



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area



Colorado
Annual Manager's Report—Fiscal Year 2018

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Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area

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

Additional Designations

- Gunnison Gorge Wilderness lies entirely within the National Conservation Area boundary.
- The Gunnison Gorge NCA is a Hands on the Land Education Program site.

Site Description

Just north of Montrose in west-central Colorado lies the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (NCA), a diverse landscape ranging from adobe badlands to rugged pinyon and juniper-covered slopes. At the heart of the NCA, the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area encompasses a spectacular black granite and red sandstone double canyon formed by the Gunnison River.

NCA Offerings

Gunnison Gorge NCA (GGNCA) is highly valued for its diversity of recreational opportunities. Here is a list of resources and activities people regularly enjoy in GGNCA:

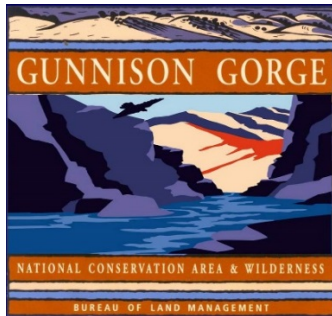
- Trail activities on over 225 miles of trails within the NCA
 - 100 miles of singletrack open to motorcycles, mountain bikes, equestrians, and hikers, including our premier Sidewinder Trail
 - 30 miles of ATV trails open to all uses 50” and under in width
 - 20 miles of non-motorized/non-mechanized trail
 - 74 miles open to all modes, including some challenging 4X4 trails
- Two OHV “open play” areas where riders are free to go cross-country
- An award-winning OHV skills course, training area, and beginner loop
- Gold Medal fishing on the Gunnison River both within and outside the wilderness on one of the finest public trout fisheries in the west
- Challenging, technical, Class III/IV whitewater boating with four boat launches
- Flatwater river activities: boating, tubing, stand-up paddleboarding, & swimming
- Hunting, particularly big-game and mountain lion
- Exploring cultural areas: ancient Native American sites and historic mines
- Exploring dinosaur track sites

Year Accomplishments

- Commercially outfitted recreation in GGNCA added \$2 million in direct income to the local economy, and supported dozens of jobs in the industry.
- GGNCA's 27 active grazing allotments supported local ranching businesses.
- Annual Cottonwood Days educational event served 431 local 6th grade students, demonstrating the resource values of the Gunnison River, including the fishery.
- Five acres of invasive and non-native vegetation were removed from the Gunnison River corridor, increasing its ecological and recreational value.
- BLM actively managed threatened Gunnison Sage-Grouse habitat, in collaboration with a number of partners.

Future Priorities and Opportunities

- Develop interpretive materials for GGNCA's outstanding cultural and paleontological sites, including educational curricula, signs, kiosks, brochures, and online materials.
- Rehabilitate the 2018 Buttermilk Fire impacts.
- Develop and implement a plan to address Chukar Boat Launch facilities lost to a human-caused fire.
- Provide improved maps, signage, and staff presence in the Flat Top – Peach Valley OHV area.
- Better quantify the recreational use on the Gunnison River from Forks to Austin through the implementation of a social monitoring protocol.



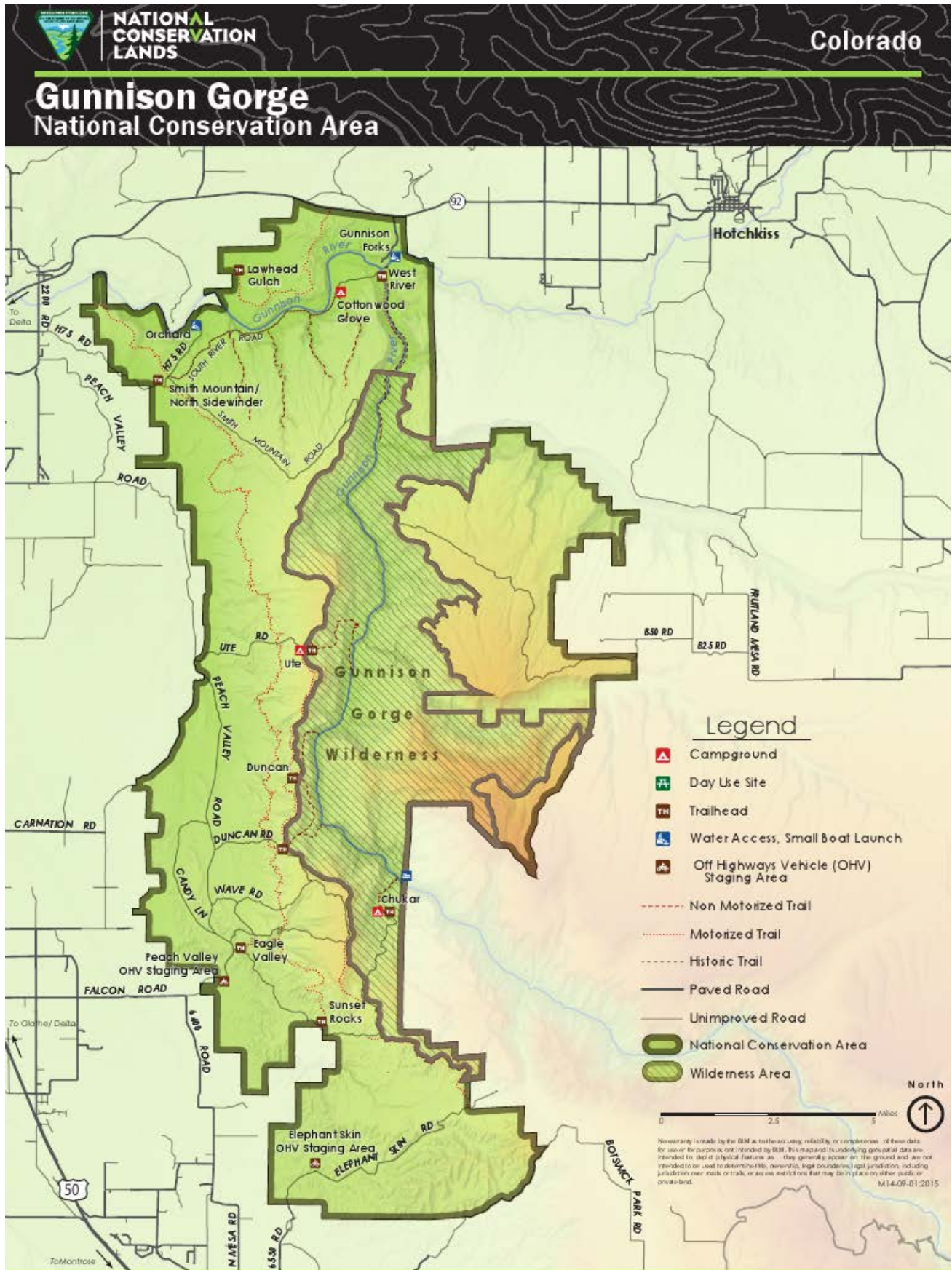
Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area

