

MANAGER'S

R DOMINGUEZ-ESCALANTE

E CANYONS

P National Conservation Area

O: October 1, 2010 - September 30, 2011

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DOMINGUEZ-ESCALANTE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

UNIT: Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and Dominguez Canyon Wilderness.

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

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ESTABLISHED: Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 (Public Law 111-11)

ACREAGE: 209,610 acres, including the 66,280 acres of Dominguez Canyon Wilderness

FIELD OFFICES: Grand Junction Field Office, Northwest Colorado District; Uncompahgre Field Office, Southwest Colorado District

ESTIMATED ANNUAL VISITATION: Approximately 100,000

The Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area (D-E NCA) 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.

The Dominguez-Escalante NCA is co-managed by the Grand Junction and Uncompahgre field offices under a single NCA Manager. Staff specialists from both offices work as a coordinated interdisciplinary team to complete projects, inventory, planning and monitoring in the NCA.

Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 was the first big year for the resource management planning effort; the majority of the work completed this year (by the BLM, our partners and the public) was related to that effort. In some cases, on-the-ground work took a back seat as interdisciplinary specialists prioritized the planning process to provide a solid foundation for work in future years.

1. Natural and Heritage Resources Conditions

A. NATURAL RESOURCES TRENDS

Planning for Priority Species and Vegetation. The natural resources of the D-E NCA were specifically cited as a purpose of the Dominguez-Escalante area's designation as an NCA in 2009. Priority species, special status species, fish and wildlife, noxious weeds, fire and fuels, as well as soils and water quality are included within the overarching category of "natural values." Within the BLM, the current condition of natural resources is often described using public land health standards. D-E NCA planners used a protocol developed through the BLM's National Training Center for setting objectives and management actions related to the condition of natural resources. The training is called Planning for Priority Species and Vegetation (PPSV).

BLM staff worked in conjunction with the Nature Conservancy, Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP), the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife in order to assemble information for this process. As part of this process, the BLM identified vegetation/habitat types and species (plants or wildlife) that would be priorities for manage-

ment and would thus require special management consideration and attention. The BLM identified the following vegetation and habitat types through this process: desert shrub/saltbush, pinyon-juniper woodlands, sagebrush shrublands, ponderosa pine, mountain shrub, riparian, seeps and springs, and hydrology/aquatic systems. The BLM identified desert bighorn sheep and Colorado hookless cactus as priority species through PPSV, as they required special management consideration and attention. Other special status species, fish and wildlife are largely addressed through management of priority vegetation or habitat types. In the terminology used below, these other species are considered to be nested under one or more vegetation/habitat type. The idea is that if the nest or habitat is doing well, then so will the nested species. After priority species and vegetation were identified, a table of key attributes

and associated indicators of health for each priority species and vegetation was created. Standards for each indicator were then identified so that condition of each indicator could be determined to be "poor," "fair," "good," or "very good." The team used the indicators identified through this process to create objectives for management. Objectives were focused particularly on key attributes that were determined to currently be in fair or poor condition. The results of this assessment will be available in the Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) in early FY 2013 and will form the basis for ongoing monitoring and evaluation during implementation of the plan.

Bighorn/Domestic sheep Probability of Interaction Assessment.

As part of Resource Management Planning process, BLM biologists, ecologists, range and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) staff de-



Hanging gardens in Escalante Canyon.

veloped a spatially-specific model to assess the probability of interaction between desert bighorn sheep and domestic sheep in the D-E NCA and Uncompahgre Field Office, to assist in gauging the overall risk of disease transmission. In designing the model, staff used criteria including grazing allotment proximity to bighorn sheep range, natural barriers to movement of bighorn and domestic sheep, and overlap of domestic grazing season of use and desert bighorn sheep breeding season. This information will be used in developing alternatives for the RMP, and will be included in the RMP.

Noxious Weeds. The upland portion of D-ENCA, west of the river, is in good shape from a noxious weed perspective. Of these upland areas, the wilderness is in the best shape. The uplands are similar to other upland areas of the northern Uncompahgre Plateau, where plant communities are healthy and competitive against noxious weed invasion. The desert area east of the Gunnison River shows a mix of healthy plant communities and those dominated by annual weed species. The Gunnison River is similar to the Colorado and Dolores rivers, where substantial areas are dominated by tamarisk and Russian knapweed. Vehicles are believed to be the primary vector for weed spread (from bicycles to motor vehicles).



