

## Advisory Council Information Summary The Hunting Grounds (Zone 1)

The Hunting Ground is characterized by wide-open spaces. The land along the highway stretches away toward a rugged vista of canyons, mesas and in the far distance, the highlands of the Uncompahgre Plateau.

### *Geology and Paleontology*

#### Current Condition:

- Predominantly Dakota/Burro Canyon and Mancos Shale
- Smaller areas made of Brushy Basin and Salt Wash, members of the Morrison Formation. (Paleontologists believe there are moderate opportunities to find fossils in the area).

#### Management Concerns:

- Mancos Shale is a marine deposition evaporate, which often contains excessive levels of selenium and a variety of dissolvable salts. Both components of Mancos Shale can degrade water quality when disturbed and/or irrigated.

#### Policy Context:

- Gunnison Basin and Grand Valley Selenium Task Forces: <http://seleniumtaskforce.org/>

### *Water*

#### Current Condition:

- No perennial streams exist in Zone 1
- Large number of ephemeral streams flow east-to-west away from the Grand Mesa and into the Gunnison River
- Water quality is characterized as impaired for selenium in those creeks that flow directly into the Gunnison River through Zone 1, however, this water quality impairment is not a result of BLM management.
- Zone 1 has a scattering of springs and seeps, all of which have been developed for livestock grazing.

### *Natural Values (including Vegetation)*

#### Current Condition/Management Concerns:

- The vegetation is predominately desert shrub/saltbush, which occupies 21 percent of the NCA. This vegetative community consists of:
  - Drought-resistant shrubs like shadscale, saltbush, winterfat, snakeweed and prickly pear cactus
  - Grasses include western wheatgrass, galleta grass, bottlebrush squirreltail, Indian ricegrass
  - A wide variety of forbs
- Areas in zone 1 not meeting Land Health Standards, with fair or poor condition for many indicators. These problems are largely a result of a combination of some or all of the following factors:

- Proximity of this vegetative community to Highway 50, Whitewater, Delta and utility corridors, which cause disturbance to the area
  - Historic grazing practices between the Gunnison River and Highway 50
  - Loss of native grasses and perennial forbs
  - Infestation with cheatgrass and halogeton, which are noxious and/or invasive and can prevent the re-establishment of native plants and lead to significant soil problems.
  - Vulnerability of the soils and vegetation to prolonged drought and disturbance.
- Rare plants can be found in this zone, particularly the Colorado hookless cactus.
    - Two A-ranked occurrences (CNHP) of this cactus are found within zone 1 of the NCA. An A-ranked occurrence means that the population has excellent viability
    - One C-ranked occurrence of this cactus are found within zone 1. A C-ranked occurrence means that the population has fair viability

*Colorado hookless cactus*

Listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act

Colorado hookless cactus has a strong presence throughout Zone 1.

Habitat includes rocky hills, mesa slopes, and alluvial benches in desert shrub communities

Elevations from 4,500 to 6,000 feet.

Occurs primarily in the Gunnison River valley, with many near Delta.

Policy Context:

- Consult with USFWS on the plan (RMP) and on projects for hookless cactus
- Land Health Assessments: ongoing monitoring for land health issues
- Decisions typically made at the RMP level:
  - Desired outcomes for vegetation: Desired mix of vegetative types, structural stages, landscape/riparian functions to provide for native plant, wildlife habitat, and livestock forage.
  - Identify areas of ecological importance, designate priority plant species and habitats
  - Actions and area-wide restrictions needed to achieve desired conditions

*Wildlife*

**BLM Sensitive** wildlife species with potential to occupy this zone (C = confirmed within past 10 years, P = not documented but suitable habitat exists):

- desert bighorn sheep (C)
- white-tailed prairie dogs (C)
- burrowing owls (P)
- kit fox (P)
- pronghorn (C)
- ferruginous hawk (P)
- long-nosed leopard lizards (P)
- midget-faded rattlesnakes (P)

- northern leopard frog (C)

#### Management Concerns:

- Proximity of sheep allotments to reintroduced desert bighorns (although note that there are relatively fewer concerns for these allotments than for those in Escalante Canyon based on barrier of Gunnison River)

#### Policy/Context:

- Bighorn Sheep/Domestic Sheep disease issues:
  - Memorandum of Understanding for Management of Bighorn and Domestic Sheep,
  - CDOW Bighorn Sheep Management Plan,
  - Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies management guidelines

