

April 2004

Issue 3



Great Sand Dunes

National Park and Preserve General Management Plan Newsletter

Dear Friends,

As most of you know, we are developing a general management plan and wilderness study for the Great Sand Dunes. Last November we issued the second general management plan newsletter, which asked for your input on the planning foundation and central questions of the plan.

More recently, the planning team and Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council have been reviewing and organizing key information about the Great Sand Dunes system—information about natural and cultural resources, visitor experiences and opportunities, and wilderness characteristics. This information is summarized in a map and table of “Resource Opportunity Areas,” included in this newsletter for your consideration. Our next steps will be to: (1) develop concepts or “themes” for different management alternatives, and (2) consider desired future conditions and management zones for different areas of the park and preserve.

This newsletter also contains several other updates that you might find interesting:

- summary of comments from the second public comment period
- revised and condensed Fundamental Resources and Values statements
- summary of an interagency meeting related to Great Sand Dunes planning
- wilderness review update
- Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council update
- planning steps update

Thank you for taking an interest in the future of the Great Sand Dunes. We encourage you to stay involved in planning for the national park and preserve. You can write to the planning team at the address below, or visit our Web site (<http://planning.nps.gov/plans.cfm>).

Great Sand Dunes General Management Plan Team
c/o Suzy Stutzman
National Park Service – Intermountain Support Office
PO Box 25287
Denver CO 80225

Sincerely,

Steve W. Chaney, Superintendent
Great Sand Dunes National Monument and Preserve



Contents

What We Heard from You	2
Fundamental Resources and Values	4
Resource Opportunity Areas	4
Resource Opportunity Areas Map	5
Resource Opportunity Areas Table	6
Update: Interagency Meeting	12
Update: Advisory Council	12
Planning Steps Update	13
Update: Wilderness Review	14
Update: News from Other Agencies.....	15

What We Heard From You—Summary of Public Comment

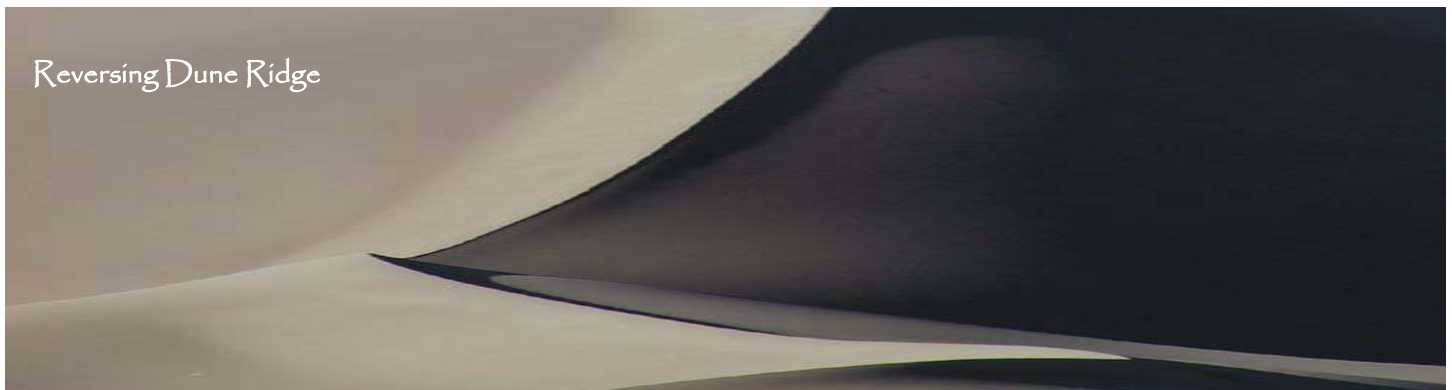
This section summarizes 17 written comments received between June 20, 2003 and January 3, 2004. Most of the comments were in response to general management plan (GMP) Newsletter 2, issued in November 2003. That newsletter presented the “foundation” for planning (Great Sand Dunes purpose, significance, mission, interpretive themes, special park mandates, and fundamental resources and values) and central questions of the GMP. Twelve of the 17 comments were newsletter response forms, four were letters from individuals (Internet Web site submissions or regular letters), and two letters were from agencies or organizations.