Desert bighorn sheep high on a wall in Dominguez Canyon

As a result, most weed infestations are located along roads and trails in the NCA. Other vectors include: livestock and livestock developments, wildlife, hikers, wind, heavy equipment, contaminated gravel, water transport of seed and floods. All of the above have contributed to weeds in D-E NCA. The type of treatments currently being applied depends on the weed and tools available, ranging from hand and mechanical treatments to herbicides and biological treatments. Creeping perennial species such as Russian knapweed and hoary cress respond best to herbicide treatments. Tamarisk is treated with a combination of methods—biological control with the tamarisk leaf beetle, manual cutting and herbicide applications. Russian-olive is treated with a combination of manual cutting and an

herbicide application. Another treatment method is to plant competitive species as part of a fire rehab project or a vegetation treatment.

Many of the projects related to natural resources in the NCA in 2011



The "weed raft," a specially-equipped raft used to treat noxious weeds in the Gunnison River corridor. Special innovations include hose reels, which allow staff to reach difficult riparian locations.

focused on establishing baselines and developing long-range monitoring plots. See the Inventory section of this report for more information.

B. HERITAGE RESOURCES TRENDS

When D-E NCA was designated on March 30, 2009, the cultural, historical and archeological resources of the area were specifically listed as purposes for the area's designation as an NCA. Cultural resources are an integral part of our nation's heritage, representing a fundamental part of our local history in western Colorado. By teaching us the stories of our past, these resources help explain the development of our communities as they exist today.

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/killing/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 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.

In 2011, the BLM initiated work related to a cultural Class I inventory to support the planning effort. In addition to site-level inventorying, broad overviews of area-wide cultural resources are called Class I inventories. The most recent Class I inventory of the cultural resources on the Grand Junction Field Office (GJFO) side of the D-E NCA is the Class I overview completed by Brian O'Neil in 1993, *The Archaeology of the Grand Junction Resource Area: Crossroads to the Colorado Plateau and the Southern Rocky Mountains*. The data for the GJFO Class I analysis in 1993 was based upon records current through June 30, 1989, with the exception of radiocarbon dates that included projects through 1992.

Many of the early archaeological surveys were not conducted or reported to current standards. As a result, there was great variability in the reports and the site forms used.

The most recent Class I inventory on the Uncompahgre Field Office (UFO) side of the NCA was completed by Rand Greubel of Alpine Archaeological Consultants (Greubel et al 2010): *Class I Cultural Resource Overview of the Bureau of Land Management's Uncompahgre Field Office, Western Colorado*. Data for the 2010 Class I analysis was based on records current through 2010. The remainder of the Class I inventories for the area (GJFO portion) will be completed in 2012.

Within the D-E NCA, the condition of cultural resources varies considerably, due to the diversity of terrain, geomorphology, access, visibility, and past and current land use patterns. Cultural sites discovered during inventory are evaluated for eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and protection through site avoidance, where possible. If avoidance is not possible, testing for NRHP site eligibility and mitigation of impacts through data recovery in the forms of archaeological testing or excavation may be necessary. Consultation with the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) is

completed through the Section 106 process.

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.

C. LAND HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

Land health assessments were conducted in 2007 (prior to designation) and 2010.

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 land health standards. The BLM did not make a conclusion on 15,708 acres (7 percent) due to remoteness or inaccessibility.

See the Natural Resource Condition and Inventory sections of this report for a description of work being completed to address land health issues in the NCA.

D. INVENTORY



Historic corral in Big Dominguez Canyon.

BLM biological technicians visited known territories for peregrine falcon and golden eagle within the D-E NCA during the breeding 2011 season. The Escalante peregrine falcon and the McCarty Trail golden eagle sites were both active.

Colorado Natural Areas Program volunteers Wendy McBride and Connie Willis visited the Escalante Canyon Natural Area and Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) in April 2011. The monitors recorded that the overall area appears to be in good condition and documented issues with off-highway vehicle (OHV) trails and campsites/fire rings within the ACEC. Monitors also found a large patch of Russian knapweed along the riparian corridor in the northeast portion of the area.

In June 2011, BLM resource specialists installed a 60x40 meter permanent demographic trend monitoring plot on the western end of the Escalante Canyon ACEC. The objective is to establish robust demographic monitoring with the ability to detect a 20 percent difference in mean population density of *Sclerocactus glaucus* between years. Each plant within the sampled transect was permanently marked with a numbered tag, allowing the BLM to follow the life history of each individual. First year data only provides an interesting snapshot of the health of the cactus population. The purpose of establishing this plot is to attempt to detect the level of impact (if any) related to cattle grazing and trailing. Additional years of data will contribute to a better understanding of impacts.

