



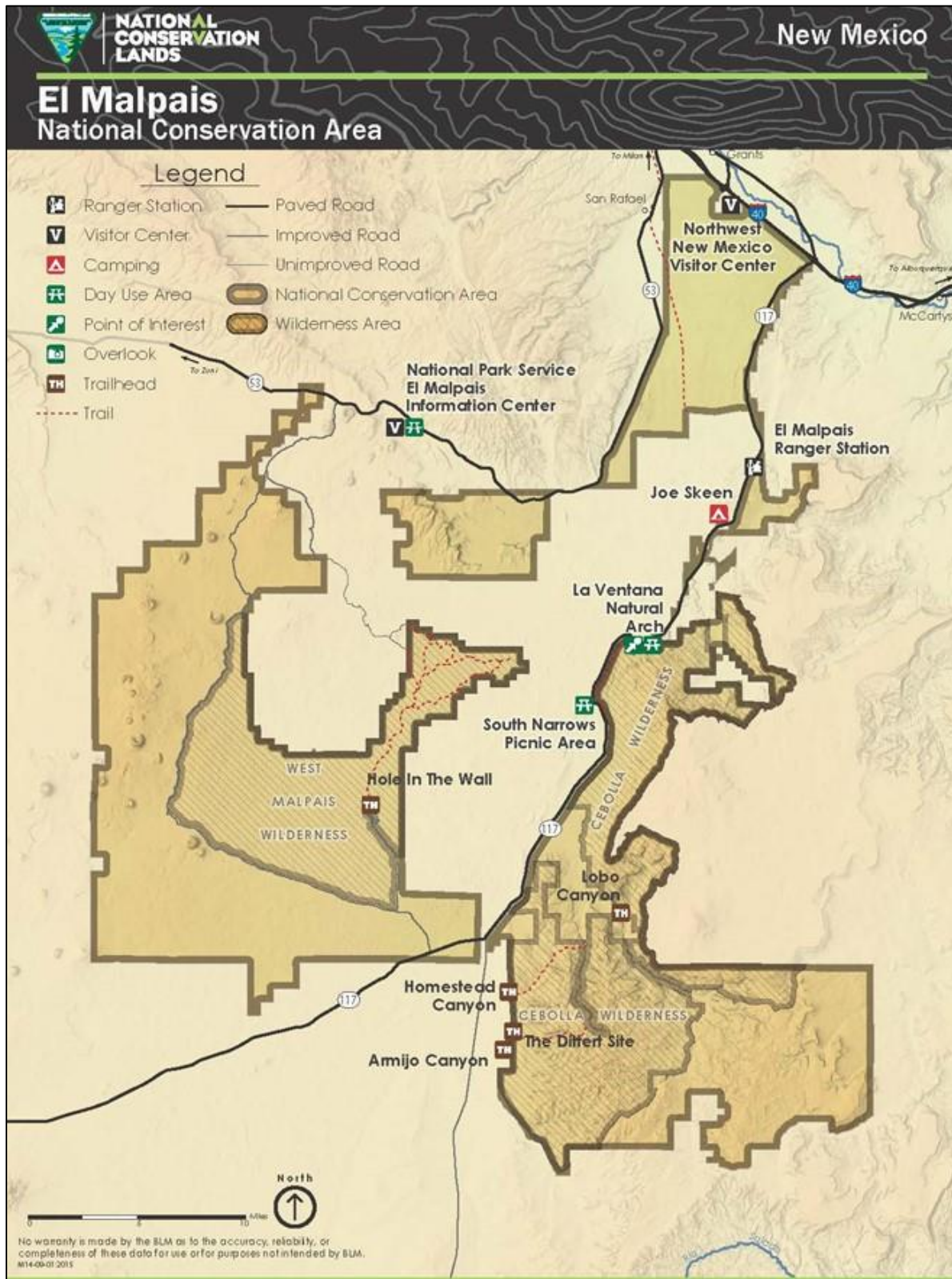
# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

