



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Utah  
2023: Annual Manager's Report

## Bears Ears National Monument





# Map

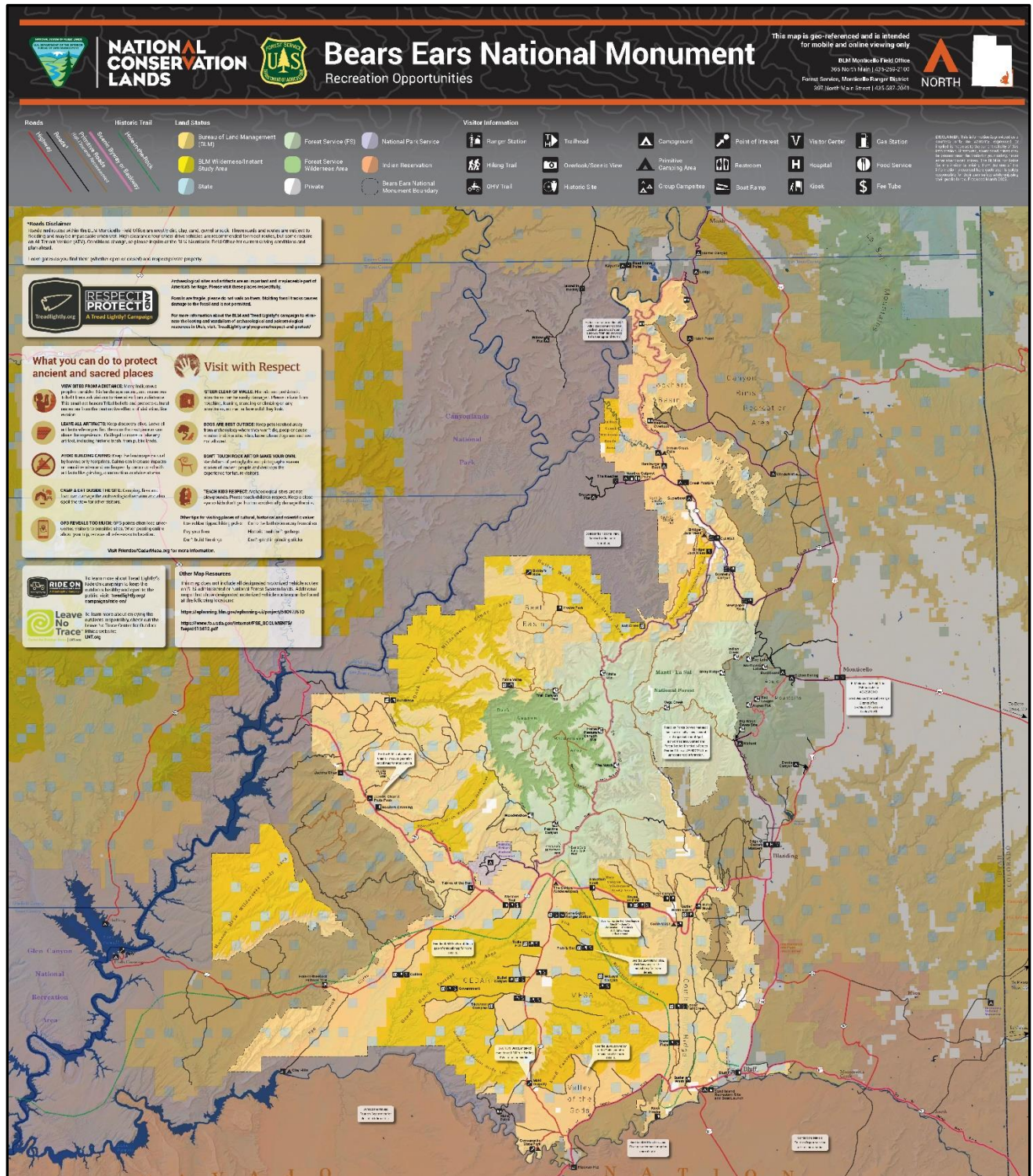


Figure 1: A map of Bears Ears National Monument

# Accomplishments

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Fiscal Year 2023 was a successful and busy year for Bears Ears National Monument (BENM). The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) at BENM, United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USDA FS) and Bears Ears Commission (BEC) have been working on a Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to determine how to manage BENM in the future. The BLM planning and management team, as well as our specialists, are working diligently with co-managers to complete the plan and build relationships. Throughout the process the BENM team has held monthly in-person and bi-weekly virtual meetings with the BEC and the USDA FS to discuss planning related to the BENM RMP and coordinate on various implementation projects.

# Challenges

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BENM staff is partnering with multiple organizations from the Utah Division of State History, Bears Ears Partnership, and Tribal Nations to better educate visitors on fragile cultural resource visitation. BENM is also experiencing increases in woodcutting across the southern portion of BENM. This is due in part to regional economic changes and the greater reliance of local communities on fuelwood for cooking and heating private homes. BENM is looking at options to augment Tribal member's ability to collect fuelwood while protecting BENM objects. The BLM and USDA FS have had some discussions with BEC about potential options for helping tribal members collect fuelwood. The State of Utah has initiated a new program, called "Wood for Life", with the intent of improving cooperation of agencies, the public, and Tribal Nations to help provide fuelwood for community members. The Wood for Life program is looking to identify or create storage locations near tribal communities, work with agencies to identify fuelwood for this use, and develop plans for transportation of fuelwood from agency projects to communities and potential storage locations.



