



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

Gunnison Gorge

National Conservation Area



Colorado

Annual Manager's Report—Fiscal Year 2019

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

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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 (NCA) boundary.
- The Gunnison Gorge 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 (GGNCA), 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

GGNCA is highly valued for its diversity of recreational opportunities. According to Colorado Mesa University's [Rural Migration Study](#), 90% of local residents find that the diversity of recreational opportunities improves the quality of their lives, with 61% reporting that it "greatly improves" their lives. Recreationists regularly enjoy many different activities across the GGNCA, including:

- Over 225 miles of trails within the NCA
 - 100 miles of singletrack open to motorcycles, mountain bikes, equestrians, and hikers, including the 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 off-highway vehicle (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 including boating, tubing, stand-up paddleboarding, and swimming
- Hunting, particularly big game and mountain lion
- Exploring cultural areas: ancient Native American sites and historic mines
- Exploring dinosaur track sites

Year Accomplishments

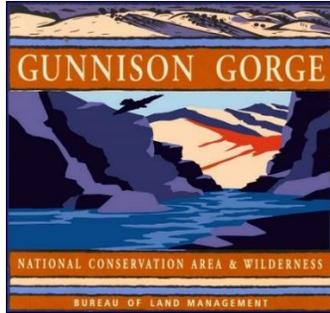
In fiscal year (FY) 19, staff and partners in GGNCA completed the following work:

- Rebuilt the Chukar Toilet at the Chukar Boat Launch, which serves thousands of visitors and protects the natural environment in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness.
- Reseeded a portion of the 2018 Buttermilk Fire to promote native vegetation regrowth.
- Repaired a structure in Howell Village to prevent further degradation of this historically significant site.
- Hosted 20th Anniversary community events that engaged 70 members of the public in educational and celebratory outings within GGNCA.
- Issued 22 special recreation permits (SRPs), generating nearly \$2 million in direct income to the local economy and supporting dozens of jobs in the industry.
- Wrapped up the excavation of Eagle Rock Shelter archaeological site. Excavated pits were backfilled, and the site is now better protected than during excavation.
- Hosted the first GGNCA Artist in Residence who created three pastels for BLM use and hosted two art outings in the GGNCA with members of the public.
- Partnered with Colorado Canyons Association, The Nature Connection, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and Gunnison Gorge Anglers to host the 11th Annual Cottonwood Days for 407 local 6th graders.
- Caged over 140 cottonwood trees along the lower Gunnison River to protect them from beaver damage.
- Removed eleven acres of invasive and non-native vegetation from the Gunnison River corridor, increasing its ecological function and recreational value.
- Actively managed threatened Gunnison sage-grouse habitat in collaboration with several partners.

Future Priorities and Opportunities

BLM staff look forward to developing interpretive and educational materials for Eagle Rock Shelter in partnership with the Ute tribes, History Colorado, the Ute Indian

Museum, and Colorado Canyons Association.