Letters from Agencies and Organizations

Colorado Division of Wildlife. A letter from the Colorado Division of Wildlife indicated that the agency would like to be involved in formulation of the general management plan. The agency has much to contribute in the way of historical data, including flight classification compilations, seasonal migration patterns, herd projections, harvest trends, hunter success rates, traditional access points, etc. The letter suggested that a separate meeting involving representatives from each agency would be worthwhile.

Mount Blanca Habitat Partnership Program Committee. (The Mount Blanca Habitat Partnership Program Committee was established in 1998 to help alleviate conflicts between wildlife and livestock on public and private lands). The committee requested that the Advisory Council consider the biological impacts

that over-population of elk can have on the landscape surrounding the Great Sand Dunes. The only efficient and cost-effective method of managing wildlife is hunting. The committee requested that: (1) reasonable access be freely and openly allowed for legal public hunters through the national park portion of the complex onto the Rio Grande National Forest, (2) reasonable access be freely and openly allowed for legal public hunters through the national park portion of the complex into and throughout the national preserve, including Sand Creek, Cold Creek, Medano Creek, Horse Canyon, and Mosca Creek drainages, (3) the Advisory Council acknowledge the significance of hunting and recognize its importance, not only in the biological scheme, but also in terms of being a legal, ethical, and long-standing tradition that is synonymous with local custom and culture.



Summary of Responses to Comment Form Questions (GMP Newsletter 2)

In general, respondents tended to agree with or support the foundation statements (purpose, significance, mission, fundamental resources and values) and central questions of the plan. Several respondents took exception, however, to the fundamental resources and values statement “driving (4x4) in sand.” This statement was intended to mean that driving passenger vehicles in the sand on the Medano Pass four wheel-drive road is a fundamental visitor opportunity. The respondents who disagreed with this statement appeared to be under the impression that the statement meant driving all-terrain vehicles on the dunes. (In fact, driving all-terrain vehicles is not permitted anywhere in the park or preserve.)

After reading over the purpose, significance, and mission statements, do you agree with them? If not, why not? (Three respondents did not answer this question.)

- Yes (3).
- Yes—with special emphasis on exceptional solitude and quiet (significance) and solitude (mission).
- Yes—fully agree, very well thought out.
- Yes—well done.
- Yes—emphasis is correctly placed on unique natural systems.
- Yes—I can appreciate what a task it is to take this on and coordinate with the “Crestonites.”
- Disagree with the wording of the mission statement to some extent. Preservation of the ecosystem should be a priority and opportunities for learning, solitude, and etc., second.

After reading over the fundamental resource and values statements, do you agree with these statements? If not, why not? (Four respondents did not answer this question.)

- Yes (4).
- Yes—very well done.
- Yes—except vehemently against “driving (4x4) in sand” (antithesis to solitude and quiet).
- How can you write “driving 4x4” in sand right under a statement about experiencing quiet, solitude in wilderness environment? I fail to see how driving 4x4s fits the purpose of preserving the dunes or providing educational opportunities, etc.
- Agree with all except driving 4x4 in sand. You are inviting every Neanderthal to come and rearrange the dunes.
- “Driving (4 x 4) in sand” is in conflict with “exceptional solitude and quiet.”

After reading over the central questions of the General Management Plan, do they cover your interests in the plan? (Three respondents did not answer this question.)

- Yes (5).
- Yes—especially statements #3 and #7.
- Yes—except for the driving 4x4 in sand. Also, I have never heard of oil and gas exploration in a national park and would not want it here.
- #2b—maintaining balanced wildlife populations is one of the critical components that must be addressed quickly. If cottonwoods are to survive on Sand Creek, the elk population must be controlled!

Do you have other thoughts or ideas you would like to share with the planning team?

- There should be controlled access to Sand Creek and the north side of the dunes.
- Contains place of emergence (sipapu) for Tewa.
- Don't destroy the charm of the dunes by overuse or neglect.
- I would like inexpensive lodging and food services near the dunes.
- I would like to see access to Liberty and Duncan.
- It is okay to strengthen ties with the American Indian community, but ranching ties are of equal importance. Will the old Gerard Homestead be within the park borders? The private water rights on Medano Creek are of considerable interest. Think of the challenge of constructing those ditches at that time in the history of the area.
- Do not allow 4x4 vehicles here (too big an impact).
- Protecting some of the high country area is important.
- The advisory committee should exist beyond completion of the GMP.
- Use some land below the entrance for parking areas and trails to hike to the dunes.
- A resource center and restrooms are a must.
- Keep the dunes natural.
- My interest and concern relates to multi-modal transportation within the park as well as integration of non-motorized recreation and scenic trails within the park. Many tourists have bicycles and are looking for an opportunity to not only travel safely within the park to its facilities and venues, but also to enjoy a scenic trail (primitive and developed) into the adjacent forest. Currently the park has narrow roads with high traffic that do not encourage bicycle use during the peak summer months. A scenic trail would also be a wonderful asset.
- I would love a road from the north.
- Keep the Sand Creek area of Great Sand Dunes National Park closed to all motorized traffic to protect opportunities for solitude.

