

FACT SHEET

DAMAGE TO THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION SYSTEM FROM VANDALISM AND ILLEGAL OFF-ROAD VEHICLE USE

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Vandalism and illegal off-road vehicle use are diminishing and destroying the unique resources of BLM's National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS).

The BLM's 26 million acre Conservation System includes the most spectacular lands and waters in the agency's purview—places like Arizona's Ironwood Forest National Monument and Colorado's McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area. In many cases, the BLM is losing resources, like rock art or pottery shards, before they are even identified. Due to chronic lack of funding, BLM has surveyed less than 6 percent of its acreage for cultural resources; sometimes vandals or ignorant visitors are the first to discover treasures—and remove them.

This fact sheet provides examples of threats and damage to the BLM's Conservation System in areas across the West.



Damaged Sign Board (photo: Kumli)



*Attempted removal of a rock art panel
(photo: Hollamby)*



Scarred landscapes from reckless off road vehicle use (photo: Bloxham)

COLORADO

McInnis Canyon National Conservation Area

Just ten miles west of Grand Junction, McInnis Canyon contains unique geological formations like spires, windows, giant alcoves, desert patina and the second largest concentration of arches in America. Big-horn sheep, mountain lions, deer and eagles thrive in the area. Yet vandalism is harming the Canyon's natural beauty and Native American rock art and artifacts.

In 2006, the BLM cut the McInnis Canyon budget by 41 percent to \$550,000. Two rangers and one law enforcement officer were laid off, resulting a notable decline in field staff. Now, just one full-time and one seasonal ranger patrol the 122,000 acre area and supervise 260,000 visitors per year. (The NCA also benefits from some attention from another enforcement ranger who patrols the entire 1.3 million acre resource area surrounding McInnis Canyons.)

At the end of May, two adults and a teenager vandalized a Native American rock panel in the National Conservation Area. They painted over ancient pictographs with the blue, black, and white colors of the local high school. In a June 2006 Associated Press story, the BLM's Conservation Area manager said "Using rock art panels for senseless graffiti not only offends Native Americans and robs the American public of cultural treasures, but it also creates an unnecessary cost to taxpayers to remove the paint."

For more information contact:

William Grant

Professor Emeritus, Bowling Green State University

(970) 256-1312



Vandalized Rock Art Panel (photo: BLM)

COLORADO

Canyons of the Ancients National Monument

The 164,000 acre Canyons of the Ancients National Monument contains the highest density of archaeological sites in the nation. Archaeologists have recorded more than 6,000 sites out of an estimated 20,000-30,000.

Looting causes considerable damage to the monument's cultural resources. For example, in January of 2006, vandals struck a large Ancestral Puebloan settlement. The prehistoric site, listed by the National Register of Historic Places since 1999, was an outstanding example of a canyon settlement, consisting of more than 120 surface rooms, 40 kivas (underground ceremonial rooms) and 16 towers, all constructed onto a canyon rim. The robbers partially or fully excavated more than 47 plots.

Despite receiving 40,000 to 45,000 visitors per year, Canyons of the Ancients can employ only 2 full-time staff. Last year, visitors to the Monument's Anasazi Visitor Center increased by 400 percent, while the budget decreased almost 40 percent between FY04 and FY06. FY06 funding of \$770,000 is barely half of the \$1.5 million BLM projected as necessary to employ an adequate staff for research, law enforcement, and visitor/educational programs.

For more information contact:

Karl Kumli
Crow Canyon Archaeological Center
303-898-7350



Large looters' pit (photo: Kumli)

NEVADA

Black Rock – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trail National Conservation Area

Black Rock – High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trail NCA encompasses a region of great historical significance for Nevada and the nation. The famous Applegate-Lassen Emigrant Trail, which runs through the heart of the region, was a major part of the western migration and the California Gold Rush. The trail and its scenery remain much the same as they were 150 years ago during the peak of the trail's use. Visitors can still find the ruts left behind by the wagons as well as historic landmarks such as the 1843-44 John Charles Fremont exploration route, the site of the death of prominent settler Peter Lassen, early military facilities, and examples of early homesteading and mining.

The region also includes prehistoric remains of sabertooth tigers and giant woolly mammoths, as well as numerous Native American cultural sites.

Today, graffiti and other forms of vandalism are significant threats to Black Rock's cultural and paleontological resources. Vandals--and even well-meaning but uninformed visitor like church groups--have destroyed 150 year old petroglyphs along the Emigrant trails within the Black Rock NCA.

BLM officials blame the damage on a lack of funding to install interpretive signs and distribute informational pamphlets. The lack of funds also makes site restoration and monitoring impossible—and continued deterioration inevitable.



Historic rock signature with modern graffiti (photo: BLM)

IDAHO

Snake River-Birds of Prey National Conservation Area

Located 35 miles south of Boise, Snake River-Birds of Prey National Conservation Area protects North America's largest concentration of nesting raptors, including eagles, hawks, owls, and prairie falcons. Birds of Prey's 485,000 acres provide both nesting and prey habitat.

Sadly, habitat quality and visitor experience in Snake River-Birds of Prey is diminished by:

* Illegal and reckless off-road vehicle use. In arid western lands, the tracks of a single vehicle can leave scars for many years and allow invasive weed species to gain a foothold. Once created, an illegal track beckons to other drivers to try the same illegal route.

* Illegal waste disposal. Recently, hundreds of square feet of lawn sod were dumped at Birds of Prey NCA. Routine discoveries include raw sewage from campers and RVs, and household trash and construction materials from contractors and citizens avoiding disposal fees at local dumps.

