



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Utah
2021: Annual Manager's Report

Bears Ears National Monument



Map

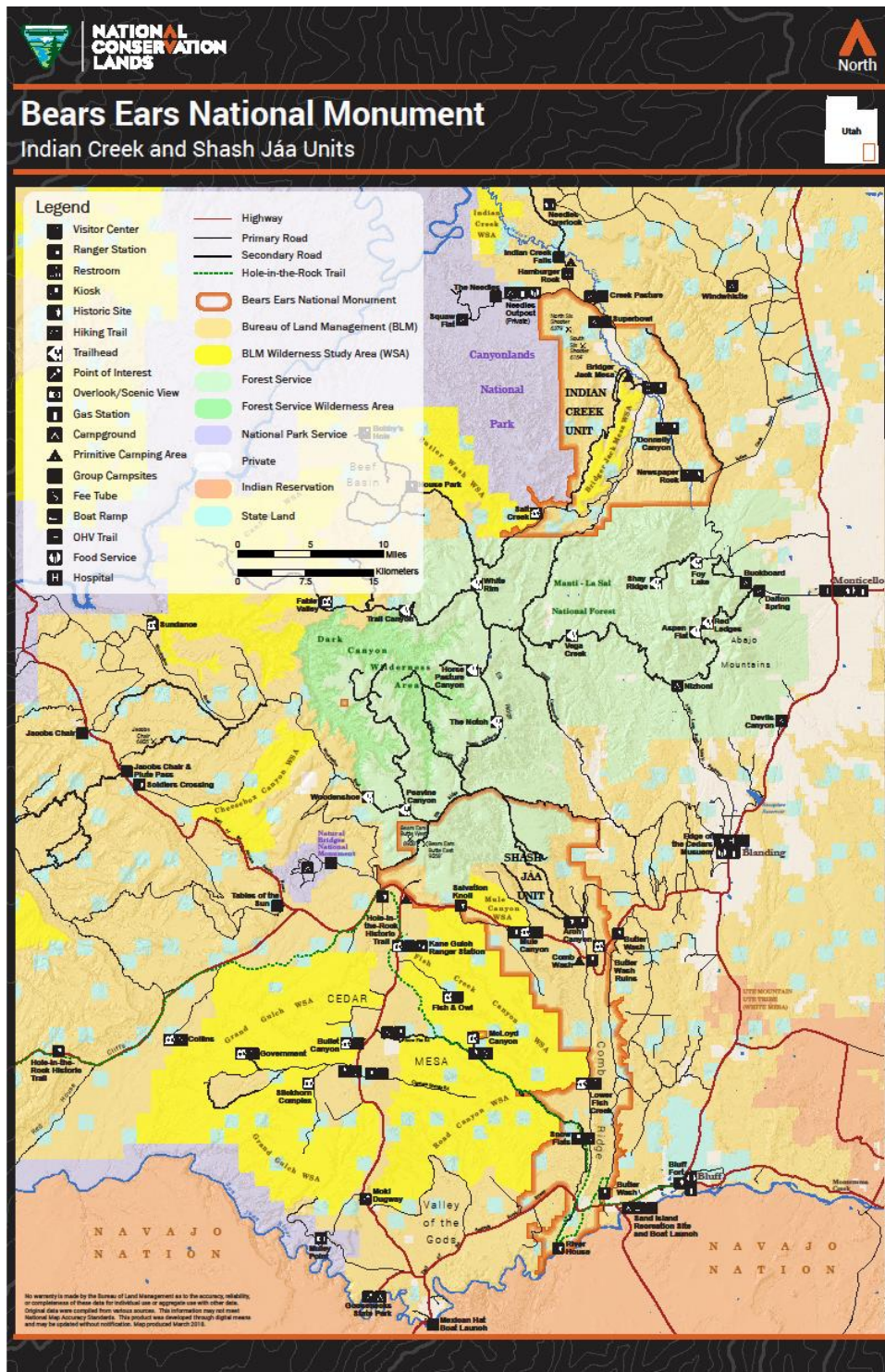


Figure 1: Bears Ears National Monument boundaries at the end of FY21 prior to Presidential Proclamation 10285.

