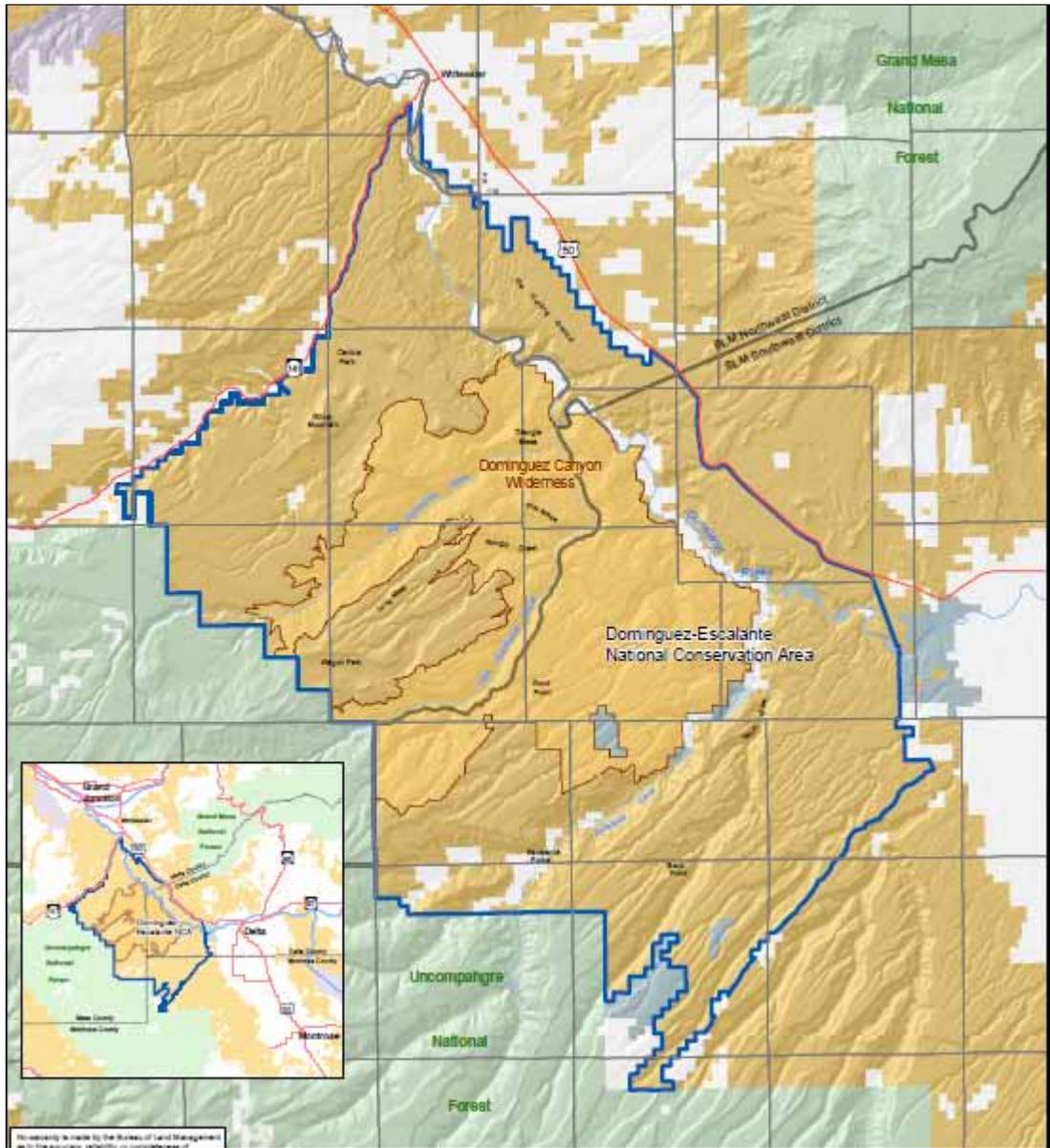


Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area

National Landscape Conservation System FY 2010 Annual Managers Report



Little Dominguez Canyon. Photo by Jeremy Matlock



Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area

I. Introduction

Unit

Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (NCA)

Contact Information

<http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca.html>

Manager

Katie A. Stevens (Interim Manager)

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A winter landscape in D-E NCA.