Gunnison Gorge

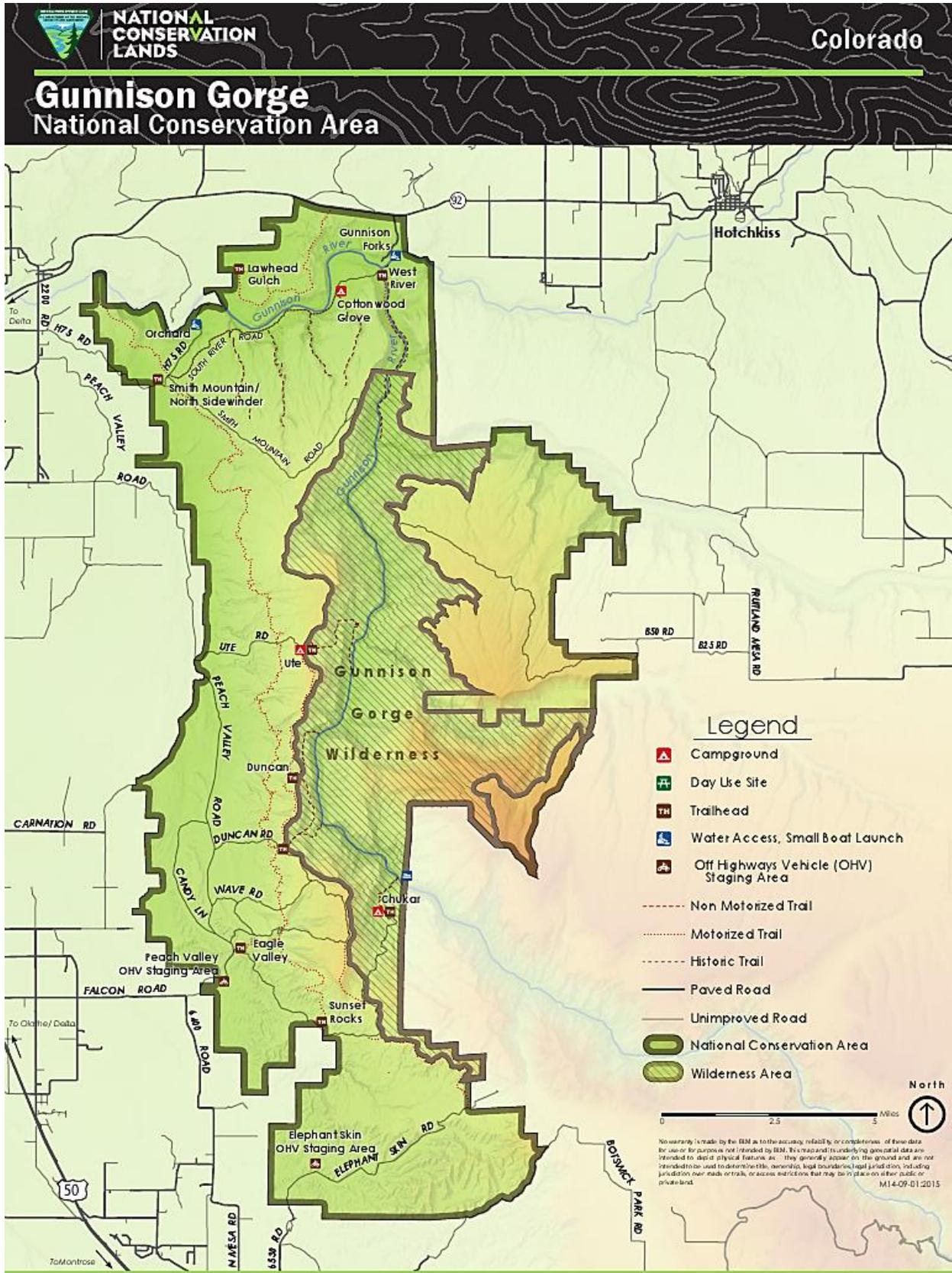
National Conservation Area

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-nca>

Map of Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area



1 Gunnison Gorge 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	\$505,733
Rangeland Management	1020	\$32,579
Cultural Resources Management	1050	\$9,121
Wildlife Habitat Management	1170	\$23,847
Aquatic Habitat Management	1160	\$21,899
T&E Species Management	1170	\$12,930
Wilderness Management	1210	\$19,425
Recreation & Visitor Services	1220	\$58,425
SRP fees and Wilderness Permit Fees (ISRP)*	1232	\$88,898
Total Budget		\$772,897

*Fees collected in FY 2018

Gunnison Gorge NCA receives substantial benefit from partnerships with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and our Friends group Colorado Canyons Association (CCA). CPW supports the off-highway vehicle (OHV) program through a grant funded by state OHV registration fees. CCA is the NCA's Friends group and holds fundraisers, applies for grants, collects donations, and receives membership dues, which they use to further the community stewardship, education, and restoration programs in the NCA.

Current Areas of Focus

Public lands across the west are seeing an increase in illegal dumping. The Gunnison Gorge NCA is experiencing its share of this problem. This issue diverts funding and field personnel time away from enhancing resource conditions and improving recreational opportunities. Local towns and counties are experiencing dumping problems as well.

In response, the Southwest District of BLM Colorado (three field offices, three NCAs, and one National Monument) is in the early stages of developing a strategy to work with Gunnison Gorge NCA partners (towns, counties, friends groups, and user groups) to reduce the magnitude of this problem. The solution is likely to involve several strategies, including a media campaign, outreach to schools and user groups, and coordinated law enforcement. The BLM and community partners will seek innovative ways to help the public “do the right thing,” such as explore the possibility of having alternate open hours for landfills and/or community dump collection days.

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. The BLM anticipates the assessments will be finalized and implementation will begin in 2020.

The BLM completed supplementary rules for GGNCA and its three Special Recreation areas in 2009. The rules address travel management issues, 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 Landscapes Conservation System (NLCS) RMP Implementation in 2004-2006 with BLM specialists, Resource Advisory Council (RAC) members, and the public.

GGNCA is currently implementing the RMP travel management plan, Gunnison Gorge Fee Area Management Plan, 2011 Crawford Area Sage Grouse Conservation Plan, 2011

North Rim Landscape Strategy, 2013 North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, BLM Rangeland 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

Montrose County Grizzly Ridge Pit Free-Use Permit (DOI-BLM-CO-S0554-2019-0001-EA)

The BLM issued Montrose County a free-use-permit for 100,000 tons of sand, gravel, and fill material over a 10-year period.

Generator Installation Flat Top Mesa Communication Site (CO-BLM-CO-S054-2019-0002-CX)

The BLM amended the existing Lease COC-69163 to allow Nexstar to install a 12kW propane standby generator at the KREY-TV transmitter facility located on Flat Top Mesa.

Buttermilk Fire Rehabilitation (DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2019-003 DNA)

The BLM approved seeding a portion of the 2018 Buttermilk wildfire, including about 150 acres within the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness.

Smith Mountain Bike Rally (DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2019-0004-DNA)

The BLM approved an 80-person mountain bike rally on designated trails in GGNCA.

Chukar Toilet Replacement (DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2019-0005-CX)

The BLM approved rebuilding the toilet at the Chukar Boat Put-In after it burned down in 2018.

North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan Black Ridge Habitat Treatments (DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2019-0006-DNA)

The BLM continued to implement the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan by approving treatment areas within GGNCA planning area.

Crawford Oak Mastication and Pinyon Juniper Lop and Scatter (DOI-BLM-CO-S054-2019-0007-DNA)

The BLM approved carrying out two vegetative habitat treatments in the GGNCA planning boundary totally 1,169 acres.

Staffing

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

Gunnison Gorge NCA Staff Time

- NCA Manager –70% GGNCA Manager, 30% UFO Recreation Program Supervision
- Outdoor Recreation Planner – 80% Outdoor Recreation Planning, Wilderness Management, and Special Recreation Permit support
- Lead River Ranger (river patrol, career seasonal) –7-month season (70% GGNCA, 30% other UFO rivers)

UFO Staff Time Working in Gunnison Gorge NCA

- Field Office Manager – 20%
- Outdoor Recreation Planner – 15%
- Special Recreation Permit Administrator – 50%
- Lead OHV Ranger – 40%
- Archaeologist – 25%
- 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

The year 2019 marked the 20th Anniversary of the designation of the Gunnison Gorge NCA – Colorado’s first NCA. Because the anniversary itself was in October 2019, the full celebration will be detailed in the FY 2020 Manager’s Report. It should be noted that NCA and UFO staff spent a significant amount of time preparing for the celebration in FY 2019. GGNCA also hosted its first Artist in Residence – Missy Rogers – which this report details in the Education, Interpretation, and Outreach section below.