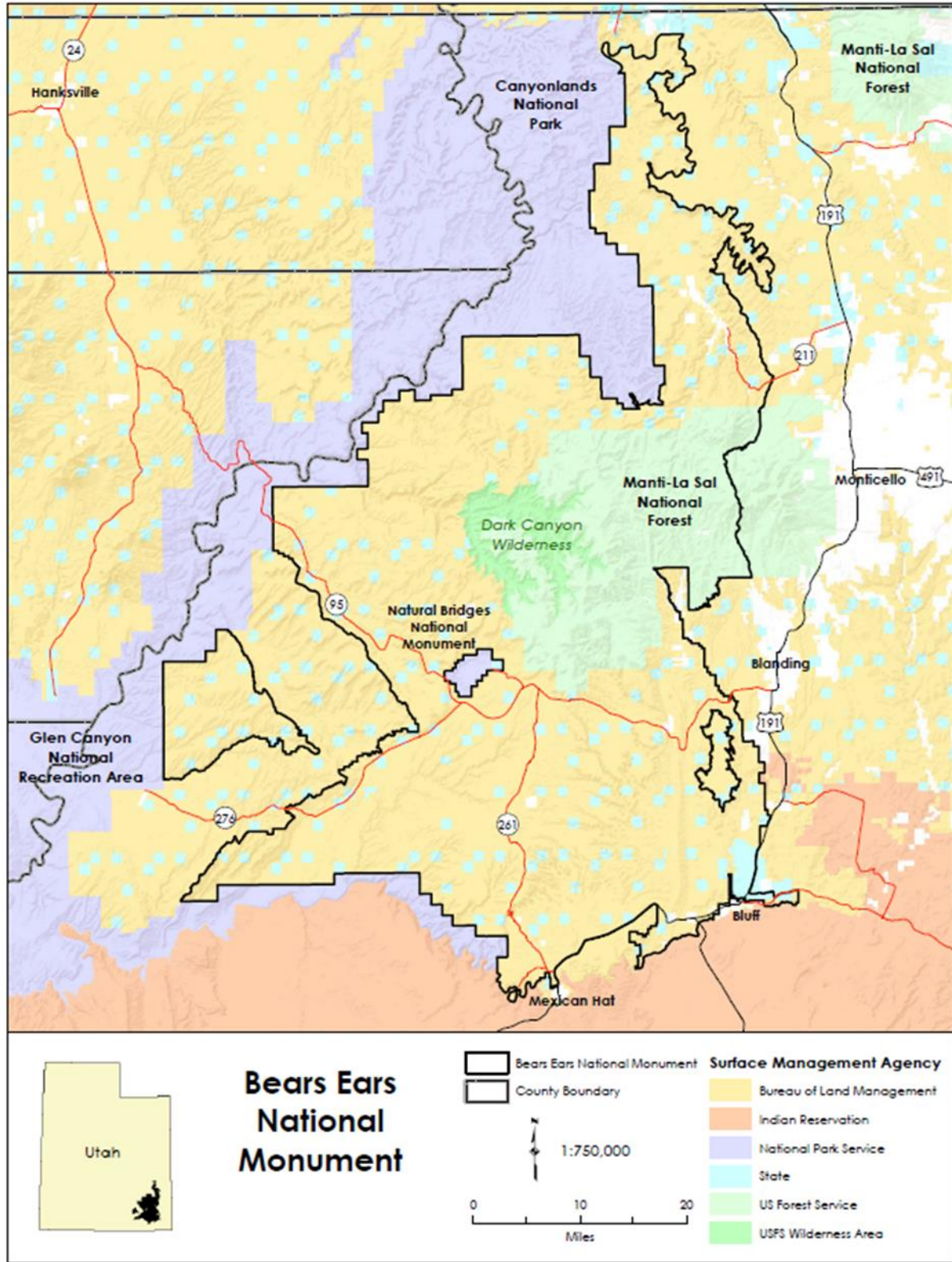


Figure 2: Map of Bears Ears National Monument after Presidential Proclamation 10285 was signed on Oct. 8, 2021.

