

# MANY HANDS MAKE FOR IMPROVED STEWARDSHIP

Jocelyn Torres, compiler

Since its establishment in 2000, the National Conservation Lands system has intended to represent a model in which landscape-scale conservation is achieved through shared stewardship. Among federal agencies, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is well-suited to work in concert with those who understand the importance of conserving America's natural and cultural heritage, given the vastness and geographical range of the public land it manages. BLM has a long history of working closely with partners and communities to pursue a shared vision for public lands. BLM has been fortunate to leverage the efforts of many partnerships and friends groups to fulfill the system's conservation mission. Funding and staffing gaps at the agency are often filled by national and local community partners who organize and lead stewardship projects, fundraise for restoration projects, and provide countless unpaid hours to support the agency in its mission. This article highlights the importance partnerships have brought to the National Conservation Lands system through a series of vignettes from partners, like the Conservation Lands Foundation and our 80-plus network of local organizations called the Friends Grassroots Network, who work with each of the system's programs. The vignettes honor a fundamental organizing principle the Conservation Lands Foundation's founders held: that meaningful stewardship and enduring protections within National Conservation Lands can only be achieved when there is broad local support for sound conservation decisions.



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## STEPPING FORWARD TOGETHER FOR NATIONAL TRAILS

**Courtney Lyons-Garcia, executive director, Partnership for the National Trails System**

Since 1992, the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) has been an active partner with BLM in protecting and promoting these trail corridors, a component of the National Conservation Lands. PNTS brings together trail organizations, government partners, and trail stewards who work to advance the National Trails System. We support these trails through advocacy, promotion, training, and partnership.

Through advocacy, PNTS has helped bring federal funding to national trails managed by BLM and the US Forest Service and ensure Land and Water Conservation Funds and Legacy Restoration Funds are provided to these trails. PNTS has also advocated for steady state funding and increased federal funding for the National Trails System and has successfully obtained a line item for national trails within BLM's budget.

BLM administers, manages, and protects 19 of the 32 national scenic and historic trails in the National Trails System, covering more than 6,000 miles in 15 states, as part of its system of National Conservation Lands.

In January 2022, working in collaboration with BLM, Native Land Digital (NLD), and Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps, PNTS launched the Native Lands, National Trails (NLNT) project to provide space for Indigenous voices. Indigenous Nations, communities, and organizations were invited into the conversation to help steward public lands, provide Indigenous ways of knowing, and tell the histories/stories that have been excluded previously. NLNT continues to be collaborative and does not aim to define Indigenous communities, but instead



provides an inclusive mapping and resource platform that includes all Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, and federally recognized and non-recognized Tribes.

NLNT consists of an interactive GIS map and resource kit that serves as a cultural awareness tool showing the intersection of and relationship between Indigenous lands and the National Trail System “in a manner that respects Tribal sovereignty and achieves mutually beneficial outcomes for Tribal and Indigenous communities.” The interactive GIS map is hosted through the software provider ESRI on the PNTS website to make it free and accessible to the public, federal agencies, trail organizations, Tribal Nations, and Indigenous communities.

The map overlays an Indigenous Territories layer from NLD onto the National Trail System map and showcases

the Indigenous communities that have inhabited these lands over time. The NLD data are a work in progress that relies on contributions from the community to create inclusive and accurate information.

This program has been a resounding success and won a Project Excellence Award from the Society of Recreation Professionals, and has received coverage in such publications as *Conde Nast Traveler*. PNTS will continue to work with our partners at BLM to protect and promote the national trails through creativity, inclusion, and persistence. We will be working over the next two years on large landscape protection, including hosting a National Trails Lands Summit in fall 2025.

More information on PNTS and its initiatives can be found at [pnts.org](https://pnts.org).



