GUNNISON GORGE
NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA

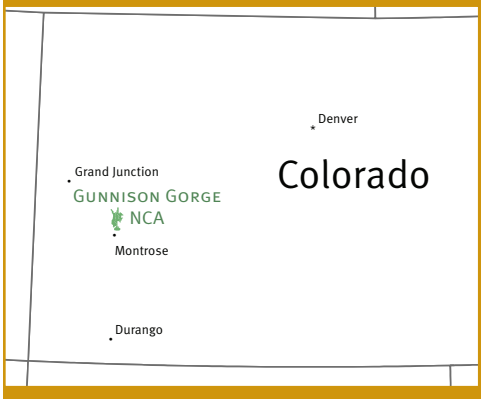
SONORAN INSTITUTE
Shaping the Future of the West

The National Landscape Conservation System includes 27 million acres of our most spectacular public lands, gathered together to conserve the essential fabric of the American spirit.

Gunnison Gorge NCA, Colorado

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT
Colorado

Created by an act of Congress in 1999, Gunnison Gorge NCA encompasses about 62,844 acres along a stretch of the Gunnison River on Colorado's Western Slope. Gunnison Gorge NCA attracts more than 90,000 visitors a year.



NATIONAL SYSTEM OF PUBLIC LANDS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

www.blm.gov/nlcs

Hypnotized by Nature's Beauty

Rafting down the Gunnison River on a summer afternoon is a hypnotic experience. The swift ripple of the river, the bands of color in the sandstone cliffs, the flocks of swallows swooping low over the water, all repeat themselves in an ever-changing yet endlessly repeated pattern that takes you far from the clamor of modern life.

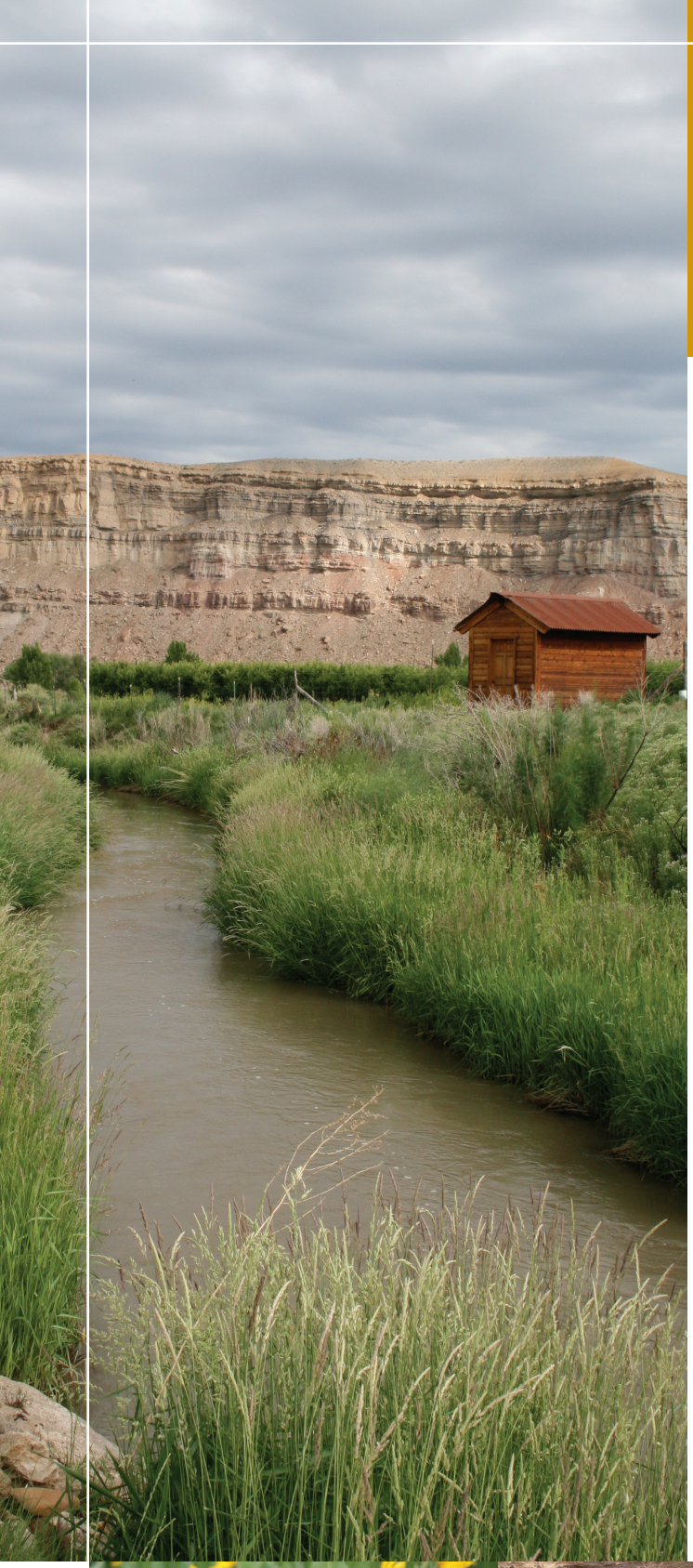
"This is my Zen," says Ryan Mathis, a Bureau of Land Management river ranger, as he paddles two guests along a stretch of the river in the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area (NCA), 62,844 acres of public lands on Colorado's Western Slope. "I love getting out here."