# Visitors

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In 2023, we had an estimated 353,126 visitor days in BENM. This is an 8% decrease from 2022. Over half of these visits were to the Newspaper Rock petroglyph panel in Indian Creek. Newspaper Rock is a popular spot for quick day trips, as it is on the way to both the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park and the world-class crack climbing opportunities present throughout Indian Creek.



Figure1: A sign for Newspaper Rock Petroglyphs.

To help better educate visitors about the importance of BENM and its landscapes to descendant communities and Tribal Nations, BENM has entered into an assistance agreement with CyArk to work with the BEC to create three dimensional online guided tours of public use sites, including River House, the Butler Wash Interpretive site, and Monarch Cave. During one of our field visits, the Pueblo of Zuni provided input to our management and staff about this project. The Hopi Tribe also visited the Butler Wash Interpretive Site with BENM staff and CyArk to assist in future interpretation at that site. In 2021, CyArk and BENM released online tours for the popular House on Fire and Mule Canyon Village sites, which can be found at <https://www.cyark.org/projects/bears-ears/Guided-Tours>.



Figure 2: Hopi Cultural Resource Advisory Task Team at Butler Interpretive Site.



# Partnerships

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BENM partners with many local and national organizations to enhance visitor experience and protect resources. A longstanding partnership with the Bears Ears Partnership (BEP) has resulted in a variety of benefits, including hosted Site Ambassadors to provide visitor information at heavily visited cultural resource sites, a volunteer project during the Celebrate Cedar Mesa event, and printed materials such as maps and site etiquette signs at trailheads. We entered into new assistance agreements with BEP to support our ongoing partnership to involve Tribal Nations in our work, conserve BENM objects, and provide education to visitors. We also have partnerships with Access Fund and CyArk.

The BLM also initiated new assistance agreements with the five Tribal Nations of the BEC last fall. These agreements help the BEC to cooperate with the BLM and USDA FS on a variety of projects, such as tribal youth education, gathering information from tribal communities, and supporting engagement in our cooperative management of BENM.

# Science

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In the last year, the BLM supported and authorized permits to a wide variety of researchers who conducted research in the BENM. Utah State University has continued its research on Raramuri Criollo cattle, testing their impacts on plants and soil and how well they respond to heat stress in comparison to Red Angus cattle. A collaboration between USGS, Brigham & Women's College, and Dine College conducted a weeklong trip on the San Juan River to connect indigenous public health students with ecological field methods (i.e., recording bat activity, studying fish, and measuring water quality). Utah Valley University conducted a vegetation study in Grand Gulch, to document the flora in this area by collecting specimens for a herbarium and genetic work. The American Southwest Ichthyological Researchers worked to determine what level of release from Navajo Dam allows nursery habitat for Razorback Sucker and Colorado Pikeminnow larvae in side channels of the San Juan River. The group has installed pressure sensors, staff gauges, and cameras in the San Juan River to monitor the effects of dam discharge on nursery habitat.

The BLM has worked with the BEC and their subcommittee members to include Traditional Indigenous Knowledge (TIK) in the development of the BENM RMP/EIS. A few examples of the inclusion of TIK include the concept of seasonality incorporated into the alternatives, a Cross Cultural Education section, a broader interpretation of cultural resources, and vegetation and water management approaches.

# Climate Impacts and Resiliency

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In recent years, the BENM region has felt the impacts of extreme and exceptional drought, with unusual snow and rainfall patterns creating vegetation changes and more frequent wildfires in the surrounding areas. In particular, land managers have noted large-scale pinyon juniper mortality and juniper crown dieback across the Four Corners region in the last several years. A multi-agency Forest Health Protection Assessment conducted in 2018 and 2019 used sampling sites within BENM to assess causes of the dieback. The researchers concluded that the dieback is an event associated with drought, which can amplify other causes of tree mortality such as insect pressure.

Among visitors to BENM, backpackers have felt the effects of the drought most acutely because they have had to carry more water against the potential for dry springs, which has affected trip itineraries. Sight-seeing visitors have also noticed the pinyon juniper mortality, which is apparent along State Route 95 under the Bears Ears Buttes.

Future planning and management decisions within BENM will take climate resiliency into account as part of the National Environmental Policy Act and land use planning processes.



Figure 3: Drought-stressed Utah juniper tree.

# Social and Environmental Justice

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BENM is funding or partnering on a variety of projects to bring youth and elders from descendant communities back to BENM to help guide the BLM on the best ways to manage this culturally important landscape.

An agreement with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe provided funding for field trips which brought Ute elders and youth to BENM in the summer of 2023. The elders could re-familiarize themselves with the landscape of BENM and have an opportunity to teach Ute youth about their cultural connections to this place while on the field trips. A trained ethnographer from Living Heritage Research Council conducted interviews during the field trips, and after reviewing those with the interviewees and representatives from the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Cultural Preservation Office, shared appropriate information with the BLM. The BLM is also hoping to work with BEP and the Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps on future preservation projects like the one at River House, pictured below.



Figure 4: An Ancestral Lands Corps crew works to stabilize the River House in Bears Ears NM.





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CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

## **Bears Ears National Monument**

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