### EXPERTISE AND WISDOM, CRITICAL TO THE FUTURE OF AMERICA'S PROTECTED RIVERS

**Risa Shimoda, executive director, River Management Society**

The National Conservation Lands system was established to “conserve, protect, and restore” America’s nationally significant landscapes, including national wild and scenic rivers flowing through BLM-managed lands. Since the system’s establishment in 2000, the number of BLM-managed wild and scenic rivers has grown by over 100%.



The River Management Society (RMS), whose mission is “to support professionals who study, protect and manage North America’s rivers,” conducts training workshops and information-sharing events that

welcome all who work on wild and scenic rivers as well as other rivers throughout North America. Our founders were members of the Interagency Whitewater Committee (established 1972), which included BLM’s early river rangers.

Between 2002 and 2020, newly created BLM-managed wild and scenic rivers included four in California, 16 in Idaho, and 12 in Utah, and 48 segments spread across nine newly designated wild and scenic rivers and two pre-existing designations in Oregon, for a total of approximately 640 river miles.

The following RMS programs illustrate our unique ability to support BLM wild and scenic river staff and partner communities:

- The River Training Center was inspired by the visionary thinking of members of the Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council (ca. 2010). RMS began offering wild and scenic river training sessions in 2011. Today, we offer a uniquely generous and growing suite of online and in-person workshops for wild and scenic river managers, partners, and the public, to encourage their understanding and confidence as stewards. Our community of river conservationists includes rangers and planners, faculty and students, environmental and social scientists, Tribal representatives, and rafting and angling outfitters. Programs posted online at the River Training Channel number in the hundreds.
- The National Rivers Project, initiated in 2014, is a geospatial resource visitors can use to easily locate wild and scenic rivers managed by BLM in the context of other nearby rivers.
- The River Studies and Leadership Certificate, whose requirements reinforce the multidisciplinary nature of river environments and their management, has been awarded to over 50 students graduating from 14 colleges and universities since its debut in 2015, and many graduates have pursued federal river-related employment.

Congress bestows designation as a wild and scenic river only on those that are free-flowing, have excellent water

quality, and exhibit other “outstandingly remarkable values.” Looking to the next 25 years, the responsibility to protect and enhance these rivers will only become more challenging. In support of the BLM mission to “sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations,” active balancing of interests will call on our collective professional courage. Our commitment to clean energy and sustainable responses to climate-related trends and extreme events will require collaboration with a broad “village” of perspectives. It will also require the proactive cultivation of Indigenous partners whose experience, wisdom, and penchant for considering the future of rivers extend well beyond 25 years.

BLM’s responsibility for stewarding wild and scenic rivers and their watersheds will grow as more are added to the National Conservation Lands system, and so must the accompanying allocation of resources. RMS, with its 700 members and their respective networks, will be standing by to support BLM as it heads downstream. We encourage BLM to practice transparency. We are inspired by the BLM staff who stepped out of the box to initiate our organization, and look to today’s bureau leadership to, similarly, address the boundless opportunities before us to honor, celebrate, and sustain these amazing rivers.

More information on RMS and its initiatives can be found at [river-management.org](http://river-management.org).



### MODELING STEWARDSHIP FOR LANDS IN OUR BACKYARDS

**Chris Herrman, former executive director, Colorado Canyons Association**

In 2011, Colorado Canyons Association evolved from the Friends of McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area and expanded its mission to include Gunnison Gorge and Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Areas. With support from the Conservation Lands Foundation, Colorado Canyons Association hired our first executive director and began building what is today an organization with five full-time staff members, an AmeriCorps member, and three seasonal river educators.

The three national conservation areas served by the Colorado Canyons Association are the only ones in Colorado, and all are located within a 60-mile radius of the association’s offices in Grand Junction. Our mission is to foster community stewardship, education, and awareness of these magnificent landscapes that are part of BLM’s National Conservation Lands.