Uncompahgre Field Office
2465 S. Townsend Ave.
Montrose, CO 81401
Phone: 970-240-5300

Unit Manager: S. Edward Franz

Site Web Address: <https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservation-lands/colorado/gunnison-gorge-nc>

Map of Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area



1 Gunnison Gorge NCA Overview

Acreage

Total Acres in Unit	63,150
BLM Acres	63,150
Other Federal Acres	0
State Acres*	0
Private Acres*	1,913

*State and Private Acres are not part of the total unit acres

Budget

Budget Title	Code	Funding
Monuments & Conservation Areas	1711	\$482,345
Soil, Water, Air Management	1010	\$4,002
Rangeland Management	1020	\$37,500
Riparian Management	1040	\$13,990
Cultural Resources Management	1050	\$13,122
Wildlife management	1110	\$30,144
Fisheries Management	1120	\$2,318
T&E Species Management	1150	\$16,704
Wilderness Management	1210	\$15,656
Recreation & Visitor Services	1220	\$57,125
SRP fees and Wilderness Permit Fees (ISRPs)*	1232	\$69,119
Total Budget		\$742,025

*Fees collected in FY 2017

GGNCA also receives substantial benefit from partnerships such as those with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), and our Friends group Colorado Canyons Association (CCA). CPW supports the OHV program through a grant funded by state OHV registration fees. CCA holds fundraisers, applies for grants, receives donations, and receives membership dues, which they use to further the community stewardship, education, and restoration programs in the NCA.

Current Areas of Focus

The BLM will continue its focus on being a good neighbor and serving the local communities in southwest Colorado. We recognize the high level of public interest in the GGNCA and we will remain committed to working with local governments, private citizens and our partners to pursue shared conservation stewardship of the NCA.

The BLM process for hiring field staff was exceptionally difficult this year. As a result, the NCA had no seasonal OHV rangers in 2018 and a lone permanent (career seasonal) ranger for only half the season. The OHV program in GGNCA depends almost entirely on a “Good Management” grant from Colorado Parks and Wildlife, funded by the state’s OHV registration program. The NCA needs to be able to show achievements on the ground in order to maintain its partnership with and funding from CPW. In 2018, the NCA used grant funds to purchase needed equipment upgrades, as well as bringing on a permanent OHV ranger. In 2019, a full seasonal ranger crew will be needed to maintain trails and signs, and to engage visitors and partners out on the ground. The NCA manager’s hope is that the OHV program will be fully staffed in 2019.

GGNCA is experiencing increasing public interest in the area’s cultural and paleontological sites. Eagle Rock Shelter, a site that has revealed human history of the NCA going back nearly 13,000 years, has been of particular interest. The excavation and stabilization of the site is nearly complete, so BLM, CCA and others, in coordination with the Ute tribes, are developing a plan to interpret the site for the public, and develop educational curricula for students. Likewise, impressive dinosaur track discoveries have sparked people’s curiosity. Again, BLM is working with our partners to interpret these sites for the public.

The Gunnison River downstream from the Gunnison Forks to the NCA boundary near Austin has seen dramatic increases in use over the past three seasons. BLM is in the process of developing a sampling methodology to get a handle on accurate visitation numbers, as well as the relative frequency of different uses.

Planning and NEPA

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area and Wilderness Resource Management Plan (RMP), 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. One of two planned environmental assessments is 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 2019.

Supplemental rules for GGNCA and its three Special Recreation Management areas were

completed in 2009. The rules address issues of travel management, off-road vehicle use, shooting sports, pets and pack stock use, camping, firewood collection and campfires, 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 Landscape Conservation System (NLCS) RMP Implementation Strategy in 2004-2006 with BLM specialists, Resource Advisory Council (RAC) members, and the public.

GGNCA is currently implementing the RMP Travel Management Plan, GGNCA 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% completed.

Key National Environmental Policy Act Actions and/or Project Authorizations

Programmatic Environmental Analysis for Incorporation of Rimsulfuron, Aminopyralid, and Fluroxpyr into the Integrated Weed Management Program (DOI-BLM-CO-SO50-2018-03-EA)

BLM approved the addition of three herbicides to the existing integrated weed management plan.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife Elk Collaring Project (CO-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0001 DNA)

BLM approved CPW to capture and collar elk in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness for the purposes of studying big-game wintering population distribution.

Peach Valley Road Runouts (DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0002 CX)

BLM granted a right-of-way to Montrose County for drainage runouts.

North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan Project Maintenance (DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0003 DNA)

BLM continued to implement the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan by removing small trees in previously treated sagebrush habitat.

Western Slope Conservation Center “Float Fest” SRP (DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0004 DNA)

BLM approved a special recreation permit for an organized group event on the Gunnison River, Forks to Austin.

Highland Cycles “Ride Montrose” Motorcycle Event (DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0005 DNA)

BLM approved a special recreation permit for a motorcycle event in Peach Valley.

Green Mountain Wildlife Habitat Water Catchments (DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0006 DNA)

BLM approved the installation for two water catchment/tanks.

Assignment of Communication Use Lease – Flat Top Mesa (DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0007 CX)

The BLM assigned the existing lease from Sunflower LLC to Skytower Corp.

Elephant Skin Road Repair (DOI-BLM-CO-SO54-2018-0009 CX)

BLM approved the realignment of a small portion of Elephant Skin Road for easier access.

Staffing

The work at GGNCA is accomplished by a small staff of NCA employees, supported by the staff of the Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO).

