



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

Colorado

# Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area

Annual Manager's Report—Fiscal Year 2016



# Table of Contents

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Gunnison Gorge Profile .....	2
Planning and NEPA .....	5
Year's Projects and Accomplishments .....	7
Science.....	19
Resources, Objects, Values, and Stressors .....	23
Summary of Performance Measure .....	33
Manager's Letter .....	35

# 1 Gunnison Gorge Profile

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## Designating Authority

**Designating Authority:** Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area ([PL 106-76](#))

**Date of Designation:** October 21, 1999

The Black Canyon of the Gunnison Boundary Revision Act of 2003 ([PL 108-128](#)) modified the boundary.

## Acreeage

<b>Total Acres in Unit</b>	63,201
<b>BLM Acres</b>	63,201
<b>Other Federal Acres</b>	0
<b>State Acres*</b>	0
<b>Private Acres*</b>	1,823

\* State and Private acres do not fall within the BLM's management of the unit

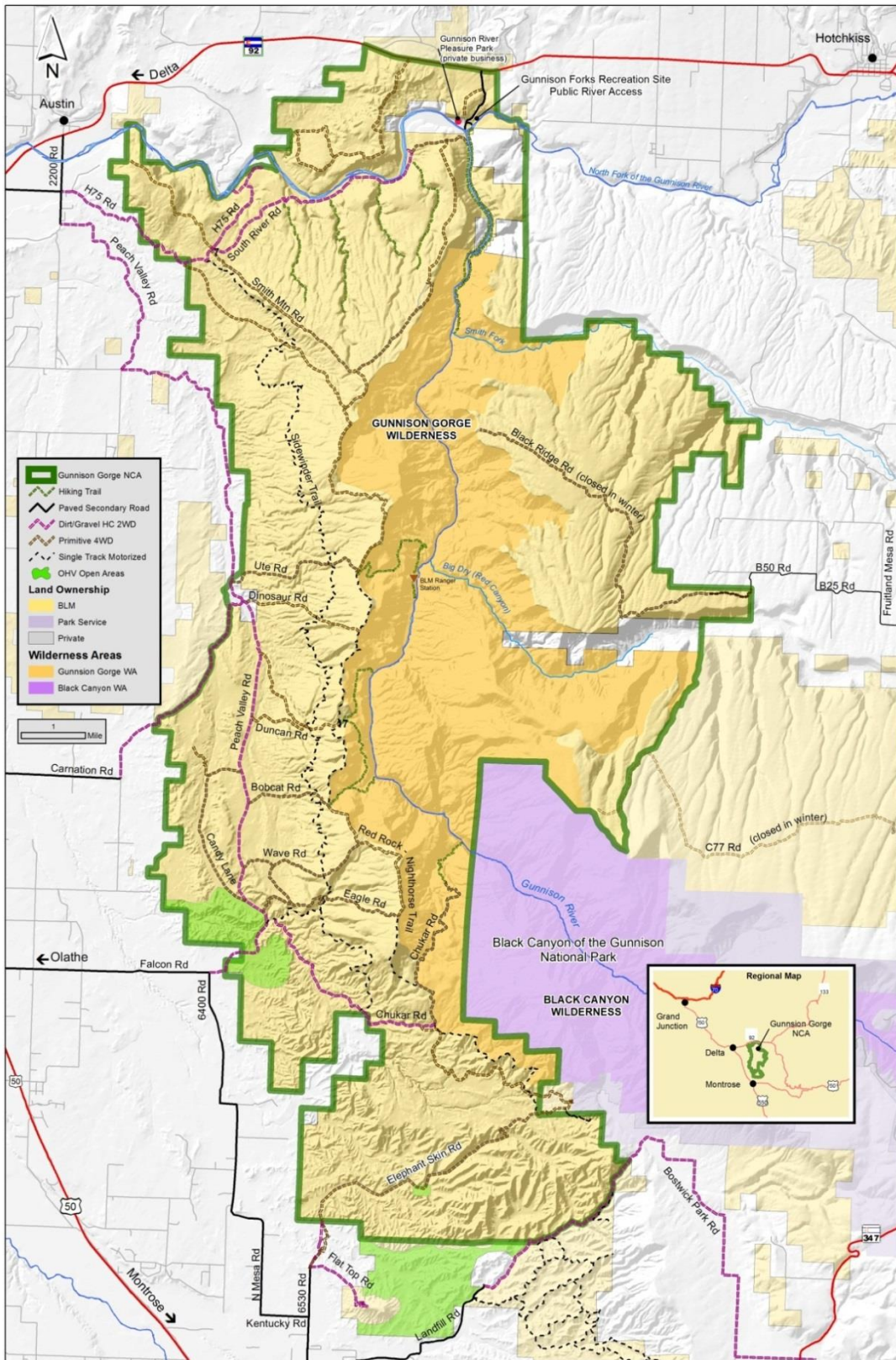
## Contact Information

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<b>Field Office Name</b>	Uncompahgre
<b>District Office Name</b>	Southwest
<b>State Office Name</b>	Colorado

## Budget

<b>Total Fiscal Year 2016 Budget</b>	\$739,061
<b>Subactivity 1711</b>	\$510,491
<b>Other Subactivities' Contributions</b>	\$158,037
<b>Other Funding (1232)</b>	\$ 70,533

# Map of Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area



## Managing Partners

N/A

## Staffing

A small staff of National Conservation Area (NCA) employees, supported by the staff of the Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) accomplishes the work at Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA).

### **Gunnison Gorge NCA Staff Time**

- NCA Manager – vacant since February 2014
- Outdoor Recreation Planner – 85 percent (15 percent work in UFO for recreational mining, recreation-related river management, WSA, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, and lands with wilderness characteristics)
- Park Ranger (Special Recreation Permit Administrator) – 50 percent
- Lead Park Ranger (river patrol, career seasonal) – six-month season (70 percent GGNCA, 30 percent other UFO rivers)

### **Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) Staff Time Working in Gunnison Gorge NCA**

- Field Office Manager – 20 percent
- Outdoor Recreation Planner – 15 percent
- Archaeologist – 15 percent
- Biologist 1 – 15 percent
- Biologist 2 – 50 percent
- GIS specialist – 5 percent
- Administrative Assistant – 10 percent
- Rangeland Management Specialist – 33 percent
- Hydrologist – 10 percent
- Realty Specialist – 3 percent
- Park Ranger (maintenance) – 50 percent
- Education/Volunteer Coordinator – 10 percent

## 2 Planning and NEPA

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### Status of the Resource Management Plan

#### **Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area and Wilderness Resource Management Plan, November 2004**

The NCA's land use plan was completed in 2004, and an implementation strategy was completed in 2005.

### Status of Activity Plans

The 2001 GGNCA Land Health Assessment covering 103,000 acres of public lands in and adjacent to the GGNCA was re-evaluated in 2011-2012. Two environmental assessments are under way to address deficiencies in land health and re-authorize grazing in the planning area. It is anticipated that they will be finalized and implementation will begin in 2017.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) completed the supplemental rules for GGNCA and its three Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMAs) in 2009. The rules address issues of travel management; off-road vehicle use; shooting sports; pets and pack stock use; camping; firewood collection and camp fires; waste disposal; group size limits; permit requirements; and length of stay limits.

