



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Colorado  
2022: Annual Manager's Report

## Browns Canyon National Monument





# Accomplishments

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In 2022 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and partners, including the United States Forest Service (USFS), Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), and Friends of Browns Canyon (FoBC) were able to complete the interpretation, education, and sign plan for the monument. This document outlines the priorities for implementing the various educational components identified in the monument plan.

Work continued on the Ethnography Study in partnership with the Southern Ute Cultural Preservation Department and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Historic Preservation Office. Representatives from the above groups were able to continue field visits and ethnographic interviews and discussions in 2022 including engagement with many tribal elders. This even included an opportunity for tribal youth to go whitewater rafting through Browns Canyon (see photo below).

Monitoring and maintenance of sites and facilities continued to occur in 2022 including several visits to lesser visited areas in the monument such as Railroad Gulch and Turret Trail.



# Challenges

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While the interpretation, education, and sign plan was completed, partners continue to be challenged with funding for implementation of the priority components. Staffing and volunteer capacity to regularly monitor the boundaries of the monument also continues to be a challenge. Visitor use has declined to pre-COVID levels which has alleviated some of the previous challenges associated with full facilities and increased resource impacts.



# Visitors

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In 2022 Browns Canyon National Monument (BCNM) saw approximately 86,000 visitors through commercial rafting and 205,000 visitors to the monument either as private boaters, staying in the developed campgrounds or hiking on the trails of the national monument. This is comparable to 2021 levels (200,000) which is down significantly from 2020 levels (400,000 visits) but up from 2019, pre-pandemic levels (126,000 visits).



# Partnerships

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BLM-USFS cooperative management of the monument continued in 2022. This work included coordination in the completion of an interpretive and education plan as well as ongoing day-to-day management and monitoring. This work also included FoBC and Greater Arkansas River Nature Association. The partnership with CPW in management of the river corridor continued as well. This work included visitor contacts, visitor safety and maintenance of the Ruby Mountain and Hecla Junction Recreation Sites. Colorado Parks and Wildlife also assisted with the annual campsite clean-up and monitoring. Through a partnership with Living Heritage Research Council, BLM hosted a visit from tribal elders to record reflections and history for a pilot tribal Ethnography Study.



# Science

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BLM conducted monitoring of upland vegetation on BLM lands within the BCNM area during the summer of 2022. Points were randomly generated in ArcGIS using aerial imagery and geospatial data and were restricted to open rangelands with slopes of less than thirty percent. A total of four points were sampled to assess foliar cover and floristic diversity during that time. Each point consisted of a line point intercept transect to estimate foliar cover using modified BLM AIM (Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring) protocol where a 50-meter transect with a randomly generated azimuth was set up. Vegetation present was sampled by dropping a vertical pin flag every half meter along the transect for a total of one hundred sample points. Every plant species touching the pin flag, ground cover type, and presence/absence of litter at each sample point was recorded.

A species richness inventory was conducted to estimate the number of species present at each sampling point using the modified BLM AIM protocol. Team members surveyed the fifty square meter survey area and recorded every plant species present and the approximate abundance of the plant. Surveys lasted until 2 minutes had passed between new species sightings, and then the inventory was completed.

In summary, the average results for the four sampled points resulted in over thirty-one unique plant species, 63% foliar cover, 29% litter cover and 9% bare ground. An inventory of weeds was done in the areas monitored and there were no weeds identified. The same points will be re-sampled in four to five years with the same methodology to identify any changes in the long term.



# Climate Impacts

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Mountain snowpack plays a significant role in Colorado, not only for the farmers, ranchers, and municipal water providers but also the outdoor recreation industry who rely on consistent flows for commercial white-water rafting. 2022 saw a below average snowpack with average run-off. Due to the Voluntary Flow Program, a coalition of water managers and water users who work together in optimizing water releases for all water users, the commercial rafting season had a successful year and private use of the river remained high. Below average snowpack in the rest of the west likely contributed to higher private boater visitation on the Arkansas River in Browns Canyon. If drought years continue the ability to selectively transfer water will be harder and harder putting strains on this outdoor recreation industry, a major source of revenue for the local communities.