New Mexico  
2021: Annual Manager's Report

## El Malpais National Conservation Area



# Map



# Accomplishments

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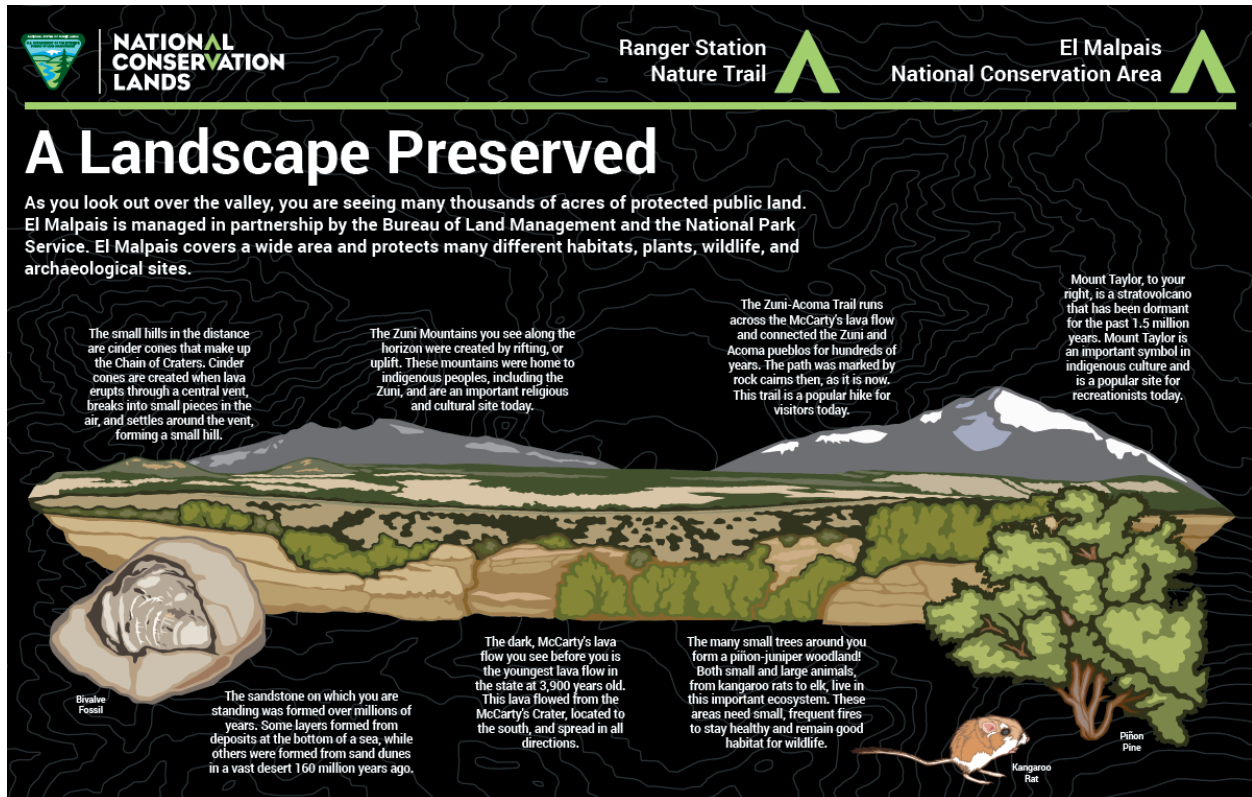
In 2017, Rio Puerco Field Office (Field Office) began revitalizing the interpretation exhibit within the main atrium at the El Malpais National Conservation Area (Conservation Area). The upgraded exhibits have interactive features and 3D displays. The installation of this exhibit was completed in July 2021. A remodel of the Ranger Station was also completed in April 2021 which included repairing exterior mortar and stucco; restoring exterior wood features (vigas, latillas, log columns and lintel, canopy, and fence); repainting interior and exterior; refurbishing restroom flooring, plumbing fixtures, and counters; new kitchenette cabinets and sink; new flooring; mechanical room plumbing; update HVAC; and new track lighting in atrium. To provide a safe visitor experience, a Risk Assessment was completed at the Ranger Station in mid-July 2021. General preparations were completed throughout FY21 in order to ready the Ranger Station for public reopening on March 18, 2022.



