

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO INSPIRE A NATIONAL MONUMENT

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ABSTRACT

Local organizations in Las Cruces and surrounding Doña Ana County, New Mexico, have nurtured and promoted the positive economic benefits of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument (OMDP) as a way to actively foster a broader cross-societal appreciation for and stewardship of National Conservation Lands. Since the designation of OMDP in 2014, this region has served as a national example of collaborations between conservation groups, local businesses and governments, non-profit organizations, and tourism agencies. These partnerships serve multiple purposes of education, conservation, tourism, and outreach. Economic studies regarding OMDP's designation conducted in 2013 and again in 2023 (BBC Research & Consulting 2013, 2023) illustrated the potential and actual positive economic impacts, respectively, to the area around OMDP. The result of "thoughtful stewardship" by local businesses, coordinated marketing, creative events like "Monuments to Main Street" month, educational hikes with under-served communities, and public relation campaigns in different parts of the country increased community appreciation and non-local visitation and spending. The resulting sense of community ownership increased involvement with the Bureau of Land Management and in turn strengthened partnerships and conversations about the stewardship of our public lands.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, several conservation and community organizations, along with elected leaders, began efforts that led to designation of a national monument for nearly 500,000 acres of public land around the city of Las Cruces in southern New Mexico. The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument (OMDP), located primarily in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, and established in 2014 through President Obama's use of the Antiquities Act, serves as an example of community collaboration and investment that has not only elevated this region's profile nationally but also brought residents together in pursuing protection, conservation, and education.

More than 10 years of community engagement and advocacy led to the designation of the monument on May 21, 2014. The success of the monument campaign was rooted in a broad base of support, including Tribal Nations (Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Mescalero Apache Tribe, and Fort Sill Apache Tribe) and local governments (Doña Ana County, Las Cruces, the city of El Paso, Texas, and the town of Mesilla, New Mexico), as well sportspeople, veterans, business owners and associations, faith leaders, ranchers, archaeologists, historians, and civic and conservation

organizations. In the lead-up to the monument's designation, a community-driven organization, Friends of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, was formed to educate about

Las Cruces Green Chamber of Commerce board members (from left) Kate Theisen and Leah Messina join LCGCC CEO/President Carrie Hamblen in handing out signs and posters to attendees of the OMDP designation celebration in Las Cruces on May 23, 2014. HOWARD GROSS



and advocate for the designation, foster ties between local communities and the monument, and serve as a partner organization to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

My organization, the Las Cruces Green Chamber of Commerce (LCGCC), played an important role in organizing local businesses and educating decision-makers and the public about the economic benefits that a national monument designation could provide to the local economy. Since the monument’s designation in 2014, LCGCC has led the business community in embracing and demonstrating “thoughtful stewardship.” This concept is rooted in an understanding that benefitting from the monument designation comes with a responsibility to promote its stewardship through activities such as educating visitors and residents and supporting the agencies and conservation groups that work to protect it. Through this understanding, the