Established

Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009
(Public Law 111-11, March 30, 2009)

Acreage

209,610 acres, including 66,280 acres of Wilderness

Field Offices

BLM Colorado's Northwest District (Grand Junction Field Office) and Southwest District (Uncompahgre Field Office)

Estimated Annual Visitation

100,000 visitors

The Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and Dominguez Canyon Wilderness is one of the newest jewels in the BLM's National Landscape Conservation System. Added in 2009 through the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act, the NCA protects, conserves and restores some of western Colorado's most stunning redrock canyon systems and fragile high desert ecosystems. This report describes the notable activities and management efforts

initiated in the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and Dominguez Canyon Wilderness between October 1, 2009, and September 30, 2010.

The Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area was established to conserve and protect for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations the unique and important resources and values within the NCA. These values include important geological, cultural, archaeological, paleontological, natural, scientific, recreational, wilderness, wildlife, riparian, historical, educational, and scenic resources, as well as the water resources of area streams. The relationship between seasonally available flows, especially through the series of small streams flowing through the NCA, and aquatic, riparian, and terrestrial species and communities, was specifically cited in the legislation.

II. Land Use Planning

a. Overview

Prior to designation, the NCA was managed under two existing resource management plans (RMPs). The BLM was revising both of these plans, the 1987 Grand Junction RMP and the 1989 Uncompahgre Basin RMP, at the time of the NCA's designation.

The Omnibus Act called for the BLM to complete a management plan that "describes the appropriate uses and management of the Conservation Area, take[s] into consideration any information developed in studies of the land within the Conservation Area; and include[s] a comprehensive travel management plan." This plan is being developed with extensive public input.

The BLM published a Notice of Intent to prepare an RMP in the Federal Register on August 3, 2010. With this notice, the BLM opened public scoping and initiated the beginnings



BLM staff talk with members of the public about the upcoming planning effort during a float trip with Grand Junction's Riverfront Commission.

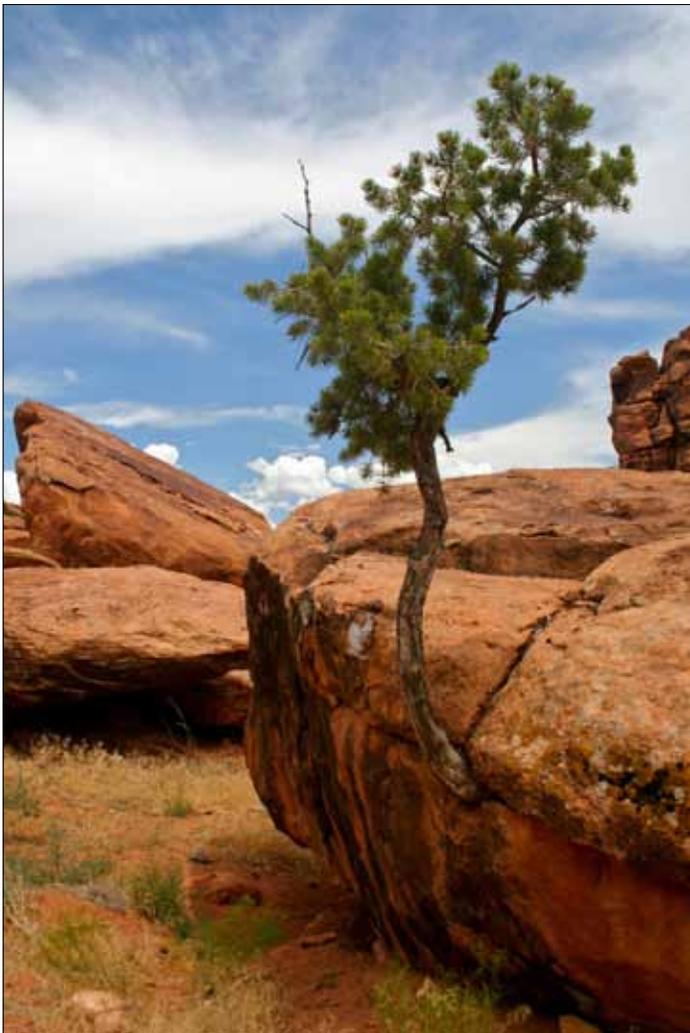
of a public dialogue on how this area should be managed. Public scoping comments were accepted throughout the period covered by this annual report, ending on October 1, 2010. More than 50 members of the public attended scoping meetings held in Grand Junction and Delta, Colorado on August 30 and 31, 2010.