BLM resource specialists also completed weed inventory, and monitored tamarisk beetle along the Escalante and Gunnison rivers in the NCA; inventories on the Mesa County portion of the Gunnison River are remaining. Gunnison river inventories focused on campsites.

BLM fish biologists sampled Cottonwood Creek in 2011 and documented the presence of a sensitive species, the bluehead sucker.

BLM cultural staff also kicked off the Ute Trails project by completing initial inventories needed to document route systems used by the Ute people as they moved through the area. This project brought Ute interns from Fort Duchesne, UT. These interns worked with cultural resource staff to locate and document portions of Ute trails and other Ute sites that exist in the D-E NCA. This project is a cooperative effort in D-E NCA, McInnis Canyons NCA and the Grand Junction Field Office.

Class III cultural resource inventories were completed on 2,353 acres within the D-E NCA in 2011.

Thirty-seven cultural resource sites were monitored as a part of the Keeping it Wild Wilderness Character Cultural Resource Monitoring program in the D-E NCA. BLM Law Enforcement pursued one Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) incident that occurred within the NCA. BLM staff gave 12 public presentations for cultural resources in the D-E NCA. Additionally staff gave eight presentations to K-12 youth, reaching 340 students. The BLM also conducted three total face-to-face consultations with Ute tribes in FY 2011.

E. RESTORATION

Most of the projects related to restoration in the NCA in 2011 focused on establishing baselines and developing long-range monitoring plots. See the Inventory section of this report for more information.

2. Recreation Facilities, Roads, and Trails Conditions

Key on-the-ground projects completed in 2011 include:

- Placing new road and trail counters at key access points to collect baseline data about visitor numbers and use patterns.
- Completing regular river patrols throughout the summer and completing upland patrols throughout the big game hunting seasons.
- Completing wilderness boundary signage at all access points where motorized routes access the boundary.
- Maintaining all developed recreation sites (two in Cactus Park, Dominguez Campground, Escalante Potholes, and the Whitewater boat ramp).

In 2011, the BLM completed new portal signs; NCA volunteers erected them at key entry sites.



BLM archeological technicians and Ute tribe interns during the Ute Trails project inventories in DE-NCA.

One of the key access points into the wilderness at Dominguez Canyon suffered a major erosional failure in 2011. NCA staff are working with a key private landowner whose access is also affected by this trail failure, with repair anticipated in winter 2012.

3. Outreach, Environmental Education, Interpretation, and Volunteers

A. OUTREACH

Most outreach in 2011 occurred in conjunction with the Resource Management Planning process (see Planning section of this report) and through direct contacts with NCA park rangers. The NCA 2011 seasonal field staff included two river rangers and one land-based park ranger. In 2011, the BLM completed the first comprehensive website for the NCA.

B. VISITOR CENTERS

There are no visitor's centers located inside the NCA. The Grand Junction Visitors and Convention Bureau and Delta County provide education and outreach to complement the visitor services provided at the Grand Junction and Uncompahgre field offices, and person-to-person outreach conducted on-site by NCA



Western Colorado Congress Trail Hands volunteers installing one of the large portal (entry) signs in the NCA.



Trail damage at Bridgeport, June 2011.

park rangers. The NCA website also offers up-to-date information related to the planning process and area attractions.

C. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Diné College – BLM river rangers partnered with Diné College on two overnight river trips for 24 middle school and high school-age Native American youth (11-15 year olds). Participants came from various tribes (Navajo, Ute, Hopi, Zuni from the Four Corners area and Chippewa from Minnesota). Diné College, located in Tsaile, Arizona, serves the residents of the 26,000 square-mile Navajo Nation which is spread over Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Founded in 1968, it is the first of 37 tribal colleges. BLM river rangers and interns/graduate students from Diné College co-lead the trip. This trip provided an introduction to outdoor skills for trip participants, giving them a chance to paddle rafts and inflatable kayaks. In addition to learning about outdoor recreation through direct experience, participants learned about outdoor careers from BLM river rangers, hiked to Native American cultural sites, collected water quality data and assisted BLM biologists with riparian restoration work. This pilot project provided an introduction as a first collaboration between the BLM NCA staff and Diné College.



NCA river rangers share information about the BLM and outdoor careers with students on the Diné College trip.

