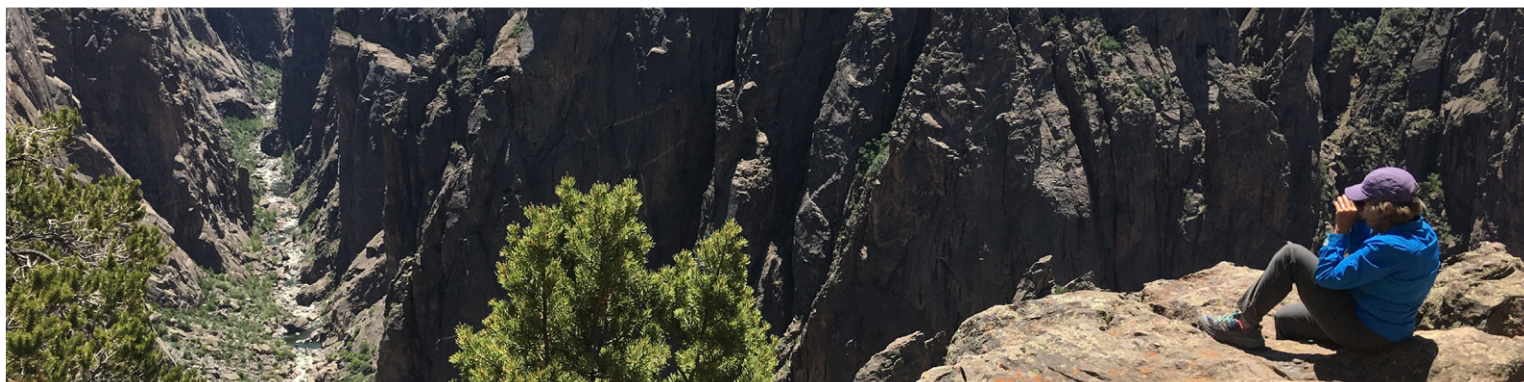




WILDERNESS AND BACKCOUNTRY MANAGEMENT PLANNING

May 2022 Newsletter: Planning Update and Public Scoping



Dear Friends,

The breathtaking and diverse landscapes and resources of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (NP) and Curecanti National Recreation Area (NRA) provided inspiration and enjoyment to more than 1.3 million visitors in 2021. Protecting the natural, cultural, and wilderness integrity of these special places requires careful consideration of resource conditions, vulnerabilities, visitor experiences, and management options.

The National Park Service (NPS) is currently developing a wilderness and backcountry management plan that will provide guidance for preserving and enhancing wilderness character while offering opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation as well as managing other land uses, activities, and park resources. In December 2021, we shared with the public an update on this effort and requested public participation and feedback on potential management strategies and actions. Comments received covered aspects of local conditions, management considerations, visitor experience and commercial services. The comments helped the planning team refine important parts of the plan such as desired conditions, proposed management zones, visitor capacities, commercial services, and a climbing management plan.

The planning team is now preparing the draft wilderness and backcountry management plan and a corresponding environmental assessment (EA) that is required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Before we release the draft plan and EA for public review, we are pleased to share in this newsletter more details related to proposed actions that the National Park Service is considering and topics that will be analyzed for potential impacts in the forthcoming EA.

A table of next steps in the planning process is provided at the end of this newsletter. We expect to have a complete draft wilderness and backcountry management plan/environmental assessment available for public review and comment in summer 2022. You will be able to see planning updates, download electronic copies of the plan and EA, and submit comments during the upcoming public comment period at the [planning project's NPS website](#).

Thank you for your interest in the future of Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and Curecanti NRA and for your participation in this planning process. We look forward to sharing the wilderness and backcountry management plan with you soon!

Sincerely,

Giselle Mora-Bourgeois
Acting Superintendent

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the draft wilderness and backcountry management plan is to accomplish the following:

- Provide an integrated framework for decision making for the stewardship of designated wilderness and backcountry lands of Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and the backcountry lands of Curecanti NRA.
- Balance the demands of visitor activities to protect resources and wilderness character.
- Provide long-term direction to preserve wilderness and backcountry resources while offering a spectrum of visitor opportunities across both units.
- 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).