GGNCA Staff Time

- NCA Manager –70%, manager (acting for 11 months in FY 2018; permanent for 1 month; 30% UFO recreation program supervision)
- Outdoor Recreation Planner – 60%, served for 6 months in FY 2018, (Outdoor Recreation Planning, Wilderness Management, Lands with Wilderness Characteristics Inventory Support, and Special Recreation Permit Administration)
- Lead Park Ranger (river patrol, career seasonal) –6-month season (70% GGNCA, 30% other UFO rivers)
- AmeriCorps VISTA – 80%, Colorado Canyons Association Stewardship VISTA (6 months in FY 18, volunteer, environmental education, and partner engagement)

Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) Staff Time Working in GGNCA

- Field Office Manager – 20%
- Outdoor Recreation Planner – 15%
- Archaeologist – 15%
- Biologist 1 – 15%
- Biologist 2 – 50%
- GIS specialist – 5%

- Administrative Assistant – 10%
- Rangeland Management Specialist – 33%
- Hydrologist – 10%
- Realty Specialist – 3%
- Park Ranger (maintenance) – 50%
- Education/Volunteer Coordinator – 25%

2 Programs and Accomplishments

General Accomplishments

Visitation to the GGNCA continued to increase in 2018. This year brought very favorable river flows during the coveted giant stonefly hatch, and for the remainder of the traditional river use season. Because of legal obligations to meet minimum Gunnison River flows downstream from the NCA, in a drought year like 2018, the Bureau of Reclamation must release more water through the dams upstream of the NCA than in a normal year. For that reason, the Gunnison River experienced very favorable flows through the Gorge from May through September, resulting in boaters and anglers capitalizing on the high quality opportunities for fishing and boating in the NCA.

Indeed, all river use was up this year with more boaters, tubers, and paddle boarders using the river than ever before. The combination of easy access to the lower part of the river, greater local awareness of the opportunities, and an unusually hot summer appeared to drive the increased use.

In addition to the increased river recreation, the Peach Valley OHV site saw record use as well. Maintenance staff noticed a marked increase in number of vehicles at the staging area, even during mid-week. With over 100 miles of motorized singletrack trail, riders from all over are discovering the exceptional OHV opportunities in the NCA.

General Accomplishments Table

	Number of Visitors (RMS Visits)	Education Participants	Interpretive Participants	Visitor Center/Contact Station Visits	Hours of Volunteers	SRPs Issued (# of permitted outfitters)	AUMs
TOTALS	294,760	431	39	1,650	1,100	19	6,748

Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

Hands on the Land

GGNCA, in partnership with, CCA, Gunnison Gorge Anglers, the local Trout Unlimited chapter, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), and The Nature Connection, held its tenth annual Hands on the Land event, *Cottonwood Days*, in September. Local 6th 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. In addition, CCA engaged the students prior to the field trip with classroom lessons that emphasized Leave No Trace principles and taking care of public lands. The event served over 430 students from seven public schools in Delta and Montrose counties, lasted four days and hosted four public volunteers, 15 partner volunteers, five teachers, multiple chaperones, and four CCA staff members.



CPW and BLM fish biologists explain the process of fish shocking and identification of fish found in the Gunnison River; students getting hands-on experience with macroinvertebrates; thank you card from students.

GGNCA birding hike with CCA

In the spring, CCA engaged 13 members of the public and one volunteer guide with a hike along the Gunnison River, featuring the different species of birds that can be seen in the GGNCA. This was a great educational and social event, exposing the local public to wildlife and public lands!



Members of the public watching for different bird species alongside Gunnison River.

Eagle Rock Shelter Interpretive Materials

In 2018, work continued on designing an interpretive material for Eagle Rock Shelter in the GGNCA. BLM partnered with CCA to draft a design for the trailhead kiosk, as well as archaeological information for the site. BLM is currently in the process of consulting local Native American (Ute) tribes in order to preserve their perspectives, history, and stories on the interpretive materials.

Eagle Rock Shelter Interpretive Talk

In March, CCA hosted a guided hike to the Eagle Rock Shelter, guided by BLM archaeologist Glade Hadden. The event reached 39 members of the public who got a first-hand account of the current archaeological findings of the site.



BLM Archaeologist Glade Hadden discusses artifacts uncovered at Eagle Rock Shelter.

Fish and Wildlife

Conservation efforts for Gunnison Sage Grouse (GUSG) (*Centrocercus minimus*) were again a top priority of the NCA wildlife program this year. BLM and CPW have collaborated on many projects over the past three decades to reduce encroaching pinyon and juniper trees and promote sage brush and healthy herbaceous plant communities—essential vegetation types for GUSG. Much of this year’s GUSG conservation efforts were focused on maintenance of these projects. In July and August, ten Conservation Corps members cleared almost 200 acres of pinyon and juniper saplings from areas that had habitat improvements completed 10-20 years ago.

Additionally, contractors utilized Hydroaxe machines to masticate approximately 300 acres of mixed mountain shrub to improve forage for big game near important GUSG habitats. Improved forage for big-game will reduce their utilization of sage brush resources, retaining essential cover and forage for GUSG.

Biology staff also executed migratory bird surveys on the western side of the Gorge, in preparation for future Land Health Assessments. During 20 point counts, biology staff identified 51 different species of breeding birds in pinyon juniper forests, grasslands, and salt-desert lowlands. Impressively, no non-native species were detected during point-count surveys.



A machine called a Hydroaxe masticates oak brush in an effort to invigorate herbaceous and woody plants to improve habitat for big game and GUSG.

GGNCA Rainbow Trout Stocking

CPW, in partnership with BLM, stocked 44,809 rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) fingerlings into the Gunnison River in August. BLM provided the river rangers and boats to carry all people and bags of fry (young fish).



Rainbow trout fry are packed in on horses at the Chukar Trail.