Accomplishments

Fiscal Year 2021 was a successful and busy year for Bears Ears National Monument (BENM). Despite the challenges of increased visitation, COVID-19, and the ongoing monument review, the BLM at BENM found unique and creative solutions to continue positive forward momentum. It was a year spent leveraging partnerships to engage Native youth, develop virtual experiences and education opportunities, and increase our contact and visibility with visitors at BENM. Several high-profile visits also took place, offering an opportunity to communicate the on-the-ground needs of the monument.



Figure 3: Cliff dwellings located within Bears Ears NM.

Challenges

Heightened visibility of the Bears Ears NM in national and social media has increased visitation to the area, which has resulted in additional pressure on fragile backcountry archeological sites. In an attempt to harden one of the more heavily used sites within the Monument, the BENM partnered with Friends of Cedar Mesa, Woods Canyon Archeological Consultants, and Ancestral Lands Corps to stabilize the River House site. Because River House overlooks the banks of the San Juan River at the mouth of Comb Wash, it is a popular trip for both boaters and OHV users, and heavy visitation was resulting in erosion and undercutting of walls. Ancestral Lands Corps crews from the Pueblo of Zuni worked with stabilization professionals from Woods Canyon to route visitors through the site in a way that protects the structures, rock imagery, and artifacts. The Utah State Office documented the process in a video currently available at <https://www.blm.gov/blog/2021-11-19/foundations-past-present-and-future-river-house-stabilization-project>.

The BENM continues to work with Tribal Nations and partners on plans for making other already-popular sites visitor ready, which could involve improved trailhead signage, installations of facilities such as restrooms in key areas, better routing through sites, and a campaign to encourage visitors to view fragile sites from a distance.



Figure 4: An Ancestral Lands Corp crew works to stabilize the River House ruin in Bears Ears NM.

Visitors

Bears Ears NM visitation increased in 2021 with an estimated 370,430 visitor days. Over half of these visits were to Newspaper Rock petroglyph panel in Indian Creek. Newspaper Rock is a popular spot for quick day trips, as it is on the way to both the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park and the world-class crack climbing opportunities present throughout Indian Creek. A bridge on State Route 95 between Blanding, UT and the BENM was closed during the spring and fall months, which may have shifted visitation patterns slightly in the southern portion of the Monument, with proportionally fewer visitors going to the developed sites at Butler Wash and Mule Canyon, and more visitors at sites along the Butler Wash Road.

To increase visitation opportunities while protecting fragile cultural sites, the BENM has partnered with Cyark, a non-profit that works with local partners to produce three dimensional digital tours. In 2021, Cyark and the BENM released online tours for the popular House on Fire and Mule Canyon Kiva sites, which can be found at <https://www.cyark.org/projects/bears-ears/Guided-Tours>.