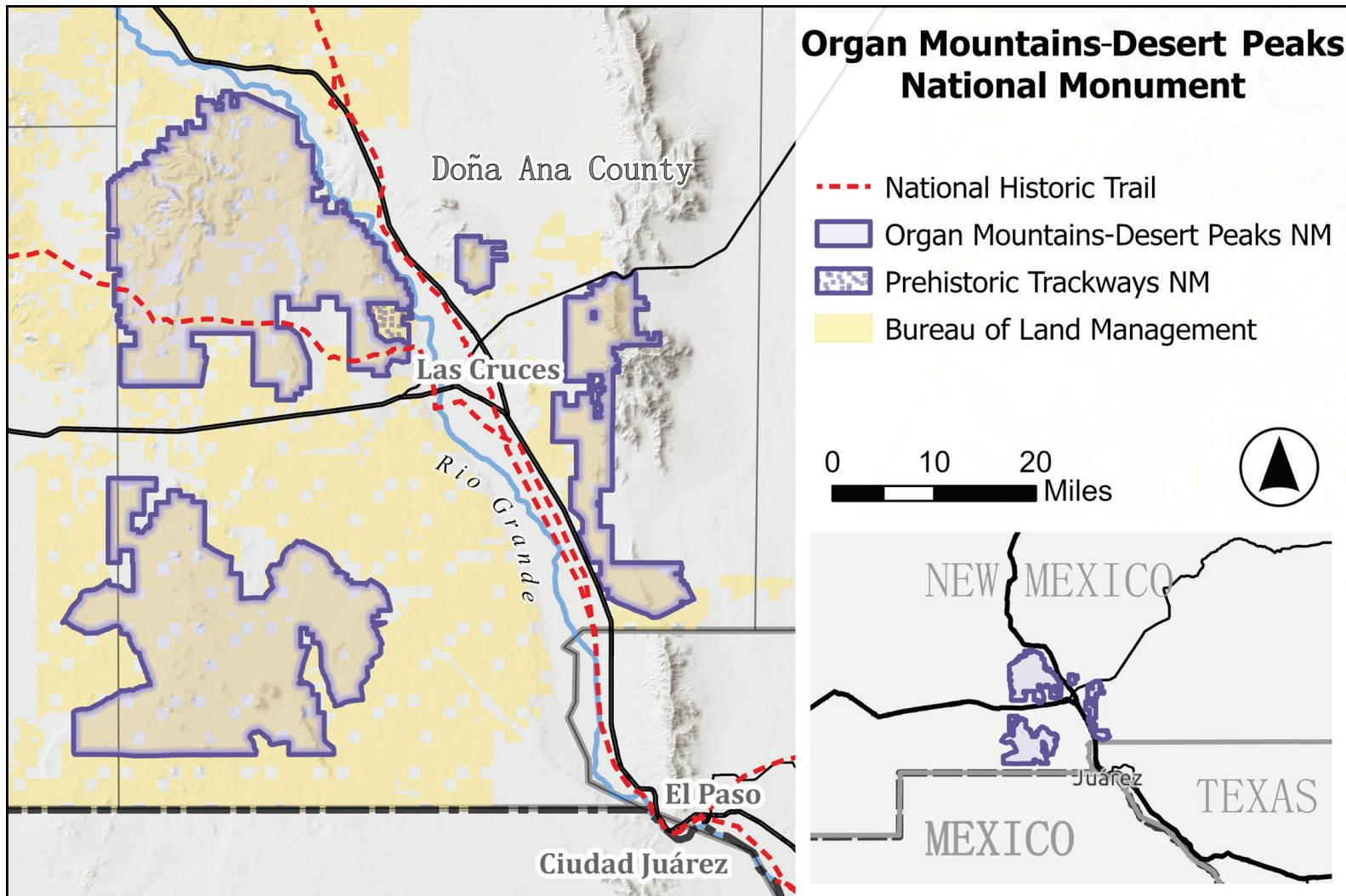
surrounding community feels a sense of ownership and an inherent dedication to protecting the monument.

BUILDING THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR MONUMENT DESIGNATION

The LCGCC was formed in 2010 to advocate for locally owned businesses, focus on creating sustainable communities, and protect our air, land, and water.

The only chamber of three in Las Cruces to advocate for the designation, LCGCC enabled Las Cruces businesses to have their voices heard locally and nationally in support of the monument’s establishment. We encouraged and supported members of Congress from New Mexico as they advocated in Washington for OMDP. We built a list of more than 300 businesses requesting the designation. We also worked with business supporters and other monument advocates to publish opinion pieces and letters to the editor in news outlets, hold several earned media events, place paid ads,

Map of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument.





The OMDP logo has been used in marketing materials, social media promotions, on websites, and the OMDP Girl Scout Patch. COURTESY OF LAS CRUCES GREEN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

run a social media campaign, and participate in fly-ins to Washington, DC, to connect local business owners with our nation's political leaders. LCGCC also led in designing a logo to use to advocate for the monument's establishment.

A foundational part of these efforts was to demonstrate the potential economic impacts that a national monument designation could have on the local economy. In 2013, LCGCC commissioned an independent economic study (BBC Research and Consulting 2013) that concluded a monument designation would result in \$7.4 million in new annual economic activity supporting approximately 84 jobs and generating more than \$500,000 in state and local tax revenues. The report was released in August of 2013 during a business roundtable event and shared with local, state, and federal decision-makers. The report's findings were widely and repeatedly publicized leading up to and surrounding the designation of OMDP nine months later.