### Status of the RMP Implementation Strategy

GGNCA was a pilot area for developing the National Landscapes Conservation System (NLCS) Resource Management Plan (RMP) Implementation in 2004-2006 with BLM specialists, Resource Advisory Council (RAC) members, and the public. BLM updates the strategy worksheets annually to track work that: 1) achieves desired natural and heritage resource conditions; and 2) addresses demands for forage and forest products, and community services and recreation.

The BLM is currently implementing the RMP travel management plan, Gunnison Gorge Fee Area Management Plan, 2011 Crawford Area Sage Grouse Conservation Plan, 2011 North Rim Landscape Strategy, 2013 North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, BLM Range-wide Conservation Plan and Habitat Assessment Framework, 2012 Land Health Assessment remedies and best management practices, and 2009 GGNCA Supplemental Rules. Overall, RMP implementation is approximately 80 percent completed.

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## Key National Environmental Policy Act Actions and/or Project Authorizations

### ***Schreckengost Productions Film Permit (DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2016-002 CX)***

BLM issued film permit for the purposes of producing a tourism video for the city of Montrose. The video highlights recreational opportunities in GGNCA.

### ***Power Line ROW Renewal (DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2016-022-EA)***

BLM renewed the ROW for a Delta-Montrose Electric Association (DMEA) power line. This included designation of maintenance access routes within endangered Colorado Hookless Cactus occupied habitat. USFWS consultation was completed as part of the project.

### ***Delta-Montrose Electric Association "Elevate" Commercial Fiber Optic Project North Delta and East Montrose (DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2016-0004-CX)***

This was an administrative action to amend the ROW of an existing fiber optic line. The line was originally installed for internal use by the power company. The ROW amendment allows DMEA to use the fiber for commercial purposes. There was no new construction, and no surface disturbance.

# 3 Year's Projects and Accomplishments

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## General Accomplishments

(Colorado NLCS [Strategy Elements in Red](#))

### **Conservation Lands Review**

The conservation lands review process is designed to take a holistic look at how the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages National Monuments, National Conservation Areas, and Similar Designations. The Gunnison Gorge NCA was selected for review in 2014 using this standardized approach. The final review, with findings and recommendations, was signed in 2016.

Direction for the review is provided in *The National Landscape Conservation System: 15-Year Strategy 2010-2025, Theme 1, Goal 1A. 4:*

“Develop measures and conduct periodic management reviews to assess management effectiveness of Monuments and National Conservation Areas. Apply results of the reviews to adaptively improve management and share best practices.”

Here is a brief overview of the findings and recommendations:

#### **Findings in Brief**

- ❖ GGNCA's RMP is consistent with law and its decisions remain relevant.
- ❖ Overall, the RMP is being implemented effectively, and management of the NCA and relationships with the interested public is working and well-received.
- ❖ GGNCA's major challenge is a trend of staffing and funding reductions while visitation and public interest in the NCA increase.
- ❖ Recreation dominates perceptions about NCA use and management.
- ❖ GGNCA is the site of a paradigmatic archaeological discovery.
- ❖ GGNCA has strong partnerships and partnership potential.
- ❖ Recent event: Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) dam release and its effects.



### Recommendations in Brief

- ❖ The Review Team recommends that GGNCA continue to implement its plan as approved. The Team does not recommend that GGNCA amend or revise its plan at this time. The RMP's decisions remain relevant and germane to NCA management.
- ❖ GGNCA and UFO should continue their excellent track record of public relations.
- ❖ Colorado State Office should initiate an analysis of how funding is being allocated to GGNCA to ensure that GGNCA has sufficient staffing and resources to manage the NCA for the purposes for which it was designated.
- ❖ BLM should ensure protection of, and research about, the discovery at Eagle Rock.
- ❖ BLM should work with BOR regarding public outreach of future dam releases.
- ❖ GGNCA should conduct a plan implementation strategy workshop to update its now ten year-old strategy.
- ❖ GGNCA should ensure that future transmission line right-of-way renewals are consistent with BLM's Regional Mitigation Policy.

### ***Liaison between the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) and river outfitters***

The BOR operates the dams upstream of the NCA. In order to help recover endangered fish far downriver from the NCA, BOR is obligated to release high flows from the upstream dam system in the spring of years with adequate forecasted runoff. In years when the timing of the release overlaps with the most desirable fishing season (June) the river outfitting businesses are strongly, negatively affected. June is when the outfitters make about half their income for the year. This has been an understandable source of friction and frustration. NCA staff worked with BOR to help provide timely notice of spring dam operations, and changes to flows throughout the river season. (3E, 4D)

### ***Eagle Rock Shelter Archaeological Site***

BLM field office archaeologist and contract crew finished the excavation of this site. At approximately 12,900 years old, Eagle Rock Shelter is the oldest human occupation site known in Colorado, and one of only a handful of sites of this age in North America. In addition their work on-site, archaeologists provided interpretive talks for hundreds of boaters who stopped by on their way down the river. (2A, 2B, 2D, 4A)



Archaeology Volunteers at Eagle Rock Shelter

***Installation of new “look and feel” National Conservation Lands signs***

All portal signs in the NCA were replaced with the new signs. (2D)



New Portal Signs

### ***Sign maintenance overhaul project***

Over the years most of the directional and informational signs in the NCA had started to appear weather-worn. Although maintenance staff keep up with sign maintenance on an as-needed basis, it was clear that all the signs needed to be “freshened up.” The NCA hired one additional maintenance Park Ranger for the summer to work on this project. He was able to strip, grind, repaint and re-letter all of the signs of this type in the NCA. Of note, he was also able to strip and repaint many of the restrooms as well. (2D)



**Before**

**During Prep**

**After**

### ***Gunnison Sage-Grouse ACEC Road Sedimentation Project***

BLM field office engineer, hydrologist and biologists worked through a contract to make needed repairs to Green Mountain Road in threatened Gunnison Sage-Grouse (GUSG) occupied habitat. The road had poor drainage and was dumping high sediment loads into critical habitat during rain events. The project improved water drainage from the road, helping to mitigate the effects of sedimentation. (2D, 4A)

## **Federally Endangered Clay-loving Wild Buckwheat Population Monitoring and Protection**

Annual monitoring was completed at all five established *Eriogonum pelinophilum* monitoring sites during September 2016. A sixth long-term demographic monitoring plot was established at the Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) Wacker Ranch Natural Area to provide an additional comparison between grazed and ungrazed sites. In general, we observed greater recruitment in 2016 with an abundance of seedlings at all but one of our monitoring location. (1A, 1B, 1C, 1E, 2A, 2D, 4D)

There are two fenced enclosures in the NCA to protect populations of clay-loving wild buckwheat – one 300-acre enclosure adjacent to the western boundary of the NCA along Montrose County Road 6200; and the other (approx. three acres) is near the southwest boundary of the NCA in the Elephant Skin Area. Both areas have received repeated vandalism. Field office staff repaired seven incidents of vandalism to these fenced areas in 2016. Volunteers monitor these enclosures every month.



