

# 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

## Potholes problems addressed

The Potholes area in Escalante Canyon is a narrow, deep canyon with walls ranging from 30 to 100 feet. The canyon is located just upstream from the Captain Smith Cabin site. The canyon's constricted water flow has carved out a variety of potholes in the rock. At low water levels, the potholes offer places to splash and swim.

During turbulent spring runoff, the waters would be fatal to swimmers, but extreme kayakers flock to the area to challenge the IV Class rapids. Jumping from canyon walls to pools has resulted in numerous accidents and at least five deaths over the last 12 years.

The Potholes area became known as a party site in the 90s. Resource damage included cutting trees for bonfires; shooting or throwing glass bottles around the parking lot, camping and swimming areas; leaving trash; and improper disposal of human waste. Underage drinking and drug use was also associated with overnight camping and bonfire parties.

In 2005, the Uncompahgre Field Office responded to these trends with a two-fold strategy

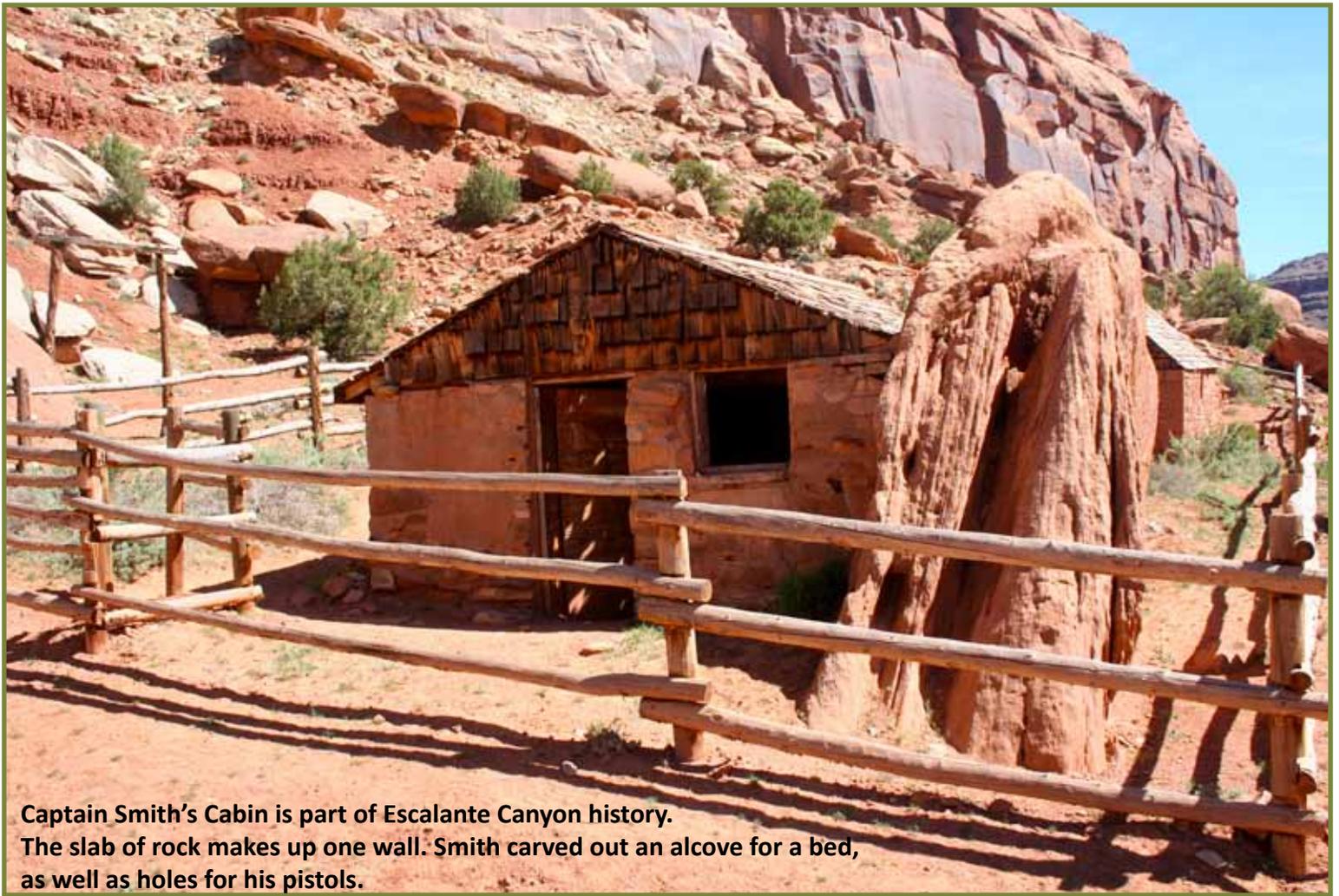
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**Potholes Recreation Area provides a world-class challenge for kayakers during spring runoff, and used to be a party site during the summer. Tougher regulations and regular patrols make the canyon a great family picnic area.**

Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area • COLORADO





**Captain Smith's Cabin is part of Escalante Canyon history. The slab of rock makes up one wall. Smith carved out an alcove for a bed, as well as holes for his pistols.**

## Advisory Council explores Escalante Canyon country

**T**he Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area Advisory Council met on August 3 to discuss Zone 5. The zone encompasses Escalante Canyon, Sawmill and Dry Mesas, the ridges southwest of Dominguez Canyon Wilderness (Sowbelly, Tatum, Camp) and Wagon Park. The area is a close-to-home destination for Delta-area residents; Grand Junction citizens tend to gravitate to the Cactus Park area, on the west side of the NCA.

Zone 5 has one recreational hotspot – the Potholes area up Escalante Canyon. The Potholes has long presented management challenges, drawing activity such as bonfire parties, littering, and a history of injuries and deaths from cliff jumping and drownings. Based on these issues, the BLM instituted special rules and educational approaches in this area.

Zone 5 has a diverse mix of federal, private and state land – more so than any

other part of the NCA:

- BLM land: 73,800.1 acres
- Private inholdings – mostly ranching properties up Escalante Canyon: 3,084.4 acres
- State land – belonging to Colorado Parks and Wildlife: 968.3 acres-

Most of Zone 5 is south of the Gunnison River, southeast of the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness and north by northeast of the Uncompahgre National Forest. Wagon Park is surrounded on three sides by the wilderness, but was not included in the wilderness because it had been extensively chained in the 1950s and 1960s to improve forage for livestock. The remote Wagon Park area is popular with hunters.

### Topography

Zone 5 lands range from low-lying areas nearest to the Gunnison River and the City of Delta, to the upper elevations nearest to Uncompahgre National Forest. The major canyons include Escalante Dry Fork Escalante and Cottonwood. Eleva-

tion rises from 4,847 to 8,355 feet.

### Geology

Escalante Canyon is a showcase of spectacular canyons and mesas. Running north and south, the canyon's formations descend down from the Salt Wash, Entrada, Kayenta, Wingate and Chinle to the Pre-Cambrian formation on the canyon floor. The Pre-Cambrian rock – what you see in the Pothole canyon walls – is up to 1.8 billion years old. The other major canyons are the Dry Fork Escalante and Cottonwood. The Brushy Basin formation has a high likelihood of containing dinosaur fossils and is found in many parts of Zone 5.

Farther up the Escalante Canyon into the Uncompahgre National Forest is the famed Dry Mesa Dinosaur Quarry, which produced more than 4,000 dinosaur bones.

**Continued on page 3**

## Continued from page 2

### Cultural resources

Zone 5 includes historic resources like Captain Smith's Cabin (on land owned by Colorado Parks and Wildlife) and prehistoric resources including open camps, rock art, buried and surface sites and prehistoric trails. These sites span from the PaleoIndian (12,000+ years ago) to 1961 and earlier. Escalante Canyon has the potential to be managed as a heritage tourism destination associated with both the prehistory and history of the canyon.

For example, Capt. Smith was a Civil War veteran and tombstone cutter. His cabin uses a large sandstone slab as a wall. Smith carved a sleeping alcove into the sandstone, as well as a spot for his pistols.