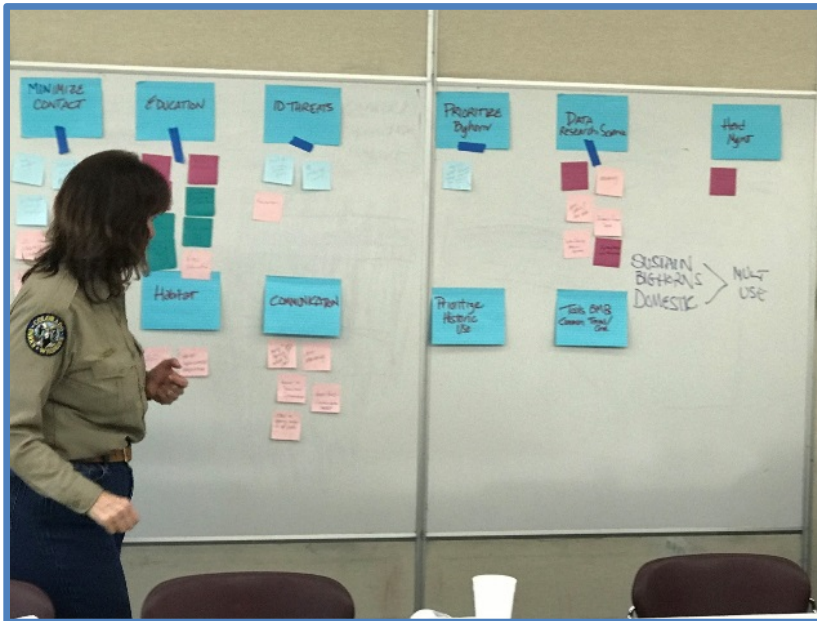
Grazing

There are 27 active grazing allotments, with 6,748 AUMs, managed under the GGNCA Resource Management Plan. Due to severe drought conditions, the same acreage was grazed in the GGNCA as FY17, but all permittees voluntarily took less time and/or took less livestock out. Drought monitoring was conducted on over half of the allotments in the GGNCA; four ponds were cleaned and several miles of fence were maintained.

Additionally, GGNCA has nine domestic sheep grazing allotments where there are seasonal populations and/or habitat for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*Ovis Candensis*). Overlap of wild and domestic sheep on federal grazing allotments is of concern due to the potential for lethal disease transmission between the species. In 2018, GGNCA staff participated in four meetings of the Southwest Colorado Sheep Solutions (SWSS) working group. This collaborative team brings together agencies and groups who have an interest in the health of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep populations in southwest Colorado, and are vested in the long-term viability of the domestic sheep industry in the area. Membership includes Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, CPW, Colorado Department of Agriculture, Delta County, Colorado Wool Growers Association and individual sheep producers, and several non-government groups such as Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep Society and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. In the kickoff meeting in February, 2018 SWSS set their purpose:

- We meet to foster relationships and work collaboratively across jurisdictional boundaries to find tools and solutions which seek to sustain domestic and bighorn sheep across the southwest Colorado landscape. We use science based information to prioritize efforts, find consistent approaches, and define acceptable levels of risk.

In subsequent meetings the group started to carry out its purpose by listing threats to wild sheep species, outlining desired local outcomes, brainstorming strategies for keeping the species separated, identifying barriers to carrying out those strategies, and considering resources that may be needed for success. Discussions were focused on localized issues and solutions rather than duplicative efforts being made by other state working groups. Through the process, members of the SWSS have fostered a better understanding of different perspectives, with an emphasis on the needs of wild and domestic sheep and the people who rely upon their well-being. Much work is still to be done in paving a path for the future, and the SWSS is committed to continuing this important work in 2019.



CPW staff facilitate discussion at the Southwest Colorado Sheep Solutions (SWSS) working group.

Partnerships

Colorado Canyons Association

In 2018, the GGNCA continued to grow its existing partnership with CCA, its official Friends group. CCA currently has five full-time staff members who dedicate their time to stewardship and education on the three NCAs in western Colorado, including GGNCA. However, CCA now has an AmeriCorps VISTA employee stationed at the Montrose field office that primarily builds capacity for CCA's work in the GGNCA. She has improved programming, built partnerships, trialed new stewardship activities, and overall made the GGNCA's education and outreach efforts stronger.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife

CPW continues to be an important partner in support of some of the most valued recreational opportunities in the NCA. CPW fish biologists with the support of Trout Unlimited have

achieved remarkable success in recovering rainbow trout populations in the Gorge, while continuing to support a healthy brown trout population. It's a testament to their efforts that the Gunnison River in the NCA exceeds the Gold Medal standard by a factor of five for number of sizable trout per acre of water.

CPW's off-highway vehicle registration program provides revenue to support many OHV riding opportunities across Colorado. Over the years GGNCA has successfully pursued the CPW OHV program's "Good Management" grant. In 2018 the NCA received grant funding that allowed the BLM to hire a career seasonal OHV ranger for consistent, long-term work on the NCA's robust OHV program. Trail maintenance, signage, visitor contact, and partnership development have been priorities for this hard-working ranger. Additionally, this year BLM was able to use grant funds to replace OHV crew ATVs (which have been phased-out by the agency) with new UTVs that meet the 50" maximum width standard.

The Nature Connection

The BLM has been actively engaged with The Nature Connection, a coalition working to get Montrose and Delta county students outdoors and develop a network of the next generation of outdoor leaders. The Nature Connection received a \$1.7 million dollar Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) grant in 2018 that allowed them to expand outdoor education programs, build a gear library, provide natural resource career pathways, and develop outdoor resources, like trails, for the entire community to enjoy.

Gunnison Sage Grouse Working Group

This group is a public/private partnership of local ranchers (grazing permittees), Black Canyon Audubon Society, US Geological Service, BLM and the National Park Service working to conserve the local population of Gunnison Sage Grouse in, and adjacent to, the NCA.

Recreation and Visitor Services

Visitor Use Summary

Recreation in the GGNCA increased 14% between FY 17 and FY 18, primarily due to the increasing popularity of motorized recreation in the Peach Valley OHV Area, and floating and fishing the Gunnison River, both inside and outside the wilderness. Eagle Rock Shelter Archeological Site is becoming a popular cultural tourism site for locals and visitors alike thanks to improved road access and continued use by river recreationists. Archaeologists counted 1500 visitors during the times they were present working at the site.