Close up of *Eriogonum pelinophilum* by Lori Brummer  
*Eriogonum pelinophilum*  
Clay-loving wild buckwheat

## ***Peach Valley OHV Skills Course***

Long-time BLM seasonal Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) rangers designed and built a cutting-edge OHV skills course in the Flat Top-Peach Valley SRMA. It is designed to help riders of all levels improve riding skills, and has features that replicate what riders will encounter on trails in western Colorado. This project won the international “Success of the Year” award from National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council (NOHVCC) for 2016. The project was made possible by a grant from CPW, funded through Colorado OHV registration fees. (2D, 4A)



**Peach Valley OHV Skills Course – Construction Phase**

## ***Gunnison Gorge NCA Visitation***

In fiscal year 2016 GGNCA had approximately 206,000 visits that totaled about 159,000 visitor days. That’s a 14 percent increase in visitor days from last year. The increase is likely due to a favorable June river season this year as compared to last year’s high river flows in June.

## ***Current Areas of Focus***

In its third year without a dedicated manager, staff of GGNCA continued to try to keep up with the workload of keeping the NCA moving ahead. Several people stepped up to help with the workload, and some really good things were accomplished. With the reorganization of Colorado’s Southwest District and related workforce planning, there is renewed commitment to fill the manager position.

Uncompahgre Field Office staff continues to address land health issues identified in the Gunnison Gorge Land Health Assessment conducted in 2011-2012. Environmental assessments are under way to address deficiencies and reauthorize livestock grazing in the Gunnison Gorge Planning Area. Those assessments are anticipated to be completed (and implementation of decisions begun) in 2017.

Gunnison Sage-Grouse conservation efforts are ongoing with our partners. In 2016 many additional grade control structures were installed in occupied habitat to improve brood-rearing conditions for this threatened species.

Implementation of BLM's recreation strategy, [Connecting with Communities](#), was carried out through several outreach events and partnerships with local communities. These partnerships and activities will be continued and built upon in 2016.

## Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

### *Hands on the Land*

GGNCA and our friends group, Colorado Canyons Association (CCA) held its eighth annual Hands on the Land event, *Cottonwood Days*, in September. Local sixth grade students joined BLM specialists, volunteers and partners for aquatic, riparian, ecological and cultural education modules on the banks of the Gunnison River. The week-long event provided the opportunity for students to spend a full day engaged in science and cultural educational activities in the NCA. Partners for this event included Gunnison Gorge Anglers/Grand Valley Anglers (local Trout Unlimited chapters), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and CPW. Delta High School authorized certain seniors who had been through this program when they were sixth graders to help lead the learning stations. The event served about 500 students from a local Montessori school, a charter school, homeschoolers and public school students from six local communities. (3D, 3E, 4A, 4D)



Using an *Atlatl* at the People of the Past Station



Learning About Gunnison River Fish

## Delta High School Fly-fishing Club

NCA and field office staff partnered with the high school club for a couple of events in 2016:

- The club contacted NCA staff with a request to be allowed to post signs relating to vulnerability of rainbow trout eggs and egg-beds to impacts from wade-fishing and beaching boats. NCA staff worked with club members and a CPW fish biologist to develop appropriate messaging and sign design. Club members then produced and installed the signs at key locations near the river or on access trails. The signs stay up for the spring rainbow spawning season, and then come down. We don't see as many young anglers in the Gorge as we would like to, so it's great to have a high school club involved in the NCA. (1C, 2B)



Club Members Installing Signs

**Attention Anglers – Please avoid fishing, walking, wading, and mooring boats near redds to avoid impacting rainbow trout eggs from March through May**

What are “redds”?



Picture 1: Typical shallow water “redd”

- Clean oval patches of small to medium-sized gravel typically 2 to 3 feet wide.
- Gravel is lighter-colored than surrounding gravel.
- Small depressions and mounds in the gravel indicate nest sites and eggs.
- Redds are located on gravel bars or riffles
- Fish will hug to a site even if they are disturbed
- There will be a large number of fish in a shallow, densely concentrated area.
- Politely help inform other anglers about trout spawning behaviors.

Why do they Matter?



Picture 2: Rainbow trout life-cycle

- Whirling disease hit the Gunnison River in the mid-1990s
- It prevents rainbow fry from developing correctly and surviving to adult sizes
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife and their partners have been working to restore wild rainbow trout in the Gunnison River
- Egg survival is critical for rainbow survival

Provided by Delta High School Fly Fishing Club





Resource Protection Sign

- Later in the season a CPW fish biologist requested raft support in the GGNCA for a fish stocking mission. CPW has been working hard to recover the wild rainbow trout population that was nearly eliminated by whirling disease several years ago. The BLM has a good relationship with their agency, and agreed to help with the mission by providing rafts and river rangers. At the same time NCA staff saw an opportunity to bring the high school club into another resource enhancement mission. It was still summer and school was not in session, but we were able to have three students from the club and their teacher join CPW and BLM on this mission. Trout Unlimited helped fund this project. (1C, 2B, 3E, 4A, 4D)



**Club Members Help with Stocking Mission**



**Releasing Fish**

***Eagle Scout Project – Jack Yarnell***

Jack Yarnell, a local Boy Scout, worked with BLM paleontologist to design his Eagle Scout project – the retrieval of a natural stone cast of a hadrosaur footprint below the rim in the Gunnison Gorge. Jack designed a litter for carrying the fossil cast out of some pretty rugged country, organized his troop, and led the mission. He then designed and poured a substantial concrete base for it and installed it at the entrance of the Montrose Public Lands Center. The display looks great and has a small brass plate interpreting the track.

**(1C, 2B, 3A, 3E, 4A, 4D)**



**Jack Leading the Scout Troop on the Carry-out**



**Jack Installing the Display**





**Finished Product**

### ***Training Field Trips with BLM and City Visitor Center Staff***

NCA and field office staff conducted two full-day field trips into the NCA with visitor information staff from the Montrose Public Lands Center (BLM and USFS) and from the Montrose City Visitor Center. These field trips provided familiarization, education and interpretation of NCA paleontology, archaeology and recreation resources. (1E, 2D, 3E, 4A, 4D)

### ***Nature Connection/Delta Area Youth Outdoor Network –National Public Lands Day Project***

High school students from Delta and Olathe worked with BLM ecologist and education coordinator to wrap young cottonwood tree plantings in wire mesh to protect them from wildlife until they become established. The event was conducted along the North Fork of the Gunnison River, and included a presentation on careers in public land management. (3E, 4A, 4D)



