

REVEALING THE UNDER-APPRECIATED VALUES OF BLM LANDS: A Photographer's Journey

Bob Wick

“Unknown,” “unloved,” or “under-appreciated” best described public knowledge of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in 1988 when I started working for the agency and exploring and documenting the rarely photographed hidden jewels under its stewardship. Since that time, public awareness and appreciation of these “leftover lands” has grown immensely and the most special areas now have a rightful place in America’s conservation portfolio. Photographs have played a key role in bringing these lands out of the shadows and building public appreciation.

During my 33-year career, I’ve become known as BLM’s de facto landscape photographer through a curious mix of perseverance and timing. This article discusses my own journey of photography of BLM lands, followed by an essay of photos that I have taken that highlight the history of growing conservation designations on bureau lands, their unique niche and management challenges among federally protected lands, and examples of the power of photos in inspiring and motivating visitors and constituents.

I grew up exploring the hardwood forests and trout streams of western Pennsylvania and took up landscape photography to capture and share their beauty. It was in pursuit of a forestry degree that I first heard about BLM. In the early 1980s, textbooks rarely made mention of this largest federal land manager.

I wanted to go west and obtained a temporary position with this mystery agency in Cañon City, Colorado. Everything in the West was new to me, and I was excited about exploring and photographing the national parks and forests. However, I was also immediately smitten with BLM lands in my new district—sagebrush steppe and high mountain aspen forests, 13,000-foot snow-capped peaks, and breathtaking canyons of the Rio Grande and Arkansas River.

My first job focused on writing reports summarizing BLM wilderness recommendations required under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA),

the bureau’s organic act. FLPMA contained extensive direction regarding conservation; however, the mandate was typically couched as “multiple use.” To traditional constituent groups and government leaders, BLM was primarily considered a workhorse agency for resource uses and commodity production. Outdoor recreation, wilderness, and cultural/natural resource conservation were an important but secondary focus with minimal budgets and staff.

I quickly developed a pride in working for this underdog agency and cemented my passion for BLM landscapes by exploring them. However, limited opportunities to share film images with large audiences meant my photography was not distributed widely until later in my career. During this period, grassroots efforts to place certain BLM lands in conservation status gained some traction, including legislation to protect areas of Arizona and California as wilderness.

I traded the Colorado Rockies for a remote corner of California’s Redwood Coast where the BLM focus in the 1990s turned from timber harvesting to protection and restoration of old-growth forests for endangered species. This made sense in an area that was mostly industrial timberlands. BLM lands were managed in a manner that allowed for “multiple use” while conserving fish and wildlife across the regional landscape. The first images below describe the evolution and growth of conservation component of BLM’s mission during this period.

During the final third of my career, I broadened my focus to include all of California and then national-level work as a wilderness program lead. This coincided with digital photography overtaking film, and with it the ease of sharing images widely via the internet.

Soon, images I took of little-known public lands were posted on BLM and the Department of the Interior's new social media sites and were immediate hits. Seeing and learning about BLM areas was new and fresh to the public and received lots of "likes" and comments from outdoor recreationists and armchair travelers alike. All the photos I took for work were available on the web as public domain images, free for anyone to use. I also donated the photos from my weekend explorations. The media and non-profit conservation organizations began regularly using them in articles and blog posts, bringing to life these special places and their importance. Although my position was never officially as a photographer, my supervisors supported my spending a portion of my time photographing areas around the West and Alaska as an ancillary duty to my wilderness policy role.



TECH

This Boring Government Agency's Stunning Instagram Pictures Will Put Yours To Shame

Maya Kosoff Sep 6, 2014, 7:10 AM PDT

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You may have never heard of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the federal government agency that manages more than 245 million acres of public land across the country.



Bureau of Land Management/Instagram

The photos and captions below highlight the history and evolution of BLM's conserved landscapes, the distinctive management niche BLM plays among federal agencies, the issues and complexities faced in managing the system for a broad array of constituents and uses, and the power of photographs in shaping public perception and opinions regarding the importance of conserving these special places.