### Water

Zone 5's water resources include year-round and ephemeral streams in the canyons. The area around Escalante Canyon has numerous seeps and springs emerging from canyon walls. Precipitation tends to percolate through sandstones until blocked by impervious layers, then seeks outlet in the canyons. Zone 5 also has numerous water developments and ponds for livestock on the mesas.

### Land health

Assessments for Zone 5 indicate that 67 percent of the area is meeting the BLM's land health standards, while one-fourth is either meeting with problems (22 percent) or not meeting (4 percent). The remainder has not been assessed. Areas consisting of desert shrub and sagebrush vegetation types have the most land health problems. Parts of the riparian zones along Dry Fork Escalante and Cottonwood Creek also have land health problems. These problems include:

- Loss of native grasses and forbs
- Spread of exotic/noxious weeds
- Low plant biodiversity
- Loss of native, riparian vegetation
- Low plant cover
- Loss of cryptogamic soils
- Mortality of Colorado hookless cactus
- Exposure of bighorn to disease

Causes of these problems include:

- Historic grazing



**Hoodoo rock formations in Escalante Canyon formed because the cap-rock is more resistant to erosion than the rock underneath. Visitors are cautioned about getting too close, as the bases can be unstable.**

- Drought
- Spread of noxious/invasive plants
- Livestock grazing in riparian areas
- Water diversions and dams
- Roads and trails, as a means of spreading weeds

### Grazing

Zone 5 includes 10 grazing allotments: two sheep allotments (Cactus Park-Club Gulch and Lower Escalante), one mixed horse and cattle allotment (Sawmill Mesa) and seven cattle allotments. In the 1960s and 1970s, many of the mesa tops southeast of Escalante Canyon and in Wagon Park were chained and re-seeded with crested wheatgrass. The BLM's inventory of range improvement projects identifies 117 water developments in this zone (stock tanks, dams, reservoirs, catchments, guzzlers).

### Area of Critical Environmental Concern

Zone 5 has one 1,895-acre Area of Critical Environmental Concern in Escalante Canyon -- designated for sensitive plant species, natural seeps and several globally-unique plant associations that only grow in those seeps -- such as Eastwood's monkey flower and small-flowered columbine. The ACEC also includes the Potholes area and its unique recreational opportunities for swimming, extreme kayaking and picnicking.

### Special status species

Zone 5 includes one threatened species under the Endangered Species Act -- the Colorado hookless cactus. BLM sensitive species that have been confirmed in Zone 5 within the past 10 years include:

- Desert bighorn sheep
- Grand Junction milk vetch
- Eastwood's monkey flower
- Peregrine falcon
- White-tailed prairie dog

**Continued on page 4**

## Continued from page 3

- Bluehead sucker
- Flannelmouth sucker
- Roundtail chub
- Colorado River cutthroat trout

Desert bighorn sheep can be seen throughout the canyon cliffs and lower elevations of Zone 5. They winter on irrigated pastures in Escalante Canyon.

### Recreation

Zone 5 is primarily a recreation area for Delta-area residents, but does not draw as many visitors as Cactus Park, the Gunnison River corridor or the Hunting Grounds. Zone 5 recreational opportunities include:

- Heritage tourism in Escalante Canyon
- Mountain biking
- Motorized recreation
- Quiet use recreation, (particularly in Dry Fork Escalante and Cottonwood Creek canyons)

Colorado Mesa University faculty surveys have given BLM insights into the activities people enjoy in Zone 5, as well as the categories into which these people fall. Hunting, swimming, ATV riding and auto touring are all popular activities according to the CMU survey data.

The people coming to Zone 5 seek the following experiences from recreation: quiet contemplative (33 percent), affiliation and social cohesion (34 percent), work where I play (22 percent) and close to nature (11 percent).

There are, however, problems associated with recreation in Zone 5, including trespass on private property as recreationists cross property to reach BLM lands or Escalante Creek. Complaints include gates left open, trash, noise, increased traffic and unauthorized camping.

**Mountain biking** has potential for growth in Zone 5. The mountain biking community has identified the Sawmill Mesa area for a potential single-track trail system in the NCA. The mountain bike community would like a mountain bike trail system somewhere in the NCA. The topography and proximity to Delta lend this area to the development of

mountain bike trails.

