



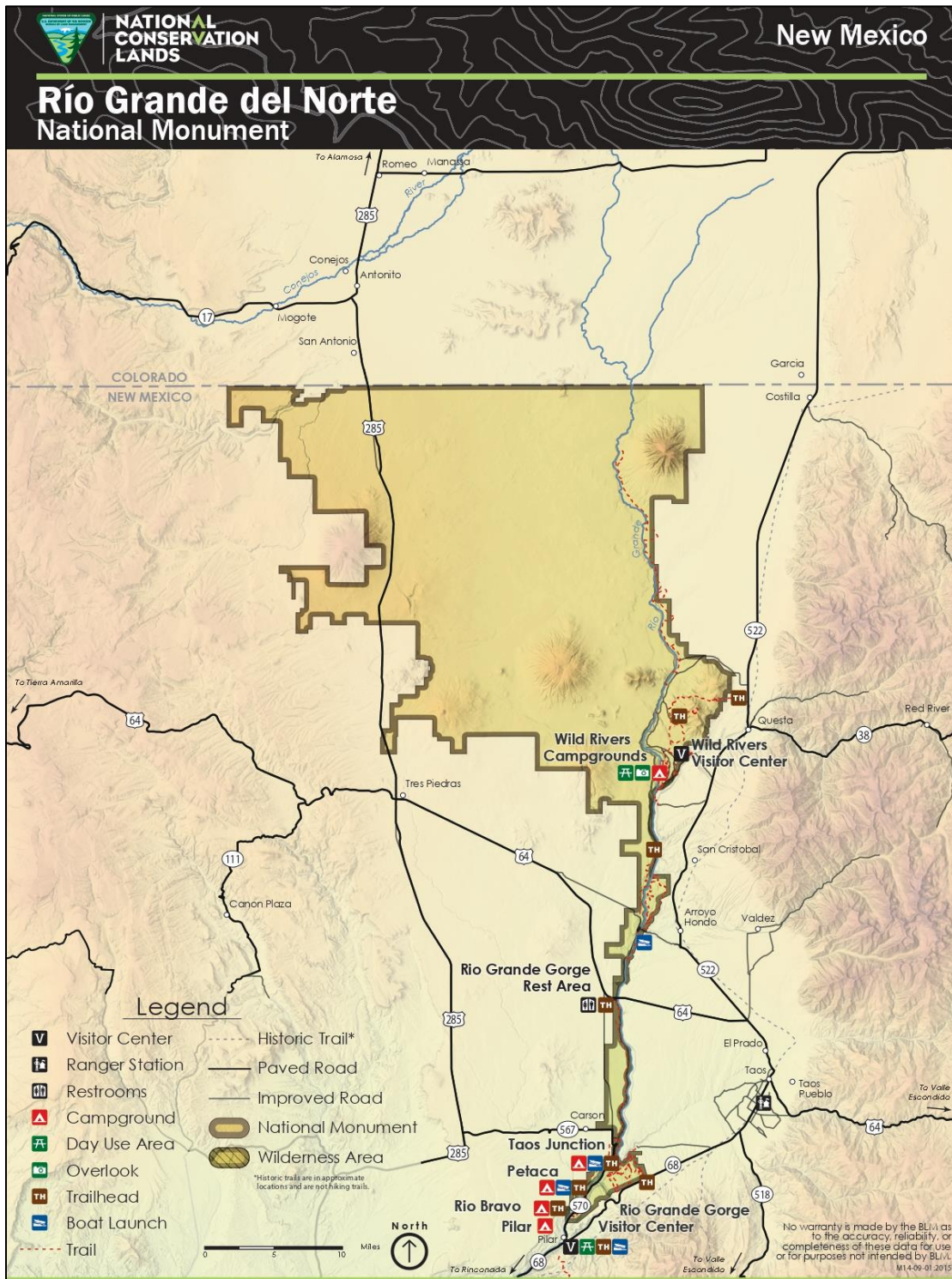
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

New Mexico
2021: Annual Manager's Report

Rio Grande del Norte National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

In 2021 Taos Field Office approved research projects in accordance to the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument (Monument)'s Science Plan. The Monument approved research and release of nine Louisiana otters to enhance the genetic variability of the Rio Grande's existing reintroduced otter population. The 2021 capture and collaring of deer, elk, and pronghorn in northern New Mexico as part of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish initiative to map big game migration corridors was completed. This project is tied into the 2022 New Mexico Department of Transportation wildlife corridor infrastructure enhancement projects that will improve the safe travel of visitors across the landscape. In addition, a Citizen Science Program was developed over the course of 2021 for roll-out in spring of 2022. The five projects planned for 2022 include weeds, rare plants, western bumble bee, Yuma skipper, and monarch butterfly projects.