EVOLUTION OF BLM CONSERVATION PROTECTIONS



Rogue Wild and Scenic River, Oregon

BLM's early conservation designations

Well before BLM's organic act (FLPMA) was passed in 1976, Congress and the executive branch directed that conservation be among the appropriate management directions for BLM lands, and over 1 million acres were administratively protected in the 1960s. The first congressional designations came in 1968 when segments of the BLM-managed Rogue River in Oregon and the Rio Grande in New Mexico were included as two of the first eight stream segments that were protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. The law was passed during a major period of dam building to protect certain outstanding river segments in their free-flowing condition. As of 2024, the federal protections across all agencies had expanded to include over 13,000 miles of river segments.



King Range National Conservation Area, California

A new designation unique to BLM: National Conservation Areas

The first national conservation area (NCA), the King Range, contains the largest segment of roadless coastline in California and on the West Coast. Unlike wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, and most other conservation designations, each NCA has unique management direction spelled out in its enabling legislation. They are not tied to an umbrella law with an established set of management requirements or protections. Although newer NCA designations spell out a narrower range of conservation-focused goals and uses, the King Range (1970) pre-dated and served as a model for FLPMA, allowing for a broad array of zoned multiple uses (e.g. timber harvesting, grazing, mineral extraction, off-highway vehicle use, primitive recreation) with sideboards for resource protection and restoration.

Over a 35-year period, management of the NCA evolved to focus on protection of this last remnant of wilderness coastline in a state with almost 40 million people. Salmon runs, endangered wildlife habitat, and the spectacular roadless coastal mountains cloaked in old growth forest became the focus of management through various public planning updates. Congress designated two-thirds of the area as wilderness in 2006. Areas inside the wilderness still allow for livestock grazing, and areas outside contain mountain bike trails and other non-wilderness (i.e., motorized and mechanized) recreation opportunities, but timber harvesting and mineral development are no longer permitted. The King Range reflects the evolution and flexibility of BLM's management mandate and land use planning process to evolve with changing conditions and demands. FLPMA direction is not a one-size-fits-all approach and management focus reflects regional and national resource needs and conservation values.



Ah-Shi-Sle-Pah Wilderness, New Mexico

The long road to BLM wilderness designations

FLPMA directed an inventory study of all BLM lands for potential wilderness designations. This massive inventory and study culminated in 1992 when BLM transmitted suitable/non-suitable recommendations through the president to Congress for consideration. All the 919 wilderness study areas (WSAs), totaling 23 million acres, meet the criteria to be protected under the Wilderness Act of 1964, and BLM recommended 42% of the acreage for actual designation. Various conflicting resource demands, lack of public support, and other issues led to the remaining 58% not being recommended for designation.

These recommendations were a reflection of the issues and public values at the time of the studies (1980s). In the 30-plus years since the studies were finalized, the attitudes of both the American public, land managers, and legislators have changed considerably regarding what areas should be designated. Also, many conflicting private use incumbrances such as rights of way or mineral rights have expired. Photographs, particularly of once-unappreciated desert lands, have inspired both decision-makers and constituent groups regarding the incredible scenic and conservation value of these special places as they reconsidered possible permanent protections. In this case a picture was truly worth a thousand words.

The image above was taken when Ah-Shi-Sle-Pah was still a WSA. The area was not recommended to Congress for wilderness designation in the 1992 BLM Study Report, primarily because it was covered by coal lease applications. These valid rights could be exercised by the owners, resulting in mining activities completely incompatible with wilderness. Public awareness of the spectacular badlands scenery, Tribal concerns, and sensitive cultural and natural resource values led to the passage of legislation signed by President Trump in 2019 to designate the area as wilderness. The legislation included provisions to exchange the coal lease applications for allowances on BLM lands elsewhere that were more appropriate for mining, resulting in a win-win solution. Currently BLM manages 487 WSAs totaling 11.1 million acres, and 267 designated wilderness areas totaling 10.1 million acres.



Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah

A new era for National Monuments and BLM in 1996

Proclaimed by President Clinton in 1996, the spectacular canyons and layered stairstep cliffs of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument [GSENM] became the first of many national monuments created on lands managed by BLM to remain under its management. For previous monument proclamations encompassing BLM and US Forest Service lands, jurisdiction was transferred to the National Park Service (NPS) upon designation.