**Students Forging the North Fork**

## ***River Conservation Program with Western Slope Conservation Center***

NCA and field office staff led one conservation learning module for this annual education program coordinated by Western Slope Conservation Center, one of the NCA's friends network partners. Participants were fourth grade students from Delta County. BLM issued "Every Kid in a Park" national parks passes to every student (approx. 350), (3C, 3D, 4A, 4D)

## **Partnerships**

### ***Community Tourism Groups***

An NCA staff member serves as a member of the Delta County Tourism Cabinet in support of the county's initiative to enhance economic and quality of life benefits from surrounding public lands. This NCA staff member also serves on the Tourism and Retail Enhancement Committee for the City of Montrose's Office of Business and tourism. (2B, 2D, 3A, 3B, 3D, 4D)

Below are some highlights from 2016:

- Provided detailed maps, advice and information for several Delta County initiatives including Delta Economic Development, the City of Delta's waterfront development initiative, Delta Area Mountain Bikers, and The Nature Connection (GOCO Inspire Grant to help get youth active outdoors). Delta County is looking toward outdoor recreation and tourism to help alleviate the economic downturn resulting from the closing of coal mines and resulting loss of many jobs.
- The City of Montrose is aggressively marketing itself as a tourism/relocation destination. In doing so, the city leaders have strongly embraced the outstanding quality and variety of outdoor recreation opportunities that the surrounding public lands offer. The NCA is one of the areas that they highlight for promotion. NCA staff have participated in the review, editing and writing of articles for the city's Visitor Guide, a high-end publication produced annually. The city contracted with a professional videographer to produce a series of high-quality videos highlighting Montrose attractions. One video featured GGNCA. BLM issued a film permit, and NCA staff provided narration and some on-camera facetime. The video was very well received and generated over 35,000 views on the city's Facebook page.

### ***Colorado Canyons Association (CCA)***

NCA staff worked closely with CCA staff and board members on planning, outreach, education and stewardship projects in 2016. As the friends group for the three National Conservation Areas in Colorado, CCA helps coordinate, staff, and fund projects and events in support of BLM's management objectives in the NCAs. These include youth education and outreach efforts, stewardship projects, informational/interpretive materials, and coordination of requests coming in from community groups. GGNCA staff presented an interpretive program with slides at an annual CCA fundraiser for members. CCA originated in, and is based out of, Grand Junction, so it was helpful to provide some information and

background to their members who may be less familiar with the Gorge than with their more local NCAs. (1A, 1C, 1E, 2B, 2C, 2D, 3A, 3B, 3C, 3D, 3E, 4B, 4D)

### ***Gunnison Sage Grouse Working Group***

The Gunnison Sage-Grouse Working Group is a public/private partnership of local ranchers (grazing permittees), Black Canyon Audubon Society, U.S. Geological Survey, BLM and the National Park Service working to conserve the local population of Gunnison Sage-Grouse in and adjacent to the NCA. In 2014 the group monitored individual birds with GPS collars, and performed counts and monitoring of grouse leks and lekking behavior. (2A, 2C)

### **Volunteers**

BLM volunteers assisted NCA staff with many projects in 2016 including:

- River Patrols (trash and campfire clean-up, and campsite maintenance)
- Archaeology surveying and site stewardship
- National Public Lands Day projects (cottonwood caging with local high school students)
- Stocking rainbow trout in partnership with CPW, Delta high School Fly fishing club, and Trout Unlimited
- Invasive species removal in the riparian corridor
- Completion of Black Ridge Trail within the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness
- Assisting BLM and other agency specialists with leading instruction for the NCA's Hands on the Land program, *Cottonwood Days*

Total Volunteer Hours: 1,806

### **Land (or Interests in Land) Acquisitions**

N/A

# 4 Science

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## Science

### ***Gunnison Sage-Grouse Conservation***

The principal investigator for this project is Doug Ouren, Physical Scientist, U.S. Geological Survey.

Research questions for this proposal are: Are current landscape modifications being made by land management agencies effective in preserving GUSG habitat? Does motorized use affect GUSG season movements? To address these questions we will analyze our GUSG Global Positioning System (GPS) derived location data set, currently containing over 40,000 locations representing the ten female and two male GUSG collected over a three year period, to assess the seasonal habitat use in relationship to landscape modifications made. Secondly, we will assess the impacts of motorized use on GUSG seasonal movements.

### ***Results to Date:***

#### ***GPS Platform Transmitter Terminal (PTT) Deployment***

To date, the BLM has deployed 12 GPS PTTs on Crawford area Gunnison Sage-Grouse (10 female, two male). Staff have collected over 40,000 locations of these grouse to date. Data collected from these collars have been used to do preliminary modeling of seasonal movements, habitat analysis and effects of motorized use.

#### ***Habitat Treatments***

There have been numerous vegetation management activities conducted within the study area over the last twenty years designed to both reduce fuel loading/continuity and improve habitat conditions. Because portions of the core Crawford GUSG range exhibit less than optimal vegetation characteristics continued vegetation/fuels management activities are necessary to improve GUSG carrying capacities, survivorship while also reducing the potential for large detrimental wildland fires. Specifically, brood rearing and nesting habitats within the core range exhibit characteristics of disrupted fire regimes. Known problems include a disproportionate portion of these habitat types with late succession sagebrush, woodland encroachment, development, and depauperate understories lacking suitable grass cover and appropriate forb representation. These habitat types are the most critical for maintaining or increasing GUSG populations in the Crawford area. Using the GPS marking techniques to accurately ascertain seasonal GUSG habitat selection will aid in identifying past treatments that are utilized by GUSG. Gathering detailed vegetation information within selected habitats and treatments will greatly aid in developing future fuels/vegetation management prescriptions and objectives.

Since 2010, 3,852 acres of sagebrush restoration treatment has taken place in the Gunnison Sage-Grouse ACEC area and adjacent private lands by removing encroaching piñon and juniper trees in predominantly intact sagebrush stands.

#### ***Wet Meadow Development***

This grouse population has extremely limited wet meadow habitat, thought to be critical for the survival of young. Wet meadow habitat has been maintained at four locations in the area with help from the National Wild Turkey Federation.

#### ***Motorized Use Monitoring***

To investigate the relationship between motorized use and GUSG habitat use and seasonal movements a seven site motorized use monitoring network was established in 2004 and continues to be operated to date. Pneumatic vehicle counters, which can discriminate vehicle type and speed, are used at the majority of the vehicle monitoring sites.

#### ***Lek Probability Mapping***

Using existing characteristics of known lek sites, USGS utilized remote sensing techniques to generate a lek site probability map for the Crawford area Gunnison Sage-Grouse. Selected locations of GPS PTTed male grouse were used to better define the model. Ground-truthing has begun and one new lek site has been located from this information (Ouren et al. 2014).

#### ***Preliminary Movement Analysis***

Preliminary movement analysis of the existing telemetered grouse has provided invaluable information to land managers. Seasonal movement information has been used to make management decisions for various activities within the Gunnison Sage-Grouse ACEC. Seasonal movement data has also shown that grouse are using the newly restored sagebrush habitat in the area. It has also increased awareness and the importance of several private land parcels that appear to be critical for grouse in late-Summer through early Fall. With the concurrent OHV monitoring, it appears that female grouse may be more sensitive to vehicular traffic than male grouse.

