



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

California  
2023: Annual Manager's Report

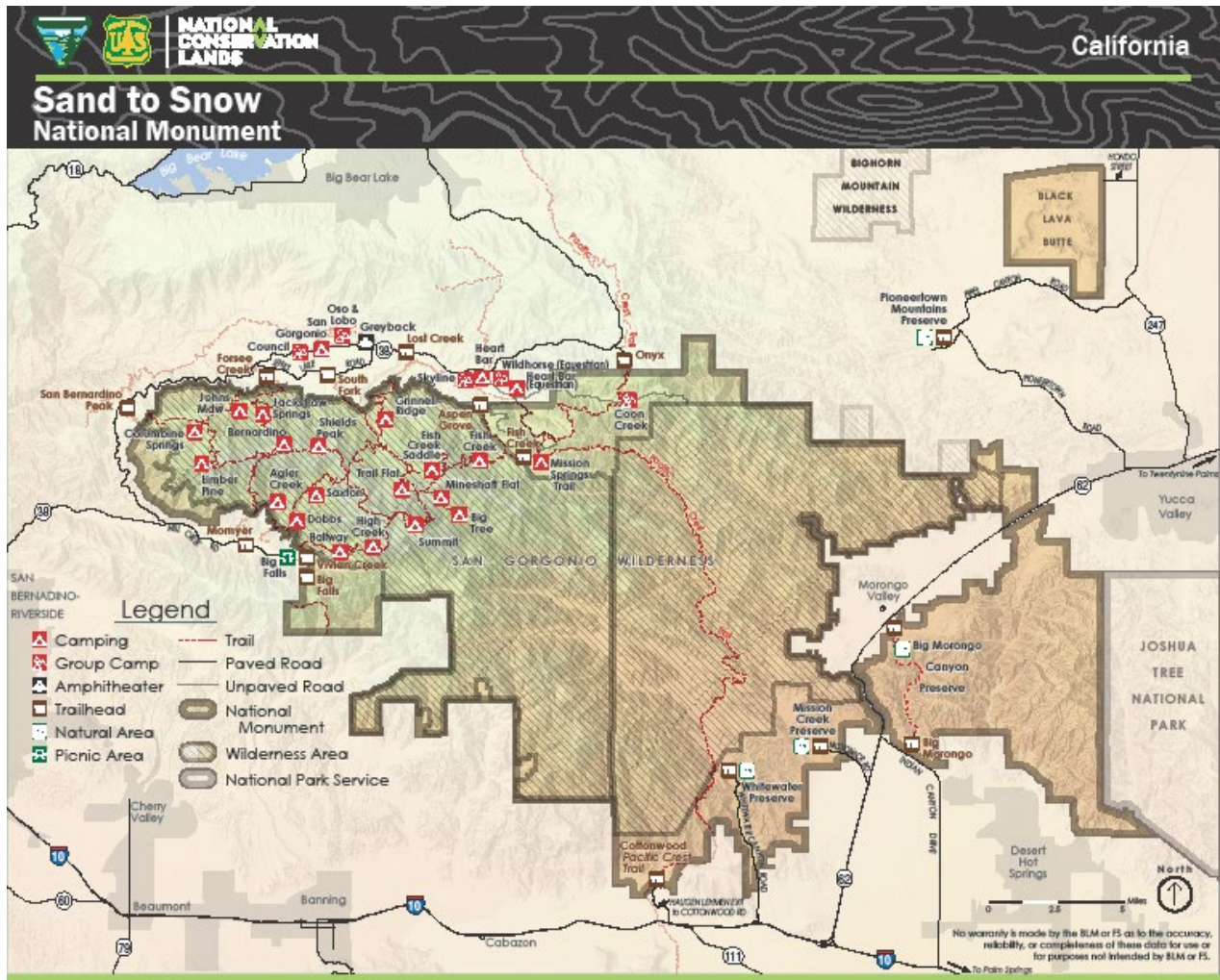
## Sand to Snow

National Monument





# Map





# Accomplishments

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The Sand to Snow National Monument (Monument) entered its official 7<sup>th</sup> year on February 12, 2023. This year saw a staffing addition as Alexandra (Alex) Sabido started her new position in April 2023 as the Monument's recreation management specialist. Alex jumped right in, supporting monument manager, Jihadda Govan, with on-the-ground operations. Alex previously served as the volunteer coordinator for the San Bernardino National Forest (SBNF), and her experience came in very handy in outreach to several groups who have shown interest in volunteer projects on the Monument. Monument friends' group, Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve, fostered a close relationship between the Morongo Tribe of Mission Indians and the Malki Museum.

Visitation to the Monument increased slightly from the previous year and many visitors came out to see the spectacular wildflower display seen in the photo below.





# Challenges

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The region was fortunate to see a decline in the extreme fire weather conditions of the previous several years. However, by the time warmer weather settled in, visitors found that many roads and trails were closed due to heavy precipitation in 2023. The winter brought record rain and snow in the higher elevations. Then, in late August, a rare tropical storm in the region resulted in heavy storm damage and additional road and trail closures.

Visitation to the Whitewater River area increased dramatically during the summer of 2023. Monument staff worked with partner groups, The Wildlands Conservancy, BLM law enforcement officers, the Metropolitan Water District (MWD), and BLM and USDA Forest Service recreation staff to educate visitors about Leave No Trace outdoor ethics and provide information about alternative areas to visit and recreate. Water is the main draw for visitors because of the high summer temperatures in the desert. The MWD Colorado River Aqueduct utilizes the Whitewater River channel to deliver water to communities in the Coachella Valley and the associated high flows are visible from the heavily trafficked Interstate 10 near the Monument. The Whitewater River, through and near the Monument, is very near that visible site and open to everyone. The Whitewater Road provides a well paved route that is adjacent to the river resulting in high visitation, resource damage, and household waste left behind (see photo below).