Fundamental Resources and Values (Condensed & Revised)

Fundamental resources and values are systems, processes, features, visitor experiences, stories, scenes, etc. that warrant primary consideration during planning and management because they are critical to achieving the park's purpose and maintaining its significance.

Dunes System. The dunes system is complex, fragile, and dynamic due to interactions of sand, wind, streams, groundwater, vegetation, and mountains. Main components of the dunes system must be protected to ensure that the system remains intact.

- dunefield
- sand sheet
- sabkha
- Sand Creek
- Medano Creek and its surge flow
- groundwater aquifers

Natural Diversity. Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve contains remarkable natural biological diversity, largely due to its range of elevation zones and mix of wet and desert habitats. The following key resources help contribute to the dunes' unusual species diversity.

- insects that are endemic to the Great Sand Dunes
- Medano Creek's outstanding water quality and closed system
- unhybridized cottonwoods
- sand sheet wetlands
- balanced and sustainable populations of native wildlife and plants
- tundra

Human Connections. The Great Sand Dunes have served as a prominent visual and cultural marker, drawing people physically and spiritually for thousands of years. Cultural resources and values that are key to maintaining the park's purpose and significance include the following:

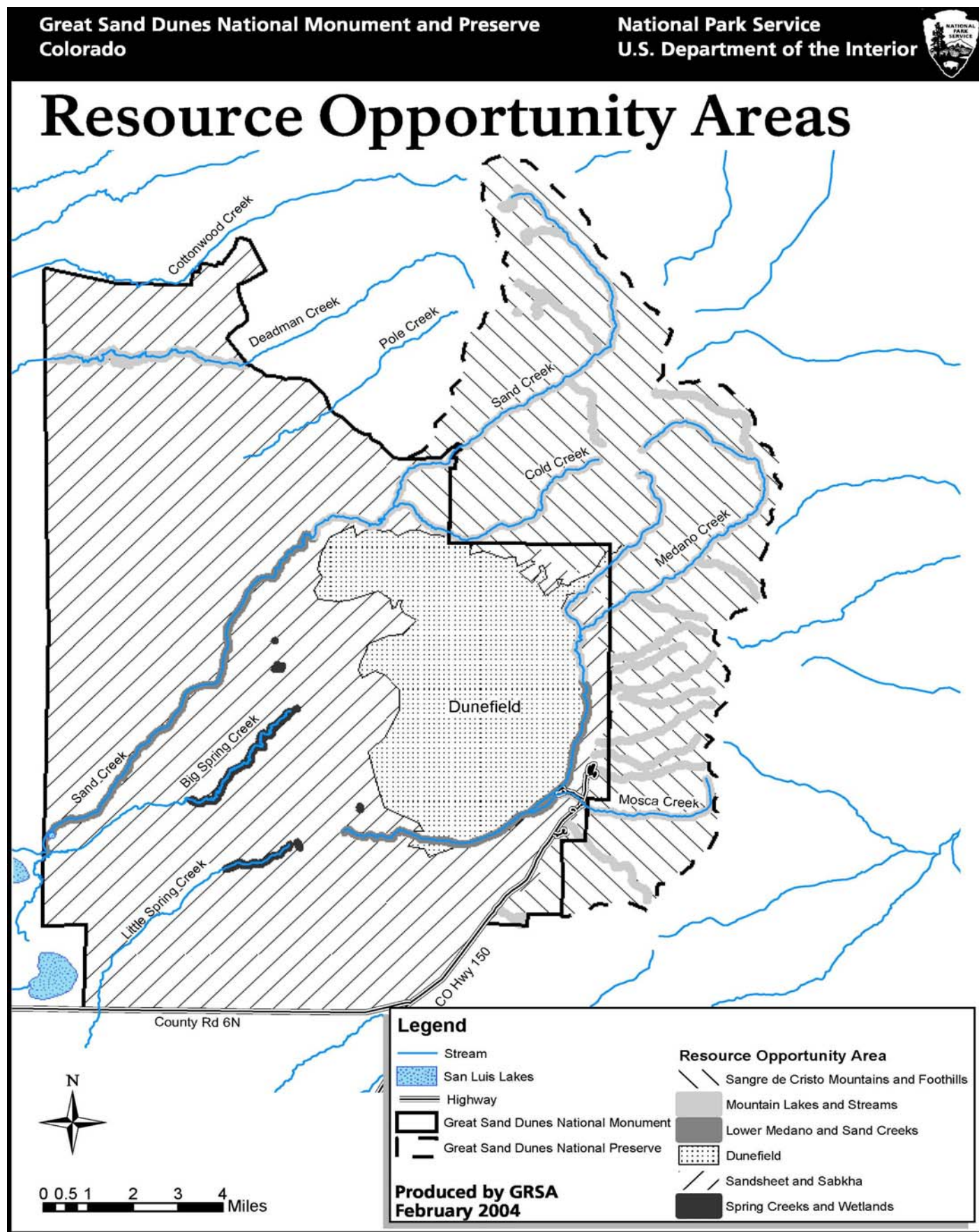
- early archeological sites
- dunes area—important to contemporary American Indian and other people
- scarred ponderosa pines
- contemporary community ties to the dunes