Gunnison Gorge NCA saw a decrease in river use in FY 2019. The winter of 2018/2019 saw record snowfall for the southern mountains of Colorado, which led to higher than expected runoff in the Gunnison River. Flows were higher than normal through June, which is when the Gorge sees the most fishing use during normal runoff years. The increased runoff resulted in fewer anglers visiting Gunnison Gorge NCA during June. Even with high flows, the fishing was still very good, but the experience was not what anglers have grown to expect. The increased flows substantially impacted float-fishing, because the flows flush boats through at a more rapid pace than normal. However, trail use and river use outside the wilderness was commensurate with use levels from recent years.

General Accomplishments Table

	Number of Visitors (RMIS Visits)	Education Participants	Interpretative Participants	Visitor Center/Contact Station Visits	Hours of Volunteers	SRPs Issued	Grazing AUMs
TOTALS	296,968	606	82	2,898	1,000	22	6,748

Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

Gunnison Gorge 20th Anniversary

In late September, fish biologists from the BLM and CPW invited the public to do some hands-on fish sampling on the Gunnison River within the NCA in celebration of its 20th anniversary. About 20 locals made the drive to Cottonwood Grove Campground to participate in the demonstration. In addition to the brown and rainbow trout the Gorge is famous for, people were able to observe some sensitive warm-water species thriving in the protected waters of the NCA, including round-tail chubs, flannel-mouth suckers, and blue-head suckers.

Gunnison River Float Trips

Close to 200 high school students from Mesa, Montrose, and Delta counties floated a five-mile stretch of the Gunnison River through the NCA as part of river education trips facilitated by CCA and The Nature Connection. BLM staff joined each trip to talk about careers, natural resources, and public lands stewardship. Most trips stopped at the Eagle Rock Shelter, where students learned about visiting archeological sites with respect.

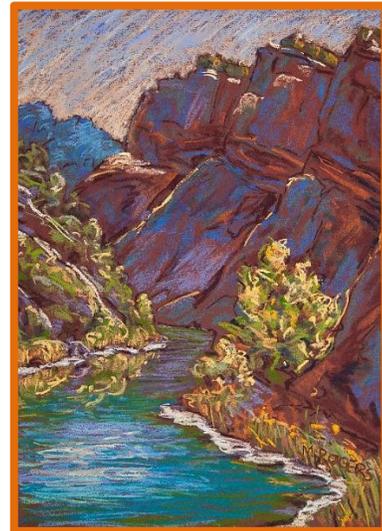


Local high school students participate in riverside education in the Gunnison Gorge.

Artist-in-Residence

Malinda “Missy” Rogers is the first Artist-in-Residence for the Gunnison Gorge NCA. Missy is a natural fit for this well-deserved role because of her deep, sustained love for the public lands surrounding her home east of Delta, Colorado. Missy earned her degree studying art and education in Tennessee and New Mexico, after which she embarked on a career as a professional artist and an art teacher. In the past forty

years, Missy has also worked as a public lands biologist and contributed more than 1700 hours of volunteer time to biological surveys, visitor assistance, cleanups, and river restoration efforts, mostly within the Gunnison Gorge NCA. As part of her residency, Missy created three pieces for the BLM to use, including posters celebrating the Gunnison Gorge NCA's 20th Anniversary and hosted two public art classes in the Gunnison Gorge.



Above, Missy working in the Gunnison Gorge on a sunny summer day. (Right) One of the pieces created as part of her residency of the "Three Sisters" rocks near the Chukar Boat Put-in.

Cottonwood Days

In September, Gunnison Gorge NCA, in partnership with Colorado Canyons Association (CCA), Gunnison Gorge Anglers, the local Trout Unlimited chapter, CPW, and The Nature Connection, held its 11th annual Hands on the Land event known as *Cottonwood Days*. 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 students the opportunity 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 400 students from seven public schools in Delta and Montrose Counties.



Left: students learn to identify macroinvertebrates with a BLM specialist. Right: How to tie flies that mimic those insects with instruction from the Gunnison Gorge Anglers, the local Trout Unlimited chapter.

Fish and Wildlife

Habitat Improvement Projects

Conservation efforts for Gunnison sage-grouse (GUSG) (*Centrocercus minimus*) were a top priority of the NCA wildlife program this year. The 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 300 acres of pinyon and juniper saplings from areas that had habitat improvements completed 10-20 years ago.

The BLM hired contractors to complete 480 acres of lop and scatter treatments of pinyon and juniper trees in the Black Ridge area. This stimulated natural disturbances and preserved both historic vegetation treatments and large sage brush parks that provide habitat for GUSG and essential forage for wintering big game.

The NCA is completing an additional 300 acres of Hydroaxe treatments in the Black Ridge area this fall. These treatments will restore more severely encroached sage brush parks. Additionally, contractors are using Hydroaxe machines to masticate approximately 650 acres of mixed mountain shrub to improve forage for big game near important GUSG habitats. Improved forage for big-game will reduce their use of sage brush resources, retaining essential cover and forage for GUSG. The Gunnison Gorge NCA will seed approximately 500 acres of these masticated units with a diverse mix of native seeds in an effort to restore depleted herbaceous vegetation.



