

# CANYON CLARION

DOMINGUEZ-ESCALANTE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA & DOMINGUEZ CANYON WILDERNESS PLANNING NEWSLETTER

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[www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/denca\\_rmp.html](http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca/denca_rmp.html)

BLM

Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area • COLORADO



## SOCIO-ECONOMIC WORKSHOPS

**OCTOBER 18**

3-6 PM

MESA COUNTY

COURTHOUSE ANNEX

MULTIPURPOSE ROOM (1ST FLOOR)

544 ROOD AVENUE

GRAND JUNCTION, CO

**OCTOBER 19**

3-6 PM

DELTA CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

822 GRAND AVENUE

DELTA, CO



## Advisory Council considers Canyon Wilderness issues

**T**he Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area Advisory Council met on Aug. 17 to discuss the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Area, which lies at the heart of the NCA.

The Wilderness is a 66,280-acre expanse of sandstone canyons and piñon-juniper covered mesas. Water runs through the Big and Little Dominguez creeks year-round, creating habitat for many birds, mammals and reptiles. The state reintroduced desert bighorn sheep and visitors can often see the sheep grazing at the base of the cliffs in the wilderness. Rock art on the canyon walls and lithic sites on the mesas testify to thousands of years of Native American use for hunting, shelter and as a travel corridor from the Gunnison River Valley to the Uncompahgre Plateau. These canyons also show traces of the early miners and settlers who lived and worked throughout the area.

As a component of the National Wilderness Preservation System, the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness must be managed in compliance with the Wilderness Act of 1964. This means that the management requirements

for Wilderness are different than the rest of the NCA. The BLM manages wilderness areas to preserve wilderness character for current and future use and enjoyment. The components of wilderness character are:

- Untrammeled: essentially free of human control and manipulation
- Natural: substantially free from the effects of modern civilization
- Undeveloped: retaining primeval character, essentially without permanent improvements
- Outstanding opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation
- Unique/supplemental values

**At a glance:** The Dominguez Canyon Wilderness is characterized by large mesas dissected by deep red slick-rock canyons, perennial water and arroyos.

**BLM land** = 66,280 acres

**State land** = 640 acres

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**Two inholdings:** The Rambo Homestead in Little Dominguez Canyon consists of an old house, an outbuilding, old farming implements, ranching and farming supplies. The property the homestead occupies has been deeded to the BLM. Colorado Parks and Wildlife has a 640-acre parcel on Sowbelly Ridge, Tatum Ridge and Camp Ridge.

**Geology:** The mesa tops are predominantly part of the Dakota/Burro Canyon Formation. Canyon walls reveal layers of the Morrison, Entrada, Kayenta, Wingate, Chinle to the Pre-Cambrian formation on the canyon floor. The Pre-Cambrian rock is up to 1.8 billion years old. Between the Pre-Cambrian and Chinle is the "Great Unconformity" -- one billion years of missing rock formations.

**Paleontology:** Dominguez Canyon Wilderness has moderate to very high potential for fossil sites, particularly in the Morrison and Chinle formations. Regionally, the Dry Mesa Quarry (in the Uncompahgre National Forest overlooking Escalante Canyon) produced some 4,000 dinosaur bones in 13 field seasons for Brigham Young University, including bones from *Ceratosaurus*, *Supersaurus* and *Torvosaurus*.

**Water:** Water quality is excellent in the wilderness. The BLM has filed for instream water rights for Big and Little Dominguez creeks that are working their way through water court. If approved by the courts, it would appropriate previously unallocated water (above a certain development allowance) to wilderness and natural values.

**Vegetation:** Piñon-juniper woodlands, desert shrubland/saltbush, sagebrush shrublands and mountain shrub communities characterize the wilderness. Most of the wilderness is meeting land health standards. The few areas not meeting are Little Dominguez Creek (grazing and wildfire) and McCarty Bench (decline in grasses and increase in decadent sage brush). There are three sensitive plant species in the wilderness:

- Colorado hookless cactus – Threatened listing under Endangered Spe-



**The Dominguez Canyon Wilderness really is wild -- as this mountain lion track attests. Man is a visitor here, where wildlife is very much at home. The wilderness is the heart of the National Conservation Area.**

- Grand Junction milkvetch -- BLM Sensitive Species
- Naturita milkvetch -- BLM Sensitive Species

Sensitive species are those that the BLM Colorado State Director has determined warrant additional conservation attention.