# Climate Resiliency

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With the management plan being recently completed resource staff are only beginning to develop monitoring and research within the Monument, including climate resiliency. AIM plots were established in 2022 (see Science above) that will serve as a baseline for plant species, foliar cover, litter cover, and bare ground.



# Social and Environmental Justice

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During 2022, work continued on the Browns Canyon National Monument Pilot Ethnographic Study. This is a pilot study to inform monument staff about Native American perspectives on management recommendations, conservation concerns, interpretative themes, the identification of significant natural and cultural resources, and other outcomes as identified by tribal participants. This will assist the staff in better managing important cultural resources as recreational visitation to the monument increases. The collaboration involved Living Heritage Research Council (LHRC) who coordinated the ethnographic research and tribal engagement with the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. The project aims to strengthen government-government relationships in the understanding of tribal connections with BCNM. The project strategic goals are:

- 1) provide information relevant to the management of cultural and natural resources within the monument boundary through ethnographic research with traditionally associated tribal communities.
- 2) provide opportunities for elders and cultural experts from associated tribal communities to participate in onsite field research to preliminarily identify natural and cultural resources of cultural significance.
- 3) serve as a pilot study that will solicit tribal input regarding future and in depth ethnographic, traditional cultural property, ethnobotanical, traditional use and/or cultural landscape studies.
- 4) generate Tribe-approved educational and public outreach material to be used both in tribal communities and with the public at BCNM.

On August 2nd-3rd 2022, LHRC, BLM, USFS, Southern Ute Cultural Preservation Department, and one Ute intern conducted fieldwork that focused specifically on visiting one new area of cultural interest, training the Ute intern on ethnographic protocols, and discussing management recommendations at project sites.

On August 22nd-25th, LHRC, BLM, Southern Ute Cultural Preservation Department, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, four Ute Mountain Ute representatives selected by the THPO and Elder's Committee, and two Ute interns participated in fieldwork, ethnographic interviews, and management discussions in and around BCNM, as well as visited one new area of cultural interest.

On August 25th, after the fieldwork closeout meeting, USFS and BLM cultural resources staff led the two Ute interns through a day where they learned about how federal archaeology is conducted by visiting several archaeological sites and discussing how they are identified, recorded, and managed. On August 26th, BLM Cultural Resource staff and the two Ute interns participated in a river trip with a focus on specific cultural resource identification and management issues related to the Arkansas River at Browns Canyon National Monument.

Finally on October 6th, LHRC, BLM, USFS, Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, and one Ute intern presented about the Browns Canyon ethnographic study and efforts supported by state historic fund matching funds to Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, along with the Director of the National Park Service Chuck Sams, BLM and USFS staff, a Chaffee County Commissioner, and FoBC. During this visit the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Historic Preservation Officer also joined in an elementary school field trip lesson on Ute history and culture hosted by the Greater Arkansas River Nature Association. Furthermore, an additional interview was conducted with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Historic Preservation Officer at a relocated cultural resource previously noted as culturally important by previous Ute Tribal Consultations.



# Events

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In partnership with CPW, four education events were hosted in Browns Canyon in 2022. This included evening program talks at the developed campgrounds, a roving education table focused on river ecology, and interpretive hikes. No competitive or commercial events were hosted in the monument.

# Words from the staff

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Overall, 2022 was a quiet year for Browns Canyon National Monument. Progress was made in BLM staff getting familiar with the less visited areas of the monument, further developing partnerships, and outlining priority work. With many of the campsites of concern on Aspen Ridge now delineated, partners will shift their focus on implementing priorities outlined in the Interpretation and Education plan, including dark skies. Field Office resource staff have additional monitoring scheduled for the monument following the decisions outlined in the management plan and are looking forward to gaining more knowledge about this area.





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## Browns Canyon National Monument

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