NURTURING ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND PROMOTING PUBLIC APPRECIATION

Following the monument's designation, LCGCC and local businesses took several actions based on the principle that in order to accrue the many benefits of the monument more quickly, we should develop a plan to promote it as the regional and national treasure that it is. We did this in a number of ways.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS TO THE MONUMENT

Marketing Toolkit

Teaching local businesses how to incorporate more informed discussions with their customers resulted in LCGCC's Monument Marketing Toolkit, which provided participating businesses with OMDP stickers and posters, talking points, and brochures that illustrate where visitors (and their customers) can go hiking and exploring. The brochures were created in partnership with BLM to feature areas that were easily accessible but also respectful of the areas the bureau wasn't yet comfortable with large groups of people exploring due to staffing and resource problems. Local businesses also



The OMDP Marketing Toolkit, created by the Las Cruces Green Chamber of Commerce, is provided to help local businesses who want to promote visitation to OMDP and the surrounding area in a consistent manner. The toolkit contains OMDP brochures, stickers, magnets, and posters, economic impact data, and bullet points for businesses to use when promoting OMDP along with their products and services. CARRIE HAMBLÉN

could place their logo on the brochures to demonstrate their support of the monument. This toolkit has been shared as a model all over the country as communities and local chambers of commerce see new ways to engage businesses in the public lands conversation.

LCGCC also encouraged locally owned businesses to incorporate Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks in their products, services, marketing, and promotions. These businesses included local media companies, real estate firms, outdoor recreation businesses, restaurants, bars, lodging establishments, and even an apparel company. LCGCC provided free consultations to our members to brainstorm ideas and build marketing plans.

Businesses created OMDP-themed products such as bread pudding, coffee blends, cupcakes, a Monumental Wine series, cocktails and other beverages, other menu items, art, and a line of apparel. Numerous businesses incorporated Organ Mountains or Desert Peaks into their names.

In the aftermath of its designation, OMDP began permeating into Las Cruces' identity and good fortune. Local realtors began regularly including the proximity of their listings to the monument, using the easy access to hiking and exploring plus the vistas as selling points. Media companies more often used the Organ Mountains as a backdrop or feature in many of their promotional projects. Publications such as *Lonely Planet*, *Sunset Magazine*, and the *Los Angeles Times* featured the national monument and Las Cruces as extraordinary

travel destinations. Organizations related to natural and cultural resource stewardship chose Las Cruces as a location for their conferences.

First Anniversary Celebration

Given the extensive work done by so many groups, the collaborations that were created, and the success of the monument designation, a series of one-year anniversary events was planned to celebrate the success and continue impactful conversations about OMDP.

In early 2015, there were regular planning meetings with conservationists, local BLM District Office staff, New Mexico's US senators' staff, and LCGCC to discuss how to build support for and address the needs of the new monument. This included planning for a first anniversary celebration. The result was nine days of coordinated anniversary events, including hikes and guided tours, local business mixers and other social events, a big game cookout, an interfaith service, a proclamation from the Las Cruces City Council, guest lectures, and a celebration of the monument between innings at the local minor league baseball team's game.

In addition, LCGCC worked with Girl Scouts of the Desert Southwest staff to create and launch an OMDP National Monument merit badge, which was unveiled at the first anniversary's keynote celebration. This patch encouraged Girl Scouts to "discover, connect, and take action" in their efforts to earn the coveted achievement. This collaboration between LCGCC and the Girl Scouts has served as an example of creating similar patches elsewhere, including White Sands National Park and California Desert National Monument.

The first anniversary was supported by a robust communications plan that included news releases, op-eds, videos, paid ads, a website, social media, and more.

Monuments to Main Street

Following the euphoria of the monument designation and success of the first anniversary celebration, city of Las Cruces tourism staff and OMDP supporters began to work on other ways to elevate the monument's visibility as an attraction. In September 2016, the inaugural Monuments to Main Street festival was created, capitalizing on mild seasonal weather, linking with existing festivals, and providing new opportunities to encourage both residents and visitors to connect with OMDP as well as Prehistoric Trackways National Monument and White Sands National Monument (now National Park), both in southern New Mexico. The first Monuments to

Main Street festival included yoga in the monument, several hikes and cookouts, aerial tours over the historic World War II bombing sites, a stagecoach ride, a mariachi concert with the iconic Organ Mountains as the backdrop, and much more. Monuments to Main Street was held from 2016–2023, with a break during the pandemic. Visit Las Cruces, the city's convention and visitors bureau, decided to discontinue the event in 2024 as it felt the festival had served its purpose of connecting OMDP with Las Cruces's downtown revitalization. The bureau, along with other businesses and organizations, continues its marketing of OMDP and outdoor recreation through other avenues.