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.

Gunnison Gorge Rainbow Trout Stocking and Surveying

CPW stocked 44,000 whirling disease-resistant rainbow trout fry into the Gunnison Gorge with assistance from the BLM River Rangers. Additionally, CPW conducted two electrofishing surveys with assistance from BLM Fisheries staff. The first was a fry survey to evaluate natural reproduction of rainbow and brown trout fry. This survey indicated that more wild rainbow trout fry are present than in previous years, suggesting that they are rebounding from whirling disease. The second survey was of the adult populations of brown and rainbow trout in Ute Park to evaluate the effects of the high flow year on these populations, and how the rainbow trout are recovering from whirling disease. CPW found fewer brown trout than typical, which is seen as a positive finding as the river tends to produce more than it really needs. CPW also found the highest estimated rainbow trout numbers since whirling disease hit, indicating that the population is recovering, and that stocking is likely assisting the recovery.



A wild rainbow trout fry.

Grazing

Due to severe drought conditions, most grazing permittees observed voluntary non-use in 2019.

Partnerships

Colorado Canyons Association

Colorado Canyons Association (CCA), the Gorge's official Friends group, has been working with the BLM to increase stewardship and education opportunities in the NCA for several years. CCA and GGNCA staff primarily collaborated on projects spearheaded by CCA's VISTA, located at the BLM Montrose office; Cottonwood Days; and river-based education (see highlights in the Education section). CCA's new volunteer and program coordinator, Sara, provided valuable support on the 20th Anniversary community events. CCA's long time Executive Director, Joe Nuehof, resigned in the fall of 2019. The BLM is appreciative of all Joe has brought to the partnership and is excited to see what this transition has in store for CCA.

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 is 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 OHV 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, which has allowed the office to hire one career-seasonal OHV ranger and two seasonal rangers that are critical to keeping robust OHV opportunities available to the public.

The BLM teamed up with CPW, Highland Cycles (a local OHV shop), Stay the Trail, WESTCORE, and CCA to celebrate motorized riding in the Gorge and get members of the public new OHV registration stickers. A total of 64 stickers were sold at Peach Valley OHV staging area.



BLM OHV ranger and member of the public strike a pose at the OHV Tag sale in Peach Valley.

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.

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 county and city leadership.

Recreation and Visitor Services

Visitor Use Summary

A mild climate and varying elevation zones within the Gunnison Gorge supports the ability of the NCA to host recreationists in every season. Visitors can do just about any kind of outdoor activity in the Gorge, but fishing and motorcycle riding are two of the most popular. On a spring evening, the staging site for the Peach Valley OHV Area is full of friends and families out for an after work ride in the adobes. In the fall, anglers flock to the shores of the Gunnison River to take advantage of wade-able river levels, clear water, and warm days.

Chukar Toilet Rebuild

A large focus for the GGNCA's recreation program in FY 19 was rebuilding the Chukar toilet, which burned down in the summer of 2018. This toilet provides an essential amenity at the Chukar Boat Put-in, which serves thousands of visitors each year. The bathroom helps preserve the natural character of the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness and protect human health and safety. Staff completed the necessary environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) minimum requirements analysis, contracting, and, most importantly, the actual rebuild. The rebuild involved hiking and horsepacking all supplies down a one-mile trail. Over the course of the season, staff installed the toilet, vault, and building. Approximately 700 labor hours went into getting this toilet back on the ground. A huge thanks to horsepacker Larry Franks and his team for their support!



Left: BLM River Ranger poses on top of the new Chukar toilet in summer of 2019. Right: Horsepacker Larry Franks poses with one of his mules hauling bathroom building supplies down the Chukar trail.

Cottonwood Grove Campground

Improvements to the Cottonwood Grove Campground, including repairing the ADA-accessible fishing pier, adding low fence to remedy vehicle intrusions, and spreading more gravel, were made in FY 19. Campers and day-use visitors are using this free camping area with more and more frequency.

Special Recreation Permits

The BLM issued 22 Special Recreation Permits in the NCA in FY 19. Outfitters again grossed nearly \$2 million dollars in FY 19, primarily from guided hunting on the east side of the gorge in unit 63 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. GGNCA views its outfitters as key recreation partners that multiply the BLM's mission and stewardship objectives.

Gunnison River and Eagle Rock Shelter

The Gunnison River continues to experience 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. This year, staff conducted a visitor use survey to begin to understand how use compares to Resource Management Plan experiences and objectives.

The 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. BLM staff are working with the Ute tribes, History Colorado, the Ute Indian Museum, and CCA to develop education and interpretation materials for the site. New kiosk signage reminds visitors at the parking area to visit with respect.

Private boaters, anglers, and hikers enjoyed over 4,000 user days in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, providing over \$17,000 in special area fees that go directly back into the Wilderness via improvement projects, ranger staff time, facilities maintenance, and more.

Documentary Film Highlights Rainbow Trout Recovery

BLM recreation and realty staff worked closely with Hog Leg Fly Fishing, a media company that produced the documentary film *Project Rainbow* about the rainbow trout recovery efforts in the Gunnison Gorge. The film will be part of the 2020 Fly Fishing Film Tour, which plays across the country and will feature CPW and outfitters that work in the Gunnison Gorge.

Volunteers

Fifty-three volunteers contributed over 1,000 hours to volunteer projects in the Gunnison Gorge. Below are just a few volunteer program highlights.