The draft wilderness and backcountry plan is needed because underlying trends such as increasing visitation, if not addressed in planning and management strategies, could result in the establishment of incompatible uses and entrenched harmful practices, which in turn could impact natural resources, high-quality visitor opportunities, wilderness character, and backcountry conditions. More specifically, the plan is needed to address the following key planning issues:

- The lack of a current comprehensive management framework for wilderness and backcountry lands
- Increasing frontcountry visitation and its effect on wilderness/backcountry resources, such as soundscape and viewshed impacts, inner canyon and upland hiking access, and fishing and climbing access
- Lack of consistent management of overnight use (e.g., formalized camping and availability of campsites)
- The lack of a formal climbing management plan
- Increased public interest in backcountry and wilderness recreation opportunities
- Changes in types of use and emerging uses on the Gunnison River in Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP
- Lack of consistent commercial services guidance for wilderness and backcountry lands
- Lack of measures/indicators, standards/thresholds, visitor capacities, and monitoring guidance and protocols for wilderness and backcountry lands



Introduction to the Wilderness and Backcountry Management Planning Document

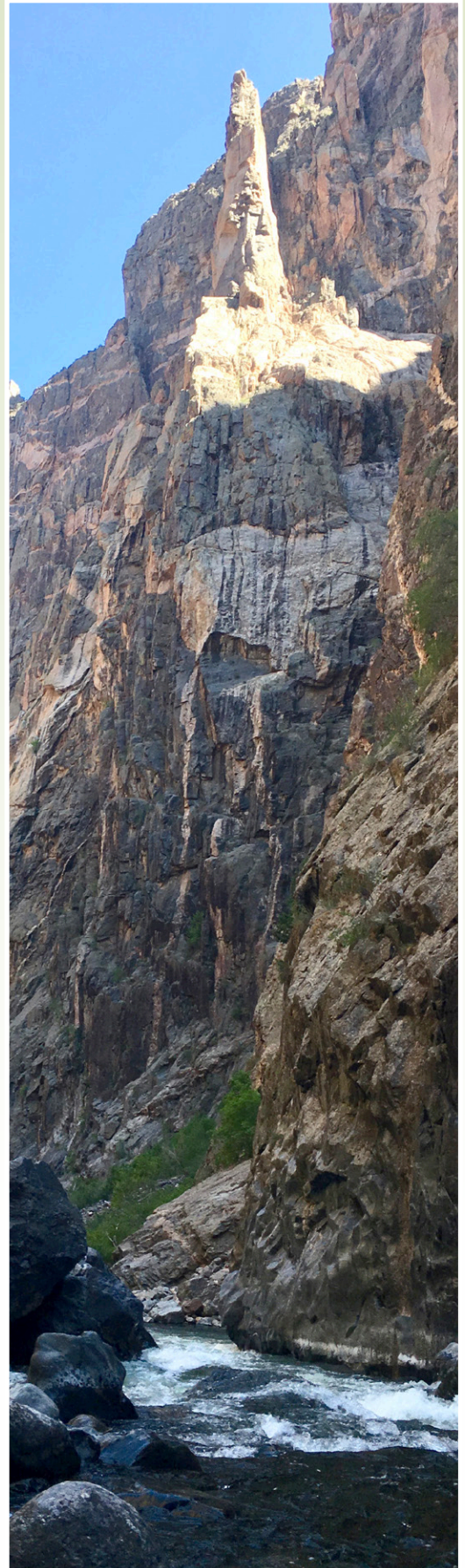
Considering the variety of planning issues observed and guidance needed to balance visitor opportunities and preservation of wilderness character and backcountry resources at Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and Curecanti NRA, the draft backcountry and wilderness management plan is being organized as two companion documents or “parts” that will be released simultaneously.