The Monumental Loop

Concurrent with the growth nationwide of gravel biking and bikepacking, local enthusiasts pioneered the "Monument Loop," a 250-mile bikepacking route that

Created by the Girl Scouts of the Desert Southwest, the first-of-its-kind OMDP Girl Scout Patch created opportunities for troops all over the state to Discover, Connect, and Take Action. To date, more than 200 Girl Scouts have completed the requirements to earn this patch. **CARRIE HAMBLÉN**





▲ As part of the inaugural Monuments to Main Street month, the Mariachis en Los Montañas concert was a huge hit, blending the rich culture of the area with the beauty of the Organ Mountains. **CARRIE HAMBLEN**

▲▲ During Monuments to Main Street month, many activities were planned to highlight the diverse opportunities for recreation and play in in the monument. In this photo, over 30 people participated in the Yoga on the Monument with the majestic Organ Mountains as a backdrop. **CARRIE HAMBLEN**

goes to all four units of OMDP. This route has garnered national attention and focuses on sharing the diverse Chihuahuan Desert landscape and the area's intriguing historic sites. The route has been improved and refined as it has grown in popularity, including efforts to tie the route better to the area's small towns and hospitality destinations. Every October, conservationists and bikepackers organize the "Dangerbird" ride, which attracts people from all over the country to ride the Monumental Loop and contribute to southern New Mexico's growing outdoor recreation economy.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS FROM SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES

Business Profiles

Two of the many local businesses that have become very active in the protection and promotion of OMDP include the tour company Southwest Expeditions and the apparel company Organ Mountain Outfitters (OMO).

Southwest Expeditions owner David Crider has been a tremendous advocate for the monument both locally and nationally, emphasizing the economic importance and community benefits of outdoor recreation on public lands. His business offers customized private tours that include stargazing, hiking, aerial sightseeing, and touring historic and cultural sites, all the while emphasizing the importance of sustainable and respectful visitation. Southwest Expeditions has been a great example of "thoughtful stewardship" from local businesses.

Organ Mountain Outfitters owner and founder Chris Lang was so inspired by the 2013 economic roundtable showing the potential a monument would hold for the community that he created an apparel company that highlights the most prominent mountain range in the monument: the Organ Mountains. OMO's success with shirts, hoodies, and hats featuring its iconic Organ Mountains Outfitters logo has served as walking billboards for the monument and region across the nation and around the world.

Like many locally owned businesses, OMO also gives back to the community. In the early years of its operations, a portion of every sale went to purchase lunches for kids in the school system participating in the reduced-price lunch program. Since free breakfasts and lunches are now provided in every local school, OMO now partners with local food pantries to provide meals to families in need. OMO also works with local non-profit organizations such as the Friends of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks to create limited-edition apparel from which a portion of sales goes back to the organization.

Southwest Expeditions and OMO are two of many local business owners who value OMDP and recognize how it contributes to their livelihoods and to the community. LCGCC profiles many of these businesses on our website to explain how businesses and our community benefit from protected public lands.

Local businesses invest in their respective communities by donating to local causes, sponsoring events and sports teams, and giving back in whatever way they can. In times of increased internet sales and big chain stores, locally owned businesses are constantly looking at ways to elevate their presence and commitment to bettering their communities. By embracing the monument, local business owners demonstrate their understanding of changing priorities of current and potential customers while also making a statement about the value of outdoor recreation to their business.

Ensuring Continued Collaborations and Engagement

The variety and depth of partnerships created leading up to OMDP's designation and the new ones that followed are a big reason for the continued local and national recognition of Las Cruces as an example of what community support for a national monument can look like. As mentioned earlier, creating a sense of community buy-in and ownership resulted in residents calling OMDP "our monument" rather than attributing ownership to BLM or the local or federal government. This community ownership has led to increased involvement with BLM to strengthen partnerships and conversations about the stewardship of our public lands.

Measuring Economic Success

Ten years after the initial economic report, LCGCC commissioned a second one in 2023 to understand the accrual of economic impacts since OMDP's designation. The results exceeded those projected in the 2013 report and showed that, by 2022, visitation to the monument had more than tripled, from approximately 184,000 to almost 613,000. The report said the result of having more visitors was approximately \$234 million in economic activity over nine years, including \$35 million in 2022 alone. While the 2013 report projected an increase of approximately \$560,000 in yearly state and local tax revenue once visitation doubled, the new report put that number at \$1.1 million annually based on visitation tripling by 2022 (Table 1).

Of note, too, is that traditional uses in the area, such as cattle grazing, continued to be strong contributors to the local economy, accounting for \$3.2 million in direct impacts before and after designation.