Western Colorado Riders and Enthusiasts

Western Colorado Riders and Enthusiasts (WESTCORE) has consistently shown up as a steward for public lands and responsible recreation. Volunteers with WESTCORE worked closely with our OHV trail crew to improve the experience, conditions, and access on Slanty Bridge Trail, a popular motorcycle trail in the Gunnison Gorge's Peach Valley OHV Area. When a bathroom in the NCA planning area was defaced in the

spring, WESTCORE and local painting company RJ's Painting were out there the following day repairing it.



Left: Volunteers with WESTCORE and RJ's Painting work with NCA Manager Edd Franz to remove vulgarities at a popular OHV Recreation site in the Gunnison Gorge planning area. Right: A WESTCORE volunteer and BLM OHV Ranger stand on the new and improved Slanty Bridge.

Sage-grouse Habitat Improvement

In October and November of 2018 and again in September of 2019 as part of National Public Lands Day, CCA and Western Slope Conservation Center partnered with the BLM for sage-grouse habitat improvement efforts in the Gunnison Gorge NCA's Gunnison Sage-grouse Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Under the direction of BLM wildlife biologists, the project involved lopping down pinyon and juniper saplings to create more optimal habitat for the approximately 130 sage-grouse that live in the area. Overall, 14 volunteers took care of 27 acres of habitat over two days in the fall of 2018, contributing a total of 112 hours of their time. This was a great example of the public coming forward to contribute to the stewardship of their public lands and to the preservation of wildlife.

In addition, CCA partnered with The Nature Connection to bring high school students out to help with sage-grouse habitat. The students worked together to improve over 18 acres of habitat while learning about the importance of their work, the biology project itself, and the various careers available to them in the outdoor industry. Overall, nine high school students and two adult volunteers enhanced 18 acres, contributing 88 hours of their time.



A volunteer with Western Slope Conservation Center lops a small juniper tree during a volunteer event.

Cottonwood Caging

Over the course of three missions, 15 volunteers, including the Forest Service's Youth Conservation Corps, helped cage over 140 cottonwood trees along the Gunnison River. The missions took place in hot weather and involved plenty of mosquitos, hundreds of t-posts, and strong arm muscles to pound them in. The cottonwoods along the river have been part of a multi-year effort to improve the riparian habitat, but in recent years, beavers have threatened fledgling stands. The wire fencing will help deter beavers and give the cottonwoods a better chance to become established.



Left: Boats filled to the brim with materials. Right: The hardworking volunteers who installed caging supplies.

3 Science

Science

Elk Herd Monitoring

In 2019, CPW continued a project that is attempting to answer questions related to the spatial and temporal movements of elk within the Gunnison Basin. Between January 2014 and June 2019, 187 adult female elk were captured via net-gunning elk on winter ranges, including areas within the GGNCA planning area. The results of this project will help CPW biologists better understand elk migration timing and spatio-temporal habitat on private and public lands, which will refine winter habitat area designations. This information should ultimately help CPW better balance conflicts associated with hunting opportunity, agricultural use, winter management decisions, human development, and management of other wildlife species of concern including the GUSG.

Gunnison Sage-grouse

U.S. Geological Survey researcher Doug Ouren, in coordination with BLM biologists Ken Holsinger and Missy Siders, published his research about the effectiveness of protective buffers around known lekking areas. BLM land management plans incorporate “protective buffers” around leks that are intended to protect GUSG breeding, nesting, and brood rearing activities. The results of this published research highlighted that site-specific use of buffers may be insufficient at providing protection for breeding sage-grouse within the GGNCA. The results of this research will help managers improve GUSG conservation within the GGNCA planning area.

Additionally, CPW coordinated with BLM biologists to explore a new method to improve GUSG lek detectability, as well as lek monitoring efficiency. In early April 2019 during the peak of sage-grouse lekking, an airplane equipped with high-resolution thermal imaging cameras flew over the areas where known GUSG were located. Simultaneously, ground-based observers surveyed leks to compare detectability and survey results. Unfortunately, excessive snow from the previous winter reduced access for the ground-based surveys and only four of the seven known leks could be monitored by ground. Results were mixed and, although the aerial survey technology is promising, ground-based surveys resulted in increased detectability. In the future, the use of Unmanned Aerial System (i.e., drones) may improve the effectiveness of thermal imaging surveys.



A male Gunnison sage-grouse strutting before dawn on a lek within the Gunnison Gorge NCA planning area.

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

There are three fenced enclosures in the NCA to protect populations of clay-loving wild buckwheat: one 300 acre enclosure adjacent to the western boundary of the NCA along Montrose County Road 6200, one (approx. 13 acres) about 0.5 miles north of Montrose County Road 6200, and one (approx. 17 acres) near the southwest boundary of the NCA in the Elephant Skin Area.

The BLM completed clay-loving buckwheat (*Eriogonum pelionophilum*) monitoring in late September 2019, which marked the eighth year of monitoring at both Selig Canal (model airplane club) study sites and Powerline study site (all in the GGNCA), the seventh year of monitoring at both South Fairview study sites, and the third year of monitoring at Wacker Ranch. We documented decreasing trends across the study system between 2018 and 2019, resulting in an overall decreasing trend range-wide (Figure 1). Reproductive frequency was higher among mature individuals in 2019 than in 2018. The northern three study sites (Selig Canal inside, Selig Canal outside, and Powerline) showed steeper population declines than the three southern study sites (S. Fairview 1, S. Fairview 2, and Wacker Ranch). Decreasing trends are the result of mortality of mature individuals and the lack of seedling recruitment. Despite the steep declines documented since 2016, average range-wide density in 2019 remains close to 2013 levels (Figure 1).