The California Desert Protection Act of 1994, still the largest piece of wilderness and land conservation legislation in the lower 48, played a major role in the decision to allow the Grand Staircase to remain under BLM jurisdiction. The act included transfer of several million acres of BLM land to the National Park Service, including several areas considered “crown jewels” that were a source of employee pride in stewardship, even though meager budgets did not allow for adequate protection from impacts. Then California State Director Ed Hastey made the case to Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt that this transfer was like a gut punch to BLM and said, “how can you expect our agency to embrace the conservation component of our mandate if you don’t provide us with management capability [and] then transfer all of the most significant areas out of our stewardship.” Secretary Babbitt took this to heart with the 1996 designation of GSENM. This was followed by numerous other national monuments that would remain under BLM stewardship, eventually as part of the National Conservation Lands.



Cascade Siskiyou National Monument, Oregon

The National Landscape Conservation System (National Conservation Lands) is codified in law

The Omnibus Public Lands Law of 2009 (PL 111-11) formally identified the entire suite of BLM conservation designations established by law and presidential proclamation as the National Landscape Conservation System, now known as the National Conservation Lands. This act also established several new BLM conservation justifications, including Cascade Siskiyou National Monument, the first such area to be identified primarily for biodiversity protection. Although the majority of national monuments are designated through presidential proclamations, Cascade Siskiyou and others were established through acts of Congress.

BLM'S NICHE AMONG FEDERAL AGENCIES AS A CONSERVATION LAND MANAGER



Pony Express National Historic Trail, Wyoming

Conserving large landscapes

The landscapes and ecosystems under BLM jurisdiction are extremely diverse, ranging from the hot deserts of southern California and Arizona, coastal rainforests in the Pacific Northwest, alpine peaks in Colorado, and Arctic tundra in Alaska. However, the lands most often associated with the agency are the sage-covered high desert steppe. The word “vast” is an understatement here, where vistas can stretch over 100 miles. These large intact landscapes allow for immersion into places and conditions that pioneers endured, such as along the Pony Express corridor. As demands increase for energy development and transmission, the bureau works to manage impacts and conserve the visual environment in key locations, such as along national historic trail corridors. BLM manages more miles of these corridors than any agency.

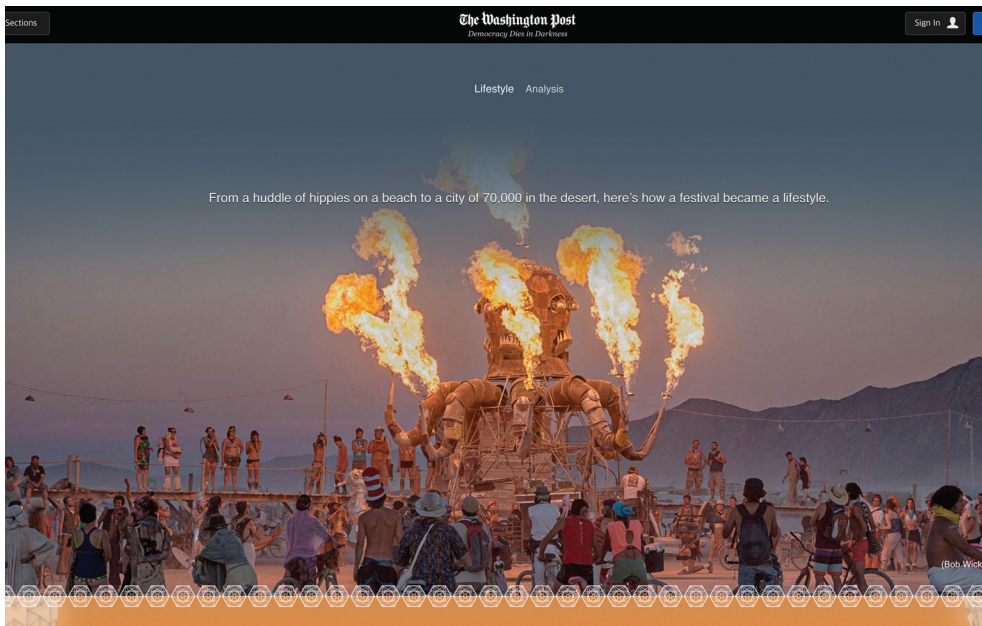


California Coastal National Monument, California

Unique conservation opportunities are created by BLM's land pattern

BLM lands are the “leftover” parts of the public domain that were never homesteaded nor made into national parks, national forests, or other federal and state allocations. This leads to some interesting land patterns. Many of these places are now recognized to have extremely high resource values including, the approximately 20,000 rocks, sea stacks, and small islands off the California Coast. Even the smallest offshore rocks are extremely important as refugia for marine birds and mammals. They were designated as part of the California Coastal National Monument in 2000.

