



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

California
2023: Annual Manager's Report

King Range

National Conservation Area



Map



Accomplishments

The King Range National Conservation Area (NCA) celebrated several major accomplishments in 2023. First, the Punta Gorda Lighthouse and oil house restoration project, funded by the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), was completed. The restoration work improved the deteriorating condition of the two historic structures and increased the safety of the site for visitors. Second, the King Range NCA partnered with community members to replace a failed fence at Mal Coombs Park in Shelter Cove, California. The new fence, separating the park from the adjacent private property, provides a much-improved aesthetic for the site (refer to image below). Third, trail crews funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) performed maintenance on trails in the King Range Wilderness that had impacts from severe winter storms and a backlog of maintenance needs. Finally, the Mattole Campground expansion project, partially funded with a grant from the California State Coastal Conservancy, was completed. This project increased the number of campsites in the Mattole Campground from 14 to 23 and provided new fire rings, picnic tables, and trash cans.



Challenges

Significant storms marked the winter of 2022/23, which delivered much needed rainfall for drought stricken California, but also provided challenges in the form of downed trees and damage to infrastructure. On December 27, 2022, a large-diameter Douglas-fir tree fell in Wailaki Campground during a “bomb cyclone” storm event; the tree landed on a vehicle and pinned an individual inside. Multiple fire departments and volunteers responded, but they were significantly delayed by the amount of trees down on roads throughout the region. After many hours, the individual was extracted safely and transported to the hospital. The BLM closed the campground for several months afterwards until trees could be assessed for hazardous conditions and removed if necessary. On the same day, shortly after this incident was completed, rescuers were called to Black Sands Beach in the King Range NCA. A woman and child were injured by a by a driftwood log that rolled across the beach from a large wave. Due to the heroic work of the Shelter Cove Fire Department and community members the two were transported to the hospital in stable condition.



Visitors

The King Range NCA received 136,586 visits in 2023. This is consistent with visitation numbers prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Total King Range NCA visits are for all sites and all types of activities. This includes overnight wilderness visits, the day use sites in Shelter Cove, visitors to Black Sands Beach for a day, and dispersed use, such as hunting, camping outside of campgrounds, driving the backroads, and target shooting.

The Lost Coast Trail continues to be a large attraction for the King Range NCA. In response to public feedback, the BLM updated the King Range Wilderness permit process on Recreation.gov. Permit sales are now on a three-month rolling window (the previous system released all permits for the following year on October 1st). Permits are released based on the start date of the trip. For example, on 10/1/23 permits opened for trips that begin on 1/1/24. On 10/2/23, permits opened for trips that begin on 1/2/24, and so on indefinitely. King Range NCA staff have received positive feedback on this update.



Partnerships

The BLM entered into an interagency agreement with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Bear River Band of the Rohnerville Rancheria to coordinate and collaborate on a variety of restoration and ethnobotanical activity in the King Range NCA. The agreement includes activities such as identifying and mapping culturally significant plant species, identifying areas where invasive species are to be removed and culturally significant species planted, collecting seed for germinating, working with the Mattole Restoration Council (MRC) to cultivate desirable plants for restoration work, and training Tribal cultural monitors. BLM will also coordinate with the Tribe on new interpretive signs and products that inform the public about selected ethnobotany and restoration project topics.

Invasive species treatments continued with BIL funding. Work was accomplished in partnership with MRC and Friends of the Lost Coast (FOLC). MRC's backcountry invasive weeds crew of seven people conducted manual removal to treat invasive species populations using a variety of tools and hand pulling. Work near Shelter Cove was accomplished with eight different volunteer days coordinated by BLM and FOLC. Projects focused on removing ice plant, fennel, pampas grass, and other invasive, non-native species found in BLM coastal recreation sites, including the National Conservation Lands Commemorative Site (formerly known as the National Conservation Lands Monument) at Black Sands Beach Trailhead (refer to photo on next page).

Through partnership with the King Range Alliance, volunteer "trailhead hosts" communicated with hundreds of visitors about coastal safety and tide hazards while also collecting visitation data at Mattole and Black Sand Beach trailheads during busy summer holiday weekends (12 days total).

FOLC continues teaching the Lost Coast Environmental Education Resource (LCEER) curriculum with regular classroom offerings throughout southern Humboldt and northern Mendocino County schools, including field trips to the tide pools at Mal Coombs Park. The curriculum was also presented as part of FOLC's Summer Adventure Camp (SAC). SAC is a 6-week day camp that is based at the Lost Coast Education Center and features regular outings to destinations throughout the King Range NCA.

