



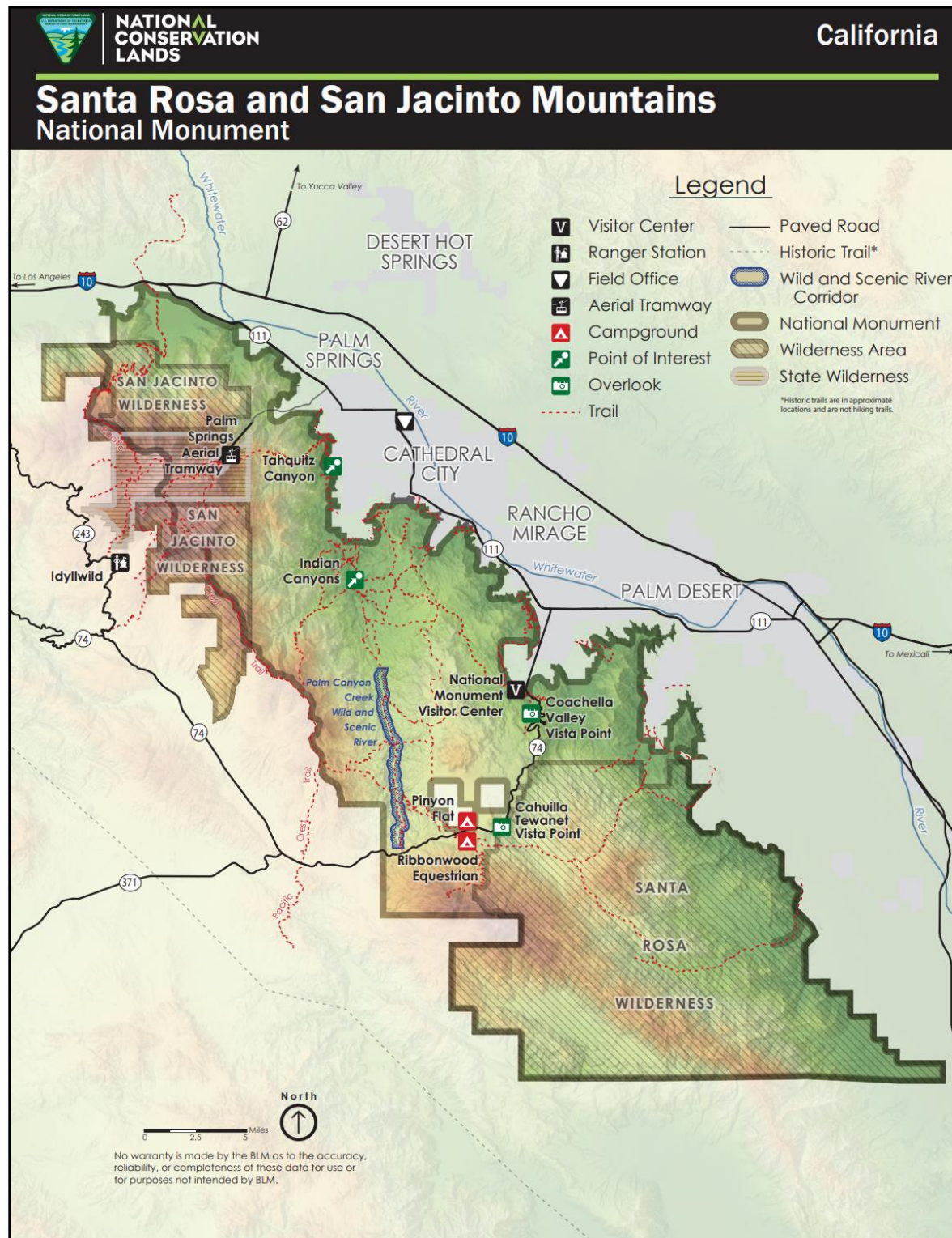
**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

California
2021: Annual Manager's Report

Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

While the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center was closed, Monument staff actively worked on some improvements to the Visitor Center and outdoor landscape in anticipation of reopening. Improvements included fresh paint to all indoor spaces, a new floor layout for the visitor center and gift shop, and new interpretive exhibits indoor and outdoors. Staff and volunteers also worked on cleaning up the landscape around the Visitor Center which had become very overgrown with numerous dead trees from prolonged drought conditions and added some new native plants to the Ed Hastey Garden Trail. Another monumental improvement came through as a result of grant funds received by the Friends of the Desert Mountains to construct and install new and updated installations from the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center Interpretive Concept Plan that was finalized in December of 2019. New visitor center improvements installed included shaded, entry-way kiosk, a welcome sign in English, Spanish and Cahuilla, a Leave No Trace sign, and a railing with five interpretive panels about desert tortoise conservation around the desert tortoise enclosure.



