



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

**Colorado**

2021: Annual Manager's Report

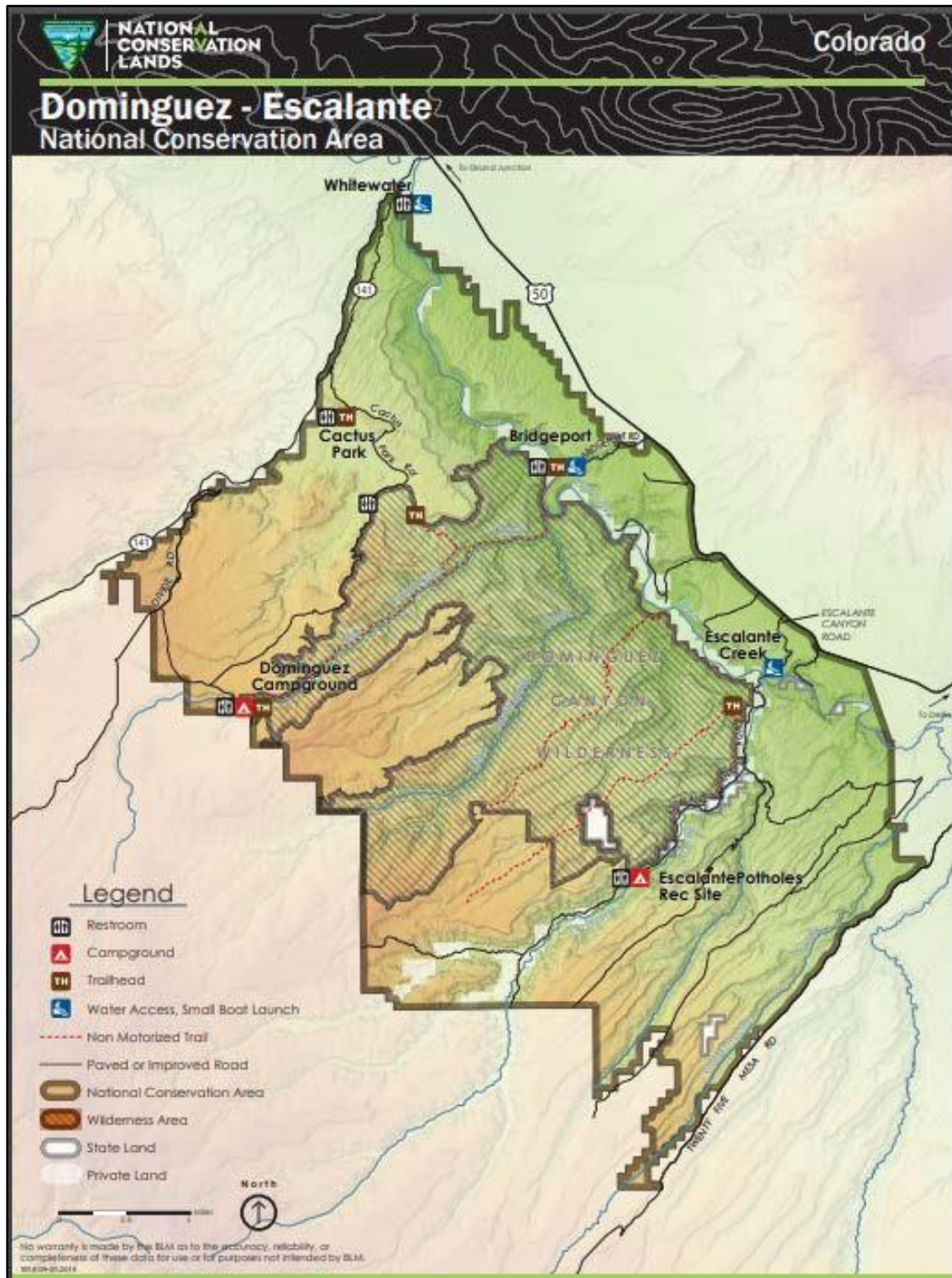
# Dominguez-Escalante

National Conservation Area





# Map



# Accomplishments

---

## **Gunnison River Campsite, Permit and Reservation system outreach**

Throughout 2021, BLM implemented a decision from the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (D-E NCA) Resource Management Plan (RMP) 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. The NCA staff and manager briefed the Northwest and Southwest Resource Advisory Councils on the project and upcoming business plan. We plan to initiate a formal scoping period for the project in early 2022.