The Federal Highway Administration, Central Federal Lands Highway Division, in cooperation with the Taos Field Office and Taos County, New Mexico began the improvements to the Wild Rivers Back Country Byway (BCB), which is located within the Wild Rivers Recreation Area.



Rio Grande Gorge from the Cascabel Trail off of County Road C110

Challenges

The Monument continues to receive heavy recreation site vandalism to include cut or torn down fences and frequent, extensive tagging. A recent graffiti event at the Cascabel Trailhead vault toilet cost \$5,000 to repair. To combat these issues, the Monument has increased patrols during the summer months, utilized survey techniques and replaced signs and split rail wooden fences with metal pipe rail fencing when funding is available. Many local community members have expressed their frustration over the damage to their favorite recreation sites. Another major challenge is the ordering and payment of replacement signs. We note an extremely limited budget for the sign program, coupled with a high external demand and expectation. The BLM consulted with the Northern New Mexico Resource Advisory Council, Taos County Sheriff's Office, the Taos County Commission and two homeowner associations to find solutions to protect the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River scenic conservation easement location on the river rim, to prevent erosion, and work to stabilize and reclaim the area. The scenic easement, which does not provide public access, has been protected by the communities installing gates across the private roads and the BLM installing fencing, signage and educating the public on the location of legal access to Manby Hotsprings. The BLM also worked with the Taos County Sheriff's office to provide increased patrols of the area.



Graffiti on a Monument facility

Visitors

The Rio Grande del Norte National Monument had an estimated 288,655 visits in 2021. This represents an explosion in visitor use and a change in visitor trends. The Orilla Verde Recreation Area had a visitor increase of 46%; and at the dispersed recreation site John Dunn Bridge, the agency saw a 61% increase in visitation. Other increases across the monument were less dramatic or not recorded. Prior to COVID, most visits to Rio Grande del Norte NM occurred between April and September. The uncrowded shoulder seasons permitted the traditional Hispanic, tribal, and local communities to continue to utilize the monument recreational opportunities for fishing, hot spring dipping or hiking, but there is no longer a shoulder season. Locations where, during the winter months, there might have been one or two hardy souls fishing or hiking every day to the parking areas being full every day. As a result, river based special recreation permit holders are having difficulty accessing boat ramps and the traditional Hispanic, tribal, and local communities have begun to be displaced from popular monument resources including John Dunn Bridge and Cascabel Trailhead. Traditional use patterns shifted to undeveloped areas within the monument, expanding the overall impacts to monument resources including shifts in big game migration routes and increased soil erosion, which are also impacted by Taos County population growth. Visitation capacity and use regulations will be analyzed in the Monument resource management plan that will be launched in 2022.



John Dunn Bridge



John Dunn Beach

Partnerships

The BLM relied on volunteers and partners contributing over 8,000 volunteer hours to provide environmental education, staff the visitor centers, complete biological surveys, clean up trash dump sites, maintain trail systems and oversee campground operations. Examples of volunteer success include Hawks Aloft surveying raptors; New Mexico Department of Game and Fish augmenting the river otter population; and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation building wildlife friendly lay down fencing. The Monument relies on 16 camp-hosts to provide customer services, monitor resource and recreation compliance and maintaining campgrounds. Five volunteers, in addition to many of the camp-hosts, staff the Wild Rivers Zimmerman and Rio Grande Gorge Visitor Centers.



Rivers and Birds volunteers installing fences Rio Grande

The BLM Aquatic Habitat Management program worked with Rivers and Birds, a local environmental education organization whose mission is to advocate for conservation of public lands. For this project, volunteers fenced native cottonwoods to prevent damage by beaver along waterways and to allow tree growth for valuable habitat and to cool the water.

Science

The Aquatic Habitat Management personnel surveyed 26 springs and seeps in 2021, providing baseline information of spring and seep function and recharge for the Rio Grande. The surveying provides georeferencing, directions and access, photos of the spring source and microhabitat array, spring type, and spring influenced land area. These

level 1 spring surveys help identify springs that require rehabilitation. Rehabilitation of springs and seeps is important to control erosion and filter non-point source pollutants, improving water quality; filter sediment and aid floodplain development; and improve floodwater retention and ground water recharge. The information is used to inform land use planning, protect in-stream flow needs, help determine responses to climate change, assist in efforts to manage, monitor, and restore springs ecosystems, and for environmental education and outreach.