(Continued on page 14)

Resource Opportunity Areas

Differences in resource values and visitor opportunities generally exist within different areas of a park. *Resource opportunity areas* (ROAs) are a way of organizing and describing these differences—especially fundamental resource and values—so they can be considered during management planning. Resource opportunity areas are often documented with a map that shows where in the park they occur, and a table that lists the characteristics or qualities of each ROA.

The resources and values of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve have been organized into the following resource opportunity areas: *Sangre de Cristo Mountains and Foothills; Mountain Lakes and Streams; Lower Medano and Sand Creeks; Dunefield; Sandsheet and Sabkha; Spring Creeks and Wetlands*. The map on page 5 shows where the ROAs occur in the park and preserve. The table below characterizes the different ROAs, focusing primarily on fundamental resources and values because these are a primary consideration in general management planning.



Great Sand Dunes Resource Opportunity Areas

SANGRE DE CRISTO MOUNTAINS AND FOOTHILLS	
Location	Upland portions of mountain drainage basins within the park and preserve.
Dunes System	Mountains and passes affect wind patterns, supply creek water, and are the source of some sand in the dunes.
Natural Diversity	Multiple life zones are tied to elevation zones. High vegetative biodiversity. Medano and Little Medano Creek watersheds have a B3 (high significance) biodiversity rating.
Vegetation	Piñon-juniper woodland, montane forest (Douglas fir, white fir, ponderosa pine, aspen), subalpine forest (Englemann spruce, blue spruce, supalpine fir), krumholz, and alpine tundra plant communities.
Wildlife	Bighorn sheep; deer; carnivores (wolverines, mountain lions, bear); rodents (marmots, pikas).
Water	Snowpack is the source of springtime meltwater runoff in the creeks.
Human Connections	Culturally scarred trees; numerous archeological sites (including wickiups); water diversion; piñon nut and mushroom gathering.
Visitor Opportunities	Experiencing quiet and solitude in a wilderness environment; driving the Medano Pass 4-wheel drive road; seeing wildlife in its natural setting; viewing the dune mass from the mountains; serves as backdrop for the dunes. Learning/education opportunities: dunes system and other geology, wilderness values, biodiversity, and habitat.
Wilderness Status / Suitability	Most is already wilderness (exceptions are Medano Road corridor and small exclusion areas near Mosca Pass, the mouth of Mosca Canyon, and diversion ditches).
Planning Issues and Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fire management ■ Access to preserve for hunting and recreation ■ Tundra sensitivity ■ Trans-mountain water diversions ■ Potential for crowding around alpine lakes ■ Human waste management ■ Non-native species (e.g., leafy spurge) ■ Management of ATV use (currently illegal) on Medano Road ■ Management of illegal off-road ATV use ■ Management of primitive roadside and backcountry camping ■ Opportunities for backcountry-related education, especially for organized groups ■ Wilderness management ■ Management of historic trail corridors