The website for the RMP effort is: http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/denca_rmp.html

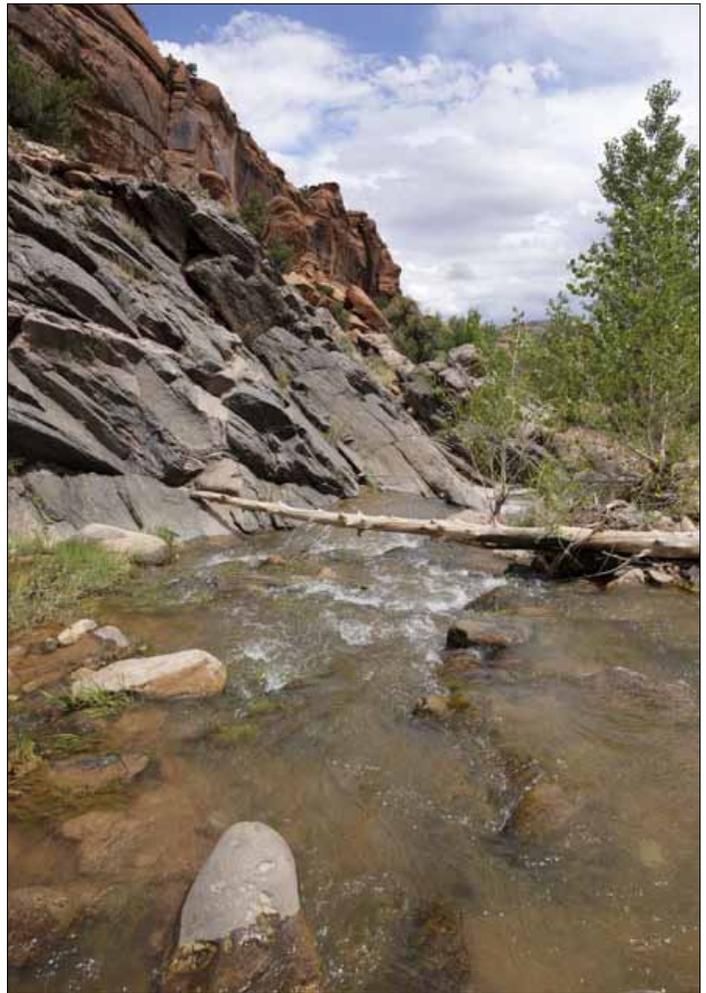
III. Protecting America's Natural Resources

a. Notable Natural Resources

The "Purposes" section of the NCA's legislation specifically referenced the "natural, wildlife, and riparian values" of the NCA, and added extra emphasis to the importance of "the water resources of area streams, based on seasonally available flows, that are necessary to support aquatic, riparian, and terrestrial species and communities".