Part 1: Draft Wilderness and Backcountry Management Plan outlines the proposed future management framework for the 15,599-acre Black Canyon of the Gunnison Wilderness, which includes 11,180 acres designated by Congress in 1976 (Public Law 94-567) and an additional 4,419 acres added in 1999 (Public Law 106-76), as well as for the undeveloped backcountry of Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP (approximately 10,370 acres) and approximately 30,330 acres of land-based backcountry visitor activities and resources at Curecanti NRA. The draft plan expands on the high-level guidance included in the 1997 general management plan and helps answer the question, “what are we managing for?” with regard to visitor use and resource protection in wilderness and backcountry areas.

Part 1 includes the following:

- Updated desired conditions
- Updated management zoning
- Climbing management plan
- Wilderness character monitoring strategy
- Visitor capacity identifications for all wilderness and backcountry visitor use areas
- Commercial service analysis and extent necessary determination
- Guidance for managing scientific research activities in wilderness

Part 2: Draft Environmental Assessment analyzes the impacts of management actions and strategies proposed in the draft wilderness and backcountry management plan that have the potential to significantly affect the human environment, including park resources and visitor experience. The EA is being prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended; the 2020 Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Part 1500-1508); and Department of the Interior NEPA regulations (43 CFR Part 46).



Potential Management Strategies and Activities

The draft wilderness and backcountry management plan provides long-term comprehensive management direction for the backcountry and designated wilderness in Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and the backcountry in Curecanti NRA.

The draft plan (Part 1 of the document) provides a spectrum of appropriate visitor opportunities and experiences while protecting NPS resources and values. Under the updated management zoning, some areas would provide for wild, natural, rugged experiences where self-reliance is integral. Other zones would provide recreational opportunities supported by trails, campsites, and other appropriate activities.

A future focus would be on enhancing the public understanding of wilderness character and backcountry values through education, interpretation, events, and/or additional signage. The National Park Service would continue to collaborate 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.

The following table outlines the proposed management strategies and actions described in Part 1: Draft Wilderness and Backcountry Management Plan and analyzed for potential impacts to the human environment in Part 2.

Management Topic	Alternative A: No Action	Alternative B: Preliminary Proposed Action
Management zoning	Existing zoning from the 1997 general management plan would continue to guide management of backcountry and wilderness areas. The 1997 general management plan refers to these zones as "management prescriptions."	New, updated management zoning and desired conditions would guide management of wilderness and backcountry at Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP and backcountry at Curecanti NRA. At Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP, the zoning changes would differentiate designated wilderness versus backcountry as well as unique management guidance for the inner canyon versus the uplands. At Curecanti NRA, the zoning changes would differentiate between the eastern and western portions of the recreation area. The eastern portion would be managed for open and secluded desired conditions while the western portion would be remote and rugged.
Climbing management	The National Park Service would continue to operate under the guidance of its interim climbing management plan. The guidance does not provide a clearly defined set of guidelines for climbers and NPS managers to administer requests to install new fixed equipment or replace existing fixed equipment in accordance with NPS policies and guidelines.	A climbing management plan would be formally adopted. It would include management guidance related to the following topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wilderness use permitting• Fixed anchors and equipment• Fixed rope• Development of new routes and approach trails• Rock and vegetation alteration• Human waste• Gear caches• Bouldering• High lines and slacklines• Commercial use authorizations• Rescue considerations• Seasonal raptor closures• Ongoing monitoring and management

Potential Management Strategies and Activities (continued)