### **Cultural**

- Trails are a defining/characteristic feature of this area
- This area was once used extensively by game animals moving down from the Grand Mesa to the river, which were followed by Native Americans
- A trade route trail was established by the Utes through this zone, which was likely later adopted by Spanish explorers and re-named the **Old Spanish Trail**.
- Archeologists note:
  - prehistoric camp sites and hunting blinds
  - rock art sites
  - lithic sites, where arrows, spearheads and other tools were crafted.
  - Likely high density of sites

#### Management Concerns or opportunities:

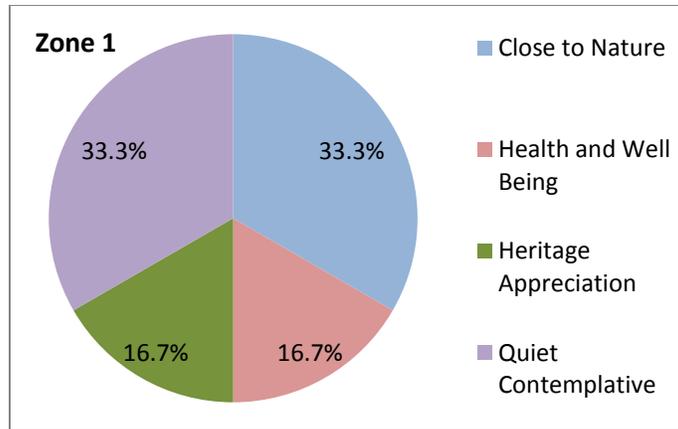
- Ease of access in this zone has led to theft and vandalism of cultural sites.
- Opportunities for cultural resource-related recreation/tourism
  - Heritage Tourism associated with the Old Spanish Trail
  - Landscape-type interpretation, showing the broad sweep of game and trade trails that intersected above and alongside the Gunnison River.

### **Recreation**

#### Current Condition:

Zone 1 has not (so far) been the site of active management for recreation, and very few recreation developments are found there. The setting for this zone is classified as a mix of back country and middle country. The BLM has very little information about the number of visitors to this zone.

Current recreational activities in Zone 1 include hiking, horseback riding, ATV and motorcycle riding, trials motorcycle riding, mountain biking, target shooting, dispersed camping, and wildlife viewing. Mesa State's survey identified hiking and horseback riding as the most satisfying activities in this zone. Survey results by Mesa State show that Zone 1 is used most by Quiet Contemplative and Close to Nature niche bundles. The results are:



Survey participants showed the most interest in

- Trails
- Community Connection Trail
- Multiple-use of resources
- Rights of private property owners
- Scenic views
- Grazing
- Protection of archeological sites
- Wildlife
- Target shooting and
- Railroad

### *Travel Management*

- All the routes, except for maintained county roads, were created to provide access for livestock grazing or were user-created.
- Area has been designated “Limited to Existing” for motorized vehicles -- limited to existing roads and trails, with no seasonal limits
- No “open” areas, where cross-country travel is allowed
- Popular access routes include Bean Ranch Road, Bridgeport Road and Escalante Canyon Road

### *Grazing*

#### Current Condition:

Zone 1 has been developed for livestock grazing, with 11 water developments (i.e. stock ponds, pipelines or catchments), 5 fence lines or exclosures and 2 cattle guards currently in the BLM’s Range Improvement Projects database. The three allotments on the Mesa County side of Zone 1 are permitted for cattle, while the three allotments on the Delta County side of Zone 1 are permitted for sheep. Cattle allotments are typically grazed in the fall and spring, while sheep allotments are grazed in the winter-early spring.

- Cattle grazing allotments: Bean, Kannah Creek Individual and Kannah Creek Commons.
- Sheep grazing allotments: Wells Gulch, Alkali Flats and Antelope

#### Management Concerns:

- Areas not meeting land health

- Understanding issue of domestic/bighorn sheep interaction

Policy Context:

- Grazing decisions typically made at the allotment level (more specific than RMP)
- Decisions typically made at the RMP level:
  - Identification of lands available/not available for livestock grazing (considers other uses for the land, terrain characteristics, soil/vegetation/watershed characteristics, presence of undesirable vegetation, presence of other resources requiring special management)
  - Available/not available question typically revisited when permit is voluntarily relinquished, or when Land Health Assessments indicate that standards cannot be achieved under any level of grazing
  - Available lands: Amt. of forage available (animal unit months-both existing and predicted), description of possible grazing management practices (types of grazing systems, range improvements, changes in season of use, stocking rates)
  - Guidelines and criteria for future allotment-specific adjustments

***Public Safety/Law Enforcement***

Public scoping comments identified public safety/law enforcement as a concern in Zone 1. These concerns related to the presence of trash, particularly glass, and suspicions of illegal activity in this zone.