# Visitors

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The Monument had an estimated 340,000 visits in 2023, an increase from approximately 320,000 visitors in 2022, despite the road and trail closures associated with storm events. This number includes visits to lands managed by USDA Forest Service, BLM, and some partner managed lands that serve as entry points. Visitation to BLM managed lands is typically highest between fall and spring and SBNF managed lands is highest in between the summer months and early fall. Use increased on BLM managed lands in 2023 because of the increase in summer surface water due to the deep snowpack and late spring storms. The water drew families to engage in water play and other day uses (as seen in photo below). Visitors also engaged in day hikes, nature viewing, and dispersed camping.





# Partnerships

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The partner group San Gorgonio Wilderness Association (SGWA) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that conducts trail patrol and trail work, staff's visitor centers, and provides environmental education, primarily on the SBNF. SGWA implemented an online permit system to issue day and overnight permits for the San Gorgonio Wilderness managed by USDA Forest Service (within the Monument). The system has been very successful and is now additionally used on the Cucamonga Wilderness, also managed by SBNF.

The Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve (BMCP), a partner who works with the BLM in the Big Morongo Canyon area of the Monument, fostered a relationship with the Malki Museum on the Morongo Reservation and members of the Native American Lands Conservancy in 2023. The Malki Museum created and placed interpretive signs that describe how the Serrano and Cahuilla used honey mesquite pods and cared for the trees along trails within the preserve. Additionally, students from the Morongo Tribal School in Banning, CA, have taken several field trips to BMCP to learn about plants and how their ancestors used them. The Conservation Lands Foundation funded the project to create a Native American education program developed from a Tribal perspective. The children were provided hands on experience on how to process honey mesquite seeds using a stone pestle in a mortar made from a cottonwood tree (photo below).



# Science

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The Conservation Ecology Laboratory, in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Las Vegas, is in the second year of the “Developing Drought Adaptation Tools for Conserving Desert Habitats” study. Ideally, the project will develop drought adaptation tools for land management agencies and partners, and will aid in the conservation, restoration, and better management of desert habitats. The project will identify and predict which portions of landscapes and ecological site types might be most susceptible to drought. The second phase of the study will identify the species, species traits, or ecotypes that are resistant and/or resilient to drought, key to prioritizing plant materials development strategies. The study sites are throughout the California Desert District and there is one site within the Monument in the Big Morongo Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern.





# Climate Impacts

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The winter of 2022-2023 saw numerous atmospheric rivers that dropped significant rain and snow in the western U.S. and California was particularly hard hit with record snowfall accumulations recorded in the high peaks of San Bernardino Mountains. Heavy snowpacks resulted in winter closures of the SBNF that are normally open for snow play as well as highway closures.

Tropical Storm Hillary (TSH) arrived August 2023. The predicted storm rainfall totals were approximately 5" in the lower elevations and 10" – 13" in the higher elevations, in just a 36-hour period. The precipitation in TSH exceeded those amounts in some areas. The most intense area of the storm was directly over the Monument, where a record 13.6" of rain fell. The impacts were severe and continue to be assessed by USFS, California Department of Transportation, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. Highway closures into the SBNF were common. Many USDA Forest Service roads continue to be closed. A section of the Pacific Crest Trail in the Monument was so damaged that, the Pacific Crest Trail Association has cautioned hikers to avoid that section of the trail.





# Climate Resiliency

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In January 2023, the Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack announced expanded efforts to reduce wildfire risk across the western U.S. Understanding that it is a matter of when, not if, large scale, devastating wildfires will impact life, ecosystems, and infrastructure, landscapes were selected to develop multiple approach strategies to protect communities and promote forest health. The SBNF is a part of the Southern California Firehatched Risk Reduction Strategy. This designation has come with increased funding through the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. At this time, the SBNF is or has partnered with fire protection agencies, utility providers, tribes, and other land management agencies in various projects:

- Fuels reduction and thinning
- Large scale prescribed fire plans
- Reforestation in previously burned areas and habitat restoration.





# Social and Environmental Justice

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In 2023, the Monument partnered with Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve to offer the first Black Birders Week event. The day was led by monument manager Jihadda Govan, Preserve Ranger Kaeliegh Watson, and the Wilderness Society's California Community Partnership Manager Alicia Thomas. It was a well attended event for the first year.

The monument manager and BLM Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office's previous field manager, Tim Gilloon, participated in a Juneteenth celebration in the historic African American community of Palm Springs. Event festivities began with a reading of the Executive Decree as originally presented on June 19, 1865 in Galveston Bay, Texas, by the U.S. Army, who announced that the more than 250,000 enslaved black people in the state were free. In addition to learning about the BLM, attendees enjoyed an evening of live music, dancing, food trucks, and camel rides. The monument manager intends to make both events an annual occurrence.





# Events

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Events were held to mark both Earth Day and National Public Lands Day in the Monument. Each event was well attended. Participants cleared invasive weeds, repaired fencing, trimmed branches from trails, and repaired areas of trails that were eroded. The Monument had support from local college students, communities, and the United States Marines from the 29 Palms base.





# Words from the staff

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Greetings from the Mojave Desert!

We have so much to offer here on the Monument! We offer challenging hiking, picnicking, wildlife viewing, vehicle exploration, snow, and water play. We hope you make the Monument one of your favorite places to get in-tune with nature.

Come visit us!

Ms. Jihadda Govan  
Monument Manager  
Sand to Snow National Monument



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

## **Sand to Snow National Monument**

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**<https://www.blm.gov/visit/sand-snow-national-monument>**  
**<https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/sbnf/recarea/?recid=81734>**

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