* Vandalism. Recent acts of vandalism include spray-painted and gun-shot signs and trashed outhouses. Vandalized signs and structures must be repaired or replaced at a cost of \$200 to \$2,000. To replace a destroyed toilet costs the BLM \$12,000. At one site, vandals chiseled off half a rock art panel; in other areas they have spray-painted rock walls.

* Unauthorized shooting. Shooters often use signs, structures and the resources of the NCA to perfect their aim. Or, they bring old televisions, computer monitors, household appliances and even junked cars for target practice, then abandon them.

The Conservation Area's total recreation site maintenance budget is \$40,000. Money spent on repairs and clean up could be used for other under-funded and much-needed work such as invasive species removal and species monitoring.

For more information contact:

Katherine Barker McCoy
Golden Eagle Audubon
Phone/fax: (208) 384-1205
Cell: (208) 921-1340

CALIFORNIA

California Desert National Conservation Area and Carrizo Plains National Monument

The 10.7 million acre California Desert National Conservation Area is a staggeringly diverse place. It contains sand dunes, canyons, petroglyphs on rock walls, 90 mountain ranges, 65 wilderness areas, the Mojave River, remnants of historic desert warfare training camps, and dry lakes popular with wind surfers.

The area's wildlife diversity is as surprising as its many landscapes. The desert tortoise, bighorn sheep, pupfish, and many birds and reptiles survive in this harsh desert environment.

Illegal off-road vehicle use has damaged nearly all of the wilderness areas in the California Desert. Over the last five years the BLM has spent scant resources rehabilitating more than 1,400 sites where reckless off-road vehicle use has scarred hillsides with tire tracks, crushed and destroyed sensitive vegetation, eroded soils and impaired native fisheries and water quality through stream siltation. Illegal off-road vehicle use also contributes to dangerous dust storms and soil damage. (See <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5415315> for a recent Morning Edition Story on this topic).

For example, in the California Desert:

- The BLM has been forced to install metal barriers to protect Native American rock art sites in the Rodman Mountains Wilderness. Still, vandals have managed to spray-paint and carve over sites, and the metal barriers themselves have been stolen for sport or sale as salvage metal.
- Teams of more than forty (including Student Conservation Association crews, citizen volunteers, and BLM employees) committed hundreds hours to restore a hillside eroded from off-road vehicle use in the Kiavah Wilderness Area.

And in Carrizo Plains National Monument in central California:

- BLM has tried to protect the famous “Painted Rock” archaeological site, but the beautiful Chumash Indian rock paintings have been shot at and covered with graffiti.
- Illegal off-road vehicle use is scarring hillsides in the Temblor Range. Occasionally off-road vehicle users poach pronghorn, a species that was reintroduced and is struggling to reestablish itself.

Despite BLM's tremendous work the BLM cannot maintain a sufficient field presence to prevent repeated off-road vehicle damage and vandalism. In the California Desert, for example, just one ranger typically patrols nearly 320,000 acres. In 2006, the BLM has undertaken rehabilitation all over again at some sites, due to continued reckless off-road vehicle use. Meanwhile, budget cuts are forcing further reductions in field staff in the California Desert.

Each year the BLM seeks funding from the State of California's OHV grant program to supplement their law enforcement, boundary signing and restoration budgets. While this funding helps cover some budget shortfalls, it is not guaranteed or sufficient to meet the long-term need for proper desert management.

For more information contact:

Geary Hund
The Wilderness Society
951-640-3398

MONTANA

Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument

The Presidential Proclamation designating the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument describes the area as “some of the wildest country on all the great plains.” Yet the Monument’s wild character and cultural heritage are threatened by hundreds of miles of roads and illegal tracks which invite excessive, unregulated vehicle access.

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument has dozens of abandoned homesteads dating from the earlier twentieth century. Sun-bleached log cabins are still capped with sod roofs, evoking for visitors an earlier era on the Montana prairie. The sites are still very special, largely because they’ve been left alone. However, interest in the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument and its cultural sites is increasing. Historians are concerned that continued motorized access to these sites without adequate law enforcement presence will lead to losses from vandalism and theft.

Also a threat to the area’s wild character and resources are plans for six backcountry recreational airstrips within the Monument. The airstrips will increase maintenance and liability costs at a time of shrinking budgets, and will increase law enforcement and administrative challenges, diminishing the BLM’s ability to effectively protect the area’s natural and cultural resources.

For more information contact:

Mary Jones
Friends of the Missouri Breaks Monument
406-538-8506

ARIZONA

Ironwood Forest National Monument

Ironwood Forest National Monument's 129,068 acres supports the highest density of ironwood trees in the Sonoran desert, plus numerous threatened and endangered species, such as the lesser long-nosed bat, Nichol's Turk's head cactus, and the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl. The Monument also contains hundreds of significant cultural resources and what may be the last viable population of desert bighorn sheep in the Tucson Basin.

The Cocoraque Butte Archaeological District is a 480 acre area within Ironwood Forest nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975 because of its outstanding petroglyphs and Hohokam village sites. Vandals have plagued the area repeatedly, leaving graffiti and trying to remove petroglyph boulders--including one successful theft. Target shooting at petroglyphs has damaged two other sites and numerous saguaro cacti in the monument. In response, the BLM has increased monitoring and recorded and mapped the vandalism in detail.

Roads caused by illegal immigration are scarring other areas in Ironwood Forest, including another National Register of Historic Places site: Santa Ana de Cuiquiburitac, a historic mission and the surrounding grounds. Other illegal routes created from both illegal immigration and alternative routes taken by drunk drivers have caused significant damage to the Nichol Turk's Head Cactus, a federally listed endangered species.

For more information contact:

Jill Ozarski
The Wilderness Society
(303) 650-5818 x.111