So do lots of other people. The conservation area, which includes a wilderness area with a spectacular double canyon system of black granite and red sandstone, is a recreational paradise for the residents of western Colorado and visitors from all over. "We've got all kinds of use," says Mathis, "everything from rafting to hiking to off-road motorized use to mountain biking to fishing. If you can do it on public lands, it's pretty much happening here."

Created by an act of Congress in 1999, the conservation area gets about 90,000 visitors a year. "That's a lot for an area of this size," notes Karen Tucker, national conservation area manager. "We've had a steady increase, year after year."

But if Gunnison Gorge is an example of the many different ways Americans find to enjoy their publicly owned lands, it's also an example of how engaging outdoor enthusiasts and their organizations in the conservation of those lands can promote a private-public partnership that improves the experience for everyone.

The BLM has encouraged the development of the Gunnison Gorge Friends Network, which taps into the willingness of the different groups who enjoy the conservation area to support it. Last year, volunteers contributed more than 3,000 hours in Gunnison Gorge to stewardship, restoration and improvement projects. "They make all the difference in the world," says Tucker. "They come in here with very little



"We share the same goals. We want to see this river treated right so we can all continue to use and benefit from it."

- Ben Olson, manager of Black Canyon Anglers

fanfare and assist with all kinds of things. The bottom line is, without them, a lot of these projects wouldn't get done."

Gunnison Gorge is part of the National Landscape Conservation System, which was created to designate a collection of special areas among BLM-administered lands to be managed with an emphasis on conservation under the Bureau's multiple-use mandate, and is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. The system includes lands of great scenic beauty, rare plants and animals, unique ecosystems and important cultural and historic sites.

The lands also provide an economic livelihood for many Americans while providing enjoyment for many more. Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area, for example, has 11 different grazing allotments for sheep and cattle ranchers who agree to make sure the livestock don't get too close to trailheads and other recreational sites.

Still, the heart of the Gunnison Gorge experience for most visitors is recreation. Roughly two-thirds are riders of motorcycles or all-terrain vehicles taking advantage of the Flat Top-Peach Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area, which provides areas where off-roaders can head through scenic adobe badlands and wooded areas of pinyon and juniper. The extent of off-highway vehicle access, included in the federal legislation that established Gunnison Gorge, is unique to the conservation area.

Gunnison Gorge also includes trails popular with mountain bikers, equestrians and hikers. The conservation area is open to both big and small game hunting, and it's a fisherman's dream, officially designated a Gold Medal Trout Stream by the Colorado Wildlife Commission. "This is the number-one fishing stream in Colorado. We have more than 7,000 trout per mile," proclaims Leroy Jagodinski, a longtime outfitter and BLM partner.

Fishing and rafting on the Gunnison are partly controlled by a commercial allocation system that limits the number of people outfitters can have on the river at any given time. Private groups

Ryan Mathis, BLM river ranger

can put in on their own at designated access spots, but must sign up to use BLM camping sites.

The outfitters work closely with the BLM to see that the rules are being followed along the river. "We share the same goals. We want to see this river treated right so we can all continue to use and benefit from it," says Ben Olson, manager of Black Canyon Anglers, one of the premier outfitters in the conservation area. Black Canyon provides one- to three-day fishing and rafting expeditions and employs 22 guides along with staff at its secluded ranch along the Gunnison.

Elevating the Experience

"It's just a 'friend' relationship as much as anything," says Olson about working with Mathis and other BLM employees. "Every time we see each other, we stop and talk."

The personal connections built between the government stewards of Gunnison Gorge and local residents clearly play a role in the public-private partnership that supports the conservation area. Jody Brown, a carpenter from the town of Olathe, has volunteered for weed control, tree planting, campsite cleanup and many other projects. When asked to explain his dedication to Gunnison Gorge, he says, "I got a buddy that's a river ranger, Rooster. We've been friends 25 years or so. He's the real deal when it comes to being a naturalist."