Spring surveyed along the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River

The Monument Presidential Proclamation includes protection of four objects: 1. Cultural/historical, 2. Ecological diversity, 3. Geological, and 4. Wildlife/wildlife habitat. The Rio Grande del Norte National Monument was a demonstration test site for the Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring data collection process to determine the status and trends of Resources, Objects, and Values, including these five: wildlife, soils, vegetation (terrestrial), special status species and invasive species. Data is assessed by trends ranging from stable to deteriorating. This project includes management recommendations to establish benchmarks of desired natural resource conditions for the Monument's planning effort. The University of Arizona Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research project, as part of the Bureau-wide National Conservation Lands Scientific Studies Support Program, explored the chronological, environmental, social, and economic aspects of the Taos Frontier Cultural Landscape and Historical Agrarian Context in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument (Dicks 2012). They used dendroarchaeological

(tree ring studies) and historic data to build on previous archaeological and historical research in the area. The report, due in 2022, should significantly enhance the understanding of early 20th century land use processes in the area and substantially contribute to the public and professional awareness of these endangered resources.



Rio Grande Gorge in the Monument

Climate Impacts

Streamflow in the headwaters above Del Norte, Colorado, where most of the water in the Rio Grande originates, has been declining over the long term. The Rio Grande del Norte Monument has been in "exceptional to severe" local drought since 2018. Streamflow will be temporarily decreased in 2022 when the El Vado Dam undergoes construction, and the majority of water will be stored in Abiquiu Dam. The Taos Field Office has worked on a programmatic hazardous fuels-reduction environmental analysis, with the aim of reducing unwanted fire and reducing invasive vegetation.

Climate Resiliency

Northern New Mexico Climate Change Corps Intern:

The Aquatic Habitat Management Program supports an intern from the University of New Mexico-Taos' Northern New Mexico Climate Change Corp. The goal of the program is to increase the availability of skilled graduates from Hispanic-serving institutions with a deep understanding of climate change challenges to Northern New Mexico and increase minority representation in Natural Resources Management agencies.

Experiential education opportunities are provided that require collaboration and are mutually beneficial to all parties involved. Activities include riparian restoration, surveys of fisheries, water resources (past and present land and water uses), aquatic invasive species, wildfire, drought, floods along with studies for resistance, resilience, and adaptability to climate change.

Social and Environmental Justice

In 2020-21, the Taos Field Office began expanding internships to include Universities, The Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Taos Pueblo, youth organizations, traditional local historical communities, other federal agencies, Conservation Legacy and other Public Land Corps programs. In addition, we continue to utilize paid STEM internship opportunities through the University of New Mexico, which engages young people through paid service in the outdoors, inspiring them to use their strengths and potential to lead healthy, productive lives. Directional and regulation signage when replaced, includes Spanish messaging to reach New Mexican, Spanish speakers. Frequently Asked Questions have been created in Spanish for a Taos Field Office location that will be duplicated for the Monument visitor centers in 2022. We also targeted specific recreation staff to complete and then utilize 508 compliance training for interpretive products including the Rio Grande del Norte Guided Hike newsletter and the Rio Grande del Norte Monument newspaper. Pueblos have been asked to provide input and review of the Rio Grande del Norte Monument Newspaper through our partnership with Public Lands Interpretive Association which should be completed in 2022.

Events

2021 saw the relaunch of the Rio Grande del Norte NM Guided Hikes programming that included the addition of guided introductory mountain bike rides and the continuation of the Sky Parties. These programs take place at the Wild Rivers Visitor Center Amphitheater that involves a group of amateur and professional astronomers from El Valle Astronomers Club in Taos County. Five astronomers and their telescopes (mirrors ranging from 10 inches to 30 inches in diameter) and up to 50 people attend the events. New Mexico Tourism and the communities of Taos and Questa promote and protect the dark skies that are identified as an ancient and authentic experience. Recreation staff has begun to research the process to potentially nominate all or a portion of the monument as an International Dark Sky Park. National Public Lands Day events also occurred at Wild Rivers Recreation Area, one in conjunction with the US Forest Service that included a ribbon cutting event for the new Red River bridge to the public, the other hosted two environmental education events for local schools.

El Valle Astronomers setting up the 30-inch telescope for the Star Party



Land Acquisitions

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has been a key partner in acquiring land parcels within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument that were identified within the Taos Field Office 2012 Resource Management Plan. The primary purpose for 1983 acres acquired in 2021, is the preservation of the Big Game Migration Routes, but the acquisitions have improved the continuity of public lands and increased an area for hunting on the Taos Plateau. The Trust for Public Land is a key partner in the potential acquisition of land parcels in 2022 that may be included within the monument. This would preserve key Big Game Migration Routes and will provide public access to over 8,000 acres of BLM and US Forest Service lands in Game Unit 49.



View from the Atencio-Teter acquisition on the Taos Plateau in prime winter elk habitat.



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Rio Grande del Norte
National Monument
Farmington District Office
Bureau of Land Management
Taos Field Office

Report compiled by:

Judy Culver, Assistant Field Manager, Recreation/Acting Monument Manager
Ryan Besser, Aquatic Habitat Specialist
Pamela Herrera-Olivas Wildlife Management Biologist
Aaron (Chris) Anderson, Cultural Resources Specialist

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