Our three largest communities, Grand Junction, Montrose, and Delta, are surrounded by the national conservation areas, making them uniquely important to our quality of life and local economy. Colorado Canyons Association works to ensure that they remain an asset for current and future generations. From hiking and all-terrain vehicle trails to world-class trout fishing and mountain biking, the diversity of recreational opportunities is remarkable. These resources attract visitors from around the world and help local employers attract top talent to their businesses.

The foresight of the Colorado Canyons Association’s leaders 15 to 25 years ago led to the designation of these national conservation areas, and we keep the vision for their future in the public eye. Working with three area school districts and numerous non-profit organizations, we provide experiential education to over 1,500 students each year, helping to develop the next generation of caretakers for these cherished places. Many of the students, with their passion for the natural world sparked by an experience with our organization, have gone on to pursue science degrees or careers with natural resource management agencies.

Our organization coordinates the work of hundreds of volunteers who donate thousands of hours annually to help BLM steward the national conservation areas, and we work with many other user groups to amplify their efforts as well. From river and highway clean-ups to native plant restoration and wildlife habitat enhancement, our volunteers answer the call when a project is identified.

Our lectures, trailhead outreach, and kiosk posters help local users of the areas and visitors alike appreciate the natural ecosystems and how to best care for the land, wildlife, and cultural resources, with Leave No Trace messaging central to our programs. Our webpage and much of our public information is available in both Spanish and English to help reach more members of our community. Junior Ranger backpacks, complete with maps and activity guides, are available for checkout from local libraries to encourage families to experience their backyard conservation areas.



Colorado Canyons Association has been recognized for our efforts with numerous awards by BLM, the Conservation Lands Foundation, and the Public Lands Foundation. Local service clubs and foundations generously support our work, along with hundreds of individual donors who value our impact. Our board and

staff are passionate about our mission and partnerships, and we are happy to give back to the landscapes that provide so much to our communities.

More information on Colorado Canyons Association and its initiatives can be found at [coloradocanyonsassociation.org](https://coloradocanyonsassociation.org).



### AN UNTRAMMELED COLLABORATION

**Heather MacSlarrow, executive director, Society of Wilderness Stewardship**

The Society for Wilderness Stewardship (SWS) is a leading national organization dedicated to developing and implementing the gold standard of wilderness management across the United States. For the past 20 years, our team of experts has provided the training, tools, and capacity needed to effectively support natural resource managers to ensure the long-term health of our nation's wildlands. To achieve this, SWS:

- Trains a highly skilled professional workforce providing in-depth knowledge on wilderness and natural resource stewardship and management paired with high-level project management skills;
- Partners with land managers across the nation to ideate, facilitate, grow, and actualize the gold standard of wilderness and natural resource management;
- Works collaboratively and flexibly with partners to develop thorough and high-quality processes and products;
- Creatively solves problems and catalyzes innovative tools to drive solutions;
- Provides needed capacity to advance land management objectives; and
- Codifies work into new standards and practices for continued success.

Through all of these components, SWS aims to deliver measurable results that support the management of our nation's wildlands to ensure they are maintained for generations to come.

Our partnership with BLM's National Conservation Lands is an example. Begun in the early 2010s to deliver on-the-ground training to field wilderness staff in the California Desert District, it has expanded exponentially in the past three years. Through a shared position at the BLM Headquarters level, SWS and BLM worked together to update the BLM Wilderness Character Monitoring (WCM) guide, *Measuring Attributes of Wilderness Character: BLM Implementation Guide 3.0*. This

achievement allows BLM to prioritize future actions by better understanding how its decisions impact wilderness character. It also sparked a revival of the agency's WCM work, major milestones of which were realized in 2024, a celebratory time for the wilderness community, as it commemorated the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act.

In 2024 alone, SWS completed WCM baseline reports for 30 wilderness areas across California, Colorado, and Oregon. Our first baseline concluded was for the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness, a remarkable landscape inside the Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last year. Also in Colorado, SWS completed five-year WCM trend updates for all five of the state's wilderness areas.