Sangre de Cristo Mountains
and Foothills

Great Sand Dunes Resource Opportunity Areas

MOUNTAIN LAKES AND STREAMS	
Location	Mountain stream riparian corridors and high altitude lakes.
Dunes System	Headwaters for creeks that transport water and sand.
Natural Diversity	Sand Creek and Deadman Creek have a B2 (very high significance) biodiversity rating. Medano and Little Medano Creek watersheds have a B3 (high significance) biodiversity rating.
Vegetation	Mountain streams: willows, cottonwoods, river birch, aspens, duckweed. Alpine lakes: sedges, spruces, willows.
Wildlife	Native fish refugia (Medano Creek, with potential in others).
Water	Outstanding water quality (Medano Creek). Medano Creek, and to some extent Sand Creek, is an aquatically isolated system.
Human Connections	Archeological sites.
Visitor Opportunities	Seeing wildlife in its natural setting; experiencing quiet and solitude in a wilderness environment; narrow views down onto dunes. Learning/education opportunities: dunes system, riparian systems, biodiversity, history, and wilderness.
Wilderness Status / Suitability	All is existing wilderness except Medano corridor and Deadman Creek. Deadman Creek is suitable for wilderness.
Planning Issues and Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Trans-mountain water diversion ■ Concentration of visitors ■ Water quality in streams and alpine lakes due to intensity of human use in surrounding areas ■ Impacts of road adjacent to Medano Creek (and crossings) ■ Management of primitive roadside and backcountry camping ■ Visitor access to and along stream corridors ■ Non-native fish in Sand Creek and creeks north of there ■ Mitigation or management of retention ponds, restoration opportunities ■ Non-native plants (e.g., Canada thistle, leafy spurge)



Medano Lake



Upper Sand Creek Lake

Great Sand Dunes Resource Opportunity Areas

LOWER MEDANO AND SAND CREEKS	
Location	Downstream from the point where the water begins to interact with the sand substrate (where the stream cross-section changes from a rectangular to a braided channel).
Dunes System	Surface water flows recycle sand and transport it along margins of the dunefield; critical for vertical growth of dunes; great example of surge flow (rare phenomenon); flow dependent on subsurface aquifer (and vice versa); barrier to eastward sand migration; dramatic slip faces formed by stream-caused sand erosion.
Natural Diversity	Lower Sand and Medano Creeks are within a B1 (outstanding significance) biodiversity area, but this significance is due primarily to endemic species that occur outside the stream corridors.
<i>Vegetation</i>	Unhybridized narrow-leaf cottonwoods; cottonwood/willow riparian forest.
<i>Wildlife</i>	Heavily used by elk, bison, deer; birds abundant in riparian areas; amphibians.
<i>Water</i>	Creeks are a source of recharge to the aquifers.
Human Connections	Important area to certain contemporary American Indian tribes; local community interest in Medano Creek flow.
Visitor Opportunities	Experiencing surge flow; playing in Medano Creek at the foot of the dunes; slip faces to see and play on; sand play; viewing wildlife and birds in their natural setting (Sand Creek). Learning/education opportunities: dunes system (water cycle, see water flowing into ground, water quality); habitat; biodiversity; history; and wilderness.
Wilderness Status / Suitability	Medano Creek: part is existing wilderness and part is not suitable for wilderness. Sand Creek: part is existing wilderness and part is suitable for wilderness.
Planning Issues and Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Water quality ■ Horse use ■ Aquifer monitoring ■ Dogs ■ Crowding and congestion at Castle Creek ■ Education opportunities ■ Wilderness management, especially appropriate uses ■ Human waste management ■ Cultural resources not fully surveyed



