



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

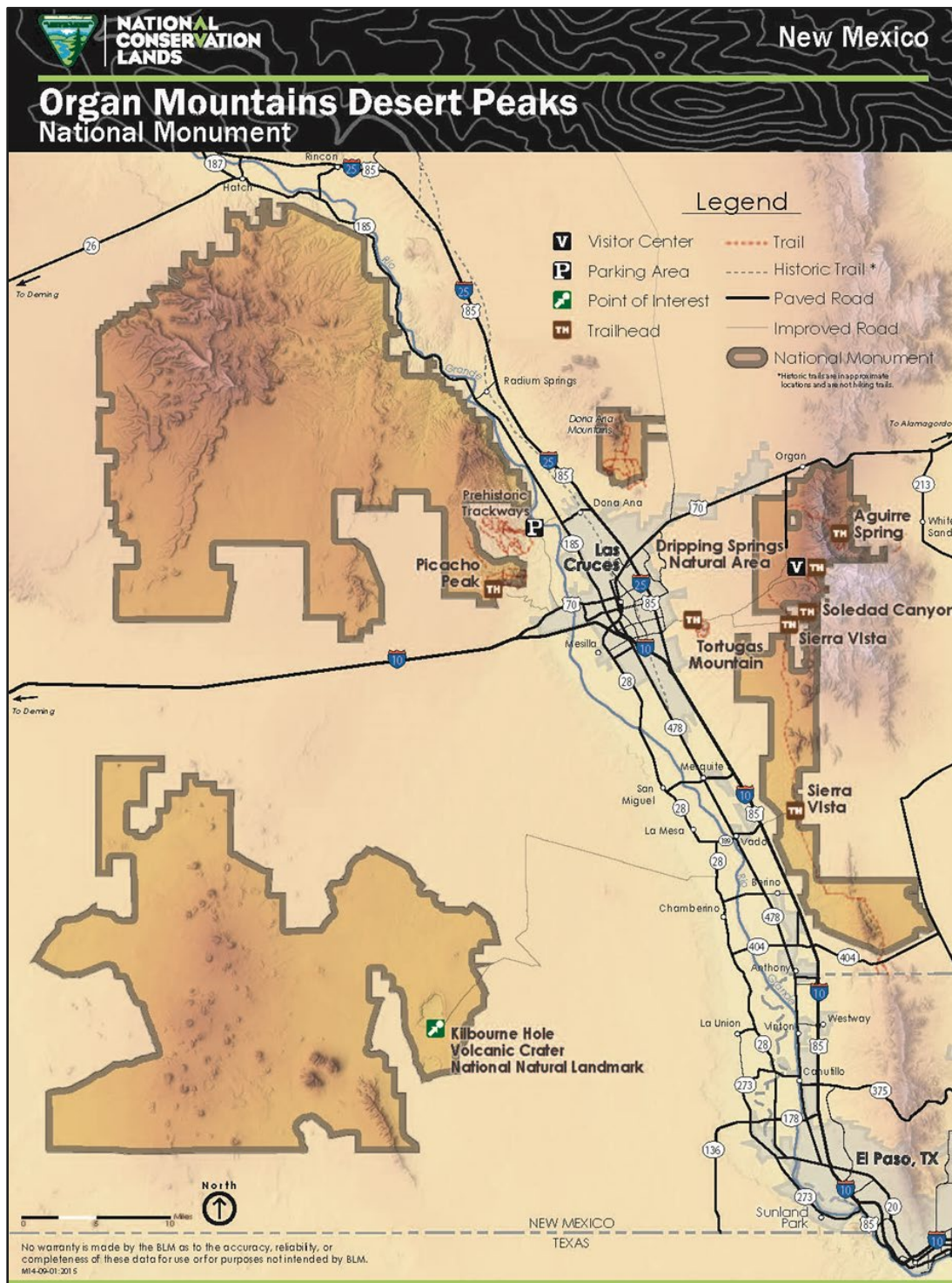
New Mexico
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks

National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

Throughout the fiscal year 2023 (FY23), the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument (OMDPNM) staff continued to work on the draft Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS). This decision document will provide management direction and decisions for implementing the goals and objectives set forth in Presidential Proclamation 9131 which designated 496,330 acres as the Monument and identified resources of value to be protected, conserved, and restored.

