

CANYON CLARION

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

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BLM

Advisory Council explores Cactus Park issues

Earlier this month, members of the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area Advisory Council discussed one of the more popular areas within the NCA, Cactus Park, and learned about the resources and activities that exist in that area.

The council is responsible for providing advice and input into the resource management plan for the NCA. In previous meetings, the council learned about the Hunting Grounds area and the Gunnison River.

Cactus Park covers 39,792 acres and is located west of the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness Area and south of the Gunnison River. Some of the more notable areas within Cactus Park include: Ninemile Hill, Cactus Park, Farmer's Canyon, Gunnison Bluffs and Gibbler Mountain. Cactus Park is a popular area for recreationists of all sorts because of its close proximity to Grand Junction and the Grand Valley.

Geography

Cactus Park is bordered by East Creek and the Unaweep Canyon to the northwest, Gunnison River to the northeast, the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness to the southeast and the Uncompahgre National Forest to the southwest.

Elevation ranges from 4,625 feet in the Gunnison Bluffs to 8,100 feet near the Uncompahgre National Forest, and 7,628 feet atop Gibbler Mountain.

Geologic formations from the Gunnison Bluffs southwestward, run from the Salt Wash and Brushy Basin to the Dakota/Burro Canyon, then alluvial deposits around Cactus Park Road.

Gibbler Mountain has the same formations, plus Summerville/Entrada formations on southwestern slopes. The southern half of Cactus Park is predominately made of the Wingate formation.

At one time, the Gunnison River may have

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50,000 visitors use Cactus Park annually, which makes up approximately half of all recreation use in the NCA. Ninemile Hill, Cactus Park and Farmers Canyon are used primarily for off-highway vehicle trail-riding recreation, with connections to additional trails on adjacent United States Forest Service land.

Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area • COLORADO



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run through Unaweep Canyon, only to be blocked by a geological uplift. The uplift — the Unaweep Divide — sends the East Stream running east to the Gunnison River and the West Stream running west to the Dolores River.

Paleontology

Cactus Park is considered to be fairly rich in fossils. The skull of an Ankylosaurid — an armored type of dinosaur — was found here last spring and received widespread news coverage.

The BLM is currently considering whether to allocate paleontology sites for public use and interpretation in a way that will not disturb ongoing paleontological research. BLM law enforcement identified fossil looting as a concern in this area.

Water

A segment of Big Dominguez Creek (East Creek is outside of the NCA boundary) is the only perennial stream in this area.

Ephemeral streams drain the Gunnison Bluffs directly into the Gunnison River, while the intermittent Gibbler Gulch and Farmers Canyon drain into East Creek. Riparian areas are associated with Big Dominguez, Gibbler Gulch and Jack's Canyon. There are seeps and springs near the Big Dominguez Creek headwaters.

