



**NATIONAL  
CONSERVATION  
LANDS**

**New Mexico**  
2022: Annual Manager's Report

# Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks

National Monument





# Accomplishments

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Throughout fiscal year (FY) 2022 Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument (Monument) staff continued to develop the long-awaited Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS). A contract was awarded to Environmental Management and Planning Solutions, Inc. (EMPSi) in late September 2021 to develop the EIS alongside Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and with participation from Tribes, Cooperating Agencies, and the public in various phases throughout the process. BLM and EMPSi hosted several alternative workshops with cooperating agencies throughout the first part of calendar year 2022. The projected timeline for the completion of the RMP/EIS is set for the end of calendar year 2024.

The Monument had many accomplishments this year, despite challenges presented by COVID-19. Park Rangers monitored more than 530,000 acres of wilderness and 70 miles of trails. Working with the Southern New Mexico Trail Alliance, they also maintained 17 miles of trail to including work on the Sierra Vista and La Maria Trails. Park Rangers also placed signs at more than 60 locations along the boundary of the Monument, including wilderness areas.

Through an assistance agreement between New Mexico State University and the Monument a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) nomination was written for Van Patten's Mountain Camp/Dripping Springs at Dripping Springs Natural Area. The proposed historic district is a series of buildings and structures related to a 19<sup>th</sup> century hotel and health resort that was a popular getaway during its heyday. This historic area is one of the most visited sites within the Monument. A successful NRHP inclusion may provide benefits such as increased access to funding and grants for purposes such as stabilization, remediation, and preservation. Having the property listed may also help to foster community pride in the history of the local area and promote heritage tourism in southern New Mexico.



Figure 2. Sugarloaf Peak in the Organ Mountains wilderness. Photo by BLM volunteer Bob Pennington.

As part of the wider BLM push to populate the National Cultural Resources Information Management System (NCRIMS), BLM has partnered with Ancestral Lands Conservation Corp (ALCC) to hire archaeological GIS interns for several BLM NM/TX/KS/OK offices. Interns were tasked with scanning and digitizing of cultural records from previous fiscal years as well as populating the NCRIMS geospatial data base with cultural resource GIS data. In FY 22, the two interns hosted at the Las Cruces District Office, supervised by the Monument archaeologist, were able to scan the bulk of the remaining survey reports from past fiscal years. By having up-to-date digital information and organized records, the cultural staff will be able to make better resource management decisions and analyses related to cultural resource conservation and protection.

The Monument's grazing program accomplished many tasks in FY 22 including:

- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review and sign off on twelve projects for range, weeds, and vegetation management.
- Jornada Agricultural Research Station completed vegetation treatment monitoring was on five allotments totaling 31,318 acres. The monitoring is used to determined how successful the treatments in these areas has been.
- AIM monitoring associated with the the Monument sample design was completed totaling 65 plots. Monitoring results are used for long term monitoring of the ecological conditions in the area.



Figure 3. Robledo Mountains wilderness. BLM Photo.

# Challenges

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The most significant challenge that faced staff during FY22 was the failure of the water well at the Dripping Springs Natural Area (DSNA) Visitor Center. Due to the lack of running water, the site hosts at DSNA left earlier than scheduled thus leaving Monument staff to fill in for the sudden loss of volunteers. The water issue created a significant burden and strain on the schedules of the Monument Park Rangers. While a contract was awarded to drill a new water well in late FY22, it was not until March 2023 that the issue was resolved.

Increased visitation to all wilderness areas throughout the Monument has caused some motorized damage and encroachment into wilderness areas. Park Rangers have increased their presence in the areas and have updated signage and maps to inform visitors of their surroundings.

Visitation and recreational use within to the Monument over the past year has continued to degrade the quality cultural resources in certain areas. The historic structures at Dripping Springs are frequently the target of vandalism that requires careful remediation by BLM staff and/or volunteers to not adversely impact the historical elements of the structures. Continued recreational use at Peña Blanca such as camping and bouldering within the area's prehistoric rock shelters continues to impact their cultural resource values. In response to these ongoing issues, increased monitoring of vulnerable cultural resources has been implemented.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic added additional challenges and considerations to the Monument's outreach programs. Programs were offered through virtual platforms and conducted in person according to Covid-19 protocols per the Centers for Disease Control.

# Visitors

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Likely due to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions across the country, the Monument's visitation decreased in 2022 with an estimated 662,445 visits. This is a decrease of 49,664 visits from FY21. Visitation to the Monument's developed recreation sites also saw a decline in visitation during 2022. Throughout 2022, the Monument continued to offer educational and interpretive programming on public lands by offering guided hikes and sharing video and/or written content on social media. During patrol duties, park rangers continued to search for opportunities to educate the public on outdoor ethics, regulations, upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, and the natural, cultural, and recreational resources of the area.

# Partnerships

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For FY22, the Friends of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks continued to work closely with BLM staff in providing outreach and educational services to the visiting public. Events and programs included an Artist-in-Residence program in the months of September and May which host a local artist to live and work on the Monument. The Artist-in-Residence program educates and promotes the appreciation, protection and preservation of natural and cultural resources on public lands. The residency provided an artist and the public an opportunity to interact and to enhance the understanding of public lands through the unique qualities an artist's eye can capture with art events on and off the Monument.