FY23 work accomplished in support of the draft RMP involved compiling data on resources of value including conducting cultural surveys and rock art identification; bat, bee, and raptor studies; and paleontological resources inventories as well as constructing management action alternatives and drafting the RMP document. The scoping process for the draft RMP was held from June 22nd through August 1, 2023, providing Tribes, stakeholders, other agencies, and members of the public an opportunity to submit comments and provide input on issues the BLM should consider in the RMP/EIS. During the scoping period in July of 2023, the BLM hosted five in-person public scoping meetings and one virtual public scoping meeting. The draft RMP/EIS was issued in April of 2024 and the completion of the RMP/EIS is anticipated for the end of calendar year 2024.

The Monument had many accomplishments this year. Park Rangers monitored more than 440,607 acres of wilderness, over 2,100 acres of recreation areas, and 49 miles of recreation trails. Working with the Southern New Mexico Trail Alliance, staff maintained 16 miles of the Sierra Vista and La Maria Trails. Park rangers also signed more than 60 locations along the boundaries of the Monument and wilderness areas defining which activities are allowed in these areas.



Figure 1. Monitoring on the edge of wilderness.

With the easing of restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, Monument staff resumed monthly guided hikes around the Monument beginning in January 2023. These hikes offered visitors guided tours of some of the Monuments' most scenic and natural areas. The programs provide visitors with insightful educational information related to natural and heritage resources of the land.

Monument archaeologist also offered monthly guided hikes to several areas within the Monument. On a rotating monthly basis, participants could learn about the history of mining in the Organ Mountains at Fillmore Canyon; hear the story of the bitter feud of Eugene Van Patten and Dr. Boyd at Dripping Springs; find out about the life and murder of the El Hermitano at La Cueva; and explore prehistoric rock shelters at Peña Blanca. The newest addition to the guided hikes focuses on the Butterfield National Historic Trail and Civilian Conservation Corps history near the Picacho Peak recreation area in the Monument.

At Dripping Springs Natural Area (DSNA), park rangers, with help from Monument volunteers and the Friends of Organ Mountains Desert Peaks (Friends), led field trips for large school groups. These field trips included interpretive hikes and environmental education activities. The Friends offered transportation assistance for school busses. This alleviated the burden of funding as roadblocks for schools to access outdoor recreational and educational programs. Additionally, the Monument staff, through talks, tables, and activity stations at public events and career fairs, provided information to the public on the natural and cultural resources of the Monument and the many recreation opportunities available.

As part of the ongoing development of the RMP/EIS, a survey was conducted to proactively inventory and assess cultural resources in the Peña Blanca area of the Organ Mountains. Although Peña Blanca refers to a rocky outcrop detached from the Organ Mountains, the name has commonly been applied to the entirety of the southern area of the Organ Mountains that is composed of Cueva volcanic tuff.

The proactive survey resulted in the recording of 13 new sites including several National Register-eligible prehistoric rock shelters, and historic water control features constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The data collected in the survey is vital in building the inventory of cultural resources within the Monument. In addition, the survey has provided documentation related to impacts to the resources, particularly from recreational activities such as bouldering and camping. This information will be used to develop and inform the RMP's range of alternatives and to codify conventions and protocols, designed to support the conservation and sustainment of cultural resources, in the RMP's goals, objectives, and actions.

The following list itemizes FY23 accomplishments related to livestock grazing in OMDPNM:

- Continued management of 38 grazing allotments.