Lower Medano Creek

Great Sand Dunes Resource Opportunity Areas

DUNEFIELD	
Location	Main dune mass.
Dunes System	Active dune field, including the tall dunes; vertically growing, wind-caused, non-migratory dunes.
Natural Diversity	Dunefield is within a B1 (outstanding significance) biodiversity area. Opposing elemental interactions within the landscape (contrast between water, wind, sand, and sun).
<i>Vegetation</i>	Mostly unvegetated; some sparse, specially adapted mostly perennial vegetation in dune troughs (e.g., Indian ricegrass, blowout grass, scurfpea, sunflowers).
<i>Wildlife</i>	Endemic insects.
<i>Water</i>	Sand transported around margins of dunefield by creeks; precipitation only—very little infiltration to groundwater aquifer.
Human Connections	Jicarilla Apache collect sand; dunes are a major landmark in contemporary and historic times.
Visitor Opportunities	Climbing and descending high dunes (resilient landscape); free play; experiencing quiet and solitude in a wilderness environment; camping in the dunes; seeing “the heavens” at night; viewing the dunes under changing light conditions; visual focal point of San Luis Valley. Learning and education opportunities: learning about the dunes system; habitat; biodiversity; and wilderness.
Wilderness Status / Suitability	All is existing wilderness.
Planning Issues and Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overcrowding in area between dunes parking area and high dunes ▪ Trash ▪ Dogs and horses ▪ Parking capacity ▪ Access to the west side of the dunefield ▪ Water quality (human and dog waste) ▪ Noise ▪ Threatened values mostly relate to visitor experience/opportunities ▪ Most natural values not really threatened in this resource opportunity area ▪ Visitor exposure to elements: heat, sun, dehydration, lightning, blowing sand ▪ Dunefield is a fundamental visitor experience, but it is very difficult for some with limited mobility to get there ▪ Dunes parking area is the easiest/only way for many people to get to the dunes ▪ Wilderness management (dune wheelchair) ▪ Wilderness values in a heavily used area



Dunefield

Great Sand Dunes Resource Opportunity Areas

SANDSHEET AND SABKHA	
Location	Relatively flat western (upwind) portion of the national park; wraps along eastern margin of the dunes.
Dunes System	Vegetated portion of the dune system (some small areas lack vegetation); relatively little sand movement; sandsheet stability is precarious—vegetation is the stabilizing factor; immediate source of sand for the dunefield; near-surface water table is the defining factor for the sabkha (creates mineral deposits).
Natural Diversity	Sandsheet is within a B1 (outstanding significance) biodiversity area. Sabkha is within a B2 (very high significance) biodiversity area. Great wildlife diversity.
Vegetation	Sabkha—salt-tolerant plants like four-wing saltbush, saltgrass, and greasewood; sand sheet—rabbitbrush, prickly pear, yucca, and grasses; irrigated meadows in sabkha and on the Baca Ranch provide forage for bison.
Wildlife	Endemic insects; great wildlife habitat overall.
Water	High groundwater table; seasonal standing water in the sabkha.
Human Connections	One of the oldest known Paleo-Indian (Folsom) sites; numerous archeological sites; culturally scarred trees.
Visitor Opportunities	Experiencing quiet and solitude in a wilderness environment; seeing the heavens at night; viewing the dunes with backdrop of the high peaks; viewing wildlife in its natural setting; driving the Medano Pass 4-wheel drive road (east side of dunefield). Learning and educational opportunities: learning about the dunes system; prehistory; habitat; biodiversity.
Wilderness Status / Suitability	Most of sabkha is unsuitable for wilderness. Most of sand sheet is suitable for wilderness.
Planning Issues and Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Natural gas exploration on the former Baca Ranch lands ■ Boundaries and trespass ■ Future management of Medano Ranch ■ Bicycling opportunities ■ Access to Liberty and Duncan, Sand and Deadman Creeks ■ Access to west side of dunes ■ Non-native plants (e.g., white top, Russian thistle) ■ Effects of ranching, irrigation, and other human uses on vegetation and wildlife ■ Fire management ■ Sensitive archeological resources ■ Free-ranging bison herd?