#### ***Benefits***

This project supports the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) Strategy under Theme 1 (Ensuring the Conservation, Protection, and Restoration of NLCS Values) through Goals 1B (expanding understanding of the NLCS), 1C (provide scientific foundation for decision-making), 1D (outdoor laboratory), and 1E (limit discretionary uses), and the Colorado NLCS Strategy Theme 1 through Goals 1B (foster and promote scientific research), 1C (better understanding for scientific decision-making), and 1D (build scientific foundation for decision-making). Both this smaller portion and the larger sage grouse study is expanding our knowledge of how this rare species uses the NLCS Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) through collaborative efforts between BLM, USGS, NPS, CPW, local working groups and private individuals. There is a very active working group associated with this research effort. This active working group is involved in this research

project as well as other grouse associated inventory, monitoring, and habitat improvement efforts in the area.

Working Group members are integral in completing annual sage grouse lek counts (population monitoring), and in the search for new, unknown lek locations during the strutting season. The information gathered from this research project and the other associated inventory, monitoring and habitat improvement efforts has provided invaluable information to guide management of this area, informing management decisions for grazing, travel, and vegetation management.

Through this larger research project, the GGNCA and the Grouse ACEC area are an outdoor laboratory and demonstration center for new and innovative management processes to aid in the conservation of this species. The use of GPS PTTs to characterize seasonal movements, pneumatic vehicle counters to characterize OHV traffic in the area will inform the upcoming travel management effort for the Grouse ACEC area. Seasonal movement data is also being used to evaluate the effectiveness of habitat restoration efforts in the area. With the addition of analysis of climatic data in relation to the ongoing population monitoring (lek counts), will provide more information to be used for the conservation of Gunnison Sage-Grouse, but will also provide additional innovation to the other populations of Gunnison Sage-Grouse. Already this research project has been providing methods and expertise to the other population Working Groups in installation of weather stations, and traffic and acoustic monitoring.

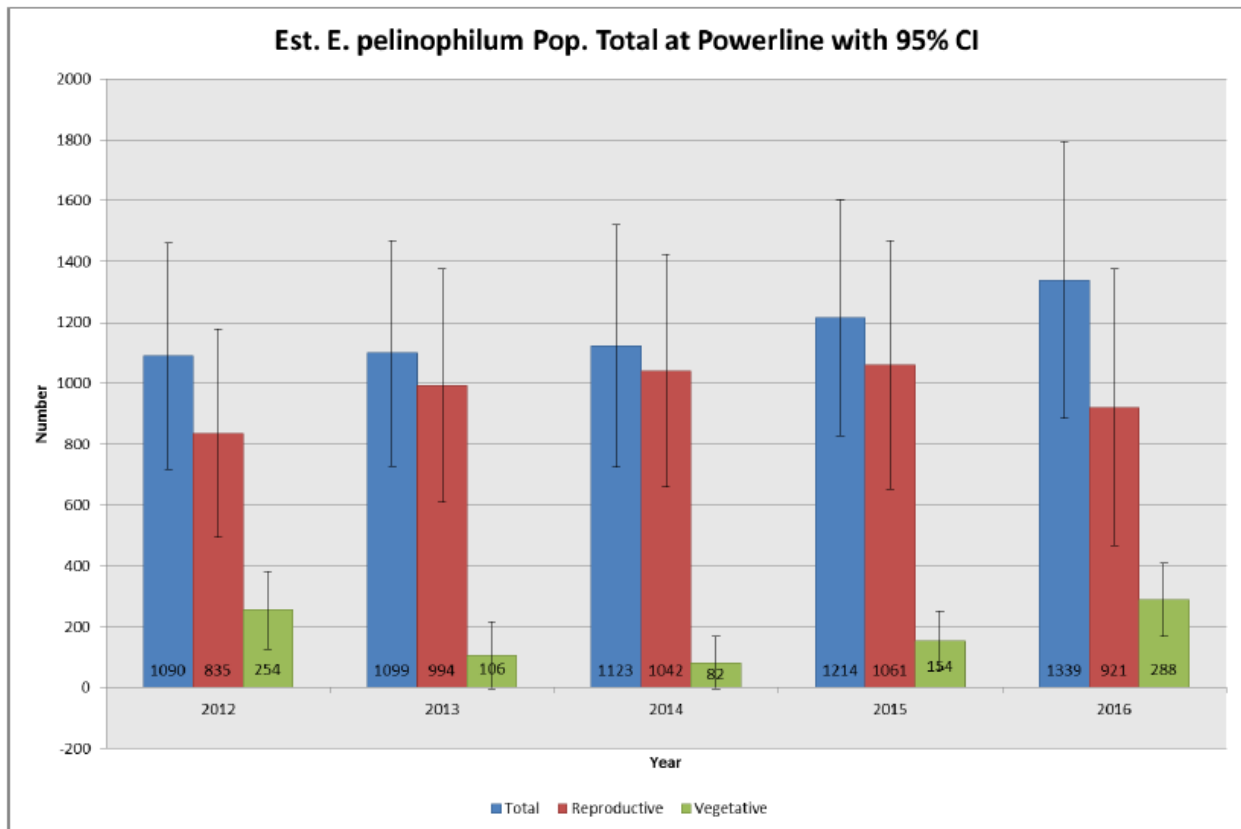
This research project is actively involved in two local Working Groups (Crawford Area Gunnison Sage-Grouse and North Rim Landscape). The focus of both of these groups is on the larger landscape of the area, maintaining or increasing habitat connectivity, and coordinating efforts across jurisdictional boundaries to maintain and improve the ecosystems in the landscape. This project will directly inform how climate change may be impacting this area of the NCA and will also inform the adjacent land managers.

#### ***Federally Endangered Clay-loving Wild Buckwheat Monitoring Study***

Principle investigators: Ken Holsinger, BLM Biologist and Phillip Krening, BLM Conservation Specialist

A long-term study of the rare endemic plant *Eriogonum pelinophilum* (Polygonaceae) was initiated by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 2012. This study investigates the population trend of *E. pelinophilum* across its documented range in Delta and Montrose counties (Colorado) and assesses the impacts from various surface management activities to populations of this endangered buckwheat.

In general, monitoring revealed greater recruitment in 2016 with an abundance of seedlings at all but one of the monitoring locations.



**Five year trend for the population of clay-loving wild buckwheat in GGNCA**

### ***Eagle Rock Shelter Excavation***

Principal investigator: Dr. Dudley Gardener, Professor, Western Wyoming College

In 2015, excavation was completed at Eagle Rock Shelter in the northern portion of the GGNCA. The degree of preservation within the shelter is unprecedented, with organic artifacts common at the 8,000 year old level including fine string and cordage, small game string snares, a yucca fiber sandal and bone, wood, sinew and leather artifacts. Two hearths were discovered in 2014 dating to 12,980 years ago. Information from this shelter is breaking new ground in research and will likely lead to a re-interpretation of many commonly accepted archaeological theories for this area. In 2016 work continued on drainage features and stabilization.