Climate is likely the primary factor driving the diminishing population trends. Consecutive years of drought in 2017 and 2018 impacted the Uncompahgre Valley, resulting in changes to clay-loving buckwheat habitat and its associated vegetation

community. Mortality among commonly associated species such as budsage (*Artemisia spinescence*), black sagebrush (*Artemisia nova*), mat saltbrush (*Atriplex corrugata*), and perennial bunch grasses has been observed, along with the proliferation of the non-native species *Halogeton glomeratus*.

Climate data from weather stations in Delta and Montrose illustrate the severity of the drought from 2017 through 2018. Near the northern end of clay-loving buckwheat's range in Delta, total annual precipitation averaged 1.67" in 2017 and 2018, or nearly half of the average of the other years since 2012, when monitoring was established. Perhaps most significantly spring and summer precipitation were low during this period, totaling just 1.34" ($\mu = 0.33$ ") over two consecutive spring-summer seasons – when temperatures and evaporative demand are at their highest. A similar, though slightly less severe, pattern was documented near the southern end of the species' range at a Montrose weather station. Weather year 2017 and 2018 averaged 2.5" of total precipitation with the respective spring-summer seasons totaling just 2.37" ($\mu = 0.59$ "). Soil moisture data loggers have been implemented across the study system to provide a better understanding of site-specific soil moisture.

Despite range-wide losses related to drought, clay-loving buckwheat may be in a unique position to overcome such extreme climate events. The persistence of flowering individuals documented in 2019 indicates that plants are hardy and able to survive a prolonged period of dormancy to conserve energy during unfavorable conditions.

Range-wide trend –

All five individual study sites exhibited decreases from the 2018 to 2019 sampling interval, resulting in a decreasing trend range-wide (Figure 1).

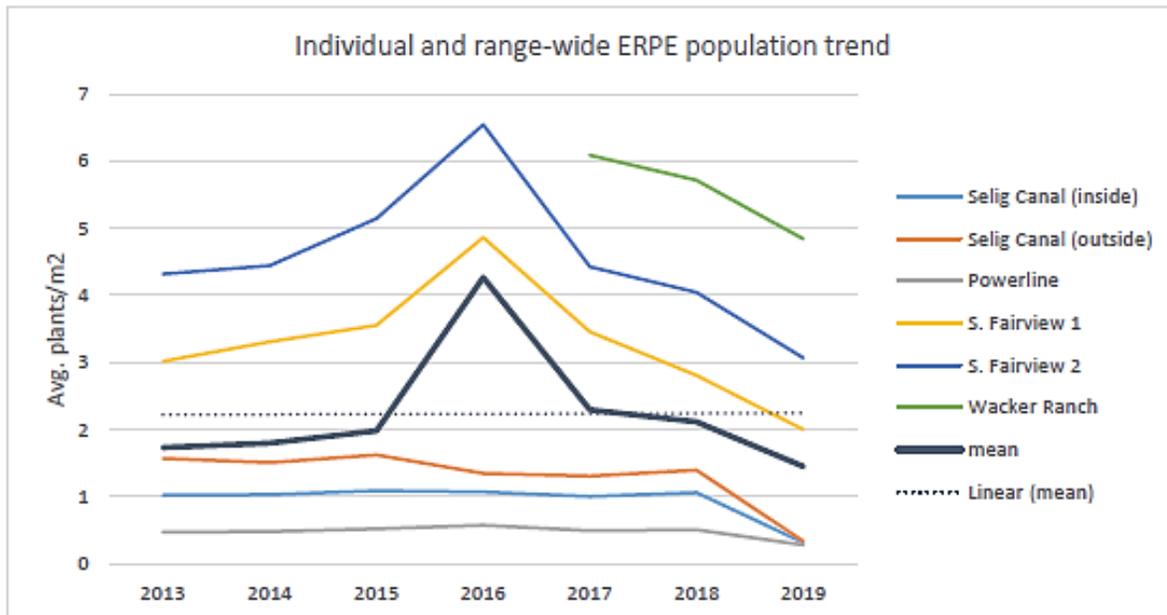


Figure 1. Range-wide ERPE trend defined by the average of individual population trends (change in average plants/m²).

Eagle Rock Shelter Excavation

Principal investigator: Dudley Gardner Ph.D. Professor Emeritus at Western Wyoming Community College

For the past 12 years, active data recovery excavations at Eagle Rock Shelter have resulted in numerous significant contributions to a better understanding of the ancient prehistory of Western Colorado. Excavations at the site resulted in the discovery of extensive stratified deposits indicating regular occupation of the site for nearly 13,000 years, making it among the oldest stratified sites in North America. After a decade of discovery, active excavations at the site concluded in the spring of 2019. Although cultural materials recovered from the site will be analyzed for years to come, the site itself will enter a new phase. To ensure its long term preservation, the site has been carefully backfilled. Through the years, the site has become a popular destination for recreationists. The field office is actively engaged with the researchers and affiliated Tribes to develop an interpretive plan that will protect the site and provide an enhanced educational experience for visitors.

Mancos Shale Paleontological Investigations

Principal investigator: Joshua R. Lively, Ph.D. Assistant Professor University of Illinois, Springfield

Ongoing paleontological, sedimentological, and geochemical investigations of the Upper Cretaceous Mancos Shale continued during 2019.

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 these opportunities include hunting, trapping, fishing, and use of motorized vehicles.