The Friends group provided assistance with the Every Kid Outdoors Program by providing transportation funds to cover school costs and the running of a 4-day summer camp. FY22 saw the continuation of the BLM/Friends docent program wherein volunteers with the Friends Group lead interpretive hikes on the Monument. Volunteers participated in National Association of Interpretation Certified Interpretive Guide training. Over the course of FY22, the docents lead 13 hikes which reached approximately 187 members of the public. This relationship is guided by a Memorandum of Understanding between BLM, and the Friends of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks. The partnership is supported by expenditures by each entity.

In collaboration with the Public Lands Interpretative Association (PLIA) and Conservation Corps of New Mexico, Monument staff hosted a multi-day Whiptail program during July 2022. The Whiptail program seeks to empower 7th grade students, particularly girls, in Las Cruces to learn about and experience public lands in southern New Mexico. The 80 students who participated in the program learned about their public lands via classroom activities and fieldtrips to nearby public lands including the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument. This program is made possible through funding from the State of New Mexico and its partnerships include PLIA, Conservation Corps New Mexico, BLM, National Park Service and US Forest Service.



Figure 4. Apache Plume (*Fallugia paradoxa*) blooming in Soledad Canyon. Photo by Lynda Johnson.

## Science

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Over the course of the fiscal year the Monument signed letters of agreement with two academic institutions in support of proposed research initiatives. Additionally, the United States Potato Genebank (USPG) conducted research on the Monument involving the locating, photographing, describing, and collecting specimens of the wild potato species *Solanum jamesii* and *S. fendleri* in the Organ Mountains. University of Texas at El Paso, in association with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), as part of the Geophysical Exploration of the Dynamics and Evolution of the Solar System project, conducted research near Kilbourne Hole.

# Climate Impacts and Resiliency

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The diverse environments of the Monument increasingly show impacts of changing climatic conditions including increased temperatures over the course of the last century, a reduction of annual precipitation, and an increase in the severity of multiyear droughts. Changing climatic conditions on the Monument are anticipated to decrease grazing resources for livestock, threaten the viability of the Monument's flora and fauna ecological diversity, and increase the severity of wildfires over time.

In February of 2022, BLM Fire Management crews held a prescribed burn of a 50-acre area within Dripping Springs Natural Area. The prescribed burn aided in reducing the volume of vegetation which in turn greatly reduced the risks associated with potential wildfires.



Figure 5. Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) in the Dripping Springs Natural Area. Photo by Sara Kay.

## Social and Environmental Justice

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The Monument is in the preliminary stages of developing a SocioEconomic Baseline Report for the draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement. Monument staff are including English and Spanish text on informative and interpretive panels throughout the Monument as they are replaced, or new ones are created. The Monument also collaborates with local non-governmental groups who focus interpretive and educational efforts for underserved communities. Finally, Monument staff are gathering information to have our brochures translated to Spanish.



# Events

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Throughout 2022, the Monument had six active special recreation permits that included a competitive trail run, cycling race, bikepacking, equestrian ride, and commercial climbing trips.

During the summer of 2022, the BLM hosted its first Artist-in-Residence program featuring a multi-site tour across several National Monuments and National Conservation Areas. The Painted Mountains tour involved Diné (Navajo) jazz musician Delbert Anderson and his band D'DAT researching Indigenous land stories and music at each location, then holding workshops in which members of the public collaborated with D'DAT to create music for a public concert. D'DAT concluded with an outdoor performance to celebrate America's public lands. A public music concert was held on July 9 at Centennial High School in Las Cruces, just a few miles west of the Organ Mountains unit of the Monument. Approximately 80 people attended the music concert in the high school's gym despite heavy rains throughout the day.



Figure 6. D'DAT performing at the July 8th workshop at the La Cueva group site. BLM photo.

For National Public Lands Day, BLM staff hosted an archaeological fair at Dripping Springs Natural Area. The objective of the archaeological fair was to increase awareness, knowledge, and appreciation of the cultural resources and history of southern New Mexico and West Texas. Over 150 people visited the fair, with many local families in attendance. Visitors enjoyed a number of hands-on archaeological activities, demonstrations, booths, and interpretative guided hikes during the fair. The fair would not have been possible without the strong support and participation of many of the BLM Las Cruces District Office's (LCDO) partners and fellow agencies across southern New Mexico and West Texas.

Monument staff conducted over 45 outreach events on the Monument including guided hikes, workshops, and clean ups to educate visitors on topics such as the environment, geology, history and culture of the area, as well as resource protection and land stewardship. Monument Park Rangers staff and volunteers conducted "Every Kid Outdoors" field trips for 135 third grade students from Las Cruces Sunrise Elementary School at La Cueva picnic shelter. Students participated in activities including a roping cattle experience, rock art identification, and an interpretative hike to the rock cave archeological site.



Figure 7. BLM Supervisory Park Ranger, Patrick Driscoll, takes Sunrise Elementary students on an interpretative hike to the La Cueva archeological site.



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## **Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument**

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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/blmnewmexico/albums/72157644381238958/>

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