the mouth of Big Dominguez Canyon. In addition to protecting the recreation setting and significant archaeology, BLM is charged with protecting the riparian vegetation and bighorn sheep present in the area. For these reasons, based on the Advisory Council’s recommendation, BLM’s Approved RMP broadly directs us to designate campsites and limit camping to designated sites, require overnight boaters to obtain a group permit, and develop a reservation and commercial allocation system for the mouth of Big Dominguez canyon.

In 2020 BLM kicked off the planning process to refine and implement these RMP decisions. We started by attempting to gather as much data about visitor patterns, and as many comments and recommendations from the public as possible. We implemented a free self-issue permit, available at the Escalante boat launch as well as at Bridgeport. The permit helps us convey the rules of behavior, while helping us gather data such as group size, preferred camping areas, number of groups, etc. We also conducted a visitor survey, with the help of Washington State University, as well as stationing our Park Rangers at the boat launch to discuss the planning process with boaters and encourage them to submit their recommendations. We conducted additional outreach through Mountain Buzz, American Whitewater, CCA, and by contacting the permitted outfitters. Due to these efforts, we received numerous thoughtful comments that will help us craft our proposal. We also inventoried existing primitive campsites, measuring size and condition of camps, and working toward complete surveys for archaeology, and sensitive wildlife and plant species. We plan to develop a proposed action and further engage the public in the summer of 2021 and finalize the plan for the river in the fall/winter of 2021.

Many folks, myself included, would prefer to be able to go anywhere anytime without restrictions such as permits and reservations. However good campsites are a finite resource, and as the popularity of recreation on public lands increases, crowding degrades the user experience and damages the very natural wonders we all seek to enjoy. While it is not clear the details of the plan yet, I am confident that the recommendations of the Advisory Council, boaters, and outfitters will help us develop a river plan that protects resources and provides boaters with an amazing experience on the Gunnison River through Dominguez-Escalante NCA.



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Dominguez-Escalante

National Conservation Area

Southwest District

Bureau of Land Management 2815 H Road

Grand Junction CO 81506 Phone: 970-244-3000

December 22, 2020

The mention of company names, trade names, or commercial products does not constitute endorsement or recommendation for use by the federal government.