Pinyon growing from a rock in Dominguez-Escalante. Photo by Jeremy Matlock

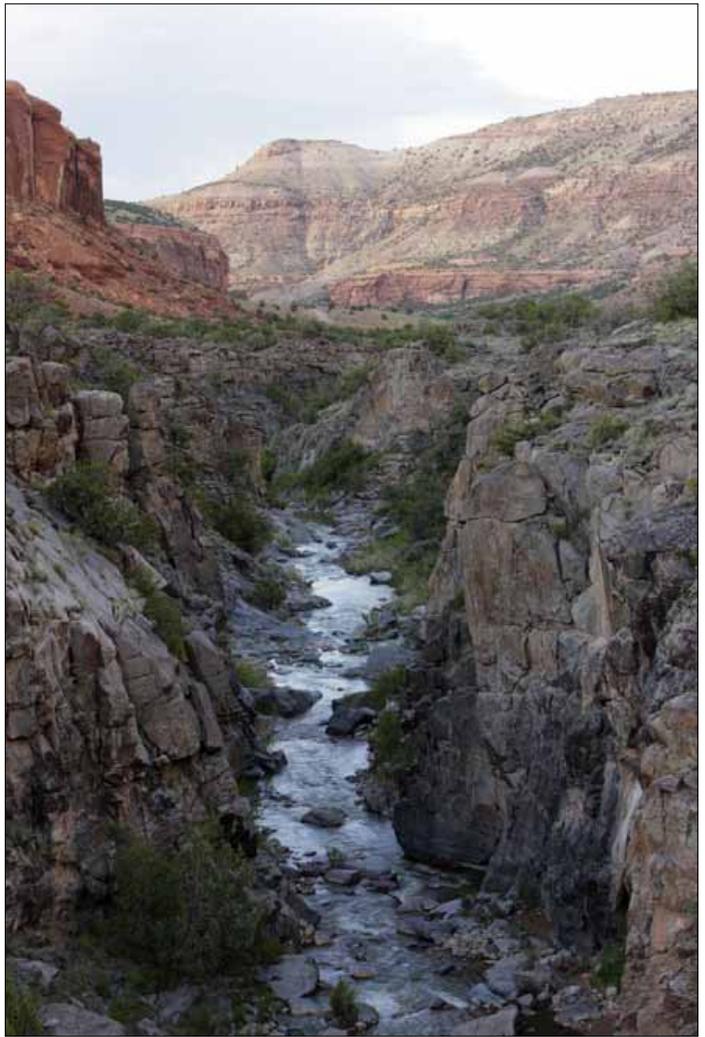


Big Dominguez Creek. Photo © Jerry Sintz

Given the special emphasis on water in the NCA and the importance of seasonal water in small streams within this landscape, the BLM and the Colorado Water Conservation Board worked together to develop an innovative model to protect the NCA's water resources in Big and Little Dominguez Creeks. Together, the organizations gained support from stakeholders within the Big and Little Dominguez Creek watersheds, and formulated an instream flow application and an accompanying enforcement agreement. The unique piece of this instream flow is that it established a future development allowance, but would provide for the rest of the water to remain in the stream to support the purposes of the NCA.

On July 21, 2010, the Colorado Water Conservation Board gave final approval for the appropriation of instream flow water rights for the Big and Little Dominguez Creeks, in the amounts recommended by the BLM. No protests were filed during the CWCB's public notice period, and the CWCB has since filed its water rights applications in the water court. The uniqueness of this approach was described Land Letter/Greenwire (May 27, 2010).

The natural, wildlife and riparian values of the NCA are dependent on these water resources, and in general, benefit from the relative intactness of the NCA's habitats. While there are locations where land health has been assessed as either "not meeting" or "meeting with problems" due to invasive and non-native species compromising biodiversity, the quality of some of its riparian habitats, particularly along the small stream corridors, has been noted by Colorado Heritage Program as being unique or exemplary. The NCA provides habitat for threatened and endangered species, including the Colorado hookless cactus (threatened). The stretch of the Gunnison River that flows through the NCA is designated as Critical Habitat for the razorback sucker and Colorado pikeminnow (both listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act) and as potential habitat for the bonytail and humpback chubs (also endangered). The BLM has also documented presence (based on 2009 sampling) of BLM Sensitive Species including the Bluehead Sucker, Roundtail chub, and Flannelmouth sucker in the NCA.



Escalante Canyon at the Potholes. Photo © Jerry Sintz



Desert Bighorn Sheep. Photo © Jerry Sintz

b. Land Health Assessments

Fresh, current information on the status of biological and natural resources is available in this area—one hundred percent of the NCA has been assessed for land health and, in most places, the BLM has completed two rounds of assessments, yielding important information about trend and progress. In 2010, the period covered by this report, an updated Land Health Assessment was completed for the southern half of the NCA; the northern half of the NCA was most recently assessed in 2009.

For the NCA as a whole, BLM specialists have determined that 161,308 acres (74 percent of the NCA) are meeting land health standards, 27,941 acres (9 percent) are meeting with problems, 12,931 acres (6 percent) are not meeting. The BLM did not make a conclusion on 15,708 acres (7 percent) due to remoteness or inaccessibility.

c. Inventory and Monitoring Efforts

In 2010, the BLM collected water quality and stream flow data at four sites in Big and Little Dominguez Creeks, adding to existing data sets and improving the understanding of watershed function and condition within the NCA. The BLM also completed the first year of follow-up monitoring on cottonwoods that were planted in 2009 for "lessons learned" regarding planting methods and characteristics of successful sites.

In partnership with the BLM, the Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) completed a basic inventory for rare plant species throughout the NCA—a continuation of work started in 2009 on the northern half of the NCA. CNHP added sites on the southern half of the NCA in 2010, resulting in comprehensive coverage of the NCA for the first time. Through this inventory, CNHP botanists re-visited known rare species sites while also establishing an exhaustive list of all plant species noted within the NCA, resulting in additional important information on general plant occurrence.

The Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) set up long-term Colorado hookless cactus monitoring in the southern portion of the NCA. These study sites will assist the BLM in determining population trends and impacts on hookless cactus.



Colorado hookless cactus in bloom.

d. Restoration Efforts

Restoration projects in 2010 focused on the Gunnison River corridor. The BLM treated russian knapweed and whitetop with herbicide, and russian olive and tamarisk infestations using several different treatment methods ranging from manual removal to a jabstick/herbicide combination.