### ***Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area Science Plan***

The NCA's approved science plan can be accessed here:

[http://www.blm.gov/style/medialib/blm/co/field\\_offices/gunnison\\_gorge\\_national/documents.Par.27536.File.dat/2013-1031%20Gunnison%20Gorge%20Science%20Plan%20Final.pdf](http://www.blm.gov/style/medialib/blm/co/field_offices/gunnison_gorge_national/documents.Par.27536.File.dat/2013-1031%20Gunnison%20Gorge%20Science%20Plan%20Final.pdf)

# 5 Resources, Objects, Values, and Stressors

## Exceptional Multiple-use Opportunities

While the NCA legislation ([Public Law 106-76, Oct 21, 1999](#)) does not enumerate or define “multiple-use opportunities,” elsewhere in the legislation infers that they include hunting, trapping, fishing, and use of motorized vehicles.

Consistent with Section 8(c) of the act establishing the NCA, the State of Colorado is responsible for regulating and managing hunting, trapping, and fishing in the NCA. Pursuant to Gunnison Gorge NCA Supplemental Rules ([Federal Register / Vol. 75, No. 70, Pg. 18880 / Tuesday, April 13, 2010](#)), and consistent with the NCA establishing legislation (Section 7(d)(2)), discharge of firearms is prohibited within 500 yards of developed recreation sites in the NCA. Otherwise, there are no restrictions on hunting other than regulation and management by the State of Colorado. Common hunting opportunities in the NCA include big game, waterfowl, upland game bird, and mountain lion.

Trapping and fishing in the NCA are regulated and managed by the State of Colorado. No additional restrictions apply within the NCA.

The NCA legislation has special provisions that allow for cross-country driving or “open play” by motorized vehicles. The RMP designated a 9,700-acre OHV SRMA comprised of lands in, and adjacent to, the NCA. The SRMA includes a 900-acre open area within the NCA and over 200 miles of designated multiple-use trails.

### Exceptional Multiple-use Opportunities Status and Trend Table

Status of Value	Trend
Motorized Vehicle Use Good	Improved by the construction of the Peach Valley OHV Skills Course
Hunting Good	Stable
Fishing Good	Improved due to rainbow trout enhancement efforts of CPW, and resource condition improvement in the vicinity of the Relief Ditch diversion structure; stable elsewhere
Trapping Good	Stable



**Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table—Motorized Use**

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Value	Acres Monitored in FY16
63,201	63,201	45,417 (total NCA acres minus wilderness acres)	45,417

**Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table—Fishing (river)**

Miles in Unit	Miles Inventoried	Miles Possessing Value	Miles Monitored in FY16
19.3	19.3	19.3	19.3

**Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table—Hunting**

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Value	Acres Monitored in FY16
63,201	63,201	60,549 (total NCA acres minus rec site shooting closures)	0

**Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table—Trapping**

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Value	Acres Monitored in FY16
63,201	63,201	63,201	0

**Stressors Affecting Exceptional Multiple-use Opportunities*****Hunting and Trapping***

There are no known stressors for hunting or trapping opportunities.

***Fishing***

The previous two years' high flows of the Gunnison River in June (the most sought-after fishing season) certainly had the effect of reducing the number of fishing trips in spring and early summer of those years, as evidenced by fewer self-issued wilderness permits during that period, as well as strongly reduced commercial fishing trips as compared to a normal

year. This year however, the high flows tapered-off and stabilized to normal levels by June 4 2016. Visitors and commercial outfitters reported having an excellent fishing year in 2016.

The uncertainty of whether the BOR will conduct a high release operation, and if so, the timing of the release, is tough on commercial outfitters, their clients, and private anglers trying to plan their trips to coincide with the giant salmonfly hatch. The decision is based on the May 1, forecast of runoff from the upper river basin, and May 1, is pretty late notice to plan for upcoming spring/early summer trips. If BOR makes the determination to do a high release, then the timing of the release is dependent on local weather trends. If May is warm and the runoff starts early, then the release can be accomplished before the prime fishing season begins. If May is cool, then the release may be delayed until well into the prime fishing season.

### ***Motorized Vehicle Use***

Colorado State Parks generates significant revenues to support OHV recreation in the state through its OHV registration sticker program and it makes some of the money available to federal land managers through state-wide grants. Since 2001, the NCA and Uncompahgre Field Office have successfully competed for an 80 thousand-dollar “Good Management Grant” each year\* from Colorado State Parks. The NCA has used the grant money to pay for 2 seasonal OHV rangers each season, ranger patrols, OHV purchases (motorcycles and ATVs for the crew), trail maintenance and construction, and recreation site development and maintenance, including the construction in 2016 of the award-winning Peach Valley OHV Skills Course.

If these funds were to become unavailable, the BLM could not maintain motorized opportunities and experiences at the high level that they are now. This is not so much a stressor as it is an acknowledgement of our dependence on the state as an important partner.

We have excellent relationships with our OHV user groups, and steadily growing compliance with most travel management in the NCA because of the patrol presence of the OHV crew, the rider education program that they administer, and highly valued recreation developments. Losing the grant would have a highly detrimental effect on public perceptions, facilities, user compliance, and trail conditions.

\*Grants to Federal agencies by CPW were denied in 2014 because their grant awards were subject to Federal budget sequestration in 2013. They objected to state funds being subjected to Federal sequestration.

### **Natural Values**

The designating legislation does not specify what natural values are, but they can reasonably be captured by two concepts of naturalness:

1. Natural Appearance (does the landscape appear to be natural; does it appear to have been affected primarily by natural forces as opposed to human activity); and

2. Ecological Naturalness (are the natural components of a landscape present and functioning to support the health of the land).

### ***Natural Appearance***

The BLM took no significant actions in FY 16 that affected the natural appearance of lands in the NCA.

Illegal off-route OHV use continued to degrade the natural appearance of about 400 acres in the lower Elephant Skin drainage. Impacts are mostly visual scars on south-facing slopes and the flats in the bottom of the drainage.

### ***Ecological Naturalness***

The BLM periodically evaluates ecological naturalness in the Gunnison Gorge NCA through the land health assessment (LHA) process. BLM resource specialists conducted the most recent assessment in 2011 and 2012. That [assessment](#) and its [appendices](#) are posted on the Uncompahgre Field Office [“Land Health”](#) webpage.

### **Colorado BLM Standards for Public Land Health**

The BLM mandates that the NCA manage public lands in accordance with five BLM Colorado Standards for Public Land Health:

- **Standard 1** - Upland soils are healthy with respect to water absorption, erosion, organic matter, and groundcover.
- **Standard 2** - Riparian systems and wetlands function properly and can recover from disturbance.
- **Standard 3** - Plant and animal communities are healthy, made up of native and desirable species, sustain viable populations in suitable habitat, and are resilient to disturbances.
- **Standard 4** - Healthy native plant and animal communities maintain and enhance threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.
- **Standard 5** - Water quality on BLM lands meets or exceeds Colorado Water Quality Standards.