**El Malpais Ranger Station Exhibit and Remodel Complete July 2021**

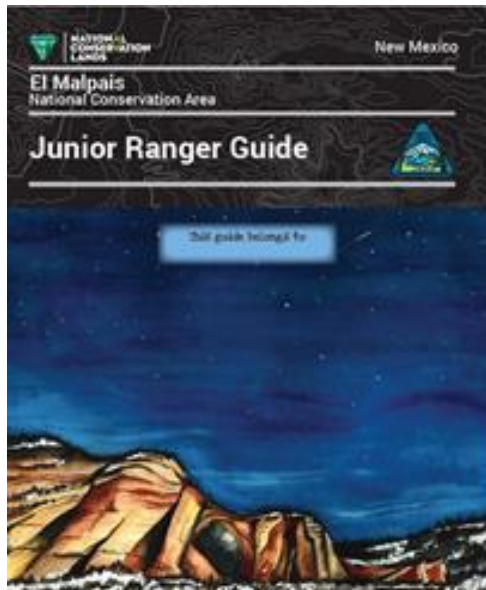
New interpretation materials for the NCA were produced and brochures updated throughout FY21. A Junior Ranger booklet for the El Malpais NCA was finalized and printed in December 2020. A Junior Ranger badge was also created and produced in FY21. An El Malpais Visitor Guide was created in collaboration with the Public Lands Interpretive Association and BLM which was finalized in December 2021 and will be

printed in FY2022. Interpretive panels meant to educate visitors about resources along the Ranger Station Nature Trail and about vegetation within the Ranger Station Courtyard were developed and printed in FY21. These projects were primarily funded through the BLM New Mexico State Office with National Conservation Lands funds.



**Wayside interpretive sign with El Malpais NCA resource information to be installed along the Ranger Station Nature Trail**

To provide more accurate visitation counts, TRAFx traffic counters were installed at La Ventana Natural Arch Recreation Area, Joe Skeen Campground, and the South Narrows Picnic Area. There are plans in FY22 to install more TRAFx counters in other areas throughout the NCA.



**El Malpais NCA Junior Ranger Booklet published Dec 2020 and Junior Ranger Badge**

Throughout FY21, El Malpais park rangers adapted to less in-person ranger-led activities by creating and posting on social media a series of videos about Leave No Trace Principles and a series of videos on El Malpais NCA resources. PLIA assisted rangers in creation and editing of the videos and posted them on their webpage <https://publiclands.org/pages/el-malpais-national-conservation-area> and <https://publiclands.org/blogs/public-lands-stewardship/tagged/public-lands> as well as on their Facebook page.



**El Malpais Park Ranger gives a virtual program on Leave No Trace Principles**

In June 2021, Rio Puerco Field Office released the El Malpais National Conservation Area Draft Business Plan for public review and comment. The objective of the El Malpais NCA Draft Business Plan is to provide the public with information on the current state of the recreation program; ensure consistency with required statutes and laws; establish future management goals and priorities of the program; and invite the public to submit comments on the proposed fee structure. The draft business plan establishes the Joe Skeen Campground as a fee site. The Business Plan proposes a fee of \$5 per night per campsite, for up to two cars, and \$5 per night for additional vehicles. In August 2021, a video field trip was prepared to present to the Northern New Mexico Resource Advisory Council in lieu of an in-person field day. The El Malpais NCA Draft Business Plan and the video was presented to and approved by the Resource Advisory Council on August 19, 2021.



**Volunteers use elbow grease to remove graffiti beneath the La Ventana Natural Arch at National Public Lands Day event in September 2021**

An Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps trail crew completed trail maintenance along the La Ventana Natural Arch trail the week of August 24, 2021, through August 31, 2021. Rio Puerco Field Office and the National Park Service hosted a National Public Lands Day event at La Ventana Natural Arch Recreation Area on September 24. Along with Federal

employees, 14 volunteers dedicated their time to remove graffiti from the sandstone beneath La Ventana Arch and assisted in re-graveling a portion of the trail.



**Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps Trail Crew  
August 2021 at La Ventana Natural Arch**

## Challenges

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As all units have experienced change in visitation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, El Malpais staff have had to adapt their on-the-ground visitor interactions and facility maintenance techniques. To protect resources and prevent their degradation, field staff is needed on the ground with the increased of visitation. Off-road driving and user-made campsites are increasing within the Wilderness Areas in the Conservation Area. Law Enforcement, with field office staff, are working together to install carsonite signs and inform the public of the special restrictions. Staff are also engaging in stewardship outreach to public visiting the Conservation Area. A priority in FY22 is to fill a supervisory park ranger position to assist with El Malpais' day-to-day operations. Interpretive programs have been minimized throughout the past two years due to COVID-19 and FY22 allows opportunity to create more in-person ranger-led visitor experiences.



**Visitors enjoy a Ranger Led Hike to Lobo Canyon Petroglyphs**



# Visitors

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Despite closure through FY21 of the El Malpais NCA Ranger Station due to COVID-19 and remodel activities, visitation throughout the NCA increased in FY2021 to 295,174 from 285,621 in FY2020. Average annual visitation from FY 2016 through FY 2021 is 269,832 visitors. Historically, visitor use numbers recorded in the database are collected through a variety of methods including estimates made by recreation staff based on data from the nearby National Park Service's El Malpais Visitor Center and El Malpais' special recreation permits. Recreation deployed new TRAFx vehicle counters FY21 with the intention to place more in FY22. In the Recreation Management Information System, the current estimated annual visitation is reported less accurately than data that TRAFx counters will provide in the future. Visitation in the NCA is steady throughout the year with the highest overall use from spring to summer. Elk and pronghorn hunting are popular in the NCA with open seasons from August through December 15. We expect that visitation to El Malpais NCA will increase over the years due to population increase and increased interest in outdoor activities.



Visitors enjoy a hike in the El Malpais NCA

# Partnerships

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Partnership with the neighboring El Malpais National Monument (NPS) staff continues to strengthen. Communication with the NPS staff is open and collaboration is occurring on projects such as sign plans, interpretation, and a reroute of the Continental Divide Trail. The BLM will also be partnering with the NPS to develop a sign plan to inform visitors to both the National Monument and the NCA about WWII munitions. In September of 2021, BLM and NPS partnered together for Public Lands Day to bring volunteers together to clean up some of our most frequented sandstone features, La Ventana Natural Arch and Sandstone Bluffs. We shared resources and a risk assessment, cutting down project planning time and cost.

The Continental Divide Trail (Trail) traverses the NCA and National Monument for more than 40 miles. This NCA section of the trail winds among the Chain of Craters and passes through piñon, juniper, ponderosa pine and a variety of shrubs and grasses. It is approximately 20 miles from CR 42 trailhead to the CR 42 trailhead, however a large majority of visitors, however, use Hwy 117 as a more direct route to hike north into Grants. For the past several years, the State Office has been working on a land exchange with Acoma Pueblo to facilitate a more direct route for CDT hikers near Grants, NM. This exchange is in line with the Trail's mission to keep hiker routes off highways. The BLM, the Trail administration, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition, Park Service, the State of New Mexico, and local Forest Service districts are coordinating routes, improvements, easements, and acquisitions in the area and throughout the state of New Mexico.

El Malpais staff have also been collaborating with Public Lands Interpretive Association (PLIA) and New Mexico State Office (State Office) to develop a local art installation for the NCA. The goal of the art installation is to provide inspiration to visitors to become active land stewards. A large sculpture will be chosen in FY22 and displayed outside the Ranger Station, while a mixed media installation will be curated for inside the Ranger Station in late FY22 to early FY23. PLIA worked with El Malpais park rangers in the creation of 14 videos in two series relaying information to social media followers on resources within the NCA and on Leave No Trace Principles. The NCA is working with the PLIA on the potential for offering a small gift shop in the newly remodeled Ranger Station when it re-opens. A Visitor Guide with safety information, recreation opportunities, resource information, and tribal perspective was completed under an agreement with the PLIA FY21 that will be printed in FY22.

NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS New Mexico

## El Malpais National Conservation Area



### Visitor Guide

#### Welcome to the Badlands






The El Malpais National Conservation Area was designated in 1987 and contains 263,000 acres of extensive lava flows, dramatic sandstone cliffs, and canyons. The area has many unique sites such as La Ventana Natural Arch, Chain of Craters Backcountry Byway, Joe Skeen Campground, Narrows Picnic Area, and the Cebolla and West Malpais Wilderness Areas. Within this unique NCA, you will find opportunities for photography, hiking, hunting, camping, and wildlife viewing.