Consistent with Section 8(c) of the act establishing the NCA, the State of Colorado is responsible for regulating and managing hunting, trapping, and fishing in the NCA. Pursuant to Gunnison Gorge NCA Supplemental Rules ([Federal Register / Vol. 75, No. 70, Pg. 18880 / Tuesday, April 13, 2010](#)) and consistent with the NCA establishing legislation (Section 7(d)(2)), discharge of firearms is prohibited within 500 yards of developed recreation sites in the NCA. Otherwise, there are no restrictions on hunting other than the State of Colorado’s regulation and management requirements. 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 FY 19
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 FY 19
19.3	19.3	19.3	19.3

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table—Hunting

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Value	Acres Monitored in FY 19
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 FY 19
63,150	63,150	63,150	0 (CPW monitors trapping)

Stressors Affecting Exceptional Multiple-use Opportunities

Motorized Vehicle Use

As a welcome improvement over 2018, Gunnison Gorge NCA was able to hire a full OHV crew in 2019. This 3-person crew, including a career-seasonal lead OHV ranger, is critical to keeping the motorized opportunities in the Gorge at a stable or improving

level. The crew engaged volunteers in several projects, thereby multiplying their impact on the resource. Local BLM managers are hopeful that the recent improvements in seasonal hiring continue into the future.

Fishing

The winter of 2018-2019 was a stark contrast to the bone-dry conditions of the previous season. High snow pack levels led to a prolonged water release schedule through the Gorge, peaking at about 7,500 cubic feet per second (cfs) in June (normal flows are usually in the range of 600 to 1,200 cfs). However, elevated flows (1,500-2,500 cfs) continued on and off through the spring and summer to make room for continued snowmelt flowing into Blue Mesa Reservoir (located a few miles upriver from the NCA).



A large Colorado River rainbow trout from the Gunnison Gorge NCA.

The Bureau of Reclamation is responsible for water storage and regulation of flows out of the reservoir and strives to meet the needs of hydro power generation, agriculture, flood control, recreation, and endangered fish habitat. The Bureau of Reclamation works with weather and stream flow forecasters to predict and communicate dam operations to interested parties, including the BLM's permitted river outfitters. However, concrete decisions generally can only be made a week or two ahead of time.

This is challenging for the BLM's permitted outfitters as well as the general public from a trip planning perspective. Most anglers find high flows to be detrimental to their desired fishing experience in the Gorge, which often leads to commercial outfitters and private anglers deciding to cancel and/or reschedule trips days before they are scheduled to launch.

Hunting and Trapping

There are no known stressors for hunting or trapping opportunities.

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 FY 19, the BLM removed 11 acres of tamarisk and Russian olives from the Gunnison River corridor. 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. Thanks to the record amount of rain and snow in the winter and spring of 2019, vegetation and erosion minimized the visual impact.

Ecological Naturalness

Ecological naturalness is evaluated periodically in the Gunnison Gorge NCA 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%

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

Status and Trend Table – Natural Values

Status of Natural Appearance	Trend
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

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 19
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 FY 19
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 use 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 across the landscape, the track looks like a road and others follow suit. The North Delta OHV open-play area is nearby, where OHVs are allowed to 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 Gunnison Gorge unit, factors commonly observed include:

- BLM routes
- Current grazing (mainly from cattle, sheep, deer, and elk, based on observations of droppings and degree of browse and grass utilization and hedging)
- Drought
- 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 right-of-ways (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

GGNCA contains a number of historic and prehistoric sites. Historic period sites include mining sites with associated structures, charcoal ovens, trails, and grazing related features. Prehistoric period objects and values found at these sites include ancient rock art panels, camps, lithic toolstone reduction sites, and other objects indicative of extensive and diverse prehistoric use of the area.

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 during FY 19.

Active excavations at Eagle Rock Shelter ended during FY 19, and the open excavation pit was carefully backfilled to protect its fragile deposits. The site will be closely monitored for erosional issues, and backfilling will be modified or augmented as needed to ensure its long term preservation. Future work at the site will include developing interpretive materials and reclaiming/re-vegetating areas around the site that have become denuded of vegetation as a result of excavations and visitation of the site.

Repairs were made to the roof of a dugout structure at Howell Village, a historic mine camp in the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness. One edge of the juniper pole, bark, and soil roof had begun to collapse. The damaged portion was repaired in-kind. The fallen cross beam was replaced, and the superstructure of bark and soil was replaced using local materials. The structure will be monitored in the future to determine if additional repairs are necessary.

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 FY 19
63,150	3,100	3,100	4

Stressors Affecting Cultural Resources

Both natural environmental and human-caused stressors can impact cultural resources. In general, casual collecting of surface artifacts can diminish sites' National Register eligibility and may lead to more destructive vandalism and artifact loss. During FY 19, Eagle Rock Shelter experienced stressors that illustrate the potential resource hazards of maintaining an open excavation pit over a long period of time. In one case, natural settling in conjunction with visitors venturing too close to the side wall of the open excavation pit led to a sidewall collapse. Cultural objects within the collapse zone no longer maintain provenience, and much of their interpretive value is lost. On another occasion, a visitor built a fire in an alcove just around the corner from the rock shelter. Had the fire been built any closer, ancient C14 samples may have been contaminated. The open excavation pit was backfilled to reduce the likelihood of these and other impacts occurring. This action will substantially reduce the number and intensity of stressors acting upon the site and ensure its long-term preservation.

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 Gunnison Gorge NCA boasts a highly scenic landscape.

There is no current visual resource management inventory of the NCA. No actions occurred in FY 19 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 FY 19
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 biggest impact to wilderness in FY 19 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 FY 19
63,150	17,784	17,784	17,784

Stressors Affecting Wilderness Values

After the Buttermilk Fire in the summer of 2018, BLM aerially seeded about 150 acres within the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness to preserve its natural character. The BLM completed a minimum requirements analysis leading to the decision to allow limited aircraft use in the wilderness, which is otherwise prohibited. In the analysis, the long-term benefit of restoring native plants to the area in support of ecological naturalness outweighed the short term undesirable impacts from the use of aircraft in wilderness.

