



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

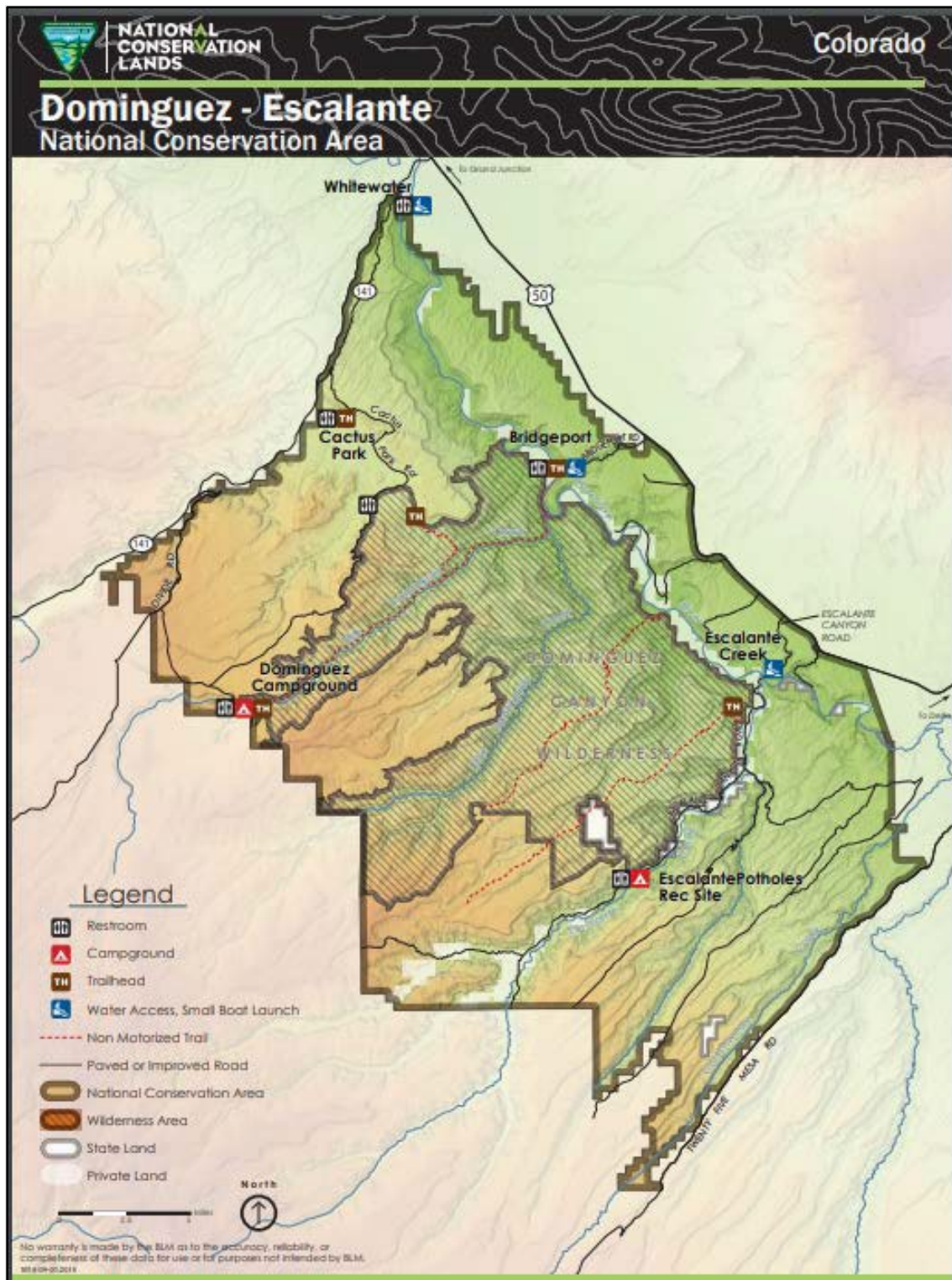
Colorado  
2022: Annual Manager's Report

## Dominguez-Escalante

National Conservation Area



# Map



# Accomplishments

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The Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area's (D-E NCA) 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. This year, the National Conservation Area (NCA) OHV Crew worked with volunteers from Western Slope ATV Club and the State Trail Crew to complete the trail re-route and stream crossing stabilization projects that needed the most attention. Plans to continue work on more crossings are under way for the 2023 season.

The Grand Junction Field Office NCA recreation staff and OHV crew supplied and shuttled material and provided oversight for the Western Colorado Conservation Corps' construction and installation of more than 400 linear feet of buck and rail fencing. This investment substantially improved the look and feel of Sawmill Mesa Road's spiderwebbing of undesignated social trails and unruly camp sprawl. The effect made it easier for motorized recreators to stay on designated trail systems.

The Grand Junction and Uncompahgre Field Office Staff spent two days on the Gunnison River to discuss improving camp sites, new data collection techniques, and night skies. This effort is to better monitor visitor use on the river and protect resources due to the increasing number of recreationists.



D-E NCA staff along with staff and volunteers from the NCA's Friends' Group, Colorado Canyons Association (CCA), spent time at the Bridgeport Trailhead encouraging responsible recreation and providing education about the NCA resources and Wilderness

area. With the increased visitor use, the BLM supplied regulation information and guidance to new visitors seeking outdoor adventures.