For more than 10,000 years, humans have interacted with the El Malpais landscape. There are prehistoric and historic sites which provide connections to the past and are kept alive through the spiritual and physical presence of contemporary indigenous groups. The peoples of the Ramah Navajo, Laguna, Zuni, and Acoma continue their ancestral uses of El Malpais including activities such as renewing ties, paying respects, and gathering plant materials.

El Malpais is Spanish and translates to "the badlands." The name refers to the harsh landscape of the Zuni-Bandera Volcanic Fields.

#### KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

The summer is often dry and very hot. Severe thunderstorms, called monsoons, can cause flash flooding from June to September. Expect freezing temperatures from late fall to early spring. Any outing in El Malpais should include daypacks with water, snacks, a first aid kit, and sunscreen. Cell phone service is unreliable in many places. **Always let someone know where you intend to explore and when you plan to return.**

 <b>WATER.</b> Drink at least one gallon per day if you are hiking. Water is available at the BLM Ranger Station.	 <b>DOGS ON A LEASH.</b> Pets are permitted in the NCA but must be kept on a leash in developed areas.
 <b>WATCH FOR WILDLIFE.</b> Bald eagles, mountain lions, and bears live in this area. Be cautious of your surroundings and be respectful of wildlife.	 <b>DRIVE AND BIKE ON DESIGNATED ROUTES.</b> Vehicles and bicycles are only allowed on designated routes throughout the NCA. If parking a vehicle, stay within 25 feet of road edges.
 <b>SUN PROTECTION.</b> There is little shade at El Malpais, so please wear sunscreen, a hat, and sunglasses. Limit your exposure in the summer months.	 <b>SAFE FOOTWEAR.</b> Wear shoes that are comfortable, have traction, provide ankle stability and protect againstactus spines and rough lava rocks.
 <b>STORM SAFETY.</b> Keep an eye on the sky and be aware that monsoon thunderstorms bring lightning and can cause unexpected flash floods. Stay alert to your surroundings.	 <b>CAVE COURTESY.</b> Please stay out of caves during cold months as bats may be hibernating. Follow national winter cave syndrome gear decontamination protocols before entering and exiting caves. Contact local BLM or NPS Rangers for more information.

EMERGENCY OR FIRE: DIAL 911 EL MALPAIS RANGER STATION: (505) 280-2918

## El Malpais NCA Visitor Guide

BLM partnered with the Ancestral Lands Youth Corps in a three year Financial Assistance Agreement. The Corps' crews have assisted with trail work in La Ventana Natural Arch Recreation Area, and in the future will assist in the CDT reroute, and with other trails within the El Malpais.

## Science

In 2019 Rio Puerco Field Office completed the El Malpais Science Plan which is meant to guide the direction of scientific research in the NCA. The Range division completed Rangeland Health Assessments throughout the NCA to determine the status of faunal and floral health of the area. Most areas are considered stable within the NCA.

# Climate Impacts and Resiliency

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



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

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

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# Social and Environmental Justice