- 69 grazing bills were issued on time for 36 grazing allotments that exist wholly or partially within the Monument. This includes actual use, quarterly, bi-annual, and annual billing. Two of the 38 allotments are billed under the Prehistoric Trackways National Monument.
- Five compliance inspections were completed to ensure cattle grazing was being appropriately managed by the permittees.
- Completed National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review and analysis of 9 projects for range, weeds, and vegetation.
- Completed four grazing transfers that included the Las Uvas Mtns, Baylor Canyon, Dona Ana Mountains, and Loco Allotments. All grazing preference transfers are typically done by a categorical exclusion. Grazing transfer of preference for the Dona Ana Mountains Allotment was completed with an environmental assessment. This was due to increased urban development, an increase in recreational use and a flood control structure by the Dona Ana County Flood Commission. This had resulted in multiple use conflicts, creating public safety hazards, as well as challenges and difficulties for managing cattle on this grazing allotment.
- Completed a batch permit renewal process for four allotments (Aden Hills, Mimms Well, Horse Canyon, and Angostura). A content analysis based on comments from 30-Day Notice and Comment Period was finalized through coordination with BLM solicitors. A Notice of Proposed Decisions along with a Finding of No Significant Impact were completed and signed on August 30, 2023. The 15-day protest period ended on September 27, 2023, with no protest received. The 30-day appeal period ended on October 27, 2023, with no appeals. New grazing permits will be issued in fiscal year 2024 for the Monument 4 Batch allotments.
- Restore NM vegetation treatment monitoring was completed on the Saddle Mountain Allotment by the Jornada Agricultural Research Station. A total of four plots were monitored to determine effects of the 2007 Tebuthiuron vegetation treatment that totaled 2,270 acres.



Figure 2. Sunset on the Desert Peaks from the Dripping Springs Natural

Challenges

The most significant challenges in FY23 revolved around adequate staffing and financial resources to implement projects, maintain and repair facilities, and adequately monitor and protect resources of value. Management of Monument resources was impacted by staff vacancies in the outdoor recreation planner, supervisory park ranger, and monument manager positions. Challenges remain in the hiring processes and the availability of high-quality candidates.

The failure of the water well at the Dripping Springs Natural Area (DSNA) Visitor Center continued to pose a challenge in FY23. Due to the lack of running water, volunteer site hosts were not able to assist visitors until March, leaving Monument staff to complete the duties of volunteers. Without site hosts at DSNA, Park Rangers were not able to resume monitoring, maintenance, and public outreach duties until March 2023, when the issue was resolved.

Another challenge in Monument management involves the grazing program. The boundary fence between Fort Bliss and the BLM managed Bishop's Cap and Chaparral Allotments was an issue as livestock from the Bishop's Cap Allotment were ranging on lands managed by the Department of Defense at Fort Bliss, specifically the Dona Ana Range Complex. This caused issues with Fort Bliss facilities, and several livestock were struck by vehicle traffic on highway 213. The BLM worked collaboratively with Fort Bliss to resolve the fence issues on the Bishop's Cap Allotment. In FY24, Fort Bliss will work on a contract to replace and repair portions of the existing fence on the boundary their boundary with Bishop's Cap Allotment as a short-term solution. The BLM will continue to work with Ft. Bliss and the permittee on this matter.



Figure 3. OMDPNM Portal Sign in the Sierra de las Uvas Unit

Visitors

The Monument's visitation increased slightly overall in FY23 from the year previous (approximately +1%). Total visitation across the monument was estimated at 613,254 visits in total across all locations and recreational uses. However, measured visitation to the Monument's developed (fee) recreation sites saw a slight decline in visitation during FY23 (approximately -3%). Throughout 2023, the Monument continued to offer educational and interpretive programming with guided hikes and content sharing on social media. During patrol duties, park rangers continued to educate the public on outdoor ethics, regulations, upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, the natural, cultural, and recreational resources of the area.

