

Land, Water and People

Progress Along the Rio Grande

By Jeremiah Martinez

Many people have visited, rafted, and fished the upper Rio Grande, but only a handful of people visit the 33-mile stretch of the Rio Grande below the Alamosa Wildlife Refuge where it wends its way through private and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. This section of the Rio Grande flows by sparsely vegetated hills before eventually dropping into a sheer-walled gorge.

For many years this stretch of river has been grazed right up to the river's bank. Only sparse pockets of riparian vegetation, such as cottonwoods and willows, could be found. Then, in the late 1990s, the BLM decided it was time to give this section of the Rio Grande a makeover. Working with the public, the BLM developed a new set of management goals for the area which include:

1. Improved riparian habitat along the corridor.
2. Protection of scenic resources.
3. Protection of archeological resources.
4. Recreation and facility development – manage facilities to meet the needs of the landscape.
5. Monitor public access to protect resources.
6. Focus on interpretation and public education.

BLM has achieved many of these goals in a very short time. The riparian habitat has quickly responded to protective fencing and has already reached levels that no person living today has seen. Stands of willows have spread out along the river and in some areas cottonwoods have taken hold and are already 15-20 feet tall.

Archeological and historic sites have been identified, documented, stabilized and interpreted in response to increased visitation. Facilities have been constructed or remodeled to blend in with the natural landscape at the Lobatos Bridge and lower gorge sites. In some areas, facilities have been eliminated to meet resource needs.

The BLM shares responsibility for stewardship of this area with residents, communities, visitors and providers of commercial recreation services. In 2006, these collaborative efforts received a boost with the signing of the Rio Grande Natural Area Act. The purpose of the Act perfectly complements what the BLM had already embarked to do: "... conserve, restore, and protect the natural, historic, cultural, scientific, scenic, wildlife, and recreational resources of the Natural Area."

Although there are a few "hotspots" that receive moderate visitation, there are many opportunities to find solitude. To learn more about the Rio Grande Natural Area or to pick up maps of the area, stop by the La Jara Field Office located next to U.S. Highway 285 south of La Jara.

Jeremiah Martinez is the new Recreational Specialist at the La Jara Field Office/Conejos Peak Ranger District (and was previously the Natural Resource Specialist at the La Jara Field

Office/Conejos Peak Ranger District and performed extensive work on the Rio Grande Corridor..