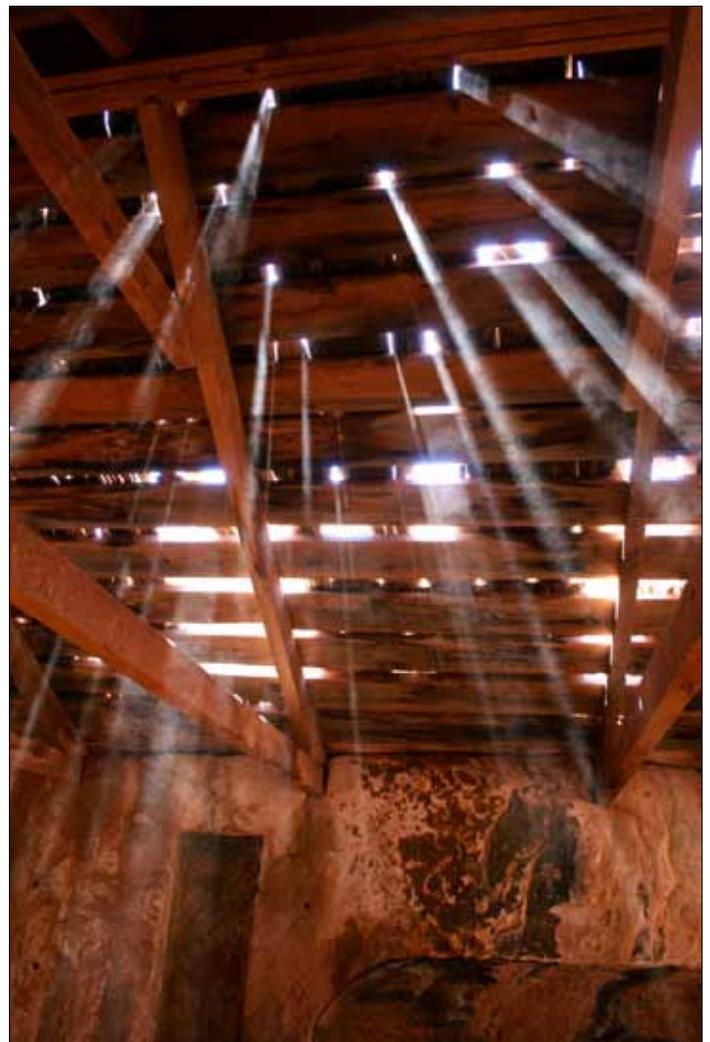
River rangers also wrapped native cottonwood saplings at the mouth of Big Dominguez Canyon to protect them from browsing and beavers.

IV. Protecting America's Heritage Resources

a. Notable Heritage Resources

A rich and vibrant record of human history and prehistory is evident in the area protected by the NCA and wilderness. Both cultural and paleontological resources were referenced as purposes in the NCA legislation; in addition, these two resources support the scientific and educational purposes of the NCA.

The NCA has been occupied, with varying intensity, for nearly 10,000 years. Cultural resources include prehistoric and historic archaeological and architectural resources, as well as Native American traditional cultural and religious properties. Prehistoric properties include stone tool (lithic) and chip scatters, quarries, temporary camps for seasonal hunting and gathering, extended camps, hunting/kill/butchering sites, game processing areas, tree scaffolds, eagle traps, vision quest sites, rock shelters and caves, rock art panels, trails and isolated finds. Historic properties (after 1860) include homesteads, trails and roads, railroads, irrigation ditches, reservoirs, mining sites, corrals, line camps, cabins, trash scatters and dumps, aspen art carvings (arborglyphs) and isolated finds. About 4 percent of the NCA has been surveyed for cultural resources, documenting approximately 800 known cultural sites. The Old Salt Lake Wagon Road and the Old Spanish National Historic Trail have long been known to run through and parallel to the



Sun shines through the roof of a historic cabin in Escalante Canyon. Photo by Jeremy Matlock

NCA in some places. In 2010, the BLM initiated a survey to document traces of the Old Spanish Trail where they still exist on the land to interpret and protect the historic route.

The NCA's paleontological resources have been studied since at least the 1950s. The Morrison or Chinle formations are exposed on roughly 38 percent (about 82,000 acres) within the NCA. These formations have produced many scientifically significant fossils. There are currently three active quarry locations within the D-E NCA. See the Science section for discussion of an exciting discovery made in 2010.

The BLM initiated eligibility studies for the stream segments in the NCA prior to the NCA's designation, as part of the Grand Junction and Uncompahgre RMP revisions. By 2009, the BLM had completed a Wild and Scenic River eligibility



Wilderness program leaders trip into Big Dominguez.