"Rooster," as everyone knows him, is Bruce Barnhardt, a longtime BLM employee. The Bureau has only three full-time employees dedicated to the conservation area. Although the agency adds seasonal staff during the summer, volunteers are critical for many projects.

The most recent trail being constructed in the conservation area is the 22-mile Sidewinder Trail, which will be open to mountain bikes, motorized dirt bikes, equestrians and hikers. A recent trail-building day brought helping hands from all the user groups. "We weren't prepared for the number of volunteers that showed up," Mathis says. "They were excited to be helping. They hammered out about two and half miles of trail in no time."

Members of the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association have been involved in clearing and maintaining several trails, including the Sidewinder. Bill Harris, an association board

GUNNISON GORGE NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA AT A GLANCE:

- Nearly 63,000 acres on Colorado's Western Slope.
- Includes a 17,784-acre wilderness area.
- Roughly 90,000 visitors annually.
- Gold Medal trout fishing.
- Challenging whitewater, and scenic flat water boating.
- Popular with four-wheelers and dirt-bike riders.
- Equestrian, hiking and biking trails.

THE GUNNISON GORGE FRIENDS NETWORK:

- Provided 3,000 volunteer hours last year.
- Includes off-road, fishing, hiking, equestrian and other user groups, along with outfitters, guides, landowners and other local volunteers.
- Builds, maintains and monitors trails.
- Participates in environmental education, safety, and resource protection and enhancement efforts.
- Among the volunteers are members of local and national environmental groups, including the Audubon Society, the Wilderness Society and the Colorado Environmental Coalition, and sporting groups; they assist with landscape-level planning and improvement projects such as efforts to enhance protection of sensitive species like the Gunnison sage grouse.

BLM site for Gunnison Gorge NCA:
http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/nca/ggnca.html

National Landscape Conservation System:
www.blm.gov/nlcs

member, had just returned from an evening trail-building session when he spoke about why he volunteers on Gunnison Gorge. "I just view it as a chance to give back," he says. "This evening out there we had a sunset that just knocked your socks off. It's a great place to go for a ride. We need to maintain that and make sure it's protected and respected."

The Western Slope 4-Wheelers are one of several off-terrain vehicle groups active in the conservation area, where the group has adopted the Wave and Eagle roads and helps police them. Ken Emory, land use officer for the group, says it's just part of being good stewards of lands the four-wheelers enjoy. But it's clear the group's dedication goes beyond self-interest. "Whatever Karen (Tucker) needs," Emory says, explaining the organization's approach to volunteering. "If she has an extra project she needs a little help with, we try to help out."

Many organizations take the same approach. Students from Western Wyoming Community College have served as scientific investigators and cultural stewards of an important rock art site. Equestrian groups volunteer for different projects. Gunnison Gorge and Grand Valley Anglers, local chapters of Trout Unlimited, "have assisted on (National Park Service) Land and Water Conservation Fund projects, grant applications and environmental education projects with local schoolchildren, and they've volunteered nonstop on rainbow trout recovery efforts in the Gorge with our partner, the Colorado Division of Wildlife," says Tucker.

> "This evening out there we had a sunset that just knocked your socks off. It's a great place to go for a ride. We need to maintain that and make sure it's protected and respected."
>
> - Bill Harris, member of the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Trail Association

The conservation area is home to a variety of wildlife, ranging from mountain lions to river otters. The river's rugged sandstone cliffs hold prehistoric petroglyphs and pictograms from Native American cultures. Parts of the river are less traveled even in high season, and the wilderness area includes backcountry where a sense of untouched nature prevails. Even with its growing popularity, the conservation area is still a place where it's possible to escape the rush of modern existence.

In other parts, it's also a place where you can enjoy some of the rushes of modern life: four-wheeling, riding a dirt bike or mountain bike down a steep trail, fighting a rainbow trout at the end of a fishing line, rafting through a churning stream.

Maintaining the balance between the two is the work of the BLM staff and the many volunteers they work with. It's a partnership fed by a shared appreciation of the Gunnison Gorge's natural resources, but perhaps even more importantly, a deeply felt sense of community. "I've enjoyed this country most of my life," says Brown. "I just had my first grandson born, and I would like him to enjoy this place as he's growing up. If we don't give back to it, I just worry it won't be here for future generations." ■■■

SONORAN INSTITUTE
Shaping the Future of the West

www.sonoraninstitute.org
tel 520-290-0828

NATIONAL SYSTEM OF PUBLIC LANDS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

www.blm.gov/nlcs

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Writing, Reed Karaim, Tucson, AZ
Production, Ian Wilson, Tucson, AZ
Photography, Ian Wilson, Tucson, AZ, Black Canyon Anglers
Design, Teri Bingham, Tucson, AZ
October 2010