Sabkha



Culturally Scarred Tree

Great Sand Dunes Resource Opportunity Areas

SPRING CREEKS AND WETLANDS	
Location	Perennial water sources in the western portion of the national park: Big and Little Spring Creeks, interdunal wetlands, and small playa lakes.
Dunes System	Groundwater aquifer near surface greatly affects the landscape; biodiversity related to near surface groundwater; presence and amount of flow in springs and wetlands are indicators of aquifer status.
Natural Diversity	Springs and wetlands are within a B2 (very high significance) biodiversity area. Great vegetative diversity.
<i>Vegetation</i>	Rushes, sedges, duckweed, slender spider flower, cattails; other riparian vegetation; emergent wetlands.
<i>Wildlife</i>	Focal point for wildlife.
<i>Water</i>	Gaining stream (groundwater flows into the stream); groundwater becomes saltier as the water moves downgradient; stream geomorphology is tied to San Luis Lakes.
Human Connections	American Indian ties; numerous archeological sites.
Visitor Opportunities	Experiencing quiet and solitude in a wilderness environment; seeing the heavens at night; viewing the dunes with backdrop of the high peaks; viewing wildlife in its natural setting. Learning and educational opportunities: learning about the dunes system (especially groundwater aquifers); prehistory; habitat; biodiversity.
Wilderness Status / Suitability	Upper stretches suitable for wilderness; lower stretches unsuitable for wilderness.
Planning Issues and Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opportunity to restore natural flows (water has been diverted for irrigation) ▪ Closed Basin project has potential to affect aquifer and related natural systems ▪ Valley-wide dewatering of aquifer from agricultural uses ▪ Visitor access ▪ Artifacts collecting and location of other sensitive sites ▪ Vegetation and water quality susceptible to damage from trespass livestock ▪ Non-native fish and turtles in Big Spring and Big Spring Creek ▪ Reintroduction of native amphibians ▪ Non-native species (e.g., Canada thistle and white top) ▪ Standing water—possible West Nile virus concern



Big Spring Creek



Sandhill Cranes at Wetland

Update: Great Sand Dunes System Interagency Meeting

On November 13, 2003, the National Park Service hosted a meeting attended by representatives from 10 state and federal agencies: Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Division of Water Resources, Colorado State Land Board, Colorado State Parks, Colorado Division of Wildlife, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The goal of the meeting

was to understand the agencies' missions, roles, and concerns related to management of resources in and near Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Outcomes of the meeting included a table illustrating the agencies' management responsibilities; better understanding of neighboring agencies' issues and concerns; and broad goals for resources, recreation, and access in and around the Great Sand Dunes.



Update: Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council

The work of the Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council, which was established to advise the National Park Service on development of the general management plan, is well underway. The council's fifth meeting was held on January 12 – 13, 2004, in Blanca/Fort Garland, Colorado. This meeting was

devoted to reviewing public comment; and reviewing and organizing information on natural and cultural resources, visitor opportunities, and wilderness characteristics.

A tentative schedule for future advisory council meetings is provided below:

Tentative Meetings	Probable Location	General Topics
April 5-7, 2004 (3 days)	Alamosa, CO	Workshop — Goals and Alternatives
September 9, 2004 (1 day)	Crestone, CO	Evaluate elements of alternatives
Jan/Feb 2005 (1 or 2 days)	Alamosa, CO	Ongoing Business

More information about the advisory council and its activities is available via the Great Sand Dunes Web site (follow the general management planning link): www.nps.gov/grsa/press_room.htm.

Planning Steps Update

Great Sand Dunes General Management Plan and Wilderness Review

Step 1: Project Start-up *Completed*

- Assemble the interdisciplinary planning team and advisory council
- Conduct a wilderness suitability assessment
- Conduct internal scoping and preliminary consultation

Step 2: "Discovery" (initial idea gathering) *Completed*

- Consult with the public, agencies, and tribes
- Develop preliminary issue statements

Step 3: Foundation and Analysis *Completed*

- Reaffirm park purpose, significance, and mission
- Reaffirm park interpretive themes
- Identify special mandates, laws, and policies
- Identify fundamental resources and values
- Gather relevant data from park, agencies, tribes, experts, public
- Map fundamental resources and visitor opportunities

Step 4: Goals and Alternatives **February 2004 - March 2005**

- Develop fundamental goals
- Develop management prescriptions (desired future conditions)
- Develop a range of alternative concepts with zoning schemes, wilderness alternatives
- Identify and analyze impacts
- Consult with the public, advisory council, agencies, and tribes
- Select a preferred alternative

Step 5: Draft GMP / EIS **April 2005 - March 2006**

- Prepare a Draft GMP/Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement
- Consult with the advisory council, public, agencies, and tribes

Step 6: Final GMP / EIS **April 2006 - July 2007**

- Prepare a Final GMP / Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement
- Consult with the advisory council, public, agencies, and tribes
- Prepare the Record of Decision and implement the plan

[Note: Dates shown are approximate.]