NCA River Rangers also supported a one-day trip with Partners of Delta County, a county-administered program similar to Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Each summer, BLM river rangers take 25 local youth (participants in the Partners program who are awaiting adult mentors) on a recreational one-day float. This is a welcome opportunity for these youth to get out on the river and have fun just being kids. The program leader has commented that these trips are the “first time she has seen some of them let their guard down,” smile and play. In addition to providing insight into the role that outdoor education can play in a healthy lifestyle, these trips provide an introduction to outdoor careers, with opportunities to transition into future job opportunities with the Western Colorado Conservation Corps.

Network volunteers contributed approximately 3,302 hours on stewardship, outreach, and resource protection and restoration projects in 2011. Projects included: river patrols; awareness and campsite



Diné college students and trip leaders hike toward Little Dominguez Canyon.

cleanup projects; facility inspections; trail construction and maintenance; cultural site monitoring and protection; weed treatments and control; recreation, wildlife and plant inventories; fishery recovery projects; environmental education; and sign installation.



2011 Partners trip on the Gunnison River through the NCA.

4. Science

In 2011, genetic samples were collected in the D-E NCA for the Genetic Investigation of *Sclerocactus glaucus* (Colorado hookless cactus) Genetic Diversity and Taxonomic Relations in Western Colorado study. More than a dozen sites within the NCA were included in the 2011 genetic study. Preliminary results show all sampled cacti within the D-E NCA to be *Sclerocactus glaucus* (Federally-listed threatened species).

In addition to the genetic study, the Denver Botanic Garden partnered with the BLM to establish floristic

surveys across the range of Colorado hookless cactus. There are three established monitoring sites within the D-E NCA. Results from the floristic surveys are not yet available, as additional data is needed for trend analysis.

5. Partnerships

In 2011, the Colorado Canyons Association (CCA) expressed interest in becoming the “Friends” group for the Dominguez-Escalante NCA (as well as the Gunnison Gorge NCA). CCA got its start as the Friends of McInnis Canyons in 2005, focusing primarily on fostering community stewardship of the nearby McInnis Canyons NCA. The Friends received a capacity-building grant from the Conservation Lands Foundation, and, in February 2011, hired their first full-time paid staff, Executive Director Joe Neuhofer. In April 2011, the Friends rebranded themselves as

the Colorado Canyons Association and began providing community stewardship support to Gunnison Gorge NCA and D-E NCA. In June 2011, CCA added part-time projects coordinator Rosa Brey to their staff. In 2011, CCA completed foundational work necessary to begin community stewardship projects in the NCA.

NCA archaeologists continued a successful site steward program in 2011 after re-initiating it 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.

Other partnership projects are described in more detail in the Environmental Education section of this report.



BLM staff discuss potential projects with CCA Executive Director Joe Neuhofer in 2011.

6. Planning and Business Practices

A. PLANNING

After two years of anticipating and preparing for the Resource Management Planning process, 2011 was a busy year. The planning team achieved many milestones anticipated since the NCA's designation when the BLM was directed to prepare a management plan and comprehensive travel plan for the area.

In November 2010, the NCA planning team completed the first of several key reports that would provide a foundation for the rest of the planning process, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Eligibility Report.

In December 2010, Secretary Salazar appointed ten individuals to the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area Advisory Council, and on January 5, 2011, the Advisory Council held its first meeting. After successfully working their way through the appointment process, council members were eager to get going and committed to meeting as often as necessary to get up to speed on the planning process and provide meaningful input for the BLM to consider during the Alternative Development Process. The Council would go on to hold 16 additional meetings in the portion of 2011

covered by this report, including two field trips to see on-the-ground issues in the NCA.

Also in January 2011, the Preparation Plan for the Resource Management Plan (RMP) was formally approved by WO. In February, the planning team completed the Scoping Report and the Analysis of the Management Situation. Like the Eligibility report, these documents form the foundation for the rest of the planning process.

Between February and April 2011, NCA staff attended five Wild and Scenic River Stakeholder meetings, which were convened by community representatives to promote community discussion in the Delta area regarding Wild and Scenic River eligibility and suitability to provide the BLM with local information to be used during consideration of suitability.

In March 2011, the NCA planning team began developing what are known as "alternatives". Each of these alternatives present a different potential way in which the NCA could be managed in the future. The BLM reviews a variety of options to improve the quality of the plan that will be ultimately selected.

The public also had the opportunity during this time to provide comments on the BLM's travel manage-

ment inventory. The travel management inventory informs the travel management planning for the RMP, which will address resource uses, including recreational, traditional, casual, agricultural, commercial, and educational; and the accompanying modes and conditions of travel on public lands. The planning team considered these inventory comments during the alternatives development process, with much of the staff work occurring in summer 2011.