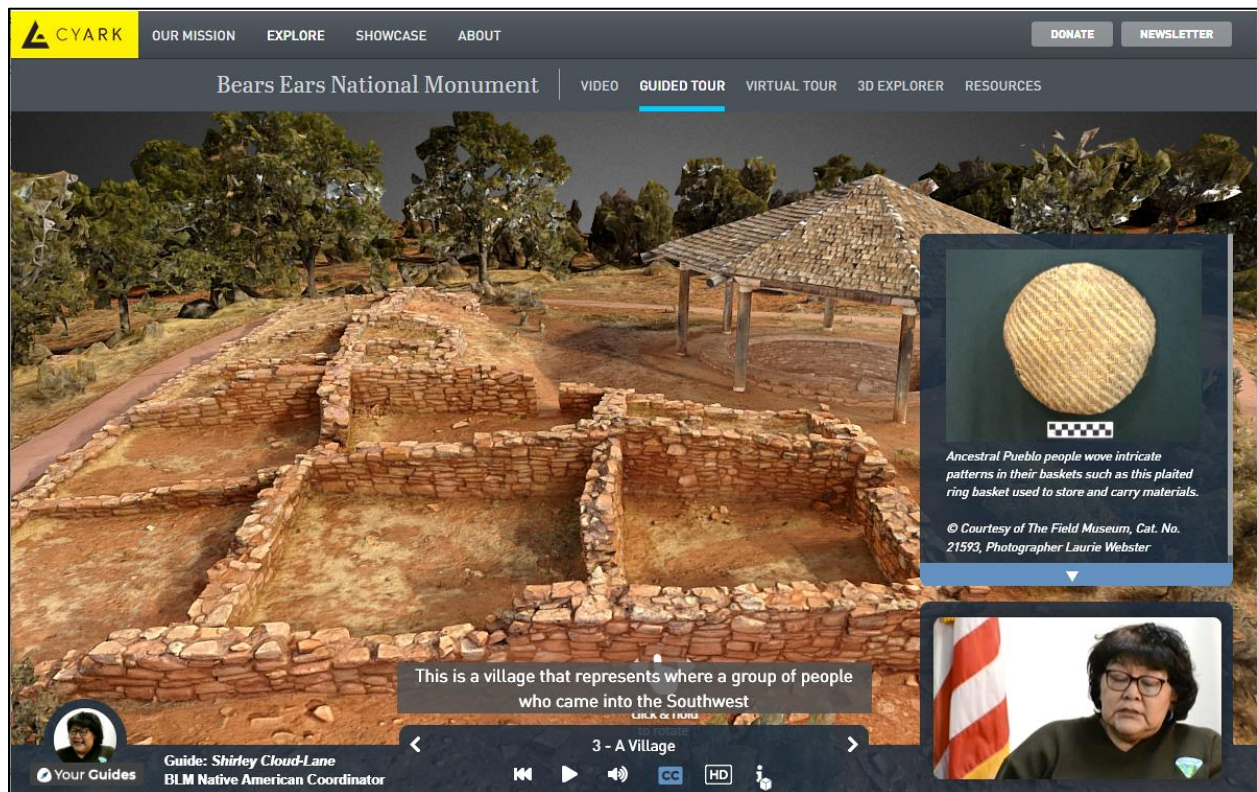


Figure 5: Screenshot of Mule Canyon Village 3D virtual tour.

Partnerships

The Bears Ears NM partners with many local and national organizations to enhance visitor experience and protect resources. A longstanding partnership with Friends of Cedar Mesa has resulted in a variety of benefits, including hosted Site Ambassadors to provide visitor information at heavily visited cultural sites, a vibrant site stewardship program, volunteer project during the Celebrate Cedar Mesa event, and printed materials such as maps and site etiquette signs at trailheads.

The Climber Steward program is a new and exciting partnership with the Access Fund which started in 2021. During the climbing season, two Climber Stewards live and work in Indian Creek, interacting with their fellow climbers and providing information about resource protection. One particularly successful aspect of this partnership is weekly “Climber Coffee” events, where the Climber Stewards are joined by BLM staff to answer climber’s questions and provide education about topics such as raptor avoidance areas, cultural site protection, and Leave No Trace camping in Indian Creek.



Figure 6: Climber Stewards at a Climber Coffee event in Bears Ears NM.

Science

The Bears Ears NM has attracted scientific researchers in multiple fields, from climate science to paleontology, for decades. However, the density of cultural materials found in the canyons, mesas, and mountains of this region have particularly lured those wishing to study the archeology and cultures of the southwest.