Unlike other federal land management agencies, BLM lands (outside of National Conservation Land units) do not contain congressionally or presidentially designated boundaries. This allows the agency to work through its public land use planning process to exchange, purchase (with federal, state, and non-profit organization funds), and accept land donations in areas with key conservation and recreation opportunities. Several National Conservation Land units (such as Las Cienegas NCA, and Carrizo Plain and Mojave Trails National Monuments) have been established on ecologically or historically significant areas that were once part of a discontinuous and fragmented public land pattern before being placed under public management through creative partnership acquisitions.



Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon-Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area, Nevada

Accommodating a broad umbrella of public land users

Laws and presidential proclamations establishing many BLM National Conservation Land units often have fairly broad allowances for continuation of established as well as new uses. Perhaps the most unique example of this is the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon-Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area in Nevada. A primary purpose of NCAs is to protect the highly intact historic landscapes traversed by the most desolate stretch of the Applegate route of the California National Historic Trail—the most foreboding and empty place faced by emigrants desperate to make it to California. Black Rock itself (the low, dark, triangular peak in the center of the top image) was a major landmark for emigrants.

The NCA's designation legislation required BLM to continue allowing "large scale permitted events." The largest of these is the annual Burning Man event, which now attracts 80,000 participants to the area's broad desert playa. The playa (dry lakebed) is also the site of large amateur rocket launching events and hosted the world record altitude of an amateur rocket of 470,000 feet. Finally, the playa is the site of the current land speed record of 763 mph. BLM faces the challenge to balance allowing these uses with protecting the historic landscape. North America's largest desert playa accommodates these uses with minimal long-term impacts.



Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument, Montana

Hosting continued traditional and dispersed recreation uses

Proclamations and legislation establishing most national park units have narrow allowable recreation uses and typically prohibit hunting, recreation shooting, and sometimes fishing. In contrast, these uses may continue and are encouraged on BLM National Conservation Lands. Similarly, there are fewer limitations on dispersed uses such as car camping and off-highway vehicle (OHV) use on designated routes.

With new designations, these traditional uses may continue or increase, and there is an influx of new visitors with very different recreation expectations. This is a recipe for conflicts that BLM must manage. Particularly contentious are OHV use and recreational shooting. The expectations and political influence of traditional constituent groups make it difficult for BLM to limit these established uses. Proactive community partnerships in certain areas (e.g., McInnis Canyons and King Range NCAs) have successfully demonstrated that a zoning approach and willingness to compromise can work to accommodate conflicting uses while minimizing conflicts.