Special Recreation Permits

Nineteen Special Recreation Permits were issued in the NCA in FY 18. Outfitters grossed nearly \$2 million dollars in FY 18, primarily from guided hunting and float fishing trips through the Gold Medal waters of the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness. Outfitters and guides contribute to the local economy by supporting local businesses and employment in addition to providing an opportunity on public lands that a visitor may not be able to experience without the expertise of a

guide. The GGNCA views its outfitters as key recreation partners that multiply the BLM’s mission and stewardship message.



Western Slope SUP owner Daniel Roman leads happy clients down the Gunnison River.

Peach Valley OHV Tag Sale

BLM partnered with a local Montrose business, Highland Cycles, WESTCORE (a motorized user group), Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado Canyons Association, and Stay the Trail to host an OHV sticker tag sale in the spring of 2018. The event was a positive opportunity for users, agencies, and local motorized advocates to come together and make buying an OHV sticker easier for the public. Over 60 tags were sold by CPW rangers that day and those funds will go back into supporting BLM motorized trails, amenities, and seasonals.



Vehicles and tents staged at the OHV Tag Sale out in Peach Valley.

Gunnison River and Eagle Rock Shelter

The Gunnison River continues to see a steady increase in use through the NCA. Locals and visitors alike take part in a variety of river activities, including float-fishing, walk-wade fishing, stand-up paddleboarding, kayaking, tubing, and rafting.

Eagle Rock Shelter Archeological site is a popular stop for users that can access the nearly 13,000 year old site via a short hike from the river. The GGNCA is working with partners to develop education and interpretation materials for the site (see above).

Private boaters, anglers, and hikers enjoyed nearly 5000 user days in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, providing over \$21,000 in special area fees that go directly back into the Wilderness via improvement projects, ranger staff time, facilities maintenance and more.

Community Tourism

In keeping with the BLM's National Recreation Strategy, Connecting with Communities, GGNCA staff actively participate in Delta and Montrose Tourism Groups. These groups, made up of government, business, and nonprofit leaders, provide advice to local tourism bureaus. The BLM provided detailed information for Delta County's new tourism website, including a sit down review with its creator: www.deltacountycolorado.com

Volunteers

One hundred and thirty-two volunteers gave nearly 1,100 hours to projects in the GGNCA. Many hours were spent on volunteer river ranger patrols and supporting Cottonwood Days. Below are just a few volunteer program highlights:

Volunteer of the Year: Jody Brown

Jody Brown, a frequent GGNCA volunteer, was nominated for the State and National Volunteer Award in FY 2018. From his nomination:

"With three rivers—the San Miguel, Gunnison and Dolores—coursing through our field office, we have an active river program that relies heavily on seasonal rangers and volunteers to complete critical stewardship and recreation maintenance work. These rivers are remote and technical, where small mistakes can have big consequences; capable, competent volunteers are a must. Jody is one of a handful of people up to the task. From expertly rigging boats to scrambling up side canyons to identify rare plants to helping with bat surveys, Jody gives the project at hand everything he's got and doesn't shy away from the physical work often required on river trips. In 2017, he joined the river crew on a patrol through the Dolores Canyons Wilderness Study Area and in the fall during the annual ranger station tipi take-down trip in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness. Jody is first in line for camp chores (cooking, washing dishes, "groover" duties, etc.) and a strong member of every river patrol he volunteers for".

Beyond Jody's strong work ethic, he brings an infectious laugh, musical talent (songs around the firepan!), a perennially sunny disposition, and a kind heart to his volunteerism. "Thinking about it now, I realize that whenever I hear his wonderful laugh it's always associated with good times -- usually out in the Gunnison Gorge," said Edd Franz, Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area manager (acting). "I feel the same way when I hear the song of canyon wrens. The man is a gift."

The UFO enthusiastically submits Jody Brown for the BLM's 2018 "Making a Difference" National Volunteer Lifetime Achievement Award."



Volunteer Jody Brown taking in the Gorge's whitewater with BLM Uncompahgre Field Office Manager, Greg Larson, and GGNCA Manager Edd Franz.

Smith Mountain Jeep Road Signage Project

BLM partnered with Western Slope 4 Wheelers in Montrose, CO to install 15 new signs to mark off-route closures on Smith Mountain Jeep Road in GGNCA, to discourage the use of “social trails” that have been created over the years. Over five hours, seven volunteers worked on installing the Carsonite signs, while also monitoring and maintaining the main trail. This work was vital to preserve the vegetation that makes Smith Mountain such a spectacular place to recreate.



Volunteers work alongside BLM staff to install off-route closure signs.

3

Science

Science

GGNCA Rainbow Trout Population Monitoring

CPW, in partnership with BLM, conducted sampling in the Ute Park of the GGNCA as part of a monitoring program to determine the response of the rainbow trout population to stocking of Gunnison River rainbows (GRR) from the East Portal of the Gunnison. The 2017 sampling resulted in some unique findings related to the population response to the extremely high flows of 2017. Typically in high flow years, the brown trout population declines, with particularly large declines for the age-1 cohort. The 2017 adult sampling estimated 8631 adult brown trout per mile in Ute Park, which is the second largest estimate for brown trout since the dataset began in 1981. The rainbow trout population increased to its highest point since whirling disease hit in the mid-1990s and was estimated at 522 fish/mile (Figure 4).