Princess Plume in bloom in Little Dominguez Canyon. Photo by Bob Wick

study for segments on the north half of the NCA, releasing an eligibility report just as the NCA was designated (http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/gjfo/rmp/Wild___Scenic_River.html).

In 2010, the BLM's Uncompahgre Field Office completed its eligibility study on the southern half of the NCA (http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/ufo/wild_and_scenic_river.html). To assist the public in understanding and reconciling these two reports, the NCA staff produced a report summarizing eligibility information for all NCA segments (completed in late 2010 and available at http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/denca_rmp/DENCA_Wild___Scenic_River_Eligibility.html).

In all, the BLM identified 10 segments on five creeks (Big Dominguez, Little Dominguez, Rose, Cottonwood and Escalante Creeks) and one river (the Lower Gunnison) that

possessed the outstandingly remarkable values and free-flowing nature needed to be found eligible for consideration as Wild, Scenic or Recreational. These segments are now being studied for suitability.

The Dominguez Canyon Wilderness encompasses 66,280 acres at the heart of the NCA.

b. Inventory Efforts

The BLM initiated additional cultural and paleontological field surveys in 2010. The cultural surveys focused on 1,060 acres in two distinct areas with little previous survey. The paleontological surveys focused on the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness. The results of these surveys will be described next year, in the 2011 report, when the work is completed.

Within the wilderness, the BLM supported a seasonal wilderness ranger to collect information for the Keeping It Wild project, which was designed to establish the baseline conditions and will support an ongoing wilderness monitoring program. NCA staff also supported the 2010 Wilderness Program Leaders meeting with a field trip to Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, which provided wilderness leaders throughout the BLM with an opportunity to discuss important policy and program priorities while out on the ground in one of the BLM's newest wilderness areas.

c. Cultural and Heritage Resource Protection

With the addition of a dedicated law enforcement ranger, the BLM pursued several occurrences of cultural and heritage resource damage, including one unauthorized excavation of a cultural site, theft of landscape rock from the NCA, vandalism to rock art panels and unauthorized disturbance associated with hydraulic gold mining.



NCA Ranger Bryce Stewart talks with local media.

V. Providing Recreation and Visitor Experiences

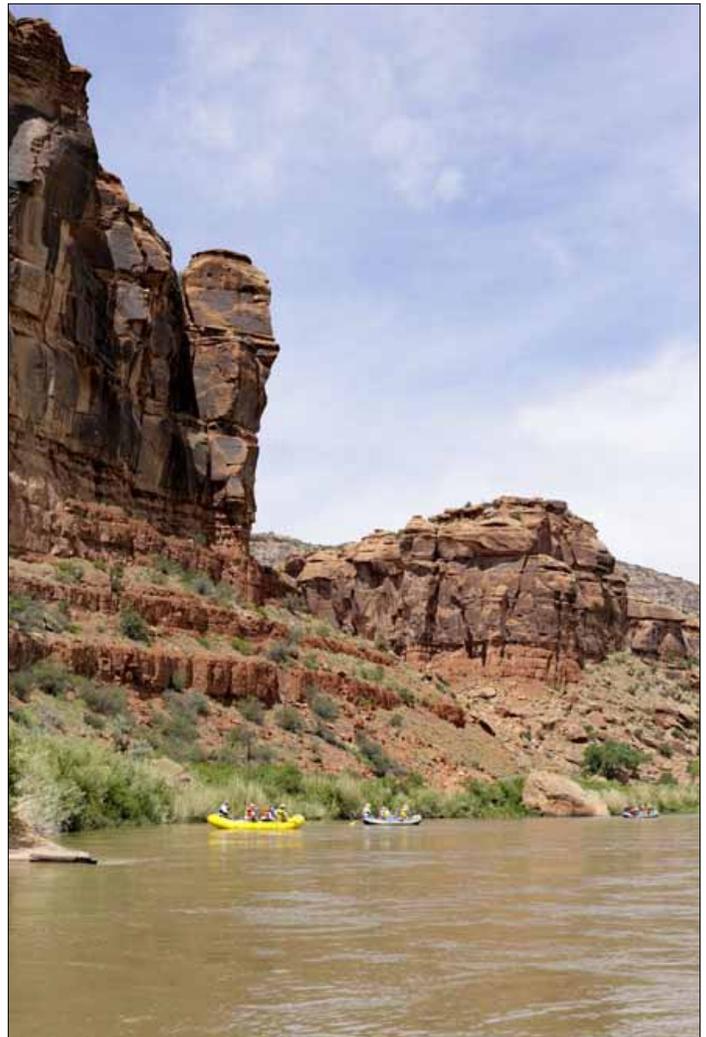
a. Overview

Estimates of visitation will improve as the NCA continues to be described and monitored as a single unit. However, based on current estimates, just under 100,000 visitors access the NCA per year. Visitors find a variety of recreation opportunities, allowing them to participate in different activities in many recreation settings. Activities include hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, motorcycle and off-highway vehicle riding, recreational prospecting, rafting, kayaking, camping, hunting, wildlife watching and heritage tourism.