The Chukar Boat Launch toilet burned down in the summer of 2018. BLM staff spent considerable time in FY 19 replacing the structure and completing the required NEPA, minimum requirements analysis, contracting, etc. The impact to the naturalness from not having a toilet facility, as well as foreseeable impacts to health and human safety, led to the BLM management decision to replace the facility. In the analysis, the protection of naturalness (prevention of accumulation of human waste and associated material) and sanitation outweighed the undesirable impact of having a permanent structure in the wilderness.

Ultimately, the summer of 2018 demonstrated how the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness is vulnerable to things outside of BLM management control (vandalism and wildfire, in these cases) that can impact qualities of the area's wilderness character.

Recreation Resources

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

The RMP provides specific management for twelve non-wilderness recreational management zones. Supplementary rules also exist, which increase the 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 (e.g. hikers, runners, equestrians, mountain bikers, dirt bikers, ATV/UTV riders). The management and recreation amenity development of this area is widely considered exemplary in the BLM.

The Gunnison and North Fork Rivers SRMA provides upland and river-focused recreational opportunities, including road access to NCA river access points (i.e. boat ramps) where boating and float fishing are less arduous and less technical than in the wilderness. 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 several years. This increase 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: the 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 FY 19
63,150	63,150	63,150	45,060

Stressors Affecting Recreation Resources

As the Gunnison and North Fork SRMA sees increasing use, GGNCA staff is implementing a social monitoring protocol for the Forks to Austin stretch of the Gunnison River. This will help ensure GGNCA staff members are meeting recreation management objectives and providing for the user experience outlined in the GGNCA RMP. Staff began collecting this baseline data in FY 19.

Since the BLM accomplishes much of its recreation workload through seasonal staff, GGNCA is very vulnerable to budget reductions. If future budgets were to tighten, seasonal employees would be among the first to be cut out of the budget. Maintenance of recreation sites, weed control, visitor contacts, and visitor compliance with regulations would be strongly affected. Additionally, we are seeing increasing use during the “shoulder” seasons, which goes beyond the traditional six-month long seasonal position. Upkeep of facilities is especially challenging when a seasonal maintenance ranger is not on board.

Stressor Affecting All Resources

The six-week shutdown of the government negatively affected the BLM’s ability to manage the NCA. It eliminated about 10% of the work year, and it put the BLM behind

in planning, purchasing, hiring, contracting, resource monitoring, partnership work, commercial permitting, etc.

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

Resources, Objects, and Values Status Summary Table		
Resource, Object, or Value	Status	Trend
		Peach Valley OHV Skills Course and completion of the Blackridge Trail.
Cultural Values	Good	Stable

6 Manager's Letter



Sometimes you
eat the bear . . .
and sometimes the
bear, well he eats
you.

Dear Friends,

After enduring record drought in 2018, FY 2019 brought much needed rain to our area on its very first day. And snow eventually followed. The past winter marked one of the snowiest on record for southwest Colorado. The spring brought all that snowmelt into our rivers, and they roared to life. In Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area, the Gunnison River surged with high water from late May through mid-June, and then remained a bit elevated through mid-August.

The exceptionally high flows of early June disrupted scheduled float-fishing trips for a couple of weeks during what is usually the most sought-after season, causing financial losses for some commercial outfitters. On the other hand, high spring flows provided necessary habitat conditions downriver that allowed for successful reproduction of endangered warm-water fish species.

In the Gorge, the fishing was excellent all season long, and the sustained elevated flows into August added extra whitewater boating fun to the experience.

At the same time, the snow in the high country on National Forest lands was very slow to melt out over the summer, and when it finally did melt out, many of the trails were blocked with downed trees and avalanche debris. This resulted in the NCA providing desired recreational trail hiking/riding opportunities for people displaced by poor trail conditions in the high country. So the same weather phenomena that led to lower use on the river also brought increased use on GGNCA's trails.

Speaking of trails, much maintenance and signing work was accomplished by the NCA's OHV crew. Colorado Parks and Wildlife funds the crew through a grant paid for by OHV registration fees. It was great to have a full crew working in the Gorge this season, thanks to this partnership. The crew also had solid help from our partners at Western Colorado Riders and Enthusiasts (WESTCORE) with reroutes and repairs to trail features. A local Boy Scout leaned into replacing one of the trail boardwalks in Peach Valley as his Eagle Scout project.

2019 was the 20th year of this amazing landscape being designated as a National Conservation Area. In reflecting on that, it becomes clear that one of the keys establishing the Gunnison Gorge NCA in the first place, and to the continuing care and management of this treasure, is the importance of partnerships. The Gorge was born out of community partners working together with local leaders to achieve the special designation of National Conservation Area for this piece of public land. Since then, partnerships with many different groups and entities have been the backbone of BLM's ability to serve our communities and make steady enhancements to the Gunnison Gorge. Whether you look at grazing management, rights of way, educational programs, fishery management, trail opportunities, commercial outfitting, illegal dump cleanups, or almost any other aspect of maintaining the Gorge as a highly valued landscape, you see the contributions of the NCA's many dedicated partners.

Even with the difficulty we faced early this year due to the lengthy government shutdown, BLM's partners hung in there with us. The Gunnison Gorge staff and I are grateful for the patience, understanding, empathy, and offers of assistance from so many you during and after that time. It's a pleasure and an honor to work with all of you in achieving our shared goals. I look forward to continuing our work together in 2020.

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
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November 22, 2019

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