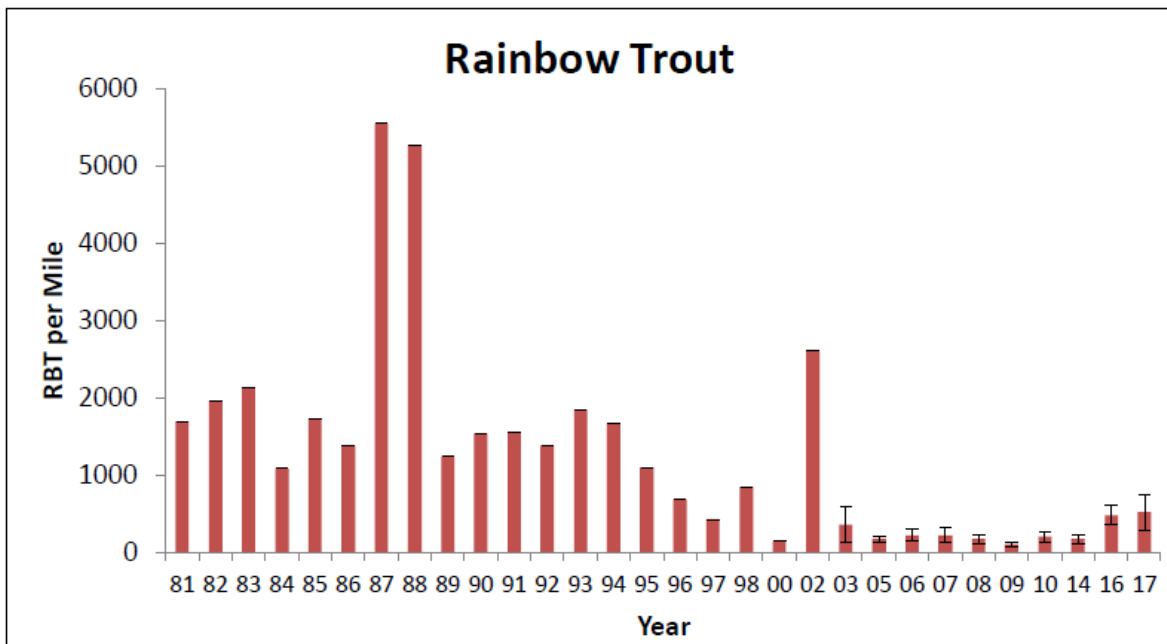


Figure 4: Population estimates for rainbow trout 1981-2017 in the Ute Park section of the Gunnison Gorge.



CPW and BLM fish biologists sample fish in Ute Park using an electroshock boat.

GGNCA Bat and River Otter Survey

Bat Data:

- Mist netting was conducted over three nights at Big Eddy, BLM Ranger Station (Teepee), and Smith Fork. Nine bats of three species were confirmed during these efforts.
- Two cave/shelter sites (Big Eddy, Boulder Garden) were inspected for bat use to follow up on previous bat sightings at these locations. The caves at Big Eddy did not show signs of use as no bats or droppings were noted. The large alcove above Boulder Garden to the west did have a large guano pile. Use of the site is thought to be as recent as this summer based on the degree of guano degradation. A sample was collected and will be sent in for genetic testing if funds allow. Bats using a rock crevice high in the cliff band adjacent to the alcove was also noted when squeaking was heard.
- A total of 2,640 acoustic files (4 Gigs) were collected during the three sampling nights in an effort to document additional bat species that were not captured in mist nets. Calls will be processed during the winter of 2018/2019 with results provided in a formal report.



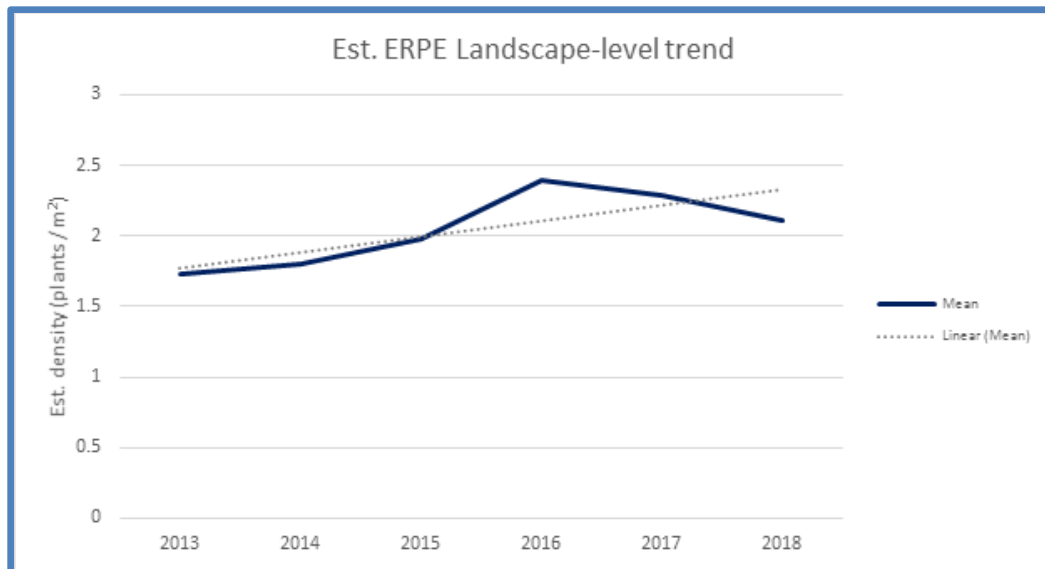
BLM and CPW staff climb up to a cave to survey for bats.

Otter Data:

- The river through the GGNCA was broken into 5 km sample reaches for otter surveys following the delisting protocol established by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (then the Colorado Division of Wildlife, CDOW). Each reach was surveyed over its entire length or until otter sign was detected, whichever came first. Surveys were last conducted in this area by CDOW (DePue) in May of 2002.
- Sign documented from this survey included latrine sites, fish and crayfish remains, tracks, and a sighting of an otter. No sign was noted for the top reach from Chukar to just below Big Eddy but this reach was abbreviated based on limited access to the river, with only the bottom 1/3 of it accessible. Otter sign was collected from four subsequent reaches below the top one, indicating that otter continue to inhabit the Gunnison Gorge. A total of 12 observations were recorded by four surveyors over four reaches.

Federally Endangered Clay-loving Wild Buckwheat (*Eriogonum pelionophilum*) Population Monitoring and Protection

Annual monitoring was completed at all six established *Eriogonum pelionophilum* monitoring sites during 2018. In general, we observed a decline in populations due in large part from the extreme drought the region experienced in 2018. Much of the mortality was to the young age classes that established in 2016 at all monitoring locations. Two consecutive years of drought have since impacted the entire range of *Eriogonum pelionophilum*. Upon completing monitoring in 2018 it was apparent that the plants were nearly entirely dormant. While few plants appeared to have died completely we observed very few individuals that had any vegetative growth from the current year, and zero individuals that produced reproductive structures across any of the six monitoring locations.



There are three fenced enclosures in the GGNCA 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; another (approx. 13 acres) approximately 0.5 miles north of Montrose County Road 6200; and the other (approx. 17 acres) is near the southwest boundary of the NCA in the Elephant Skin Area. Both areas have received vandalism, but the number of incidents are tapering over time. Field office staff repaired 2 incidents of vandalism in 2018. They are still monitored monthly by volunteers.