MULTIPLE USE CHALLENGES



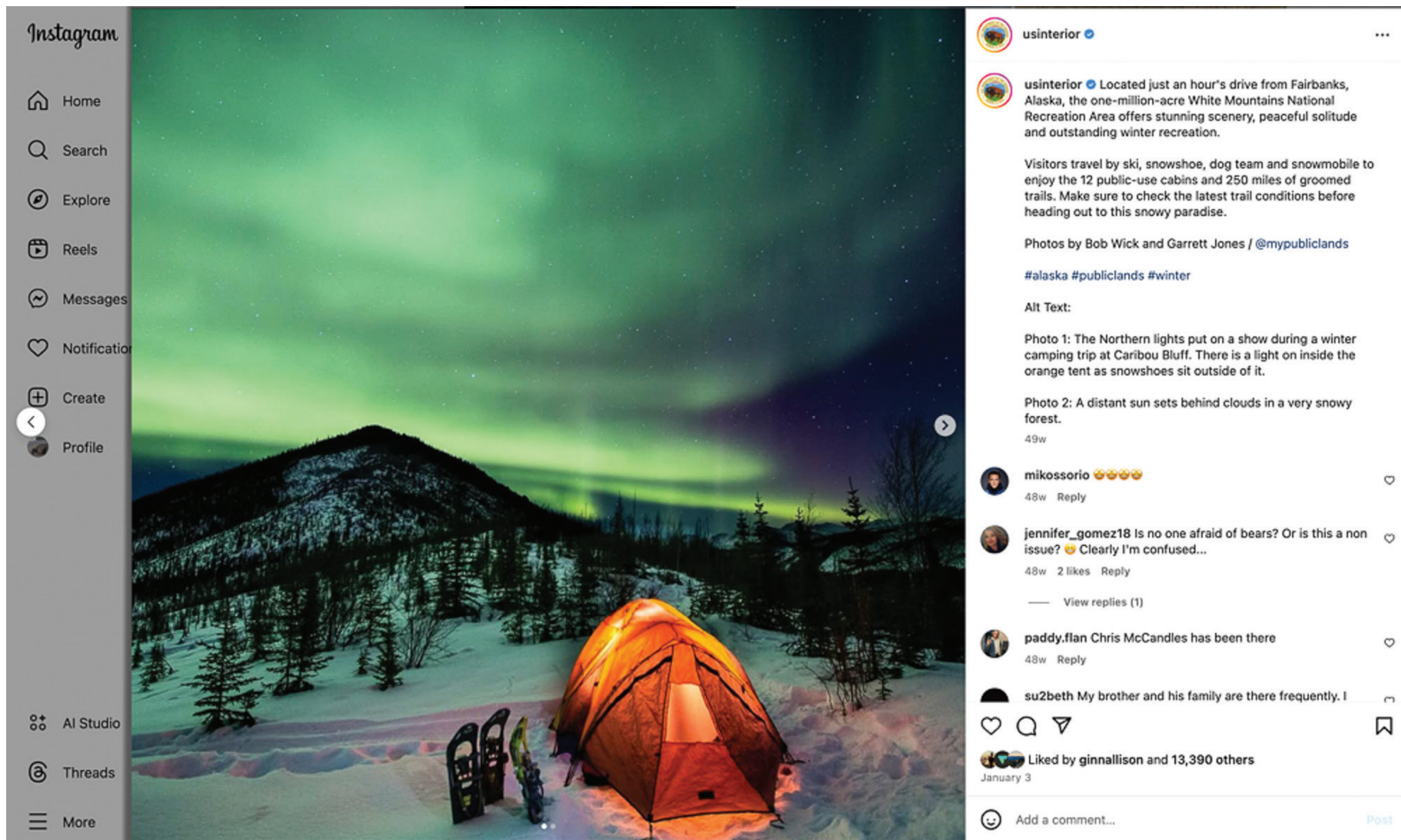
Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, Arizona

A complex mission with continuing historic uses

Continuation of traditional uses such as livestock grazing on BLM conservation designations can be challenging and controversial, even when implemented in a way that protects objects and values. Almost all acts of Congress and presidential proclamations designating these units direct the BLM to allow traditional uses such as livestock grazing to continue. These uses are also vestiges of the Old West and portray authenticity in the present that contrast with living history reenactments in areas where traditional uses are curtailed or eliminated. This model of management also allows for continuation of historic relationships between the agency and the rural communities within and surrounding the areas. Local angst and sometimes anger surrounding nationally imposed designations often requires a rebuilding of trust between agency managers and local communities and traditional users.

In this image, cattle herders move livestock in Las Cienegas NCA based on specific vegetation management goals. The area was originally made up of private ranches purchased with funds from non-profit organizations as well as the state and federal government for habitat conservation. The area was placed under BLM stewardship with the understanding that livestock grazing would continue.

IMAGES BUILD EXPECTATIONS, INSPIRATION, AND ACTIONS AMONG VARIOUS PUBLIC LAND USERS



Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River Corridor, Alaska

Sharing the great unknown with armchair travelers

This remote part of the White Mountains National Recreation Area north of Fairbanks, Alaska, is along the Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River. Hardy visitors still visit the area in winter even though temperatures can dip to minus 30 or 40°F. Parts of many BLM National Conservation Land units can be very difficult to access, but agency social media posts have broadened virtual accessibility to these places so that the public can vicariously “visit” and learn about them. Ephemeral events such as the appearance of the aurora borealis can also be appreciated by a wider audience via images.

The author of the Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser, was well aware that many of these remote locations on federal lands would not be directly visited, but he believed that didn’t diminish their value. He stated, “[There are] those who may never hope to explore a wilderness yet through reading, through photography, in imagination, find a relief and inspiration that make them among the most zealous of wilderness defenders” (Senate Hearing on S1176, June 19, 1957)



Pacific Crest Trail, California

Increasing the comfort level of non-traditional visitors to venture into the outdoors

Some National Conservation Land units are in the backyards of western cities and towns, such as this Pacific Crest Trail segment just outside of Palm Springs, California. These locations offer easy access and great opportunities to introduce visitors to the great outdoors. Mention the Pacific Crest Trail and most people will picture an arduous backpacking expedition. However, images showing families with small children using an easy-access part of the trail can inspire less adventurous users that they too can enjoy a piece of this national gem.



McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area, Colorado

The road less traveled—Images can help portray the remote undeveloped nature of BLM National Conservation Lands

McInnis Canyons NCA contains the second highest concentration of natural arches in the US after Arches National Park, and is located less than two hours away. However, unlike the popular paved scenic drive and short trails accessing the most famous spots in Arches and many other NPS units, access to the arches in McInnis require navigating a challenging four-wheel drive road impassible in wet weather followed by a 5-mile hike. An alternative 14-mile arduous hike allows access from paved parking. Unprepared visitors can quickly run into trouble if they are not ready for heat or impassible roads, or do not have the physical stamina required for the hike. On many days they will encounter few if any other visitors and no BLM personnel.

This BLM model of minimal development contrasts with and complements that of most NPS-managed units that include a higher level of visitor facilities and interpretive programs in the frontcountry. BLM units offer a very different experience, typically hosting fewer visitors looking for less structure, as well as a broader array of allowable recreation uses such as dispersed camping and hunting. As a result, there is often little guidance about visitation.

Visitors, influenced by past experiences at more popular NPS units, are sometimes perplexed why BLM-managed areas are so undeveloped. Even worse, they can blindly venture out into remote areas completely unprepared. These management styles offer visitors a greater spectrum of opportunities but present difficulties in informing visitors with pre-formed expectations from a longer history of visiting national parks.



Nez Perce National Historic Trail, Idaho

Portraying a growing role for Native American Tribes and representing Tribal heritage

National historic trails are corridors that reflect important events in our nation's history. Most national historic trails have few visible remnants of the physical trail itself but may have auto tours following the approximate route with interpretive information highlighting significant events and locations. The Nez Perce National Historic Trail follows a sad chapter of history where the US Cavalry pursued the Nez Perce across three states before forcing them to surrender to a reservation. It is difficult to capture emotions of these events with images from the present. This photo is intended to represent a family viewing the route and contemplating the tragic events. Native American Tribes have taken leadership roles in new BLM and other agency conservation areas that protect important parts of their ancestral territories. Tribes have been successful in spearheading several new National Conservation Lands units such as Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni-Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument, Arizona, and Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Nevada. They are also requesting an equal presence in decision-making regarding management of the areas versus an advisory role.

Native Americans press Biden to designate three new national monuments in California



A vista of wildflowers and the Mule Mountains in the proposed Chuckwalla national monument. (Bob Wick)

COLORADO NEWSLINE

GOVERNMENT ENVIRONMENT JUSTICE HEALTH ECONOMY COMMENTARY ELECTION 2024

ENVIRONMENT

COMMENTARY

Colorado's last, best wild places must be protected

National monument designation for Dolores Canyons would benefit not only local communities and tourists but also all Coloradans.



Laura Martinez

JULY 26, 2024 3:30 AM



A view of the Dolores River in Colorado. (Bob Wick/BLM/Public domain 1.0)

Chuckwalla National Monument, California; Proposed Dolores Canyons National Monument, Colorado

Grassroots advocates use images to inspire public support for new designations

BLM and other agency images are not copyrighted and are in the public domain, meaning they are available for free use by the news media, interest groups, and the general public. Almost all outreach materials and articles advocating for new or expanded conservation designations incorporate images to portray the significance of areas. Without images, words on paper (or screen) simply would not capture the areas' values in a way that inspires the public.





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News

Utah is still fighting Bears Ears. Court arguments show a state desperate to take “its” land back

KUNC | By [Tracy Ross, The Colorado Sun](#)
 Published October 3, 2024 at 12:34 PM MDT



 LISTEN • 4:20



Bob Wick / Bureau Of Land Management Via CC License

Sunset over the Indian Creek area of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah in on Aug. 14, 2016.

Bears Ears National Monument, Utah

Images portray values of existing designations when they are threatened by impacts

Agency public domain images are similarly used to build compelling cases to defend areas from threats or impacts. Images highlighting the values, resources, and scenic beauty of these areas reach readers and compel the news media to cover issues so that the message has a broader reach. Agencies and government employees cannot advocate for designations or otherwise lobby Congress or organizations. However, they have a duty to provide information on the areas under their stewardship, and this includes photos.