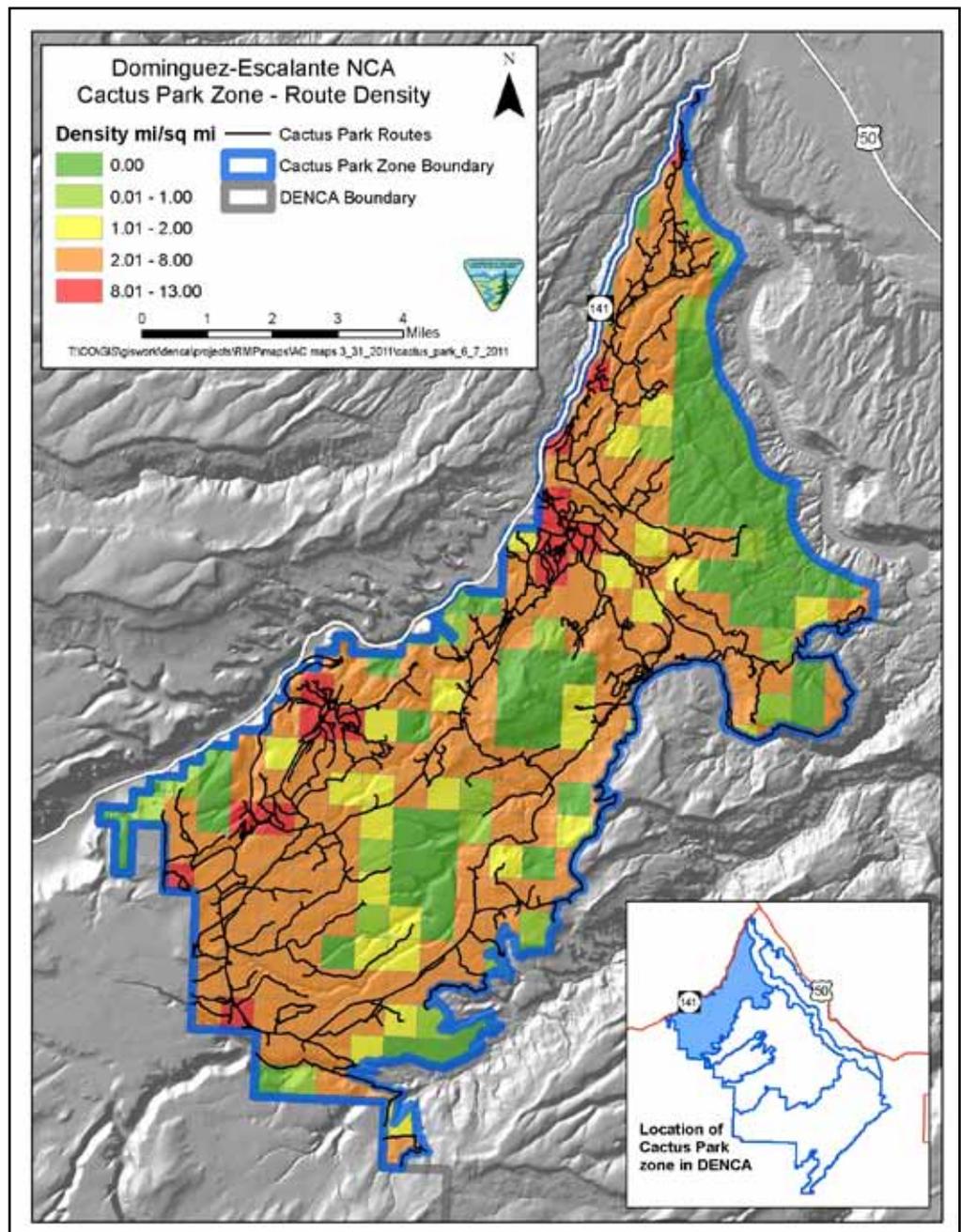
Vegetation & Soils

The vegetation within Cactus Park varies by elevation and includes desert, mountain and sagebrush shrublands, pinyon-juniper woodlands, ponderosa pine and riparian habitat.

Sensitive plant species include the federally-endangered Colorado hookless cactus and the Grand Junction and Naturita milkvetch, which are identified by the BLM as a sensitive plant species. According to BLM analysis, at least 89 percent of the Cactus Park area currently meets land health standards.

The area has been intensively managed for livestock since the 1960s. There are a number of water developments, trails and fences and vegetation treatments, such as chaining within the area.

Many of these treatments were followed with seeding using crested wheatgrass, an exotic grass that reduces erosion and may offer grazing value for livestock.



Cactus Park has a high density of trails in the front country, near the main roads. They include: Cactus Park Road and the Old Quarry. The least traveled areas are: Gunnison Bluffs, Gibbler Mountain and Gibbler Gulch.

The BLM is concerned that this area is losing native plants, while invasive plants, such as cheat grass and Russian knapweed, become dominant. Other concerns include low plant diversity, accelerated soil erosion and habitat fragmentation.