Challenges

COVID-19 was by far the greatest challenge faced by the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument, especially with the California Stay at Home order that was in effect from March 19, 2020 through June 15, 2021. The visitor center for the Monument was closed on March 16, 2020 and remained closed until March 11, 2022. COVID-19 also had a major impact on volunteerism within the Monument. The majority of volunteers elected not to engage in any volunteer programs for the 2020 - 2021 season. This decrease in volunteers, as well as the majority of Monument staff working from home, aside from mission-critical work, resulted in greatly reduced public programs and outreach being undertaken within the Monument this season. These challenges were evident with an increase in use and abuse of public lands during this season including more trash, especially facial masks left behind on trails/trailheads, and a few trails having “outdoor gyms” set up with unauthorized placement of exercise apparatus on the trails.



Visitors

The number of international and out-of-state visitors to the Coachella Valley this year was lessened due to COVID-19 and some limitations to international travel. Even some of the portals that visitors use to explore the Monument such as the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway, the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center and the Living Desert Zoo (which has the only access to the Eisenhower Trail) were temporarily closed due to restrictions with the pandemic.

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument remained a popular destination for locals to get outdoors and explore the trails while most other activities and attractions in the Coachella Valley were closed. This increase in visitors using the trails was clearly observed with many of the trailhead parking lots and even Highway 74 overflowing with cars in the Palm Desert area of the Monument, as well as other trailhead locations across the Coachella Valley. Recreational use along the Highway 74 corridor has continued to rise so much that a new gate installation is being planned for at the upper parking lot for Randall Henderson Trail at the visitor center for the Monument. This new gate will improve public access to trails on the east side of the highway and allow public access to the area 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Installation of the new gate was planned for December 2021.



Partnerships

The Friends of the Desert Mountains (FODM) are the primary non-profit support partner for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. FODM manages the Monument's volunteer program, including recruitment, training, program and project development, recognition, and development. The organization is a major contributor to Monument programs and projects including trail maintenance, stewardship, invasive plant removal, visitor outreach and education, visitor services and community science research.

This year FODM was awarded a cooperative agreement from the BLM in the amount of \$49,000. This one-year agreement was for youth education and included community science within the Monument with University of California Riverside as a sub-recipient. The youth education portion provided place-based natural and environmental science education and local field trips for school aged children (K-12) and introduced them to the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.



Science

University of California Riverside (UCR) continued researching the effects of drought response on common plant and animal species within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains with support from a BLM Cooperative Agreement. UCR worked with a small group of Friends of the Desert Mountains Community Science volunteers to monitor 68 vegetation plots across both mountain ranges. Unfortunately, due to limitations related to COVID-19, only low and mid-elevation plots along 14 trails in the Monument were able to be assessed and no plots in the high elevations were surveyed because of concerns about staff and volunteer safety. This research is providing helpful insight into managing the Monument in the face of long-term drought and highlighting important areas of climate refugia, that appear to be important areas to focus management attention to for sustaining biodiversity within the Monument. One of the plants focused on was the creosote bush which seems to be more drought resistant than some other natives, such as brittlebush.

Monument staff have continued to study a “new” desert tortoise population in the Santa Rosa Mountains. Little is known about the extent of this population. Interns and a handful of Community Science volunteers continue to collect data on tortoise sign along these trails as well as complete habitat assessments where the species has been documented. Many of these new occurrences are the result of recreationists sharing their sightings with staff and this has expanded the known range of desert tortoise in the Monument from La Quinta out to Palm Springs.