Eagle Rock Shelter Excavation

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

In 2018, archaeological excavations continued 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 2018, excavations continued in the lower levels of the deposit with a projected completion in late 2018 or early 2019. As active excavations near completion, site stabilization and interpretation plans are being developed to ensure the long term preservation of this important site.

Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area Science Plan

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

<https://www.blm.gov/documents/colorado/public-room/strategic-plan/gunnison-gorge-national-conservation-area-science-plan>

4 Resources, Objects, Values and Stressors

While the NCA legislation ([Public Law 106-76, Oct 21, 1999](#)) does not enumerate or define “multiple-use opportunities,” it can be inferred elsewhere in the legislation 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 GGNCA 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 Special Recreation Management Area (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	Stable
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 FY18
63,150	63,150	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 FY18
19.3	19.3	19.3	19.3

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table—Hunting

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Value	Acres Monitored in FY18
63,150	63,150	60,498 (total NCA acres minus rec site shooting closures)	0 (CPW monitors hunting)

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table—Trapping

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Value	Acres Monitored in FY18
63,150	63,150	63,150	0 (CPW monitors trapping)

Stressors Affecting Exceptional Multiple-use Opportunities

Hunting and Trapping

There are no known stressors for hunting or trapping opportunities.

Fishing

Winter 2017/2018 saw some of the driest conditions since the drought of 2002. The Gunnison River peak flow through the Gorge was 1,000 cfs for 24 hours as opposed to 13,000 cfs in 2017. However, the flows ranged from 600 to 850 cfs for most of the fishing season. Because the upstream Aspinall Unit dams regulate the flows through the Gunnison Gorge, the river actually saw some of the most consistent water across the state, creating optimal fishing and boating conditions. The stonefly hatch, which attracts visitors from all over the country, was one of the

biggest in recent years and certainly the busiest as evidenced by campsite use and wilderness special area fee collection.

If the GGNCA has another dry year, that may affect the release from Blue Mesa Reservoir and result in flows that are difficult to float-fish (300 cfs or lower).

Motorized Vehicle Use

The GGNCA usually has two seasonal OHV rangers that conduct patrols, maintain trails, educate users on rules and regulations, and close illegal vehicle intrusions. Despite multiple efforts, we were unable to hire any seasonal OHV rangers. Because of this, we saw an increase in illegal activity, broken and missing signage, and trail degradation. We are working on a strategy to allow for a more successful year in seasonal hiring.

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 natural appearance of the river corridor's riparian zone is noticeably improving from year to year. A few factors contribute to this welcome trend. First, BLM biologists and ecologists have been making steady headway in restoring the riparian habitat along the lower reaches of the Gunnison River within the NCA both with removal of invasive species and with the planting and protection of native species, primarily cottonwood trees. In addition to these efforts, riparian species throughout the NCA river corridor have responded to the fairly regular high spring flows with robust growth.

Illegal off-route OHV use continues 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. Off-route OHV use is increasing between highway 92 and the Gunnison River. With the drought this year, vegetation is not coming back and new routes are proliferating due to the quick scarification that happens on adobe soils. The BLM is working on strategies to educate and reduce the residual impacts from this type of activity.

Ecological Naturalness

Ecological naturalness is evaluated periodically in the GGNCA through the land health assessment (LHA) process. The most recent assessment was conducted by BLM resource

specialists in 2011 and 2012.

Colorado BLM Standards for Public Land Health

The NCA is mandated to 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** - Threatened, endangered, and sensitive species are maintained and enhanced by healthy native plant and animal communities.
- **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.

	Lands and Streams Meeting (acres / % of unit)	Lands and Streams Meeting with Problems (acres / % of unit)	Lands and Streams Not Meeting (acres / % of unit)	Not Evaluated or Not Applicable (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%

An environmental assessment was completed in 2014 to close one vehicle route (approximately 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. Implementation of the closure and construction of the fence was completed in the spring of 2015.

Status and Trend Table – Natural Values

Status of Natural Appearance	Trend
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Good overall, but poor in the 400-acre Elephant Skin problem area and in the NCA south of Highway 92 and north of the Gunnison River	Improving along the Gunnison River riparian corridor; stable elsewhere
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Status of Ecological Naturalness	Trend
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. Standards 2 and 4 are improving in the Gunnison River riparian corridor.

Natural Appearance Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY
63,150	63,150	63,150	63,150

Ecological Naturalness Inventory, Assessment and Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY18
63,150	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 in the areas identified above. 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.

The area between the Gunnison River and Highway 92 also consists of expansive adobe hills with few natural barriers to cross-country travel. Once someone drives a vehicle through this area, the track looks like a road and others follow suit. Nearby is the North Delta Open OHV area, where vehicles can travel cross-country. It can be difficult for the public to differentiate the various designations on BLM land.

Ecological Naturalness

The LHA report 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 GGNCA, 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
- 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 GGNCA 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. With the assistance of a dedicated group of trained site steward volunteers two archaeological, and two paleontological sites were monitored for impacts within the NCA.

The Eagle Rock Shelter site had a viewing deck, drainage structure, and trail maintenance completed in FY 18. This will help with water and social route issues.

BLM staff assessed Howell Village, a historic site in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, and will repair damage to the roof in FY 19.

Excavation and subsequent stabilization of the Eagle Rock Shelter site is scheduled to be completed in FY 2019. An interpretive plan for the site is currently in development.

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	Sites Monitored in FY18
63,150	3,100	3,100	4

Stressors Affecting Cultural Resources

Casual collecting of surface artifacts diminishes sites' national register eligibility and may lead to more destructive vandalism and artifact loss. A group of site steward volunteers actively monitor the condition of priority and vulnerable 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, to remote sagebrush flats and piñon-juniper forests on the east side, to the rugged wilderness canyon at its heart, the GGNCA boasts a highly scenic landscape.

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

No actions occurred in FY 18 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 FY18
63,150	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. Most recreational use of the wilderness is focused on the river. Camping, whitewater boating, float fishing, and hike-in fishing are the main recreational activities.