These problems emerged from the following:

- Livestock grazing
- Vegetation treatments
- Drought
- Road and trail proliferation
- Fire suppression

Livestock Grazing

There is a long tradition of livestock graz-

ing in the Cactus Park area, most of which falls within the Gibbler Common cattle allotment. The Gibbler Common has six pastures – three are used in spring and the other three are used during the fall and winter.

The RMP may consider additional actions to improve land health and objectives for biological resources.

Wildlife

Cactus Park has a dozen BLM sensitive wildlife species, including:

- Gunnison sage grouse (c)
- Desert bighorn sheep (c)

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- Northern goshawk (p)
- Bats (Allen's big-eared bat, Big free-tailed bat, Spotted bat, Townsend's big-eared bat, Fringed myotis) (p)
- Midget-faded rattlesnake (p)
- Milk snake (p)
- Columbian sharp-tailed grouse (p)
- Brewer's sparrow (p)

(c = confirmed habitat, p = potential habitat)

Cactus Park also provides habitat for deer and elk, and is used during the fall and winter for hunting.

Habitat fragmentation from road/trail proliferation and increased use of roads and trails concern management.

Cultural Resources

Cultural surveys conducted in nearby Bangs Canyon and in Cactus Park revealed a high density of cultural sites. It is highly likely that a similar density would be found in other areas throughout Cactus Park.

The Cactus Park area contains hunting camps, culturally modified trees, deeply buried significant sites and rock art. The BLM is concerned about vandalism and looting at these sites.

Recreation

At least 50,000 people use this area annually. That number makes up approximately half of all recreation use in the entire NCA. The Cactus Park area is readily accessible from the greater Grand Junction area and is a popular area for the following activities:

Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) use - Cactus Park has a high density of OHV trails. Since few trails were engineered, some sustainability issues exist. Ninemile Hill, Cactus Park and Farmers Canyon are used primarily for all-terrain vehicle trail riding recreation, with connections to additional trails on adjacent US Forest Service land. Ninemile Hill also has potential for motorcycle trial riding.

Scoping and recreation focus groups suggest that many members of the public would like to see the Cactus Park/Ninemile Hill area become an OHV area.

Horseback riders and hikers - Equestrians and hikers enjoy the Cactus Park trails and trailheads that give access to the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness. Public

feedback suggests the need for quiet recreation opportunities in these areas.

Mountain biking - The Tabeguache Trail is 144 miles long and connects Montrose with Grand Junction, running through Cactus Park. According to public scoping, the mountain biking community would like a new single-track trail system in Cactus Park, Gunnison Bluffs and/or the Gibbler Mountain areas. The emphasis would be multiple-use, including some mixed motorized/non-motorized trails.

Camping - The majority of camping in this area is in dispersed, undesignated camp sites. In fact, there are hundreds of dispersed campsites throughout the area.



Dispersed camping is often associated with hunting, OHV riding, wildlife viewing and hiking.

The Dominguez Campground is the only developed camping in the area and as a result is a popular site for the public. The campsite features a pit toilet, campsites, picnic tables and a trailhead for hikers and equestrians who want to venture down Big Dominguez Canyon.

Rock climbing - The cliff walls of Unaweep Canyon are a popular destination for rock climbers who seek bouldering and multi-pitch climbs.

Hunting - The higher elevations within Cactus Park are popular with big game hunters, particularly elk and deer hunters. Almost all of the NCA falls into Game Management Unit 62. Hunting season for big game varies each year, but generally begins the end of August and lasts through November, with late-season elk hunting extending through December.

Auto Touring - State Highway 141 bounds the northwest side of the NCA and Cactus Park. It is the first leg of the

138-mile Unaweep/Tabeguache Scenic Byway that sweeps south and then south-east, through Gateway, Naturita, Norwood and Placerville.

Travel Management

Few roads and trails in Cactus Park were designed by engineers, but were driven in or roughly built to access stock ponds, paleontological exploration sites, a flagstone quarry and fuel-wood harvest sites. Motorized recreationists then connected or extended these primitive roads and trails.

