



Wilderness and Backcountry Management Planning | December 2021 Newsletter: Planning Update

Dear Friends,
I am excited to provide this update on wilderness and backcountry management planning for Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area. In recent years, the National Park Service has been working toward a comprehensive planning document that will address trends in backcountry and wilderness recreation. Black Canyon of the Gunnison and Curecanti offer opportunities for high-quality backcountry and wilderness experiences. Through thoughtful decision making, the National Park Service works to balance the demands of visitor activities to protect resources and wilderness character. A comprehensive management plan would provide long-term direction to preserve wilderness and backcountry resources while offering a spectrum of visitor opportunities across both units. In addition, through this management planning, the National Park Service would identify resource indicators and measures to monitor changes in condition as well as visitor capacities in fulfillment of legal requirements (1978 National Parks and Recreation Act).

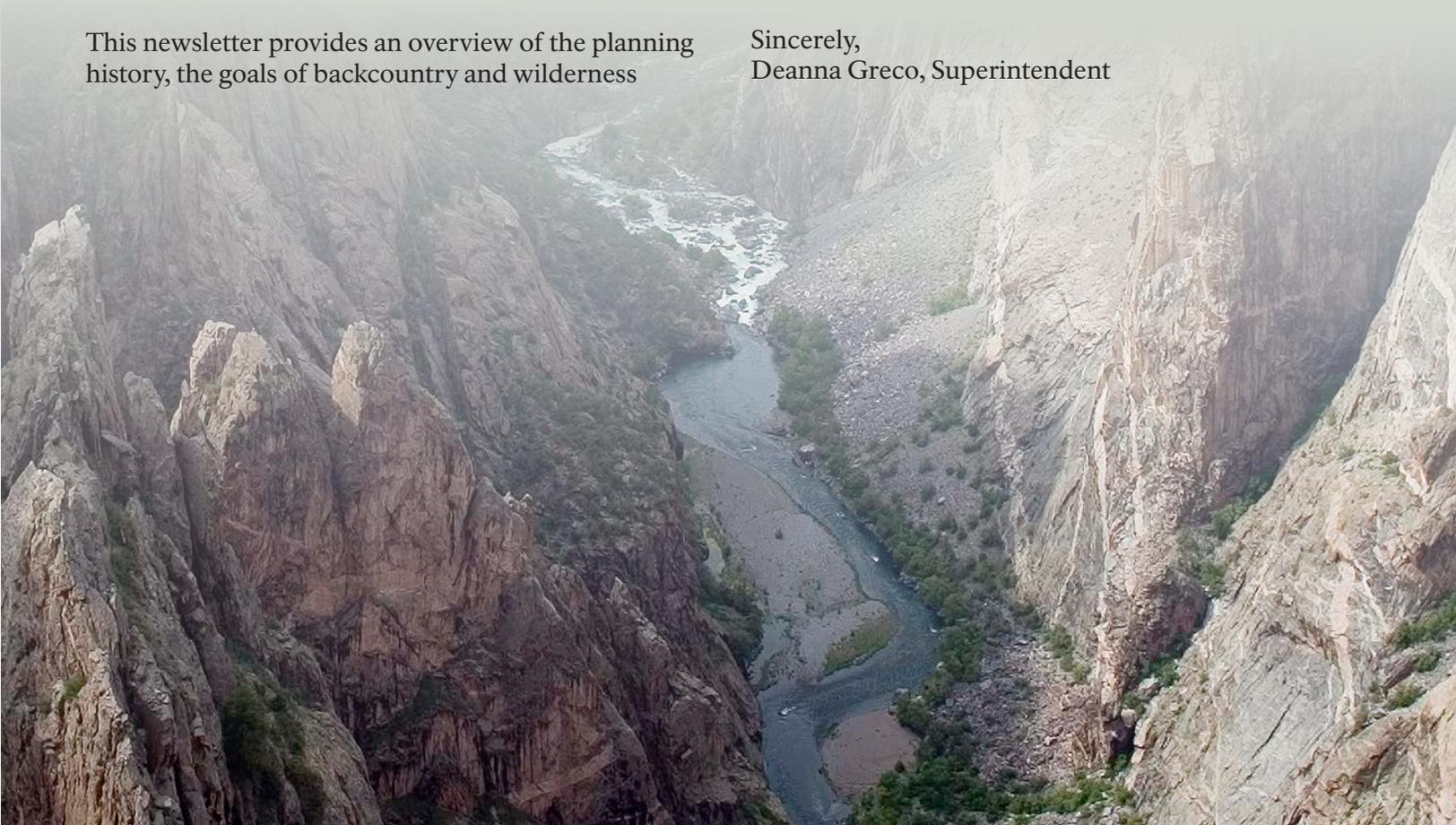
This newsletter provides an overview of the planning history, the goals of backcountry and wilderness