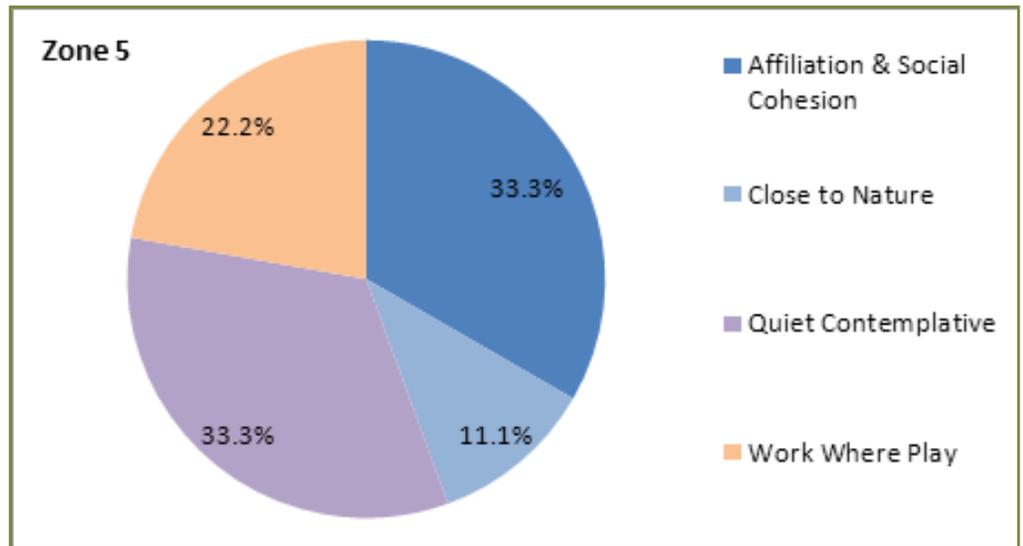
**Motorized recreationists** use the Cactus Park (South) and Sawmill Mesa areas for trail rides. However, the topography of the area, as well as the lack of adjoining motorized trails on USFS land, would make the development of a motorized recreation area difficult in Zone 5.

**Big game hunting** is popular in Zone 5's higher elevations and on the neighboring Uncompahgre National Forest. The area north of Escalante Creek, southwest of the wilderness, is highly valued and most heavily used during big game hunting

season. Wagon Park is also a popular area for hunting. The NCA's elk population and hunting activity have grown in recent decades .

**Camping** is often associated with hunting in the fall and winter. There are several designated camping sites in Escalante Canyon, but all other camping is located in dispersed, undeveloped campsites.

Quiet use recreation (horse and foot) has opportunities in Zone 5. New trails could be developed, particularly along Cottonwood Creek and Dry Fork Escalante Creek.



**Zone 5 recreationists most heavily favored the values of Affiliation & Social Cohesion and Quiet Contemplative -- tied at 33.3% each. Next most popular was Work Where We Play -- 22.2 percent of people who recreate in Zone 5 because it is close to home. Finally, there's the Close to Nature crowd (11.1%), who relish getting away to enjoy wildlife and the scenic beauty of Zone 5.**

## Potholes --

### Continued from page 1

:1) new regulations to address damaging and dangerous behavior, and 2) new facilities to help change the atmosphere of the area.

The special management for the Potholes included bans on:

- Camping outside designated campsites
- Cutting live or dead trees
- Burning materials containing nails, metal, hardware, etc.
- Failure to keep sites free of all litter, trash, and debris during occupancy of a site and failure to remove all personal equipment and clean site upon departure

- Diving/jumping into the water
- Discharging firearms of any kind, including those used for target shooting or paintball weapons
- Possessing glass containers
- Exhibiting public nudity
- Burning wood fires

New facilities – picnic shelters, a pit toilet and information kiosks – made the site more attractive to families and less attractive to the partiers. Young adults still go to the Potholes to cool off on hot summer days, but the party atmosphere has diminished with frequent patrols by BLM law enforcement and the presence of picnicking families from Delta.