The 2017 Travel Management Plan identified issues with creek crossings on the Gibbler Gulch ATV trail. In 2021 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) completed an environmental assessment and decision to complete work on the crossings to improve riparian conditions and recreational access. BLM plans to implement this project in 2022.

BLM and Colorado Canyons Association (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.

We implemented several fuels mitigation and restoration projects in 2021. BLM fire crews used prescribed fire to improve 40 acres of mountain shrub habitat on Dry Mesa, and this project will continue in 2022. Crews also used prescribed fire to burn 16 acres in the Farmers Canyon area to protect ponderosa pine stands from high intensity wildfire and improve ecosystem function. We also completed mechanical treatments on Jacks Flat (219 acres) and Middle Mesa (237 acres) as a part of a comprehensive strategy to improve Gunnison sage grouse (GUSG) habitat. These treatments are within areas that were previously treated. The objective was to remove pinyon and juniper in areas that have a well-established sagebrush understory and improve connectivity of the Pinon Mesa GUSG sub-population as well as restore sagebrush habitat, improve big game habitat, and lower potential for catastrophic wildfire.

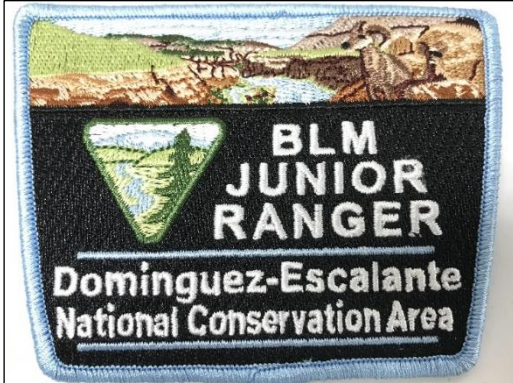




BLM completed restoration planning for more areas along the Gunnison river and continued treating sites. Restoration efforts include removal of invasive tamarisk and secondary weeds such as Russian knapweed. The removal is done in a phased approach as directed by the D-E NCA Resource Management Plan, with native plant seeding based on condition of remaining vegetation in treated areas. We completed cutting and piling of tamarisk and burned the piles created from a previous 5 acres treated along the Gunnison river to reduce risk of fire in native cottonwood galleries, improve riparian habitat, and improve camping opportunities. We seeded 15 acres of previous treatments.

### **Jr. Ranger and Agents of Discovery Program Development**

CCA and BLM released the D-E NCA Junior Ranger program and launched the Agents of Discovery program in 2021. Participants must complete various activities and submit their responses to receive a Jr. Ranger patch. The funding for the patches came from a Leave No Trace grant.



## Challenges

---

Increased recreation use has come with increased demand for campsites. We are seeing users creating new campsites in Escalante Canyon, damaging vegetation, and in some cases, archaeology. We are beginning to collect monitoring data to help assess how to manage the increased demand. We plan to develop a proposed action for the Escalante Camping Plan and begin public scoping in 2022.



## Visitors

---

Dominguez-Escalante NCA is a popular destination for a broad array of recreation activities. In addition to hiking and equestrian recreation in the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, BLM stewards the following seven recreation management areas in D-E NCA:

---

## **Cactus Park**

This area provides rich opportunities to motorized vehicle enthusiasts to experience the backcountry. Miles of trails within the NCA provide access to the Uncompahgre National Forest, which manages a successful multi-recreational trail system.

