

Can You Manage That? San Juan Resource Management Plan

by Tom Rice

Here it is - Fall 1994. There was gridlock on the river, battles for camps heated up, and there is still no Resource Management Plan (RMP) for the San Juan River.

Paper Ho! Out on the bureaucratic horizon floats a ship holding a River Management Plan due to arrive next year. According to folks at the San Juan Resource Area BLM office, it is next in line after the Cedar Mesa Resource Management Plan.

However, we can get the ball rolling on our side of the river bank with a little discussion and communication. There are several tools we can utilize in order to create a successful RMP. One such tool is the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). The FLPMA provides the BLM with the general authority to manage public lands: "to protect the quality of scientific, scenic, historical, ecological, environmental, air and atmospheric, water resource, and archaeological values...". It boils down to protecting, "where appropriate", certain lands in their natural condition. The "where appropriate" phrase will be very important when deciphering the type and amount of management proposed. Although the plans deal with a river corridor, it is surrounded by the ever-present multiple-use land rationale.

Another possible tool is the Wilderness Act. Roadless areas which have wilderness characteristics, as defined by the Wilderness Act, have the potential of being protected. If an area meets those characteristics, the BLM would be required to manage those areas in a manner that would not impair its wilderness value until Congress made a decision whether, or not to, designate such an area as wilderness. If applicable, the Wilderness Act could be one of our strongest preservation tools.

The Endangered Species Act states that no federal action can be taken, which will destroy or harm critical habitat of an endangered species. Presently, the Animas-La Plata project near Durango, Colorado, is being fought with, among other things, the presence of endangered squawfish and humpback chub in the San Juan. This act could be one of the most important tools in maintaining the present flow release pattern on the San Juan River.

A final tool for the successful creation of a San Juan River RMP could be the use of the National Historic Landmark designation. Not only is the prehistory rich along the San Juan, the Mormon pioneer history and the contemporary indigenous history, abounds among the banks of the river.

Now you know about all of the important governmental legalese, acts, etc., that can be used in the creation of a RMP. They look good on the desk, but don't necessarily make it on paper, as we would like to see them. Therefore, it is necessary to look directly at the San Juan River and the conditions which effect it.

The San Juan is in the midst of rich oil and mineral

country. This past spring welcomed us with a limestone quarry visibly perched above the river west of Comb Ridge. Unfortunately, the site is on state land, which is notoriously lax on permitting environmental assessments, visual corridor consideration, and well, ah, common sense. A RMP could have blocked this. One possible route could have been the acquisition of state lands through sales, trade, or scenic easement. Years ago, the BLM acquired state land along Deso/Gray, protecting that corridor from development and possible harm. Including a similar rationale in a San Juan RMP could protect it from any further visual or physical harm due to mineral or oil extraction.

Moooo! You want a steak? Come run the San Juan from Bluff to Mexican hat! There are plenty of cows along the river to keep Billy Bob's Beef and Buckaroux House (sic) open for an eternity! If management objectives include maintaining the natural character of a canyon environment, there is a ton-of-work ahead when it comes to the bovine population on the mighty San Juan. An outright ban would be the best possible solution. However, remember this is Utah and I, unfortunately admittedly so, can eat only so much tofu. Restrictions would be the best compromise.

There is a conflict between cows and the dwindling number of desert bighorn sheep in the canyon. Cows can transmit deadly viruses to sheep. Therefore, cows should be restricted from area where sheep live. Overgrazing on certain sections of the corridor have heavily impacted the vegetation. Those areas need a little rest and revegetation. Further solutions to the cow problem are: closer monitoring of livestock, decreasing the number of livestock in the river corridor, and as a last resort, the construction of livestock barriers, which would blend in with the surrounding environment.

The Anasazi left behind a legacy of cultural materials, rock art, artifacts, and dwellings that cover much of the country surrounding the river. Antiquities legislation not only protect the scientific value of archaeological sights, but also provides public access to the sights in a manner which does not harm or detract from their informational value. Preservation is a key term regarding archaeological features. Sights visited often, such as River House Ruin, need to be stabilized, organized in a manner that would preserve its scientific integrity, and at the same time, remain as natural looking as possible. Vandalism, both intentional and out of ignorance, could be reduced through patrols and education. Finally, an extensive inventory of archaeological sites along the river corridor needs to be accomplished.

Water projects never die. Currently, the Animas-La Plata Project threatens the San Juan. A RMP should state an opposition to such a project, because it threatens endangered species and critical habitat protected by the Endangered Species Act. Certainly federal opposition to such a project is not simple, so public opposition must be vocal.

A RMP rolls together smoothly when you are an outsider looking in on the bureaucratic process. There are

however many possible headaches. To begin with, the lack of San Juan Resource Area recreational money, which funds river management programs, throws a serious monkey wrench into the RMP process. A river, which gets as much use as the San Juan, should never be without rangers at the ramp, nor with rangers on patrol.

One bureaucracy creates havoc and headaches. What about three! Joining the BLM creation of a RMP will be the Park Service and the Navajo Nation. The river ahead looks low, barred out, with an up-channel wind for these three entities.

There are many other issues to be discussed in a RMP. To name a few: user days, airplanes, party size, bathroom systems, roads, and camp designations. River Resource Management Plan becomes very important. This is a fabulous opportunity for BLM to create a fresh and functional approach to one of its most heavily used area.

To become involved with the San Juan River Management Plan please write:

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