



The Desert is Alive

Why do we want to minimize our impacts when traveling across GSENM? The desert is alive and not well adapted to high volumes of people traveling across it.

While on the Monument in lower-impact areas, you may notice that the ground is covered in a dark “crust.” This crust is called cryptobiotic soil crust. It is created by microscopic organisms such as algae, cyanobacteria, and fungi. The bacteria within the soil release a gelatinous material that binds soil particles together in a dense matrix, making a hardened surface layer made up of living organisms and inorganic soil matter.

Cryptobiotic soil crust plays an important role in both preventing erosion and supporting water absorption in a place where water is often scarce. This “crust” of cryptobiotic soil can be damaged easily by people and pets traveling across it. Once crushed, the crust can take anywhere from a few years to decades to grow back. Until recovery, the soils in the impacted area can be damaged by accelerated erosion and nutrient loss.



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The Desert is Fragile

The amazing geology of the monument provides habitat structure for a variety of ecosystems. Even though the landscape is dominated by rock, the desert is fragile!

In addition to cryptobiotic soil, desert plants, which are important for erosion control, wildlife habitat and food, and aesthetics can be damaged by those not traveling on durable surfaces.

When people go off designated trails and roads, they often leave tracks which can encourage others to follow their path and create more damage.

Thankfully, the durable rocks and washes in this landscape, along with the designated trails and roads, provide visitors with ways in which to navigate the desert with less impact to the landscape.

Minimal Damage Checklist - How many of the boxes below can you check?



I KNEW WHERE
 I WAS GOING

I DIDN'T BUILD
ANY CAIRNS

I CAMPED AT LEAST
200' AWAY FROM WATER

I STAYED ON
EXISTING ROADS
AND TRAILS

I PACKED OUT
ALL MY TRASH

I SET UP CAMP IN AN
 EXISTING CAMPSITE
OR DISTURBED AREA

I COOKED ON SAND,
 GRAVEL, OR ANOTHER
DURABLE AREA

I SET UP MY
TENT ON A
 RESILIENT
SURFACE LIKE
SAND, ROCK,
OR GRAVEL.

I DID NOT
DAMAGE
 VEGETATION
OR CRYPTO-
BIOTIC SOIL

* FOR BACKCOUNTRY CAMPERS*

I MOVED CAMPEACH NIGHT AND
DID NOT CREATE SOCIAL TRAILS