Throughout the year, the NCA planning team published seven editions of the Canyon Clarion, the newsletter for the NCA planning process, available at http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/canyon_clarion_newsletter.html; and developed and maintained a planning-process website, available at http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/denca_rmp.html

As the fiscal year closed in September 2011, the BLM awarded the contract for RMP support to EMPSi, a Boulder-based environmental contractor. EMPSi is providing the scientific analysis of environmental impacts, which will form Chapter 4 of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and the Biological Assessment.

B. BUDGET

The NCA's permanent staff includes an interim NCA manager (currently shared with McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area); a science ecologist (a joint position that also supports Gunnison Gorge and McInnis Canyons); a law enforcement officer; and an outdoor recreation planner. Staff supporting the planning effort include a planning and environmental coordinator and a writer/editor. The NCA receives Special Recreation Permits administration and facilities maintenance support from the Grand Junction and Uncompahgre field office recreation staffs. In 2011, seasonal staff included two river rangers for information/education on the river, several cultural technicians shared with the Grand Junction Field Office, and one land-based seasonal recreation park ranger to patrol and monitor in the NCA and wilderness.

The NCA receives staffing support from the Grand Junction and Uncompahgre field offices, primarily in the areas of visitor services and contact (e.g., front desk visitor specialists); geology/paleontology; cultural resources; range; wildlife biology; ecology; weeds management; Geographic Information Systems (GIS); and soil/water/air.



7. Manager's Corner

Because the RMP process was such a focus for the NCA staff and planning team in 2009, much of this report was devoted to describing that effort. Two themes woven throughout the RMP process are worth especial note here.

As the NCA Manager, I want to call special attention to the work completed by members of the Dominguez-Escalante Advisory Council in support of the planning effort during 2011. The planning section of this report describes the 16 meetings that occurred during 2011, and explains how eager the Council was to get going, but each member of the Council truly deserves recognition for the amount of time, energy and dedication that they contributed to support the planning effort, develop their own recommendations as an Advisory Council, and achieve the utility envisioned in the Omnibus Act. Each Advisory Council member volunteered more than 50 hours meeting with their fellow members of the Council, in addition to the time they spent studying the issues and talking with members of the public outside of meetings.

Members of the Council are:

Katie Steele, Chair (representing historic resources and dispersed recreation)

Bill Harris, Vice-Chair (representing cultural resources, mountain biking, and Montrose County)

Steve Acquafresca, Mesa County Commissioner (representing Mesa County)

Jan McCracken, former Delta County Commissioner (representing Delta County-Jan served until June 2011 and was then replaced by sitting Delta County Commissioner Doug Atchley)

Oscar Massey (representing grazing permittees)

Jason Beason (representing wildlife resources-Jason served until June 2011 and was replaced by Steve Boyle of Montrose)

Terry Kimber (representing traditional uses)

Tamera Minnick (representing science, education, and land restoration/ecology)

Neil "Mike" Wilson (representing motorized recreation)

Joe Neuhof (representing quiet use, wilderness and environmental values, and community stewardship groups)

The Advisory Council served as a sounding board for the second group that deserves special mention here: members of the public who attended the Advisory Council meetings to engage with the Council and the BLM during the planning process. Individual members of the public put substantial time and energy into engaging with the BLM and Advisory Council through these meetings. While these individuals are too numerous to mention by name here (because I don't want to leave anyone out), I saw many of the same people, or different people representing the same group, at every single meeting. Each meeting was consistently attended by 20-60 members of the public, and I know that, through their efforts, the Advisory Council understands the issues better, as do I and the rest of the NCA staff. Collectively, members of the public contributed more than 1,000 hours of their time to this process.

The members of the public who engaged with the Wild and Scenic River stakeholders group also impressed me with the amount of time they contributed to forming up independent feedback to the BLM.

Finally, I am proud of the dedicated NCA staff members who supported the planning effort and each one of these Advisory Council and public meetings this year. Planning efforts are intensive, deadline-driven, multi-year processes, with multiple com-

peting deadlines and a substantial amount of work to be done for each incremental step. The NCA staff specialists and the resource specialists in the Grand Junction and Uncompahgre field offices who worked on this plan are truly professional public servants, a committed group that worked together to achieve each milestone that came at them. I am impressed with their excellence, creativity and innovation, and I am excited to share the Draft RMP/EIS in 2012.