Using 2010 NCA base funding, the BLM supported two new river rangers to provide a consistent presence on the 33-mile stretch of the Lower Gunnison River. This year marked the first time that the BLM was able to provide a sustained and regular visitor outreach and agency presence on the Lower Gunnison.



River Ranger Maggie Dungan on a Gunnison River field trip.



Gunnison River boaters. Photo © Jerry Sintz

b. Facilities, Construction, and Maintenance

In 2010, volunteers installed new portal signs, and BLM recreation staff completed an initial analysis of priority sign locations. Over time, as the BLM makes planning decisions regarding allowable recreational uses and travel management in the NCA, this analysis will transition into a comprehensive sign plan.

The recreational facilities in the NCA consist of two newly designed and constructed trailheads completed in 2010 (see “Your Recovery Dollars At Work” section of this report), two primitive trailheads, one primitive boat ramp, one primitive campground and one developed picknicking/day-use recreation site.

The two new trailheads were funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. These projects were listed on the Grand Junction Field Office’s capital improvement project list since before the NCA’s designation. The BLM anticipates one additional project to improve access safety

in 2011, which will be described in a future report. No other new construction, deferred maintenance or capital improvement projects are anticipated until the RMP process is complete.

c. Comprehensive Travel and Transportation Management

As part of the RMP process, the BLM is completing a comprehensive travel management plan for the NCA. Until that plan is completed, travel is limited to existing routes, based on the inventory completed in 2009.

Visitors, permittees and the BLM use various forms of transportation in the NCA for recreation, administrative use and grazing permit administration. Inventoried routes range from singletrack trail to maintained county roads, for a total of 790 miles of routes. The vast majority of those routes, approximately 485 miles, are classified as “BLM non-maintained two-track roads.”

The high density of cultural sites likely to exist throughout the NCA will present a unique challenge for travel management planning. In order to make good, resource-based decisions, designate components of the existing system for permanent use and add new sustainable routes where appropriate, the BLM will need to find ways to obtain updated, intensive cultural surveys. This future workload associated with travel management implementation will require significant and extensive new solutions and partnerships.

d. Recreation Fee Program

There are no recreation fee sites within the NCA. The BLM administers 28 Special Recreation Permits (SRPs) in the NCA: three of these permits are associated with special events, 13 are associated with river trips, nine with big game

or lion hunting, one with climbing and canyoneering, and the remaining two with instruction or equipment rental/shuttles. No new special recreation permits will be accepted until the BLM develops long-term management direction through the RMP.

VI. Your Recovery Dollars At Work

The BLM completed final inspections on two new trailhead/parking areas constructed with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding in Cactus Park in 2010. These trailheads will allow the BLM to move one existing trailhead out of the wilderness, and will reduce the amount of disturbance associated with informal parking pullouts.

Parts of the NCA also fell into several more comprehensive ARRA projects, in combination with the Uncompahgre Field Office. These projects contributed to enhanced maintenance upkeep, increased seasonal presence and weed treatment around range improvements. The Gunnison River Restoration project focused on invasive weed treatment, tamarisk removal and site restoration along the Gunnison River (mechanical tamarisk removal, spraying noxious weeds, and planting native cottonwood and willows). The BLM conducted approximately three acres of weed control and one mile of habitat improvement in the Rattlesnake Gulch section of the lower Gunnison River within the NCA. The Dominguez-Escalante Increased Presence project provided for increased BLM field presence in the Escalante Canyon area, focusing on use supervision, compliance, law enforcement patrols, project maintenance and site clean-up. The BLM maintained or installed parking barriers, site protection and signing to reduce impacts to riparian areas and key biological resources (hanging gardens, fragile soil



Two new trailheads during and after construction in Cactus Park.

areas) along Escalante Canyon. The BLM also monitored biological resources, maintained two livestock water ponds and constructed two small ponds in the Dry Mesa area to improve livestock distribution and provide water for wildlife.