Please see the foundation overview documents for Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area on the NPS project website (<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BLCA-CUREOverviews>) to read about each unit's purpose, significance, and fundamental resources and values.

management planning, and information on how to share your ideas with the National Park Service. We would love to hear your feedback on these ideas for managing the undeveloped backcountry of Black Canyon of the Gunnison—including designated wilderness—and the land-based backcountry visitor activities and resources at Curecanti, along with your ideas or concerns about the visitor experience and resource protection.

Please visit the NPS project website at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BLCA-CUREWBMP> to stay current with the planning process and leave any comments you may have related to backcountry and wilderness planning. Thank you for your interest in the future of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area.

Sincerely,
Deanna Greco, Superintendent





Background/Project History

Before the current planning effort, the National Park Service developed a draft wilderness and backcountry management plan and environmental assessment for Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area. The draft plan and environmental assessment were released for public review in September 2011. In response to public comments, the National Park Service reviewed the draft plan and released revised alternatives for public review in 2015.

Since 2015, the interdisciplinary planning team has reevaluated actions identified in the 2011 draft plan and terminated the previous environmental assessment. Currently, the National Park Service is engaged in a new planning effort that accounts for current conditions and planning needs including updated requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the National Recreation Act of 1978. This planning builds on the earlier alternatives and includes an updated analysis of commercial services in the backcountry and wilderness, management zoning, climbing management, resource condition monitoring strategy, and potential visitor capacities.

Distinction Between Backcountry and Wilderness

The term “backcountry” is a generic descriptor for primitive, undeveloped portions of a park unit outside highly developed frontcountry areas. Lands that are NOT highly developed with roads, parking lots, overlooks, vehicle campgrounds, and visitor centers are often considered the backcountry. These lands are managed in accordance with the National Park Service Organic Act and NPS Management Policies 2006.

While both park units contain large areas of backcountry that are managed in accordance with the NPS Organic Act, approximately 50% of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (15,599 acres) is designated wilderness. Under the Wilderness Act and NPS policy, lands designated by Congress as “wilderness” require additional protections when compared with nonwilderness backcountry resources. For example, wilderness and backcountry may require different administrative practices because the Wilderness Act imposes additional conditions and constraints. Similarly, wilderness policy and guidance require defining and determining appropriate activities, the necessity for commercial services to support those activities, and the extent (i.e., amount) of commercial services necessary in wilderness. While there are similarities between backcountry and wilderness, backcountry has more management discretion than the legal protection of wilderness.

Planning Goals

The overarching goal of the planning process is to provide an integrated framework for decision making for the stewardship of wilderness and backcountry lands within Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and the backcountry of Curecanti National Recreation Area.

To successfully manage and protect the wilderness and backcountry, planning would ultimately accomplish the following:

1. Restore, preserve, and enhance wilderness character in wilderness areas.
2. Provide a range of visitor opportunities while protecting fundamental resources and values and park purposes in wilderness and backcountry areas.
3. Enhance public understanding of the relevance of wilderness character and opportunities, and stewardship of the wilderness and backcountry areas.