## **Gunnison River**

The relatively flat stretch of river between Escalante Canyon and the mouth of the Dominguez Canyon is attracting increasing numbers of commercial and private boaters, with its unprecedented views of stunning red-rock canyons and wildlife viewing opportunities. Nearly 30 miles of the river flow through the NCA. Campsites are marked and available along the river.

## **Escalante Canyon**

Escalante Canyon includes the Potholes Recreation Area, popular with extreme kayakers in the spring and picnickers in the summer. Restrooms and picnic tables are available for day-use recreation as well. A 15-mile county road offers visitors a trip back to pioneer days through Escalante Canyon's "Red Hole in Time" popularized by local author Muriel Marshall. The road provides easy vehicle and viewing access to historic cabins and trails, rock walls with early settler and Native American inscriptions, and spectacular geologic formations.

## **Sawmill Mesa**

Immediately adjacent to the town of Delta, this area provides critical motorized links to the Uncompahgre National Forest. The Delta-Nucla/25-Mesa Road borders the NCA on the southeast and connects Delta to Nucla and the Divide Road, which follows the spine of the Uncompahgre Plateau. Sawmill Mesa Road and Dry Mesa Road provide Forest Service access to hunting in the fall and 4-wheel drive, ATV, and mountain bike access in spring, summer, and fall.

## **Hunting Grounds**

West of Hwy 50 and east of the Gunnison River, this area is rich in cultural heritage resources and a popular location for dispersed recreation. The area was the traditional hunting ground for Ute and Fremont people that migrated and hunted through the region. The area provides valuable opportunities for many different forms of recreation, particularly OHV and horseback riding.

## **Ninemile Hill**

As a result of its proximity to the Grand Valley, this area is valued for its easily available recreation opportunities for nonmotorized recreation. This is a popular area for relatively



unimproved exploration via hiking and horseback riding. The Tabeguache trail, a long-distance mixed-use trail popular with mountain bikers, motorcycle riders and jeep enthusiasts, also runs through the Ninemile Hill area. Ninemile Hill is easily identifiable by its communication towers along the crest.

### **East Creek**

Unaweep Canyon is on the northern boundary of the NCA. The canyon is unique because it has drainages running east and west out of the canyon. East Creek is the eastern drainage that runs along Hwy141 which is designated by the state of Colorado as the Unaweep-Tabaguache Scenic Byway. Scenic auto touring, bouldering, and multi-pitch climbing occur along East Creek.



## **Partnerships**

---

### **Colorado Canyons Association**

CCA is the Friends group to the local National Conservation Areas. In FY 2021, they helped BLM staff host river cleanups, trail monitoring classes, and educational trips for area youth. CCA provided crucial assistance in visitor services for the NCAs at the BLM office, organizing volunteer projects, and creating awareness in the community surrounding the stewardship and management of MCNCA.



### **Colorado Mesa University**

McInnis Canyons NCA staff partnered with Colorado Mesa University (CMU) for a variety of projects. McInnis Canyons 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, and visitor information services.

### **The Conservation Fund**

The Conservation Fund (TCF) is partnered with the BLM for the acquisition of the Crow Bottom parcel. This acquisition enabled the BLM to protect a key inholding and improve access to recreation opportunities along the Colorado River in McInnis Canyons NCA.

### **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.



## **Mesa County**

BLM has established an assistance agreement with the Mesa County Trails Program, and Mesa County also completes important road maintenance projects in MCNCA. In FY2021, Mesa County secured an easement for the road to Loma Boat Launch, securing access to this important site for NCA visitors.

## **More Great Partners**

McInnis Canyons NCA benefitted from strong partnerships with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado State University, Rivers Edge West, Western Colorado Conservation Corps (WCCC), Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Grand Mesa Backcountry Horsemen, Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association, Motorcycle Trail Riders Association, Museums of Western Colorado, and School District 51.

