
Rio Grande National Forest – Assessment 13 Cultural Resources – Executive Summary



Introduction

This document is a brief summary of the first step in the forest planning process; our assessment, and public input we solicited; for cultural resources. Many of the elements we describe in this summary represent centuries of tradition and cultural continuity up to the present day. Because of this, there are activities and resources that cross over to socio-economics and multiple use management (Assessments 6, 7 and 8) as we move from the past to the present.

The Rio Grande National Forest plan area has been under the management of the USDA Forest Service since 1908, a little over 100 years. American Indians, Hispanic and Euro-American communities continue to use the plan area for economic, social, recreational and religious purposes.

The plan area contains cultural resources that demonstrate human occupation and use for at least the last 12,000 years. The occupation and use of the plan area by American Indians with Numic (Ute), Athabascan (Navajo and Apache) and Ancestral Puebloan ethnic affiliation and groups ancestral to these ethnic affiliations has occurred over this entire time span.

Occupation and use of the Rio Grande National Forest plan area by Euroamericans has occurred over approximately the past 300 years. There are two Euroamerican cultural groups that have specific histories in the area. From 1536 to 1848, most of the western United States, including a majority of the land that was later to become Colorado, was under the rule of Spain. The Rio Grande National Forest was originally part of the Conejos Land Grant granted to 40 local families. Unlike other portions of northern Mexico annexed by the United States (Texas, California, and Arizona), southern Colorado did not see as large an influx of Anglo settlers into the territory, and the Hispanic population remained a majority.

What We Asked

From February 2015 through July 2015, we engaged the public extensively on cultural and historic uses of the forest. Peak Facilitation and the National Forest Foundation facilitated one public meeting on March 9, 2015 in Alamosa, CO. Approximately 50 members of the public attended this meeting. In addition, the National Forest Foundation provided a web-based tool that allowed us to ask the same set of questions to those who could not be at the meetings.

We also participated in meetings with diverse organizations focused on traditional and historic uses, including Saguache County Sustainable Environment and Economic Development, Conejos County Clean Water, Rio Grande Roundtable, San Luis Valley Cattlemen's Association, San Luis Valley County Commissioners Association, Hinsdale County, Mineral County, and The Crestone Spiritual Alliance. These meetings combined included over 150 attendees.

We asked the same questions at meetings and on-line to give us consistent input for the assessment process, covering topics such as important cultural and historic resources, conditions of those resources, and traditional uses of the forest.

- What cultural or historic resources or uses are important in and around the Rio Grande National Forest?
- What conditions and trends are influencing the condition of, or the demand for, cultural and historic resources (either positively or negatively)?
- What opportunities are there to foster a greater connection between people and cultural and historic resources and landscapes in and around the Rio Grande National Forest?

- How are the use and enjoyment of cultural and historic resources or uses contributing to social, economic, or ecological sustainability?
- How do you use the forest?
- What do we see as trends?

What We Heard

There are traditional cultural, prehistoric and historic resources throughout the forest. The importance of the resources and the way they are used depends on the location and the group using them. The forest is used for tree products such as firewood, timber, cottonwood, roots, pitch, and piñon nuts; plant products such as pigments, medicine, oshá, tobacco, yucca, chamiso; additional products such as mushrooms, earthen pigments, plaster, clay, minerals, and material to make tools. Ongoing traditional cultural activities include recreation, fishing, ranching, livestock grazing, irrigation, tourism, hunting, and labor. These activities occur throughout the forest but are often located on traditional use, or historic sites; including traditional recreation areas, spiritual use areas, historic mines, and old fisheries. The value of the land to those with cultural connections is more similar to a home landscape where there is a need for harmony among all resources. People come long distances to go on meditative walks because they have a cultural connection with the landscape.

Ranching and Cattle

Cattle grazing and ranching are important to the community, economy, and cultural heritage. The cattle have a value to the community and stimulate the economy. The cattle operations provide job opportunities but also are important as a cultural heritage. The private land and adjacent forest service land help each other to maintain a heritage important to southwest Colorado (see also the social, cultural and economic resource assessments 6, 7, and 8).

Changes in How the Forest is Used

Technical and social trends are changing the way people use the forest. Technology provides greater access to maps and information, but ignorance or misunderstanding about the resources can lead to disrespect, vandalism or resource degradation. An increasing population; increasing popularity of recreating, artifact collecting, and technology such as drones; and increased grazing; all have the potential to damage traditional cultural, prehistoric and historic resources. The forest service has an opportunity to educate and interpret, in order to increase knowledge of and respect for cultural resources.

Changes in Natural Processes and Land Use

The forest is losing its ecological balance, which has the potential to damage cultural and historic resources. Climate change and drought affect the availability of traditional plants, and of water for wildlife and cattle. The bark beetle epidemic has increased the potential for large catastrophic fires, which would affect traditionally harvested plants and animals, as well as damaging prehistoric and historic structures and artifacts.

Public Education and Learning

The forest service should take this opportunity to foster a deeper connection between the public and cultural and historic resources. The forest should enhance public education, engage more youth, increase outreach efforts, improve the permitting process, decrease staff turnover, reduce negative impacts of connection to the land and resources, and make it easier for people to continue cultural traditions such as harvesting resources. Fort Garland Museum wants to partner with the forest service to host a teaching program.

The Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area Board wants to encourage Hispanic users to participate in the National Visitor Use Monitoring program and also to help the forest reach out to learn more about the different ways the forest is used. The group plans to write a comment letter highlighting the priorities and concerns they want the forest to address in the NEPA process.

Intangible Benefits of the Forest

The forest is valued because of the wildness and quiet. The valley is considered the sacred center of the entire continent. There are petroglyphs and kiva all along the mountains. It should be easier to get permits for spiritual practices.

Where We're Headed

We need to address the gaps identified by the public and in the Cultural and Historic Resources Assessment. The public raised several concerns about the importance of traditional cultural, prehistoric and historic resources and the trends that could damage them or have negative impacts on traditional uses.

We identified issues that put cultural resources at risk. Similar to some concerns mentioned at the public meetings; historic and cultural resources are at risk due to continuing drought, loss of vegetation and soil, cattle grazing at lower elevations, high fuel load, vandalism, illegal collection on public lands, and illegal off-road motorized use. Based on information in the cultural assessment and suggestions from the public we need to revisit how activities on the forest affect cultural resources in the existing Forest Plan. Forest Plan components such as grazing, managing for multiple uses, logging allowances, and grazing are traditional uses and need to consider historic and cultural resources. The plan also needs to recognize special interest areas such as the Old Spanish National Historic Trail. The forest plan should mention the Old Spanish National Historic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan being drafted by the National Park Service and standards and guidelines should follow recommendations from that management plan.