The five-year update to the Keeping It Wild monitoring report was completed for the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness in FY 18. Fluctuations in values were generally the result of uncontrollable actions (i.e. emergency helicopter landing), overlooked data, and the construction of the Black Ridge Trail on the east side of the wilderness.

The BLM secured two river and wilderness interns through Western Colorado Conservation Corps in FY 18. They completed Lands with Wilderness Characteristics inventorying for the GGNCA in addition to providing strong support to the GGNCA wilderness.

The biggest impact to wilderness in FY 18 was the Buttermilk and Chukar Bathroom Fires detailed below.

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 FY18
63,150	17,784	17,784	17,784

Stressors Affecting Wilderness Values

The lightning-caused Buttermilk Fire started on the rugged and remote Buttermilk Ridge in July of 2018. The fire burned 640 acres in wilderness. By emergency order, 4(c) prohibited uses were allowed in the wilderness, including retardant and a chainsaw containment line. A big task for staff in FY 19 will be assessing rehabilitation needs.

The Chukar Boat Put-In Bathroom also burned down this summer. In just the couple of months between the absence of a toilet and the end of the fishing season, rangers noticed human waste issues. A high priority for FY 19 is assessing and implementing a sanitation strategy.

Recreation Resources

The GGNCA is managed 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 is an important economic driver in the region, attracting anglers from around the world.

The RMP provides specific management for twelve non-wilderness recreational management zones. Supplementary rules also exist, 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. Multi-use trails in this SRMA are enjoyed by all types of users (hikers, runners, equestrians, mountain bikers, dirt bikers, and ATV/UTV riders). The management and recreation amenity development of this area is widely considered exemplary in the BLM.

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. Use of this area, particularly of the river corridor, has dramatically increased in the past five years. This is likely due to the area becoming “discovered” by local recreationists looking for close-to-home, family friendly recreation.

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

Recreation Resource – Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY18
63,150	63,150	63,150	45,060

Stressors Affecting Recreation Resources

As the Gunnison and North Fork SRMA see increasing use, GGNCA staff are moving toward implementing a social monitoring protocol for the Forks to Austin stretch of the Gunnison River. This will help ensure GGNCA is meeting recreation management objectives and providing for the user experience outlined in the GGNCA RMP.

Since so much of the recreation workload is accomplished by seasonal staff, GGNCA is very vulnerable to budget reductions. If future budgets were to tighten, the seasonal employees would be among the first cuts that would have to be made. Maintenance of recreation sites, weed control, visitor contacts, and visitor compliance with regulations would be strongly affected.

5 Summary of Performance Measure

Resources, Objects, and Values Status Summary Table		
Resource, Object, or Value	Status	Trend
Hunting	Good	Stable
Trapping	Good	Stable
Fishing	Good	Improved due to rainbow trout enhancement efforts of CPW and resource condition improvements in the vicinity of the Relief Ditch diversion structure; stable elsewhere
Motorized Vehicle Use	Good	Stable
Natural Appearance	Good overall, but poor in the 400-acre Elephant Skin problem area and in the NCA south of Highway 92 and north of the Gunnison River	Improving along the Gunnison River riparian corridor; stable elsewhere.
Ecological Naturalness	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. Standards 2 and 4 are improving in the Gunnison River riparian corridor.
Scenic Values	Good	Stable
Wilderness Values	Good	Stable
Recreational Values	Good	Improved slightly due to the construction of the Peach Valley OHV Skills Course and completion of

		the Blackridge Trail.
Cultural Values	Good	Stable

6

Manager's Letter



Dear Friends,

In 2018, more people enjoyed recreating in the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (GGNCA) than in any previous year. More people experienced the thrill and challenge of riding one of the NCA's many technical singletrack trails, such as Sidewinder Trail. More families enjoyed riding OHVs together in the rolling adobe hills in the Flat Top-Peach Valley area. More hikers had the chance to have quiet, contemplative walks along the scenic Bighorn Trail in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, often with a good dog leading the way.

More people made lifetime memories while float-fishing the Gold Medal waters of the Gunny Gorge as clients of expertly-guided, commercially outfitted river trips. Many more local residents enjoyed self-directed boating, tubing, fishing, and stand-up paddleboarding on the NCA's lower, non-technical reaches of the Gunnison River. And with improved road access (thanks to help from Delta County), many more archaeology students and enthusiasts were able to access the Eagle Rock Shelter Archaeological Site.

All of this use contributes to the improved health and well-being of families and individuals in our local communities, while adding to the local economic output of the growing recreation-based economy. People use the NCA's recreation amenities to pursue active, healthy lifestyles, perhaps contributing to the City of Montrose earning the 2018 Colorado Governor's Healthy Community Award. New businesses are opening in Montrose and Delta counties because our economic base is expanding, due in part to the fact that people are moving to the area to enjoy the many desirable qualities of Colorado's West Slope. High among those qualities are the first-rate recreational opportunities available in BLM's National Conservation Areas: Gunnison Gorge, Dominguez-Escalante, and McInnis Canyons. I am proud of the work our local BLM offices have done in implementing BLM's *Connecting with Communities* national recreation strategy in support of local communities.

While recreation may be the most visible use of GGNCA, these lands support other uses as well. Eleven grazing allotments support sheep and cattle operations. Power and communications rights-of-way through the NCA keep our communities powered-up and connected. Conservation efforts are ongoing to recover special status species such as endangered clay-loving buckwheat and threatened Gunnison sage-grouse.

This year brought some welcome improvements to the staff capacity for GGNCA. After several years of having no dedicated NCA manager, I was honored to serve as acting manager for most of the year, and was fortunate to be named the permanent manager in October. BLM was also able to hire a dedicated Outdoor Recreation Planner, greatly improving staff capacity to serve the needs of the public. BLM also filled a key vacancy in the maintenance staff, resulting in welcome improvements to the condition of NCA facilities.

October 2019 will mark the 20th anniversary of the establishment of GGNCA. As the coming year takes us closer to that important date, BLM staff and I are looking forward to providing outstanding recreational opportunities while serving our communities and conserving important resource values.

Best,

S. Edward Franz
Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area Manager



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area

Bureau of Land Management, Colorado
Uncompahgre Field Office
2465 S Townsend Ave
Montrose, CO 81401
970-240-5300

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