(Continued from page 4)

Visitor Opportunities. The Great Sand Dunes are attractive, inviting, and approachable. These qualities and certain inspirational, recreational, and educational opportunities must be managed and protected to maintain the park's purpose and significance:

- climbing and descending the high dunes
- experiencing surge flow, playing in Medano Creek near the foot of the dunes
- seeing the heavens (stars, planets, etc.) at night
- viewing the dune mass with backdrop of the high peaks and from the mountains
- seeing wildlife in its natural setting
- learning about the dunes system—its components and dynamic nature
- experiencing quiet, solitude, isolation in a wilderness environment
- driving in sand on the Medano Pass four-wheel drive road



Update: Wilderness Review

In the first GMP newsletter, the National Park Service process for reviewing new lands for possible inclusion in the national wilderness preservation system was presented. Normally, this is a two-step process: (1) assessing wilderness suitability or non-suitability based solely on the condition of the land, and (2) completing a formal wilderness study. The deputy director of the National Park Service has provided a waiver to this policy, allowing the planning team to combine wilderness suitability assessment and wilderness study into the ongoing GMP process. We have already begun to integrate lands that are suitable for wilderness based

on their condition into the resource opportunity area analysis presented in this newsletter. At a future phase, when a range of alternative management concepts are developed for the GMP, there will be a range of alternative proposals for recommended wilderness that generally fit with the various management concepts. Combining suitability assessment and wilderness study in the GMP will streamline the process, provide a logical framework to plan for new lands, and allow for broad-based public consideration of wilderness and other values.

Update: News from Other Agencies

Related News from the U.S. Forest Service

The U.S. Forest Service, in cooperation with the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have finalized a plan with The Nature Conservancy that provides a management framework for the Baca Ranch while under joint undivided interest ownership. The U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have held two meetings to discuss and develop a coordinated interim interagency strategy for managing the lands each

agency will receive when the Baca Ranch real estate transaction is complete. Strategies for managing the following resources will be further discussed at an upcoming meeting: wilderness management, land uses, wildlife management, natural resource research, timber management, noxious weeds, recreation, interpretation, fire management, public safety, law enforcement, and access. The planning process for lands to be transferred to the Rio Grande National Forest will begin in 2005.

Related News from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

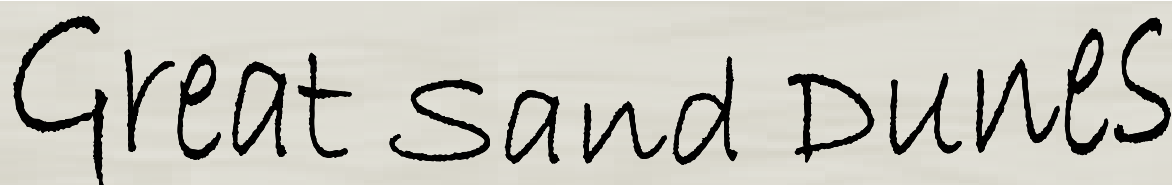
During April 2003, the Baca National Wildlife Refuge was established upon transfer of the 3,303-acre White Ranch to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Although this is a relatively small portion of the Baca National Wildlife Refuge that Congress authorized in 2000, it contains resources sufficient to manage as a National Wildlife Refuge.

A first step is for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to prepare a Conceptual Management Plan that outlines to the public the general way in which the refuge will be managed. The Service is gathering ideas from the public on management of the new refuge. This plan will guide management until a more substantial comprehensive conservation plan can be developed.

In the case of Baca National Wildlife Refuge, the conceptual management plan will be truly "conceptual." It is premature to discuss management details, but the plan is being prepared around some management themes. For example: habitat and wildlife management will be

the first priority of refuge operation; biological, hydrological and facility inventory will be a high priority; the refuge will be closed to all public uses until opened through a formal public process; all standard vegetation management tools (e.g., irrigation, haying, grazing, rest, and prescribed fire) will potentially be used on the property.

The Service briefed the Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council on April 5 and held public workshops in Alamosa, Colorado, that evening and in Crestone, Colorado, on April 6. Other workshops are planned in Saquache County regarding this plan. If you have questions or comments regarding the conceptual management plan for the Baca National Wildlife Refuge please contact refuge manager, Michael Blenden, at 719.589.4021 or by e-mail at: <Mike_Blenden@fws.gov> or refuge planner, Mike Artmann, at 303.236.4381 or by e-mail at: <Mike_Artmann@fws.gov>



Great sand DUNES



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