Current scientific research in these fields include research done in partnership with the BENM and done under permits issued by the BLM. An ethnographic study with Living Heritage Research Council focuses on interviewing tribal religious and cultural leaders to better understand descendant community connections to BENM. This research will inform management and interpretation throughout the Monument. An ethnobotany study in partnership with the University of Utah works with tribal cultural and botanical experts to better understand the importance of local native plants to descendant communities and then documents the presence of these culturally important plants at prehistoric archaeological sites. An ethnographic study and virtual documentation of the Moon House cliff dwelling with the University of Arizona uses laser scanning, high resolution photography, and computer generation to create a highly realistic three-dimensional model of Moon House. The researchers plan to then gather data from tribal and cultural leaders on the importance of Moon House and the adjoining landscape to descendant communities. The BLM is working with Woods Canyon Archeological Consultants to collect samples of live old growth pinion and juniper trees within the BENM to analyze paleoenvironmental conditions and to date the trees. The BLM approved research and is assisting in funding a scientific article on a prehistoric jewelry piece made from iridescent insect legs which is housed at Edge of Cedars State Park and Museum and from public lands in BENM. Laurie Webster of the Cedar Mesa Perishables project has been working in museums across the country to document collections originating from southeast Utah and the BENM. Finally, the BLM is continuing work with highly regarded researchers including Bill Lipe, Winston Hurst, Tom Wines, and Jim Allison on a range of topics. These include conducting laser scanning and lidar to record archeological sites, intensive study of prehistoric Chacoan Roads on Cedar Mesa, and dendrochronological dating of sites.

Climate Impacts

The Bears Ears NM region has felt the impacts of extreme and exceptional drought in 2021, with unusual snow and rainfall patterns creating vegetation changes and more frequent wildfires in the surrounding areas. In particular, land managers have noted a large-scale pinyon juniper mortality and juniper crown dieback across the Four Corners region in the last several years. A multi-agency Forest Health Protection Assessment conducted in 2018 and 2019 used sampling sites within the BENM in assessing causes of the dieback. The researchers concluded that the dieback is an event associated with drought, which can amplify other causes of tree mortality such as insect pressure.

Among visitors to the BENM, backpackers have felt the effects of the drought most acutely, because they have had to carry more water against the possibility of dried springs, which has affected trip itineraries. However, sight-seeing visitors have also noticed the pinyon juniper mortality, which is apparent along State Route 95 under the Bears Ears buttes.



Figure 7: Drought-stressed juniper tree.

Climate Resiliency

Future planning and management decisions within Bears Ears NM and implementation level actions will take climate resiliency into account as part of the National Environmental Policy Act and land use planning processes.

Social and Environmental Justice

The Bears Ears NM is funding or partnering on a variety of projects to bring youth and elders from descendant communities back to the BENM to help guide the BLM on the best ways to manage this culturally important landscape. Unfortunately, some trips and partnerships planned for 2020 and 2021 have been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Bears Ears Intertribal Coalition, in coordination with Friends of Cedar Mesa and the BENM, has planned a trip with youth and elders from the five Tribes that would involve removing a fence at the Arch Canyon Great House and spending time learning from each other about the site. At the end of the project, the youth and elders would advise the BENM on appropriate interpretative materials for that location, and the BLM employees would share information about possible federal career paths.

An agreement with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe provided funding for field trips which would bring Ute elders and youth to the BENM. The elders would refamiliarize themselves with the landscape of the BENM and have an opportunity to teach Ute youth about their cultural connections to this place while on the field trips. A trained ethnographer from Living Heritage Research Council would conduct interviews during the field trips, and after reviewing those with the interviewees and representatives from the Tribal Preservation Office, would share appropriate information with the BENM.

The BLM has funded one Youth Conservation Corps position, with the intent to conduct recruitment outreach in local Native American communities. BENM is also hoping to work with Friends of Cedar Mesa and the Ancestral Lands Corps on future projects similar to the one at River House, as mentioned above.

Events

In April 2021, Secretary Haaland visited Bears Ears National Monument as part of the ongoing review of the Monument. Included in this event were leaders from Tribal Nations, the Utah Governor, members of the Utah Congressional delegation, and many other leaders from the State of Utah and throughout the region.



Figure 8: Interior Secretary Deb Haaland visiting Bears Ears NM.



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LANDS**

Bears Ears National Monument

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