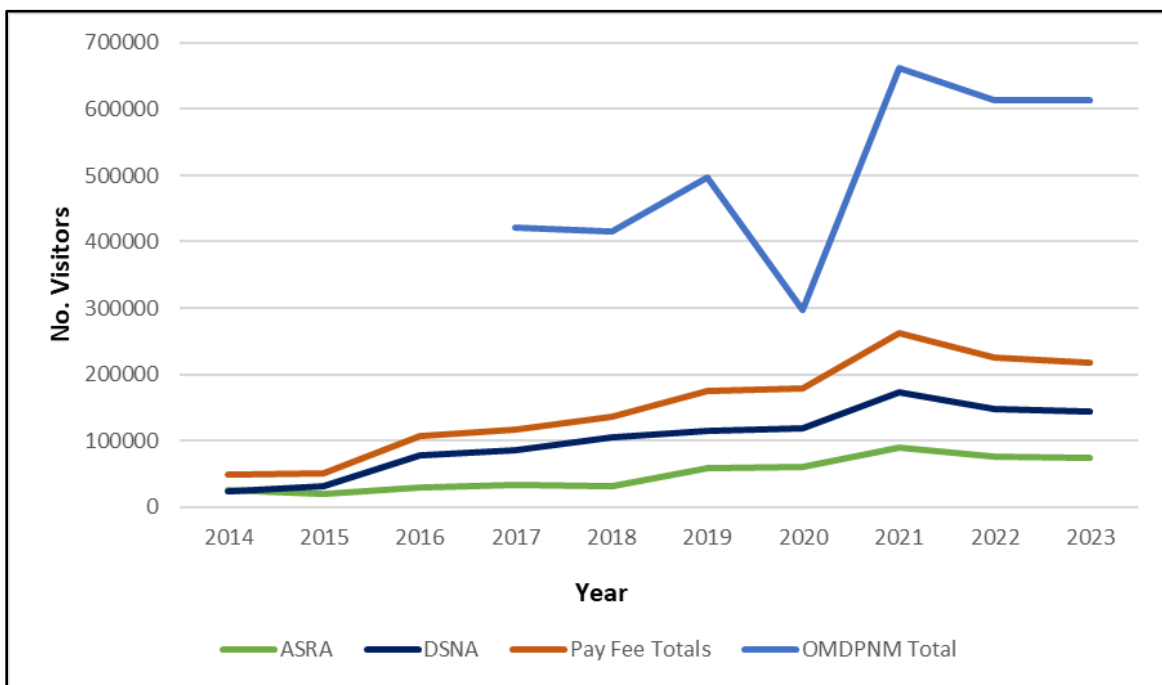


Figure 4. Number of visitors at Aguirre Spring Recreation Area (ASRA) and Dripping Springs Natural Area (DSNA) 2014-2023.

Increased visitation, recreation use, and changes to local regulations associated with off-highway vehicle use have caused some negative impacts to non-motorized trails, undeveloped and undisturbed lands, particularly in some wilderness areas. Park rangers have increased their presence in these areas and have updated and/or installed additional signage of designated trails and wilderness boundaries. Wilderness area maps were uploaded to BLM webpages to inform the public on how to visit wilderness areas responsibly.



Figure 5. OHV trespass into wilderness area.

Unmanaged recreational use and prohibited activities within the Monument's cultural sites has continued to degrade their quality in certain areas. The historic structures at Dripping Springs are frequently the target of vandalism. This requires careful remediation by BLM staff and/or volunteers to work carefully not to adversely impact the historical elements of the structures. Continued recreational use at Peña Blanca such as camping and bouldering within the area's prehistoric rock shelters continues to impact their cultural resource values. In response to these ongoing issues, increased monitoring of vulnerable cultural resources has been implemented. During FY23, the Monument archaeologist worked alongside BLM special agents and law enforcement officers to document two separate violations of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act. The violators in each case were successfully identified and prosecuted for damaging and removing cultural archeological resources, including sherds of Mimbres pottery and other materials.

Partnerships

In FY23, the BLM continued to work closely with several local organizations to provide educational and recreational opportunities and to promote the social, health, environmental, and economic benefits of the public lands within the Monument. This included hosting and supporting programs with New Mexico Conservations Corps, Southern New Mexico Trail Alliance, Visit Las Cruces, Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science, Public Lands Interpretive Association (PLIA), and the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum.

The Monument continues to benefit from the successful partnership between the BLM and the Friends of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks (Friends). The two organizations continued to work closely in providing outreach and educational services to the visiting public, particularly local youth and students. The BLM and Friends partnered to bring events and programs including the Monuments to Main Street event in which public lands are celebrated the whole month of September. They also partnered in the following: National Public Lands Day, an Artist-in-Residence program, and the continuation of the docent program.