# Science

---

## **Academic Research**

Colorado State University is performing important research in MCNCA. Two ongoing studies are looking to determine how sagebrush islands of opportunity can aid arid rangeland conservation, as well as whether sagebrush restoration impacts native bee pollinators or their habitats.

## **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.

## **eDNA and Disease Studies of Amphibians**

Since 2019, USGS and CMU, MCNCA and D-E NCA have partnered to collect water samples and testing for traces of non-native bullfrogs and native sensitive amphibian species and diseases. The project continues to be ongoing.

## **Pollinator Studies**

A Presidential memorandum dated June 20, 2014 creates a strategy to promote the health of honeybees and other pollinators directing the BLM to research whether sagebrush restoration impacts pollinators and their habitats. The NLCS Management

Studies Support Program funds research on public land activities effect pollinators and their habitats. DENCA created a strategy to promote the health of honeybees and other pollinators; this is an ongoing project.

**Shrub Islands of Opportunity for Arid Rangelands Conservation**

Restoration of salt desert and sage brush systems is difficult. Research in these systems builds off past research and provides land managers practical tools for success of these critical habitats.





---

## Climate Impacts

---

Drier, warmer conditions can affect restoration response, for example after fire, trail construction, or other disturbance. Water availability in canyons can also be affected by less snowpack, and warmer and drier periods, which may affect wildlife that depend on these areas.

---

## Climate Resiliency

---

Ongoing research is being conducted and used to improve climate resilience. In partnership with Colorado State University and the Upper Colorado Native Plant Center, past research on appropriate native species seed mixes and restoration techniques in salt deserts has been used to inform seed mixes in road reclamation and fuels treatments. Additionally, in partnership with Colorado State University, ongoing research will further inform improved seed mixes in sagebrush and salt desert habitats, and improved seed mixes for pollinators. Ongoing research on amphibian use of canyons in partnership with US Geological Survey, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and Colorado Mesa University will inform habitat, and population management, especially invasive bullfrog management.

---

## Social and Environmental Justice

---

BLM works Colorado Canyons Association and our community partners to reach underserved youth in our communities. We have built partnerships with groups like the Riverside Education Center, Dual Immersion Academy, and Mesa County Partners to help remove barriers students may face when visiting and recreating on public lands. These partnerships provide the opportunity for the BLM to host students in an outdoor classroom setting and to provide a safe environment for students to feel supported while developing new skills and learning about the resources we manage. These partnerships provide hundreds of youth in our community with new experiences, such as place-based learning, hiking, rafting, and camping, on their public lands. While providing students with new knowledge, experiences, and skills, we also teach them about potential careers in public land management. We are striving to build a workforce that reflects the face of the community we serve which will help us better reach underserved youth and help them understand that public lands are for all Americans and see themselves in a career in conservation.



## Events

---

BLM and CCA hosted a National Public Lands Day event in Escalante Canyon. Eight volunteers cleaned up Potholes Recreation Site; we dispersed 28 user-created fire rings and collected micro-trash and glass shards. CCA, BLM, Western Colorado Climbers Coalition and Thunder Mountain Wheelers held several tabling events at the Bridgeport Trailhead and Escalante staging area. We talked to recreationists and discussed leave no trace principles, including being considerate of others. Additionally, with the increased visitor-use, the BLM supplied regulation information and guidance to new visitors seeking outdoor adventures. Other events that took place in 2021 included a hike with the Hilltop Residential Youth Services program, a volunteer river cleanup, A river trip with North Fork Elementary students, a leave no trace backpacking trip in the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, several adopt-a trail events, and educational webinars on sensitive native fish and the history of the railroads in the west.







# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

## **Dominguez-Escalante**

### **National Conservation Area**

Upper Colorado River and Southwest District Offices  
Bureau of Land Management  
Grand Junction and Uncompahgre Field Offices  
2815 H Road  
Grand Junction, CO 81521  
Phone: 970-244-3000

**Report compiled by:** Collin Ewing NCA Manager

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