**Planning for Priority Species and Vegetation:** The planning team is using the Planning for Priority Species and Vegetation methodology to organize biological data and analyses and inform decision making during RMP planning. Most of the wilderness ecosystems and species of concern are in good to very good shape. Two ecosystems are evaluated as being in "fair" condition. They are:

- Sagebrush/shrublands:**
- Unbalanced ratio of grass to shrub to forb
  - Insufficient habitat for sage grouse

- (require 10-30 percent sage cover)
- Overabundance of the non-native crested wheatgrass, reducing the biological diversity and ecological value of the community

**Aquatic Systems:**

- Lack of native trout
- Lack of spawning access to Big and Little Dominguez creeks
- Selenium

**Wildlife:** Species include the collared lizard, desert bighorn sheep, mountain lions, golden eagles and peregrine falcons. Bighorn sheep inhabit much of the wilderness. Lambing takes place around Triangle Mesa and Star Mesa. Proximity to domestic sheep and goats in the NCA is a disease concern. The Rambo Homestead keeps 10-20 goats in Little Dominguez. Elk are found around Wagon Park, in Escalante Canyon and to the southeast.

**Cultural:** Archaeologists have surveyed  
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only 18 percent of Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, which is rich in sites.

**Livestock grazing:** According to the terms of the 2009 Omnibus Act, grazing shall be allowed to continue in Dominguez Canyon Wilderness, and new livestock water developments may be built. There are three grazing allotments held by two local ranchers in the wilderness. There are no sheep on these allotments and the number of cattle ranges between 1,620 and 2,120 animal unit months (AUM).

**Recreation:** The wilderness is strictly non-motorized and non-mechanized; the primary recreation activities will be hiking and horseback riding. The BLM estimates 9,500 wilderness visits annually.

The mouth of Dominguez Canyon is the most popular point of access. There are five other recreation access points to the wilderness: Cactus Park, Dominguez Campground, Gunnison Pack Trail, McCarty Trailhead and Escalante Canyon.

Recreational use via the canyon mouth provides access for half of the wilderness area's visitors.

In order to reduce resource/user conflicts upstream from the mouth of the Dominguez Creek Canyon, the BLM manages the initial stretches of Big and Little Dominguez Creeks as day-use-only areas. In the past, campers have left trash, fire rings and human waste. Problems have diminished as a result of this change in management.

There are 100 miles of routes within the wilderness, including:

- 33 miles of former roads (with evidence of construction)
- 45 miles of old two-track routes
- 22 miles of single-track routes

A survey conducted by the Natural Resource Land Policy Institute found that 40 percent of respondents cited Quiet/Contemplative values as why they recreated in the wilderness. Another 26.7 percent cited Affiliation and Social Cohesion

values. Wilderness focus groups in Delta and Grand Junction were asked questions last year by the Natural Resource Land Policy Institute.

In assessing the most important wilderness values for those two communities, Delta citizens feel both the wilderness and people should be left alone. In contrast, the Grand Junction focus group puts a priority on naturalness and unique values, like the desert bighorn herd.

**Wilderness monitoring:** Federal land management agencies use the "Keeping It Wild" program to monitor trends in wilderness character across the National Wilderness Preservation System (which includes units managed by USFWS, NPS, BLM and USFS). The agencies monitor the following characteristics:

- Untrammeled
- Natural
- Undeveloped
- Solitude or primitive recreation
- Unique and supplemental values

## Advisory Council briefed on bighorn sheep issues

The Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area Advisory Council was briefed on the NCA's desert bighorn sheep herd on Sept. 7. The guest speaker was Brad Banulis, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (formerly Colorado State Parks and Colorado Division of Wildlife) terrestrial biologist.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife transplanted desert bighorn into the Big Dominguez Creek drainage in 1983 (10 sheep from Arizona), 1984 (10 sheep from Arizona) and 1985 (21 sheep from Nevada in two transplants). They released additional sheep in the Roubideau Creek drainage in 1991 (18 sheep from Arizona) and 1993 (20 sheep from Nevada). In the late 1990's, CPAW biologists estimated the population to be approximately 250 sheep.

A *Pasteurella pneumonia* outbreak occurred in the bighorn population in 2001-2002. In 2001-2002 very few lambs were observed and the population

appeared to decline dramatically before appearing to rebound in 2004 and 2005. Currently, the population is estimated at 150 individuals. Overall, biologists estimate that the area could support up to 400 bighorns.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife is responsible for managing bighorn sheep populations, and considers affects of factors such as predation, disease and hunter harvest on population size.

As the habitat manager for the Dominguez-Escalante herd, the BLM can contribute to desert bighorn conservation goals by improving habitat and considering the effect of authorized land uses on the desert bighorn (such as grazing and recreation).

In areas where domestic sheep or goats are authorized to graze, the interaction between domestic livestock and wild sheep is a particular concern, and several working groups at the local and national levels have produced management rec-

ommendations regarding disease.

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (a consortium of 23 state and federal wildlife agencies) updated their set of management recommendations in 2010. These recommendations include strategies for state wildlife population managers, land managers (including the BLM) and private livestock owners.

The NCA currently includes five allotments authorized for domestic sheep grazing. When complete, the resource management plan will examine and analyze recommendations from existing strategies regarding grazing, and may consider potential habitat treatments or restrictions on recreationists at certain times of year. The Advisory Council requested additional information on this issue, and would like to hear specifically from sheep producers who operate in the NCA. The Oct. 5 meeting will likely focus on this issue.