Figure 6. Monument visitors learn bird banding data collection and a matching game.

The BLM/Friends docent program grew considerably in FY23 and broadened our community's knowledge and appreciation for our public lands. Friends' volunteer docents, as official BLM volunteers, received interpretive training and program guidance. Their interpretive outlines were reviewed and approved by BLM. The docents led 19 hikes which reached approximately 321 members of the public.

The Artist-in-Residence program educates and promotes the appreciation, protection, and preservation of natural and cultural resources on public lands. The BLM and Friends jointly sponsored and selected an artist to reside in the Monument for the month of May. This year's selected artist collaborated with park rangers and Friends members to create a wall sized paint by numbers mural of the Organ Mountains. She facilitated two community paint days where members of the public each painted a portion of the mural to create a beautiful collaborative display at the A.B. Cox Visitor Center.

In addition to external partnerships and collaborative programs, the management of the Monument relied heavily on the service and dedication of many seasonal and day volunteers. A rotating cadre of seven site hosts managed the daily operations at the Aguirre Springs Campground and the Dripping Springs Natural Area and Visitor Center. These volunteers provided essential services including opening and closing facilities and gates, monitoring trails, trash pick-up, and managing group reservations. The site hosts resided at their assigned facilities and assisted the BLM from March through September 2023. In addition to the site hosts, the Monument was privileged to have over 30 volunteers from the local community who provided services during the day such as visitor contact and information, maintaining gardens, and monitoring trails. Monument staff are very grateful to these dedicated public servants and recognize that the quality and magnitude of service provided to visitors would be significantly reduced without them.

Lastly, a Visitor Guide was printed and made available to the public in FY23. The guide provides safety information, recreation opportunities, resource information. This was completed under an agreement with the PLIA that was initiated in FY22.

Science

Over the course of the fiscal year, the Monument signed a letter of agreement with one academic institution in support of proposed research initiatives. The University of Texas at El Paso, in association with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), as part of the Geophysical Exploration of the Dynamics and Evolution of the Solar System project, conducted research near Kilbourne Hole on how effective the seismic study methods used during lunar missions (Apollo and Artemis) are, in areas where the seismic instrument readings can be ground-truthed by observing subsurface stratigraphy on the edge of the Kilbourne Hole rim.

The BLM Las Cruces District Office also entered into an Interagency Agreement with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) to conduct baseline surveys for bats across all units of the Monument. Prior to this agreement, there had not been a formal study to establish baseline data for bat communities. The data from these surveys will be used to enhance knowledge of bat distribution and habitat use across the Monument, allowing for informed decision making.

The Monument continues to be a pilot program for the science component of Recreation and Permit Tracking Online Reporting (RAPTOR) system. Four scientific research use authorization permits were issued through the RAPTOR system for FY23.

New Mexico State University (NMSU) conducted two research projects on insects along the western edge of the Organ Mountains. One study sought to determine the nesting habits of solitary ground-nesting bees. Little is known about the physiology of these species, and increased information may allow researchers to predict how changing environmental conditions impacts ground-nesting bees. The second study sought to gather data, including species presence and composition, on true bugs (Heteroptera) in southern New Mexico. Little is known about the biology, seasonal occurrence, and life histories of different genera and families of these bugs in New Mexico. Increased data will help fill these information gaps and increase knowledge of the local ecosystem.

Research on the evolution of *Euagrus* (funnel-web spiders) was conducted by a University of Idaho doctoral student. While there are no records of these spiders from the Organ Mountains, the area contains their habitat and this research involved locating the spiders and documenting their biodiversity before collecting specimens for genetic and morphologic research. Ultimately, these and other specimens from around the United States will be used as the basis for a morphological revision of the *Euagrus* genus.

A doctoral student from the Pennsylvania State University conducted field work to examine the geochemical connection between volcanic and plutonic rocks in the Organ Mountains from zircon crystal analyses. This information enhances the available information on geologic resources in the Monument.

Climate Impacts and Resiliency

The diverse environments of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument increasingly show impacts of changing climatic conditions including increased temperatures over the course of the last century, a reduction of annual spring precipitation, and an increase in the severity of multi-year droughts. Changing climatic conditions on the Monument are anticipated to decrease grazing resources for livestock, threaten the viability of the Monument's flora and fauna ecological diversity, and increase the severity of wildfires over time.