The BLM completed two miles of riparian and 1,000 acres of terrestrial habitat monitoring in the Brushy Ridge and Sawmill Mesa areas.

VII. Engaging Youth in America's Great Outdoors

a. Youth Engagement



In 2010, the BLM river rangers supported a river trip through the NCA with 30 students from a local youth mentoring organization.



The river rangers also supported an overnight biological monitoring trip with eight students from the EXPLORE! organization. Both of these projects are part of annual, ongoing programs. See the partnerships section for additional accomplishments related to youth-related projects.

VIII. Partnership and Volunteer Efforts

a. Overview

In this initial stage of the NCA's evolving history, partnership and volunteer goals relate largely to resource protection and environmental education. In 2010, the BLM initiated new partnerships for cultural resource stewardship and supported new youth-based partnerships with an eye toward these projects becoming ongoing programs.

Key outcomes related to environmental education, interpretation and outreach are summarized in this section as well.

b. Partnership and Volunteer Accomplishments

In July 2010, the BLM and the Western Colorado Conservation Corps co-sponsored a four-day educational learning experience in the NCA. This project created an integrated learning curriculum based on lessons and activities focused on ancient people, art, physical education (climbing and rafting), conservation education and ecology. This project demonstrated the true importance and leveraging value of partnerships: the Corps obtained several grants to support the project, designed the curriculum and provided support staff as part of their Learn and Serve program, and the BLM provided curriculum content and logistics guidance. The Colorado Environmental Coalition provided key grant, vision and other support for this project as well.

The Colorado Natural Areas Program volunteer stewardship program matches volunteers with Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and Natural Areas for the



Kids participating in the Dominguez Canyon Learn and Serve project learn about ancient peoples by grinding corn using a mano and metate.



Western Colorado Congress Trail Hands on a workday in Big Dominguez Canyon.

purpose of monitoring. The stewards monitor their assigned ACEC/Natural Area at least once annually, submitting monitoring reports to the BLM at the end of each year. In 2010, volunteer stewards recorded 10.5 hours at Gunnison Gravels ACEC in the NCA.

NCA archaeologists re-initiated a site steward program in 2010. Through this program, the BLM trains cultural resource volunteers to monitor sites for damage and vandalism. Volunteers also rehabilitated social trails leading to sensitive sites to decrease the potential for vandalism.

Volunteers from the Western Colorado Congress Trail Hands assisted with sign installations and a cultural site protection project in the newly designated NCA.

Western Colorado Congress Trail Hands on a workday in Big Dominguez Canyon

In all, these projects add up to approximately 854 hours of volunteer labor at a monetary value of \$17,800.

IX. Science

a. Overview

In spring 2010, one of the NCA's quarry sites produced the skull of an ankylosaurid, a rarely found armadillo-like dinosaur, which garnered significant publicity and excitement throughout Colorado (http://www.deltacountyindependent.com/index.php?id=14534:rare-dinosaur-found-in-dominguez-escalante-nca&option=com_content&catid=34:delta&Itemid=347).

The researcher who made the find, Kent Hups, is a Colorado schoolteacher who works in the NCA under a Colorado paleontological permit.

As described in the Natural Resources and Partnership sections of this report, the BLM also completed significant science work through restoration projects, as well as Land Health Assessment work in the southern half of the NCA. The approach that BLM took to Land Health Assessment in 2010 in the Escalante Land Health Assessment Landscape is notable from a science perspective: with substantial support and innovation from the Uncompahgre Field Office ecologist, natural resource specialists used the Land Health Assessment process as an opportunity to complete interdisciplinary monitoring for the health of the landscape as a whole, examining recreational developments, rights-of-way, and other features and disturbances. By including these features in their sampling design, the team developed a holistic picture of overall disturbance on the Escalante landscape, and conducted important discussions that will help guide future conservation measures.



Researcher Kent Hups shows an ankylosaurid fossil in relation to a plaster cast of a similar skull.

X. Manager's Corner

With all the startup activities of a new NCA and planning effort, 2010 was an important year. The new capacity that came with the NCA's designation, including the hiring of an Outdoor Recreation Planner, a Law Enforcement Ranger, and two river rangers, provided an opportunity for us to connect with our publics in a way that we hadn't been able to before.

Future annual reports will be even more exciting, as we build on all the foundational work completed in 2010. Expect to see information here in next year's report about achievement of planning milestones, the formation of the Advisory Council for the NCA, and a new "Friends" group—both of these groups were in the initiation stages in 2010 and will accomplish important advisory and stewardship outcomes to benefit the NCA in the coming years.