Issues to Address

Wilderness and backcountry management planning will address the following key issues:

- The lack of a current comprehensive management framework for wilderness and backcountry areas
- Increasing frontcountry visitation and its effect on wilderness/backcountry resources, such as soundscape and viewshed impacts, inner canyon and upland hiking access, and fishing access
- Lack of consistent management of overnight use (e.g., formalized camping and availability of campsites)
- The lack of a formal climbing management plan
- The increased interest in recreation opportunities
- Changes in types of use and emerging uses on the Gunnison River in Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park
- Commercial services in wilderness and backcountry
- Raptor disturbance (especially peregrine and eagle nest disturbance)
- Lack of monitoring guidance and protocols to minimize impacts to wilderness character

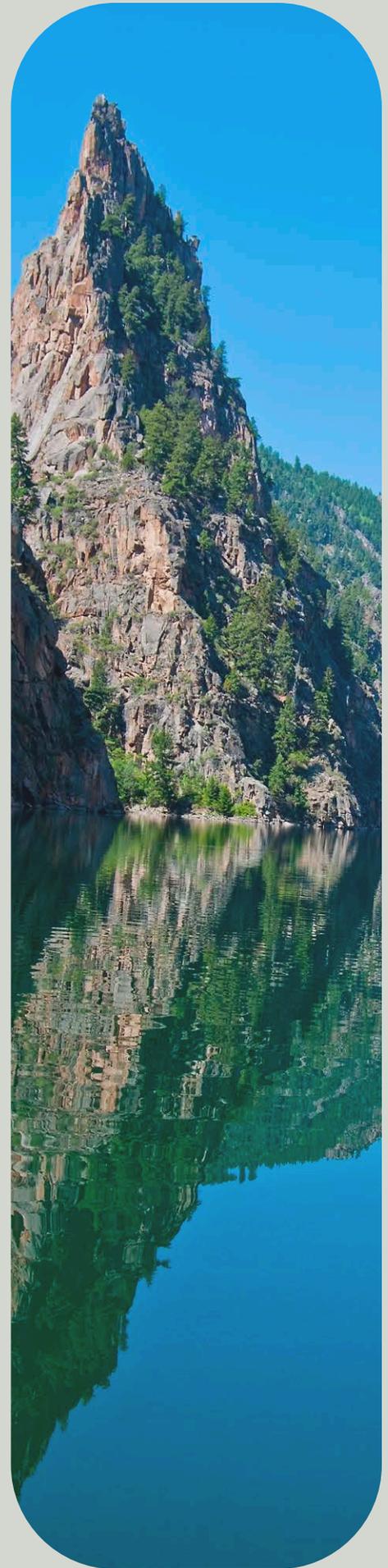
Potential Management Strategies and Activities

The National Park Service is considering a variety of management strategies and activities that could achieve wilderness and backcountry management goals and address key issues. These activities include the following:

- Identifying desired conditions and updating management zoning
- Enhancing public understanding of wilderness character and backcountry values
- Continue collaborating with other land stewards and related federal agencies to monitor and improve habitat for threatened species, improve visitor experiences, and preserve and restore wilderness character and backcountry desired conditions
- Implementing a climbing management plan to guide future use and route development

Broad management strategies for all wilderness and backcountry areas at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area are summarized in the supporting document available on the NPS planning project website:

<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BLCA-CUREWBMP>.



Comments will not be accepted by fax, e-mail, or any other way than those specified above. Bulk comments in any format (hard copy or electronic) submitted on behalf of others will not be accepted. Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

The NPS planning team will analyze feedback received during this outreach period and then work to finalize a wilderness and backcountry management plan for Black Canyon of the Gunnison and Curecanti. Once complete, the resulting planning document and any related compliance documents required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) will be available for public review and comment through the NPS project PEPC website mentioned above.

How to Comment

Every stakeholder should have a seat at the table to help us support long-term, effective planning and decision making. We are interested in hearing your ideas and questions on the potential management strategies outlined in this newsletter and supporting documents. We will accept feedback from December 22, 2021, to January 21, 2022.

You may submit comments in the following ways: Electronically by visiting the National Park Service (NPS) Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website at: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/BLCA-CUREWBMP>. Once on the website, select "Open for Comment" to provide your thoughts on the preliminary strategies.

Mail comments to:
 Black Canyon of the Gunnison
 National Park–Curecanti NRA
 Attention: Superintendent Deanna Greco
 102 Elk Creek
 Gunnison, CO 81230

Next Steps

Planning Activity	Time Frame
Public outreach on potential management strategies	December 22, 2021–January 21, 2022
National Park Service to analyze comments and complete development of the draft wilderness and backcountry management plan	Spring 2022
Public review of draft wilderness and backcountry Management Plan and associated environmental compliance documents	Summer 2022
Analyze public comments and finalize plan and associated environmental compliance documents	Fall–Winter 2022