This year (2025), the California Desert Protection Act celebrates its 30th anniversary. In true commemorative fashion, SWS completed baseline reports for 23 spectacular areas covered by the act, which collectively boast beautiful sand dunes, stunning peaks, and crucial desert tortoise habitat.

SWS continues to partner with BLM on furthering the professional practice of wilderness management, and monitoring and assessing lands with wilderness characteristics (LWCs) and wilderness study areas (WSAs). This work includes everything from boots-on-the-ground research, to developing professional trainings and education, to high-level technical writing, GIS support, and planning. We look forward to progressing our partnership with BLM and achieving more milestones for wilderness together.

More information on SWS and its initiatives can be found at [wildernessstewardship.org](https://wildernessstewardship.org).



## FOUNDATION SEEKS TO CULTIVATE SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC LANDS

### I Ling Thompson, chief executive officer, Foundation for America's Public Lands

The Foundation for America's Public Lands was established by Congress in 2017 to foster strategic partnerships and generate private support for the public lands and waters that BLM manages. As the agency's official charitable partner, the foundation works hand-in-hand with local communities, funders, industry groups, and other parts of the private sector to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our public lands and waters—restoration, access, and awareness—to ensure these unique and hard-working places are healthy and sustainable for generations to come.

America's public lands and waters, specifically our National Conservation Lands, are where we work, play, and come together. These special places are more than destinations on a map or scenic backdrops—they have something to offer everyone. Our public lands are some of the hardest-working lands and waters in the country, providing essential services to the American people, including food and fiber, clean drinking water, recreational and cultural opportunities, habitat for fish and wildlife, and forage and timber. These lands and waters are also powerful economic drivers, fueling job growth and balancing multiple uses that create opportunities in rural communities.

BLM has a vital responsibility to manage public lands and waters for multiple uses, while conserving and safeguarding the natural, historical, and cultural resources that make up our National Conservation Lands. It is responsible for the largest amount of public land of any federal agency—approximately one in every 10 acres of land in the US across 30 states—as well as 81 wild and scenic rivers. In 2023, more than 82 million people visited BLM-managed public lands—a number that grows each year. BLM's multiple-use, sustained-yield mission requires balancing a variety of activities, such as energy development, livestock grazing, recreation, and timber harvesting, while ensuring that the health and sustainability of our public lands and waters are maintained now and into the future. Despite this broad mandate, BLM has limited resources to carry out its important mission. Other federal agencies have benefitted from having a foundation partner for decades, and BLM has not had the same support—until now.

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This year the foundation solidified its programmatic focus areas, adding capacity and resources in support of BLM and its partners and bringing new innovations to the table in service of:

1. Recreation. We improve outdoor recreation experiences by supporting the development of the recreation economy in rural communities and advocating for long-term, sustainable funding for recreation on BLM-managed lands and waters.
2. Restoration and stewardship. We support the restoration and shared stewardship of public lands and waters; in particular, those facing impacts of severe drought or fire or both.
3. Wild horses and burros. We pilot new approaches to wild horse and burro management, including adoption education, trainer assistance, and on-range management.

The foundation also launched a new public awareness campaign, Lands to Love, to help shine a spotlight on the value, diversity, and opportunities for adventure within America's public lands and waters—and to recognize their caretakers at BLM. Storytelling is central to the campaign and the foundation is working closely with BLM and its many partners to uncover the unique history, culture, and experiences associated with the National Conservation Lands that are not known by the greater public.

Another priority for the foundation is to effectively move dollars out the door to help advance existing projects or jump-start new ones. In 2024, the foundation awarded nearly \$2.5 million to partners working alongside BLM to address drought in Colorado and Arizona. We also deployed \$600,000 in funding to support education, restoration, and access-related initiatives at BLM sites in New Mexico and Idaho.

More information on the foundation and its initiatives can be found at [americaslands.org](http://americaslands.org).

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