From February 27th thru March 3rd of 2023, the BLM Fire Management crews held a prescribed burn within Dripping Springs Natural Area. The prescribed burn aided in reducing the volume of vegetation under the specific prescribed conditions which in turn greatly reduced the dangers and risks associated with potential wildfires, as well as decreased potential threats to natural vegetation from encroaching invasives. Prior to the prescribed fires, the BLM fire managers coordinated with the New Mexico Environment Department and followed all air quality regulations.



Figure 7. Cactus bud beginnings in front of snow-covered Organ Mountains

Social and Environmental Justice

In September of 2023, the BLM completed its Socioeconomic Baseline study to support management actions and impacts analysis included in the draft RMP/EIS for the Monument. As part of the study the BLM analyzed data on the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the area surrounding the monument and examined the affected economic sectors as well as the uses and values of the monument's public lands. In addition, the BLM conducted two public socioeconomic workshops in July of 2023. The report illustrates changes in urban growth and recreation uses and will be incorporated into the RMP/EIS decision making process.

Since October of 2021, the BLM Las Cruces District Office has worked with New Mexico State University (NMSU) to coordinate the repatriation of items associated with Native American ancestors and their belongings in accordance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The items held in physical custody at the University Museum were taken from BLM managed lands at some point in the past.

After three consultation meetings with federally recognized tribes hosted at NMSU, the BLM LCDO coordinated with NMSU to develop a joint Notice of Inventory Completion (NIC) for publication in the Federal Register. The BLM received and accepted a formal request from the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Mescalero Apache Tribe for the repatriation of all ancestors and their belongings that originated from lands managed by the BLM LCDO.

The ongoing NAGPRA repatriation efforts is reinforcing, with the consulting Tribal Nations, that the BLM is committed to working with the Nations in ensuring their ancestors and their belongings are repatriated and treated with respect and dignity.

Events

During FY 23, Monument staff and volunteers conducted field trips for over 300 students from Las Cruces area elementary and middle schools at La Cueva picnic shelter and trails. Students participated in activities including a cattle roping experience, rock art identification, and an interpretative hike to the rock cave archeological site.

Monument staff conducted 50 outreach events on the Monument. These events included guided hikes, educational events, presentations, and clean ups for both visitors and school groups. Educational outreach focused on the environment, geology, history, and culture of the area, as well as resource protection and land stewardship. These events occurred both within the Monument and in the surrounding communities. The goal was to meet the diverse needs of the regional population. Monument staff represented the BLM at a career fair for elementary students, a job fair for high school students, and a talk on outdoor recreation opportunities to a Boy Scout troop. During Migratory Bird Day, staff offered a bird banding demonstration, hike, and hummingbird memory game. Staff also co-facilitated a National Public Lands Day (NPLD) cleanup on public lands. Monument staff participated in a local farmers market to offer monument information while promoting the NPLD's cleanup. At a "Don't Let Water Go Extinct" event, Monument staff reached hundreds of fourth grade students. They shared the importance of paleontological resources and water on Monument lands. The theme promoted the

Monument's connections to local communities. At a "Meet the West" event at a local state park, Monument staff shared the ranching, resort, and recreation opportunities of the BLM. Park Rangers staffed an outreach table at a local festival (!Mira! Las Cruces) for a fun, high energy evening of several hundred contacts with the public from around the region. These are some of the many events that allowed staff to reach the public in a variety of venues.

In addition to staffed events, the Monument issued two new special recreation permits (SRP) and managed two active SRPs that included a competitive trail run, cycling race, and commercial climbing trips. One of the SRP events, the Dangerbird 250 is a three-year SRP issued in 2022, in which the Friends and the Monumental Loop are permitted to organize a bikepacking ride throughout the Monument and LCDO BLM lands. The three-year permit will allow the event to be held in the months of October through November in a 14-day window.



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<https://www.flickr.com/photos/blmnewmexico/albums/72157644381238958/>

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