**2011-2012 Land Health Determinations for the Gunnison Gorge LHA unit.**

Percentage figures for Standard 2 and Standard 5 show the land health determinations as a proportion of the total riparian and stream channel area.

	<b>Lands and Streams Meeting</b> (acres / % of unit)	<b>Lands and Streams Meeting with Problems</b> (acres / % of unit)	<b>Lands and Streams Not Meeting</b> (acres / % of unit)	<b>Not Evaluated or Not Applicable</b> (acres / % of unit)
All Standards	44,889 / 44%	38,256 / 37%	14,506 / 14%	5,275 / 5%
Standard 1	84,330 / 82%	11,834 / 11%	382 / 0.4%	6,379 / 7%
Standard 2*	582 / 38%	539 / 34%	0 / 0%	445 / 28%
Standard 3	55,755 / 53%	29,565 / 29%	11,226 / 11%	6,379 / 7%
Standard 4	51,234 / 50%	33,627 / 33%	12,805 / 12%	5,258 / 5%
Standard 5*	1,052 / 64%	0 / 0%	52 / 3%	573 / 33%

The BLM completed an environmental assessment in 2014 to close one vehicle route (about one mile) and fence out vehicle access to an important area containing endangered clay-loving buckwheat. Illegal off-route OHV use was negatively impacting the endangered plants in the area. BLM completed the implementation of the closure and construction of the fence in the spring of 2015. Aside from one incident of fence vandalism, the closure has been effective.

**Status and Trend Table – Natural Values**

<b>Status of Natural Appearance</b>	<b>Trend</b>
Good overall, but poor in the 400-acre Elephant Skin problem area	Stable

<b>Status of Ecological Naturalness</b>	<b>Trend</b>
Varies depending on location and land health standard. See LHA report for details.	Varies depending on location and land health standard. See LHA report for details.

**Natural Appearance Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table**

<b>Acres in Unit</b>	<b>Acres Inventoried</b>	<b>Acres Possessing Object</b>	<b>Acres Monitored in FY</b>
63,201	17,780 acres in Gunnison Gorge Wilderness	17,780	17,780

## Ecological Naturalness Inventory, Assessment and Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY15
63,201	60,040	51,195 (meeting land health standards , or meeting with problems)	27,000

## Stressors Affecting Natural Values

### *Natural Appearance*

The main stressor for natural appearance is illegal off-route OHV use on about 400 acres in the lower Elephant Skin Drainage. OHV travel in the Elephant Skin area is limited to designated routes. A contributing factor is that the Elephant Skin OHV staging area (sited in the problem area) has the same “look and feel” as the Peach Valley and Flat Top OHV staging areas, which are located in OHV open-play areas. Also contributing is the open nature of the adobe hills in the Elephant Skin area – there are few natural obstacles to cross-country travel.

### *Ecological Naturalness*

The LHA report on the BLM website goes into detail on the various factors contributing to loss of naturalness in the NCA. The causes behind land health are often complex and intermingled. In the LHA analysis, factors which appear strongly tied to health problems across the landscape are considered causal factors, while factors which are found only occasionally at sites with health problems are considered contributing factors. Complicating analysis is the fact that factors which appear on sites with health problems can also appear on sites which meet health standards. Therefore, depending on the situation, many factors which contribute to health problems can be compatible with meeting land health in other situations.

In the Gunnison Gorge unit, factors commonly observed include:

- BLM routes
- Current grazing (mainly from cattle, sheep, deer and elk, based on observations of droppings and degree of browse and grass utilization and hedging)
- Drought (most recently occurred between 2000-2002, lasting effects visible as dead and/or low vigor trees and shrubs)
- Domestic sheep allotments (encompassing grazing, disturbance from bed grounds and impacts from concentrated trailing)
- Wildfire
- Fire suppression impacts (lack of burning)
- Historic grazing (livestock and wildlife)

- Neighboring agricultural or residential land
- Noxious or invasive weeds
- Recent vegetation treatments (and prescribed burns)
- OHV use (off-route)
- Older vegetation treatments
- Pinyon-juniper invasion
- Recreation impacts
- Road and highway ROWs
- ROWs (excluding roads)
- Seral stage of the vegetation
- Woodcuts
- Augmented streamflows
- Flood deposition
- Flow regulation from dams
- Intermittent flows
- Irrigation tailwater
- Road encroachment into riparian areas
- Upstream channel condition impacts
- Upstream water quality impacts
- Water diversions
- Wildlife use in riparian areas

### Cultural Objects and Values

The NCA contains a number of historic and prehistoric cultural sites, with associated objects. Historic sites include charcoal ovens, mining sites with associated structures, and trails and structures associated with historic grazing. Prehistoric objects and values include rock art panels, occupation sites, camps, lithic scatter, clothing, tools, cordage and other objects.

BLM completed drainage and stabilization of the Eagle Rock Shelter site in 2016.

BLM surveyed (inventoried) approximately 100 acres in the wilderness in 2016.

### Cultural Status and Trend Table

Status of Cultural Objects and Values	Trend
Good	Stable

### Cultural Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY16
63,201	3,000	3,000	100 additional acres inventoried in 2016

### Stressors Affecting Cultural Resources

Casual collecting of surface artifacts diminishes sites' national register eligibility and may lead to more destructive vandalism and artifact loss. Site stewards helped increase monitoring to some of our priority sites.

### Scenic Values

From the stark moonscape of the Mancos shale adobe hills on the west side, to the cottonwood-lined canyon of the gently meandering Gunnison River on the north end, remote sagebrush flats and piñon-juniper forests on the east side, and the rugged wilderness canyon at its heart, the Gunnison Gorge NCA boasts a highly scenic landscape.

There is no current visual resource management (VRM) inventory of the NCA.

No actions occurred in 2016 that would have reduced the scenic quality of any area of the NCA.

### Status and Trend Table – Scenic Values

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	Stable

### Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table – Scenic Values

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY16
63,201	0	Unknown until an inventory is completed	0

### Stressors Affecting Scenic Values

Illegal off-route vehicle use, particularly on about 400 acres of the lower Elephant Skin drainage has a localized detrimental effect on scenic quality.

## Wilderness Values

Gunnison Gorge Wilderness is at the heart of the NCA. It includes the very rugged gorge of the Gunnison River from the boundary with the Black Canyon of the Gunnison Wilderness (National Park Service), to about a mile below the Smith Fork confluence, and rim-to-rim in between. The river is the focus of most recreational use of the. Camping, whitewater boating, float fishing and hike-in fishing are the main recreational activities.

BLM completed the Black Ridge Trail in 2016. This is the only public trail access into the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness from the east side of the NCA.