	Predicted, 2013	Actual, 2022
Lodging	\$ 5.5 million	\$10.2 million
Restaurant	\$ 4.1 million	\$ 6.2 million
Groceries	\$ 0.5 million	\$ 1.5 million
Gasoline	\$ 0.7 million	\$ 1.5 million
Transport	\$—	\$ 0.2 million
Retail	\$ 1.6 million	\$ 2.0 million
Operations	\$ 0.3 million	\$ 1.2 million
Grazing	\$ 3.2 million	\$ 3.2 million
Direct Impacts	\$15.9 million	\$25.9 million
Secondary Impacts	\$ 7.2 million	\$ 9.1 million
Total Impact	\$23.1 million	\$35.0 million

TABLE 1. Comparison of annual actual and predicted direct and secondary annual economic impacts of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument from operations and non-local visitors. Adapted from Figure 20, BBC Research & Consulting 2023.

These positive numbers were likely boosted by deliberate actions taken by local business organizations in partnership with BLM, local governments, and conservation organizations. Furthermore, the presence of an active friends group working in conjunction with business organizations has been a key ingredient in fostering pride and stewardship participation among local residents. Although the population slightly grew by 6,800 residents, there is no indication that the increase in local residents significantly impacted the 2023 study results.

While establishment of a national monument under the Antiquities Act has a sense of permanence, Congress backed it up with the passage of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act in 2019 (Public Law 116-9, Sec. 1201). The act recognizes the monument’s status, extends Wilderness Act protections to certain parts of it, and provides direction for management of other areas.

Embracing the momentum of communities rallying around public lands, including the Rio Grande Del Norte National Monument in northern New Mexico in 2013, and seeing the success in Las Cruces around OMDP, a statewide movement began to unfold to capitalize on the burgeoning outdoor recreation economy.

Beginning with the creation of the Office of Outdoor Recreation in 2019, signed into law by New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, a concentrated effort was started to develop ways to connect the economic benefits of public lands while providing educational opportunities to promote conservation. Included in that

legislation was the Outdoor Equity Fund which, since its creation, has awarded over \$6.5 million to connect more than 83,000 youth to experience the outdoors, foster stewardship, and develop a respect for our public lands, waters, and cultural heritage. In Las Cruces, groups like the Friends of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks and Nuestra Tierra have drawn on the Outdoor Equity Fund to provide outdoor experiences on the monument to communities of color.

The annual Outdoor Economics Conference, held at locations throughout the state, brings together businesses, community groups, and local municipalities to highlight regional outdoor recreation opportunities while featuring businesses providing services to the industry. First held in 2018 in Las Cruces, the conference has been held in various locations throughout the state, returning to Las Cruces in 2024, thanks in part to the community’s embracing of both public lands protection and outdoor recreation.

SUMMARY

Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks offers an example of how a community can help communicate the value of conservation for its lands and how the designation can have positive impacts on surrounding communities. It is not a one-size-fits-all example, however. Some monuments are designated solely for purposes that would conflict with increased recreational activity, but in southern New Mexico, the stewardship of the community working with BLM strives to strike a balance.

At the heart of this monument effort has always been the engagement of local communities and educating them



One of the BLM's Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument entry signs. HOWARD GROSS

about the importance and benefit of protecting our public lands. For many years, making the case based on conservation of natural and cultural heritage, access to hunting and other forms of outdoor recreation, and significance to Indigenous communities was very effective and important. Emphasizing the economic impacts also has become very important for engaging with the community and local elected officials: providing jobs and other revenue has given decision-makers additional reasons to act. Community discussions about economic impacts were part of a larger frame of overall economic vitality that included quality of life, outdoor equity, and environmental benefits.

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RELATED WEBSITES

OMDP proclamation: [ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ORGAN MOUNTAINS-DESERT PEAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT](#)

OMDP's first anniversary events: [OMDP Anniversary Week–Local Las Cruces](#)

LCGCC profiles of area businesses supporting the monument: <http://locallascruceres.com/omdpbusinessprofiles>

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CONSERVATION
LANDS
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25TH ANNIVERSARY
NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

OMDP has robustly demonstrated that public lands placed into the National Conservation Lands can provide economic and other important community benefits. With these economic benefits comes the responsibility to be active stewards of our public lands. A coordinated plan with relevant partners, along with deliberate action, helped shape what those benefits would look like and hastened the pace at which they materialized.

In Las Cruces, we have seen our local community, including businesses, chambers of commerce, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and the BLM working together to be impactful, active partners in the stewardship of National Conservation Lands. Each partner understands their purpose and audience. The business community can and does do its part through educating visitors, marketing our public lands in a responsible way, and supporting local stewardship organizations and events.

Continuing to nurture strong partnerships between BLM and community groups can foster economic benefits and local engagement in public lands stewardship while demonstrating the multi-faceted importance of permanent protection and conservation for generations to come.