BLM implemented several fuels mitigation and restoration projects in 2022. Fire crews used prescribed fire to improve 31 acres in the Farmers Canyon area to protect ponderosa pine stands from high intensity wildfire and improve ecosystem function. The 259-acre, lightning-caused, Big Dominguez wildfire was managed for similar ecological effects. The fire removed hazardous fuels, improved wildlife habitat, and enhanced the resiliency of multiple ponderosa pine stands. The Fuels program also completed mechanical treatments on Jacks Flat (119 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 trees 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 planning efforts to manage camping and designate campsites in the Gunnison River Special Recreation Management Area continued through Fiscal Year (FY) 2022. A preliminary proposed action was publicly scoped from November 15 to December 15,

2021. This public scoping yielded over 100 unique submissions which have since helped shape the proposed action. Final survey and monitoring efforts were performed in May and June of 2022. A comment period on the proposed action is anticipated this fiscal year (2023).

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 through a grant from the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics.



## Challenges

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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. The GJFO in conjunction with the UFO has come up with a draft proposal for a Business Plan that will include new campsites, facilities, and a reservation system within Escalante Canyon and other popular areas within D-E NCA. The draft proposal is planned to be out for review in 2023.

# Visitors

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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 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-use 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 views of stunning red-rock canyons and wildlife viewing opportunities. Nearly 30 miles of the river flow through the NCA. Camping is 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 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 Ground**

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 Hwy 141 which is designated by the state of Colorado as the Unaweep-Tabeguache Scenic Byway. Scenic auto touring, bouldering, and multi-pitch rock climbing occur along East Creek.



# Partnerships

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## **Colorado Canyons Association**

CCA is the Friends group to the National Conservation Areas in Western Colorado. In FY 2022, they helped BLM staff host river cleanups, trail monitoring classes, and educational trips for area youth. CCA provides 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 D-E NCA.



## **Colorado Mesa University**

D-E NCA staff partnered with Colorado Mesa University (CMU) for a variety of projects, including hosting 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.

## **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 D-E 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



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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.

### **More Great Partners**

Dominguez-Escalante NCA benefitted from strong partnerships with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), 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

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## **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. GPS-equipped collars were placed on multiple sheep. Throughout the year, field crews monitored recreation activity throughout the NCA to compare human use types, frequency, and location relative to bighorn sheep activity patterns. Data collection for the project was completed in Fall 2022.

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

Since 2019, the United States Geological Survey (USGS), CMU, NCA staff 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 National Landscape Conservation System Management Studies Support Program funds research on public land activities effect pollinators and their habitats. D-E NCA 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**

Colorado State University is performing important research in D-E NCA to determine how sagebrush islands of opportunity can aid arid rangeland 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. This is an ongoing project.

# Climate Impacts

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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

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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 USGS, CPW, and CMU will inform habitat and population management, especially invasive bullfrog management.

# Social and Environmental Justice

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BLM works with CCA and other partners to reach underserved youth in our communities. Partnerships have been built 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 the 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, BLM also teaches 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

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### **Big Dominguez Backpacking Trip**

BLM and CCA staff along with six volunteers went on an overnight backpacking trip through Big Dominguez Canyon to break down fire rings along the way. A total of 28 fire rings were disassembled, and 110 total volunteer hours logged during this trip.

### **Escalante Canyon Road Seeding Event – REI Opt Outside**

CCA partnered with REI and the BLM to seed a closed route that has continued to be used in Escalante Canyon. Volunteers began by using hand tools to till the soil. After that was completed, some volunteers used seed spreaders and others their hands to spread out seed through the whole section of road. A post was the final piece placed to act as a limiter and reduce the chance of the route being used again. Volunteers hiked approximately 4 miles and included 13 adult volunteers and 52 volunteer hours spent.

### **Volunteer Leave No Trace Awareness Hike**

CCA volunteers joined staff and BLM Master Educator, Iris Salamanca, for a guided Leave No Trace awareness hike at the Upper Big Dominguez Campground, then hiking approximately 2 miles of the Big Dominguez trail discussing LNT best practices in NCAs, wilderness areas, and on trails.

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## **Education Events**

This year many education events were hosted including a new bilingual event: Día de Agua y Tierra. A total of 11 education events were held in which 634 students were taken into the NCA. We also offered a total of nine outreach and volunteer opportunities. This included tabling at Bridgeport Trailhead as an outreach effort to educate about Leave No Trace principals—especially as it pertains to the necessity of wag bags along the Big Dominguez trail. Staff also had discussions with visitors about the restrictions on the use of bikes in the wilderness area and, the need to keep dogs on leash, to be aware of horses, and to share the trail with other user groups.

## **Other Events**

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 increased visitor-use, the BLM supplied regulation information and guidance to new visitors seeking outdoor adventures. Other events that took place in 2022 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 Master Educator course in 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:**

Amber Koski, National Conservation Area Manager  
Angela Belay, NCA Supervisory Park Ranger  
Mathew Heinritz, NCA Archaeologist  
Iris Salamanca, Park Ranger & Visitor Services  
Anjelica Spencer, NCA Ecologist

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