Additional accomplishments in collaboration with FOLC include:

- Eight volunteer trail maintenance days (Trail Stewards)
- Nine virtual lectures on a wide variety of King Range related topics
- Four LCEER educational events at the Shelter Cove library for K-6 youth



Science

Cal Poly Humboldt continues to monitor and track the demographics of the northern elephant seal colony at the Punta Gorda Lighthouse. Additionally, Cal Poly Humboldt conducted construction monitoring requirements for the completion of the Punta Gorda Lighthouse Rehabilitation Project during the summers of 2022 and 2023. The elephant seal colony has been growing significantly through local recruitment as well as recruitment of individuals from other colonies across the Pacific Coast. During the 2023 pupping season, there were a total of 238 pups observed, 3 pups more than the previous year. The colony expanded its distribution across the beach during the 2023 breeding season occupying more space than previous breeding seasons, with a total of seven separate breeding harems. The high count for 2023 included 710 seals during the spring molt, a 5% increase from the previous year.

Climate Impacts

Arcata Field Office staff have worked with the BLM's National Operations Center geospatial team to study and quantify the rate of erosion or other change along the King Range NCA coastline. The project involved collecting high resolution imagery and adding layers of LiDAR. A solid baseline has now been created to support additional layers of LiDAR as it is collected and monitor change over a long period of time. One pattern that is emerging thus far is that erosion is happening at a faster rate along the southern King Range NCA coastline than the northern coastline. As the model is further built, the data will provide scientific information to help with difficult management decisions. There is Tribal support for the study because climate change induced erosion is greatly impacting coastline cultural resources. This past year, the study attracted the attention of a BLM Committee tasked with finding examples of using climate change science within BLM. This committee decided to use the King Range study as the BLM's Climate Change Information Use Case to illustrate good practices and accurate use of climate change science across the BLM. The Use Cases are posted on the DOI and BLM internal web pages and will also be included in a Department Handbook to be published in Spring 2024.



Climate Resiliency

The King Range Forest Health and Community Resiliency CalFire Forest Health grant funded 133 acres of fuels reduction and forest health treatments along Paradise Ridge Road. The work thinned dense second growth stands adjacent to the road to reduce hazardous fuels and increase forest resiliency. Work also began along King Peak Road and adjacent trails under the same CalFire grant; 26 acres were completed before winter weather halted the project. Work will begin again in August 2024 and the remaining 743 acres of the project are scheduled to be completed by March 2025. Once complete, nearly 1,500 acres of forest health and fuels reduction will have occurred since the project inception in 2021, resulting in landscape level increases in resiliency.

The Prosper Ridge Prairie Restoration project continued within the northern portion of the King Range NCA. MRC propagated and planted 18,215 plugs of native grasses and forbs within the prairie on Windy Point in the footprint of 5 acres of woody vegetation that was removed during the project. Species included forbs supporting native pollinators and key perennial bunchgrasses derived from relic stands of perennial grasses found within the King Range NCA. The BLM ecologist trained MRC staff on Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) protocols to use in project monitoring. The change to the BLM standardized monitoring protocol was essential for providing consistent data products for BLM to use in land management decisions.



Social and Environmental Justice

The King Range NCA ordered new ocean safety signs to include messages in Spanish. These will be placed at BLM day use sites in Shelter Cove, Black Sands Beach Trailhead, and Mattole Trailhead. FOLC has continued to provide skilled environmental educators and teachers to present hands-on lessons in classrooms. The curricula for K-6 grade was designed specifically to be place-based for southern Humboldt County and includes monthly themes with correlating lessons for each grade level, building on a student's cognitive development and prior knowledge as they progress through the school year. Topics include science inquiry, rivers and oceans, archaeology and culture, geology, ecology, interrelationships, processes, energy, and watersheds.



Events

It was a successful year in the King Range NCA filled with many events. The highlights were two Artist in Residence programs in which artists lived and worked in the King Range NCA for 4-weeks to produce a collection of NCA inspired artworks. Each session included two community workshops, one for youth and another for adults, and a gallery showing where the community came out to view the artist’s work. The BLM also hosted an Earth Day event and two National Public Lands Day events. In addition, FOLC provided five educational hikes, including a BLM led “geologic ruminations of the Lost Coast” hike.



Words from the staff

Summer 2023 marked the 20th anniversary of the Nick's Interns program, named after a former BLM Intern, Nick Raphael, whose passion for the outdoors and hard work continue to inspire us to this day. The program provides an opportunity for local high school youth to work with BLM and local environmental organizations including the Mattole Restoration Council, Friends of the Lost Coast, and Sanctuary Forest in the King Range NCA. Working with land managers, interns gain valuable skills and work ethics while learning about public land management. Made possible by BIL funds, the King Range NCA expanded the Nick's Interns program from 14 to 26 local youth. Working in collaboration with Native Heath in Native Hands, a Wailaki-led non-profit organization, four tribal youth and a tribal leader stayed overnight at the KRNCA barracks while the youth served as Nick's Interns for one week. Projects included trail maintenance, habitat restoration, douglas fir treatment to improve bear grass habitat, stream habitat restoration, beaver dam analogues, and native plant garden projects. In addition, BLM staff and community partners learned indigenous methods of land management and were taught Wailaki methods of bear grass collection to be used in regalia for upcoming ceremonies.





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Report compiled by:

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Photo on Page 7 provided by Dan Sayre.

Photo on page 8 provided by Christina Cortez with Mattole Restoration Council.

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