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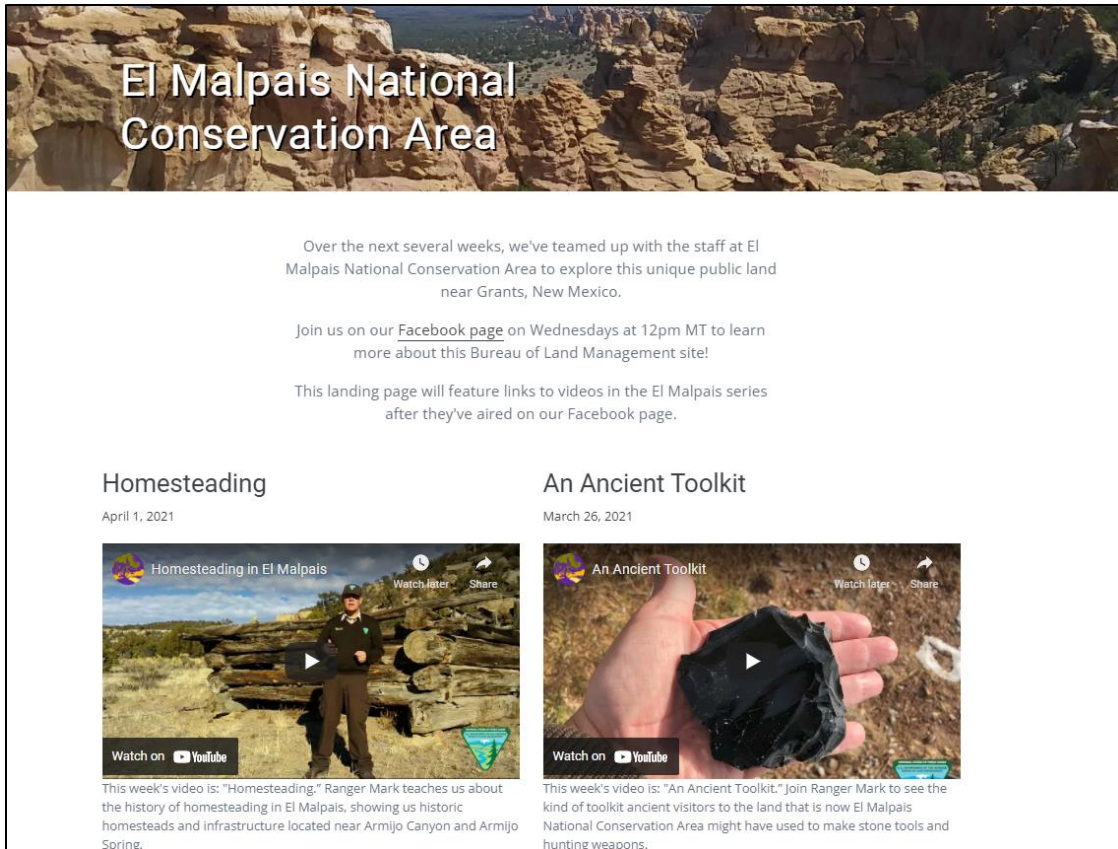
A Visitor Satisfaction Survey at La Ventana Natural Arch Recreation Area, Joe Skeen Campground, and the El Malpais Ranger Station Recreation Site was completed in 2019 which gave a glimpse at the demographics of visitors to the NCA. Though we lack detailed information regarding our visitors and the impacts of the NCA on surrounding communities, BLM is making a national effort to provide Field Offices with more support and training on identifying and clarifying those impacts.

## Events

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A National Public Lands Day event was held at La Ventana Natural Arch Recreation Area on September 24, 2021. Rio Puerco Field Office and National Park Service partnered in this event. Along with several federal employees, 14 volunteers dedicated their time to remove graffiti from the sandstone beneath La Ventana Arch and assisted in re-graveling a portion of the trail.

With assistance from PLIA, El Malpais park rangers created a series of eight videos about Leave No Trace Principles and a series of seven videos about El Malpais resources which were posted on PLIAs homepage throughout FY2021. These videos were viewed more than 7,000 times and reached more than 21,000 social media followers.



**Snapshot of the PLIA Webpage for the virtual ranger programs/videos on El Malpais NCA resources**

## Words from the Staff

Dear Friends of the El Malpais National Conservation Area,

The Bureau of Land Management and the El Malpais NCA staff have made modifications and adjustments to visitor services to continue availability during the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing visitor and staff safety and incorporating more virtual interpretive programs.

We are excited to welcome visitors back to the Ranger Station in March 2022 where visitors will find a newly renovated building and fresh interpretive exhibit. Staff continues to update and create new interpretive materials for our visitors. Park rangers continue to strive for excellence through their on-the-ground visitor interactions and we continue to strengthen our communication with partners.

In 2022 the Rio Puerco Field Office will restructure their Recreation program with the intent to provide more direct focus from management and staff. Priorities for 2022 will

be to fill staff vacancies and continue to enhance and improve visitor facilities and experiences.

Thank you for being a steward to your Public Lands!





**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

## **El Malpais**

### **National Conservation Area**

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