### Status and Trend Table – Wilderness Values

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	Stable

### Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table – Wilderness Values

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY16
63,201	17,784	17,784	17,784

## Stressors Affecting Wilderness Values

The most significant threat to wilderness character in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness is from invasive species (weeds), particularly along the riparian river corridor. The NCA river ranger crew regularly monitors the wilderness for weed infestations, and (working with the field office weed coordinator) treats the weeds as needed.

NCA and field office staff have nearly eliminated invasive tamarisk from the wilderness, but tamarisk stands still serve as seed sources from upriver, downriver, and from side drainages feeding into the river from agricultural lands. If the BLM reduced field staff presence, it is likely that tamarisk would re-establish in the wilderness.

Staff treat other, less common and less known invasive weeds, as needed. For example, the NCA river crew a couple of years ago treated a new population of yellow toadflax.

The weed issue also presents a trade-off in protection of wilderness character. Weed treatment is a management control of natural processes, and therefore decreases the “untrammled” quality of wilderness character. But, since weeds are ecologically unnatural, treatment supports and enhances the “natural” (ecological naturalness) quality of wilderness character. In the end, occasional targeted treatment of invasive species does constitute a kind of low-level trammeling, however, if weeds were left untreated it could lead to a widespread and cascading loss of naturalness.



## Recreation Resource

The BLM manages the NCA to provide a wide variety of motorized and non-motorized recreational activities which attract over 200,000 visitors a year. The Wilderness is famous for backpacking, technical boating experiences and world-class Gold Medal trout fishing. Private and commercial walk- wade and float-fishing, which reaches a peak during the June stone fly hatch and attracts world-wide fishers, is an important economic driver in the region.

The RMP provides specific management for twelve non-wilderness recreational management zones. We have supplementary rules which increase BLM's enforcement authority in these areas to preserve natural settings for diverse motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunities, and enhance visitor safety and enjoyment by reducing hazards and visitor conflicts.

The Flat Top-Peach Valley OHV Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) provides outstanding opportunities for trail-focused recreation. All types of users (hikers, runners, equestrians, mountain bikers, dirt bikers, and ATV/UTV riders) enjoy multi-use trails in this SRMA.

The Gunnison and North Fork River SRMA provides upland and river-focused recreational opportunities, including road access to NCA river access points (boat ramps) where boating and float fishing are less arduous and technical than wilderness trips. Other great opportunities include 4X4 and ATV/UTV scenic driving, mountain biking, camping, horseback riding, and walk-wade fishing. A number of developments support recreation in this SRMA, including three boat ramps, a campground with a universally accessible campsite and fishing pier, parking areas, vault toilets, dispersed campsites, picnic tables and cabanas.

There are over 200 miles of trails in the NCA, including one of the premier single track trails on Colorado's west slope, Sidewinder Trail.

### Status and Trend Table – Recreation Resource

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	Improved slightly due to the construction of Peach Valley OHV Skills Course, and the completion of the Black Ridge Trail

### (Name of ROV) Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY16
63,201	63,201	63,201	35,000

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## **Stressors Affecting Recreation Resource**

We observed an uptick in vandalism and dumping in the NCA in the fall of 2016.

Since seasonal staff accomplishes so much of the recreation workload, the NCA is vulnerable to budget reductions. If future budgets were to tighten, the seasonal employees would be among the first cuts we would have to make.

# 6

## Summary of Performance Measure

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Overall, resources, objects and values in the NCA were in good shape with stable trends.

CPW is continuing its long term management and enhancement of the Gorge's outstanding trout fishery. Since the near 100% loss of rainbow trout to whirling disease in the 1990s, CPW has worked steadily toward the successful reintroduction of whirling disease-resistant rainbow trout.

Illegal off-route OHV use continues to be a concern on about 400 acres in the lower Elephant Skin drainage.

The 2011-2012 Land Health Assessment in the NCA showed that much of the land in the NCA is in good shape and meeting land health standards. It also revealed areas that have problems that still need addressed, as well as areas that are failing to meet standards. There is significant work to do to get all lands in the NCA trending in the right direction.

Summary Table		
Resource, Object, or Value	Status	Trend
Hunting	Good	Stable
Trapping	Good	Stable
Fishing	Good	Improving (due to enhancement of rainbow trout populations by CPW, and improved resource conditions at the Relief Ditch diversion)
Motorized Vehicle Use	Good	Improved slightly due to the construction of the Peach Valley OHV Skills Course
Natural Appearance	Good overall, but poor in the 400-acre Elephant Skin problem area	Stable

<b>Ecological Naturalness</b>	Varies depending on location and land health standard. See <a href="#">LHA report</a> for details.	Varies depending on location and land health standard. See <a href="#">LHA report</a> for details.
<b>Scenic Values</b>	Good	Stable
<b>Wilderness Values</b>	Good	Stable
<b>Recreational Values</b>	Good	Improved slightly due to the Peach Valley OHV Skills Course and the completion of the Black Ridge Trail

# 7 Manager's Letter

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In 2017 we look forward to continuing the important work of the NCA with the support of our friends group, [Colorado Canyons Association](#). We anticipate collaborating on stewardship, outreach, interpretation and education programs. In particular, we look forward to working together on interpretive signage and materials for the Eagle Rock Shelter archaeological site.

With the designation of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act in early FY 2015, our active conservation of this species has taken on ever more urgency. We look forward to continuing our work with our partners on this important effort.

In an effort to understand effects of the NCA transportation system on resources, we anticipate undertaking an environmental assessment of the “limited to designated” travel designation within the NCA planning area. This will help us to make better informed decisions regarding roads and trails to benefit Gunnison Sage-Grouse, recreation and a range of other resources.

We anticipate working to improve land health across the NCA and adjacent lands in support of Colorado BLM’s Land Health Standards. Working with our livestock grazing permittees in the process of renewal of their grazing permits will be a key part of this effort. The continuing efforts of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Working Group in the conservation of the Crawford population are vital to this effort.

We have applied for an \$85,000 Good Management Grant from the State Trails Program in support of our OHV program in 2017. We anticipate competing favorably.

In the coming year, Gunnison Gorge will be supporting National Conservation Lands initiatives, including updated signage and the refinement of recreation maps designed to have the same look and feel across BLM’s system of National Conservation Areas and National Monuments.

We look forward to continuing to work closely with our local communities, in alignment with BLM’s “Connecting with Communities” national recreation strategy. Implementing the strategy will require committed engagement with our communities. As local communities increasingly to look to tourism and outdoor recreation as economic and quality of life opportunities, NCA staff will prioritize working with our community partners to realize these opportunities.

2017 looks like it will be a big year for us. Thank you for supporting your National Conservation Lands.

Sincerely,



**Samuel Dearstyn**  
Uncompahgre Field Office Manager (acting)



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

## **Gunnison Gorge**

### **National Conservation Area**

Southwest District Office  
Bureau of Land Management  
Uncompahgre Field Office  
2465 S Townsend Ave  
Montrose, CO 81401  
Phone: 970-240-5300

December 12, 2016

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