Images and social media as a double-edged sword

Department of the Interior and BLM social media sites regularly feature National Conservation Lands at their best and attract followers primarily because of these spectacular landscape images. As stated above this calls attention to the unique values and importance of these special places. Agencies have learned that they have a great responsibility as “Instagram influencers,” to provide detailed accurate information on areas, and sometimes not to publish specific information on sensitive locations that are overused.

With any new medium, learning through error was a part of the process for improving BLM’s social media information and recognizing its role in causing unforeseen use impacts along with encouraging responsible visitor behavior. As an example of responsibility and expectation management, the images to the right were published following a Department of Interior (DOI) Instagram post that showed an off-the-charts wildflower bloom at Carrizo Plain National Monument in 2017; the DOI post in which it appeared only included general information about the area. It quickly went viral and was featured in international media publications. The small staff at the national monument was soon overwhelmed by visitors, with some showing up a month later only to be greeted by a brown, dry landscape after the very ephemeral bloom. BLM geared up in subsequent years (blooms only happen in wet years) to provide accurate real-time information on the state of the bloom, as well as current road conditions, proper use etiquette, and other public safety warnings to minimize visitors getting stranded in the remote area. The news media also increased information on responsible behavior.

There is no perfect solution to the social media quandary: Posts build awareness and appreciation of areas, and allow armchair travelers who can’t access areas to obtain enjoyment, but also increase use and impacts to public places already suffering from staff shortages and inadequate management budgets. Agencies also have no control over private posts and images depicting unsafe or resource-damaging behaviors. Commercial and news media articles and private individual posts combine to reach a much broader audience than agency sites. Agencies must model good information in their own posts while continuing to appeal to private entities to do the same.



California's superbloom has totally outdone Texas' bluebonnets

#SorryNotSorry

By Daniela Sternitzky-Di Napoli, *Houston Chronicle*
April 4, 2017



The superbloom has migrated north to California's Central Valley, and the show is simply indescribable at the Carrizo Plain National Monument. The Valley floor has endless expanses of yellows and purples from coreopsis, tidy tips and U.S. Department of the Interior Facebook [Show More](#)

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Rozkvetlá planina Carrizo
Zdroj: Bob Wick/BLM/Wikimedia Commons

Svět čeká více delších období sucha, Česká republika se s tímto problémem potýká již řadu let. Velký americký výzkum ukazuje, kdo může na takových dobách profitovat a komu naopak sucha nejvíc škodí.

Carrizo Plain National Monument, California

THE FUTURE: EVOLVING MANAGEMENT IN A MORE CROWDED WEST AND COMPETING DEMANDS FOR RESOURCES

These images highlight how BLM's implementation of FLPMA over the past 50 years has evolved from striving to accommodate a broad range of uses across the landscape to a realization that a more zoned approach is now necessary. In this example, the top image shows the Salt Wells Geothermal Plant, a very-small-footprint example of the renewable energy developments that are expanding over large areas of BLM-managed lands. In the background are the dunes of the Sand Mountain Off Highway Vehicle Area, which receives intensive motorized recreation use, also shown in a closer view in the right bottom image. In the far background is the 160,000-acre Numunaa Nobe National Conservation Area, a landscape of rugged peaks and cultural resources that are sacred to the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe. The center image shows petroglyphs in the southern part of Numunaa Nobe.

An example of this zoning and trade-offs is the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (PL 117-263). This large effort was spearheaded by the Department of Defense to allow for transfer of 500,000 acres of BLM lands as an addition to the Fallon Naval Training Center for military exercise-area expansion. Negotiations with constituent groups, BLM, Tribes, and state and local governments led to numerous trade-offs, such as the designation of 500,000 acres of BLM wilderness and new national conservation areas, including Numunaa Nobe. As demands for finite public lands grow, their management will likely continue to evolve with more specific resource uses and development in some areas, and additional conservation protections in others.

Bob Wick retired as a BLM headquarters wilderness specialist (and unofficial photographer) in 2021. He currently works as a free-lance conservation photographer and lives with his partner, Noah, near Sacramento, California. bob_wick@hotmail.com



CONSERVATION
LANDS
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25TH ANNIVERSARY
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS



TOP TO BOTTOM Geothermal Plant, Numunaa Nobe National Conservation Area, Sand Mountain OHV Area, Nevada