The number and density of trails and roads used by all recreationists range from high to low density. The highest density exists within Front Country, near the main Cactus Park road and the old flagstone quarries. The lowest density exists within the Gunnison Bluffs, Gibbler Mountain and Gibbler Gulch.

High-trail density areas can create problems for wildlife, vegetation (roads spread weeds), cultural resources and recreation. Roads or trails designated under the resource management plan will need to be surveyed for cultural and biological resources, which can be costly.

The areas with low road/trail densities would allow for the construction of new trails. However, low-density areas are important for wildlife and vegetation.

Wilderness Characteristics

The BLM is required under the 1976 Federal Land Policy Management Act to maintain an inventory of lands with wilderness characteristics. This applies to lands that are outside of wilderness study areas and federally-designated wilderness.

The BLM is still in the process of updating the inventory for the NCA.

At least one area within Cactus Park was identified by the public in a Citizen's Wilderness Proposal and in public scoping comments - specifically, Gunnison Bluffs/Dominguez North.

Law Enforcement

Past problems in this area include:

- Looting
- Squatters
- Off-road travel by OHVs users





The trail connecting the Bridgeport footbridge to the mouth of Dominguez Canyon is closed to equestrian, motorized and mechanized travel. The trail collapsed due to saturated soils. It may take months to effect repairs.

Two new developments for Bridgeport safety

Jn addition to a number of changes to improve public health and safety in the Bridgeport footbridge area, the Bureau of Land Management will also focus on a 40-foot section of a nearby trail that collapsed in the Gunnison River last month.

The collapsed trail is located on the south side of the Gunnison River just yards from the footbridge and provides access to the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness. As a result, the BLM has temporarily closed the trail between the Bridgeport footbridge and the mouth of Dominguez Canyon to equestrian, motorized and mechanized travel.

“While we are not closing the trail to hikers, we are discouraging all use of the trail,” said Katie A. Stevens, manager for the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area. “We will reopen the trail to horseback riding as soon as it is safe to do so.”

The trail is particularly popular with hikers and horseback riders, and sees about 7,200 visitors each year. For now, the only equestrian access is via trails from Dominguez Campground and Cactus Park. Repair will require extensive work and will likely not be completed for three-to-six months.

The BLM, Union Pacific Railroad and Mesa County have long been concerned about access to the Dominguez Canyon Wilderness in this area. More specifically, a concern for hikers and equestrians walking alongside railroad tracks near Bridgeport.

The three organizations are working together to find an alternative access route that would keep visitors away from the route that runs between the railroad tracks and the steep hillside. Equestrians report that horses are sometimes spooked by noisy

trains. County safety and railroad officials worry about hikers crawling under stopped trains that might start up again or shift their weight at any moment.

In April, the BLM approved a proposal for a new access route that would allow the public to use an underground tunnel to cross beneath the tracks to the footbridge. As part of this project, the BLM will also construct a new trailhead, parking area and restroom facility to guide the public away from the railroad tracks. Additional details for this project are included in the environmental assessment completed in 2011 (www.blm.gov/co/st/en/fo/gjfo.html).

“While we still have some work ahead of us before construction, including additional access, scientific and technical work, we are taking an important step closer to putting this project on the ground,” said Stevens.

“We at Union Pacific appreciate all the effort on both the public and private sides in dealing with Bridgeport access. The safety of the public is the priority for all of us. From our perspective, the discussions and the effort put into the EA are a good step forward,” said Dick Hartman, director of public affairs for Union Pacific.

Full completion of the project could be a few years away. The parties need to discuss a final structure design, engineering needs and funding. Until then, the BLM still cautions recreational users in the area to maintain a safe distance from trains and railroad facilities, structures and equipment.

For information, contact the Grand Junction Field Office (970) 244-3000. See map at www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/denca.html.