Management Topic	Alternative A: No Action	Alternative B: Preliminary Proposed Action
Visitor-created trail restoration	The National Park Service would continue to restore visitor-created trails to natural conditions using a variety of techniques.	The National Park Service would evaluate visitor-created trails in the backcountry and designated wilderness and restore those areas as appropriate to reduce safety concerns and resource impacts.
Removal of unnecessary facilities and structures	The National Park Service would continue to remove unnecessary facilities and structures at both units (in wilderness and backcountry), such as fencing and stock ponds, on a site-specific basis.	The National Park Service would continue to remove unnecessary facilities and structures at both units but would expand the types of structures removed to include irrigation systems, underground water infrastructure, two-track roads, and livestock trailing routes. For any removal or restoration action that requires the use of mechanized or motorized tools in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison Wilderness, these actions would be evaluated and documented, and implemented if appropriate, using a minimum requirements analysis process.
Wilderness use permit system (Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP)	The current access permit system, with a maximum number of people per day at each route (access point), would be continued, along with a set of measures and standards for adaptively managing the system.	Continue current management. In the future, the National Park Service may evaluate an online permitting system through Recreation.gov.
Backcountry use permit system (Curecanti NRA)	The National Park Service would continue to employ free backcountry use permits to monitor use of campsites along the shore of Morrow Point Reservoir.	Continue current management. If use levels were to increase in the future, the National Park Service would consider managing additional backcountry locations such as trails, campsites, and climbing areas by employing backcountry use permits.
Campsite management (Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP)	Existing campsites at the bottom of the inner canyon routes would remain undesignated and would continue to be operated on a first-come, first-served basis. Campsites at the bottom of the East Portal routes would remain undesignated and first-come, first served.	Campsites in the proposed inner canyon primitive wilderness subzone of Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP would be designated to minimize resource impacts from overnight use. Visitors would choose a designated campsite upon arrival. The National Park Service would continue to allow camping in the proposed inner canyon pristine wilderness subzone via the North River and Devil's Backbone routes accessed at East Portal. Sites would remain undesignated and available on a first-come, first-served basis. However, the National Park Service would encourage visitors to camp no longer than one night maximum in one spot as one way of educating visitors about Leave No Trace principles.
Inner canyon waste management (Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP)	The National Park Service would retain the existing pit toilets at the bottom of Gunnison and Warner routes and continue to encourage visitors to pack-in and pack-out waste on all other routes.	The National Park Service would phase in required pack-in and pack-out waste management on other routes into the inner canyon wilderness. In the future, the National Park Service would consider other options for retrofitting, replacing, or removing the pit toilets.
Horse use (Curecanti NRA)	Horses are allowed in the areas identified in the 2010 <i>Curecanti National Recreation Area Motorized Vehicle Access Plan/Environmental Assessment</i> .	The National Park Service would close horse access to backcountry areas that do not allow motor vehicle access. Any land acquired by the National Park Service in the future would be evaluated for potential expansion of backcountry horse use.

Potential Management Strategies and Activities (continued)

Management Topic	Alternative A: No Action	Alternative B: Preliminary Proposed Action
Measures, standards, and visitor capacities	The 1993 Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP resource management plan and the 2010 Curecanti NRA motorized vehicle access plan would continue to provide guidance for monitoring and managing use levels.	Measures (i.e., indicators), standards (i.e., thresholds), and visitor capacities would be established for the wilderness and backcountry using the Interagency Wilderness Character Monitoring guidance and the Interagency Visitor Use Management Council framework and guidebooks. Visitor capacity is the maximum amounts and types of use that can be accommodated while achieving and maintaining desired conditions. Visitor capacities would be identified for all visitor use areas within the wilderness and backcountry (including hiking routes and trails, climbing areas, and campsites) in accordance with the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978.
Commercial services	Commercial services under current management would continue to provide guided services, including guided climbing within the inner canyon, guided hiking/fishing and overnight use in wilderness in the westernmost portion of Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP (administered by Bureau of Land Management), and guided horseback riding in Curecanti NRA. A wilderness use permit is required for guided climbing within the inner canyon.	A commercial services analysis was conducted as part of the planning effort. An extent necessary determination for wilderness and complete commercial services necessary and appropriate analysis for wilderness and backcountry will be included in the plan. In addition, a commercial allocation was identified for commercial services in Black Canyon of the Gunnison NP to ensure that guided services do not monopolize opportunities for the public to access the parks for recreation.

Topics Carried Forward for Detailed Analysis in the Environmental Assessment

Based on input received from NPS subject matter experts and other stakeholders, the analysis in the EA will focus on those resources and values that could be meaningfully impacted by proposed actions in the draft wilderness and backcountry management plan.

These include the following:

- Visitor use and experience
- Wilderness character
- Vegetation and soils
- Archeological resources

Next Steps

Planning Activity	Timeline
When ready, release draft wilderness and backcountry management plan and EA for public review	Summer 2022
Analyze public comments and finalize plan and associated environmental compliance documents	Summer / fall 2022
Release finalized plan and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), as appropriate.	Fall 2022