Climate Impacts

The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument landscape increasingly shows impacts of elevated annual temperatures, reduction in annual precipitation, and increases in invasive species distribution. These impacts are becoming more evident across both mountain ranges, especially in the hotter and drier Santa Rosa Mountains, and some native plant species are dying off. An increase in wildfires is also evident. Wildfires are even occurring in the low desert area of the Monument, which was unheard of until recent years. Notable wildfire events for fiscal year 2021 included the Snow, Flats and Scenic Fires.



Climate Resiliency

One of the ongoing actions within the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument is managing invasive species. This season, 13 acres of weed treatments were carried out in the Monument, with a focus on tamarisk and fountain grass. These treatments were focused on specific watersheds in the Santa Rosa Mountains. Where these continuing efforts have been undertaken, some of the natural water sources that had been dry for years have been observed with water at the surface again, which is a huge benefit to the local wildlife, such as the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep. A

long-term goal for better management of invasive species throughout the Monument is completion of a programmatic invasive species NEPA document so that additional areas and other invasive species can be treated by Monument staff and partners.



Social and Environmental Justice

Volunteers for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument have been leading guided interpretive hikes for SoCal Adaptive Sports for individuals with physical disabilities. The adaptive hiking program, operated by SoCal Adaptive Sports in partnership with Friends of the Desert Mountains, provides persons with disabilities the opportunity to experience hiking in the magnificent lands of the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

All guided hike and educational programs are free and open to everyone. Guided, interpretive hikes are being lead on other trails across the Monument and additional recreational experiences being planned for the future. Additionally, ongoing improvements to the Visitor Center and Ed Hastey Garden Trail include plans to expand interpretive materials and experiences to include more ADA-friendly accessibility on site, and to offer more information in Spanish for visitors.



Events

On October 24, 2020, the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument celebrated its 20th anniversary. While big in-person events and celebrations that were planned were not able to happen due to California Stay at Home Orders, staff were able to work with partners to celebrate this milestone in other ways. Events included special social media posts by Friends of the Desert Mountains and Conservation Lands Foundation, as well as a special article that made the cover of Palm Springs Life magazine that highlighted the Monument's anniversary.

In partnership with the Friends of the Desert Mountains, a special 24-hour BioBlitz event was held on the day of the anniversary to encourage the public to learn about the outstanding biological diversity found within the Monument by having participants upload their observations from the trails to a project just for the Monument using the iNaturalist app. At the end of the event, participants submitted 328 observations of 117 species including the federally endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep, Abert's towhee, zebra-tailed lizard, and hedgehog cactus.



Words from the staff

Fiscal year 2021 was another whirlwind year because of ongoing challenges with COVID-19 and the prolonged closure of the visitor center for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. With the visitor center closed all year, staff continued to find creative and safe ways to engage and educate the public as they visited the Monument. As a Service First Monument co-managed with the US Forest Service, supported by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, Friends of the Desert Mountains, the City of Palm Desert, and many others, the importance of building and maintaining strong partnerships and communications across the Monument continues to be critical to effective management and collaborative stewardship of the Monument.

To help address all the use and abuse of public lands seen over the past year, all Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument staff have completed Leave No Trace awareness training to help better engage with the public and promote responsible recreation on public lands. Both BLM and US Forest Service Monument staff are leading the way to help establish the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument as a Leave No Trace Gold Standard Site in the next year and are actively bringing more attention to local Leave No Trace messages and programs to share with visitors to the Monument.

Staff are also working on updating the brochure for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument and will have the product completed in fiscal year 2022. The updated brochure will expand on recreational opportunities available within the Monument, as well as include local messages of Leave No Trace. In addition to this publication, other brochures are in the process of being updated as well, including those for the Ed Hastey Garden Trail, Randall Henderson Trail, and various brochures on resources such as birds and wildflowers of the Monument.

Finally, staff are looking forward to welcoming visitors back to the visitor center for the Monument in fiscal year 2022. Staff have been busy at work behind the scenes getting the facility spruced up and refreshed in anticipation of reopening and are anxious to return to in person visitor services and show off new seasonal interpretive exhibits that were developed during the closure that will highlight new resources, objectives and values that the Monument was designated for.





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Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument

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