



GRAND STAIRCASE ESCALANTE PARTNERS

To: Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland; BLM Utah State Director, Greg Sheehan;
BLM Paria River District Manager, Harry Barber; and GSENM Manager, Adé Nelson

Re: (1) Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS) Comments; (2) Consulting Party Status Comments

November 9, 2023

Dear Secretary Deb Haaland and the Department of the Interior:

On behalf of Grand Staircase Escalante Partners (GSEP) and as a member of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) Advisory Committee, I am submitting (1) Comments in response the Draft Resource Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (RMP/EIS) for GSENM, and (2) Consulting Party Status Comments under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. We are grateful to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for its efforts to examine data and public comments and create Draft RMP/EIS with goals, objectives, and management directions to protect the Resources of Value (ROVs) and the identified objects within those resources at GSENM that are described in detail in Presidential Proclamations 6920 and 10286. We thank BLM staff, Tribal representatives, local residents, science specialists, and our nonprofit conservation organization partners who shared their unique knowledge and expertise to help inform these comments.

At GSEP, our mission is to honor the past and safeguard the future of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSENM) through science, conservation, and education. We were established in 2004 as the official Friends Group for GSENM and just this year signed a new Friends Group agreement with the BLM to collaborate on projects aimed at supporting ecological restoration/conservation, Wilderness Study Area (WSA) monitoring, stewardship/visitor impact prevention and mitigation activities, recreation area/trail projects, tribal relations and co-stewardship, scientific research, climate change adaptation, and education to increase our collective understanding of Monument culture, history, and science. GSEP also has Consulting Party status under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

We are grateful for the opportunity to provide input on the draft RMP/EIS to be considered for the development of the final Monument Management Plan for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. We look forward to continuing to work with the BLM and our partners to support the adoption and implementation of a new plan that prioritizes the protection of the Resources of Value and the objects identified in the Presidential Proclamations 6920 and 10286. We are enthusiastic about supporting a new era in conservation for this landscape that includes co-stewardship with Tribal Nations, aligning with the new strategy for the National Landscape Conservation System, and working together to build resilience and ensure a promising future for the landscape, surrounding communities, and all the diverse life forms that call the Monument home.

Sincerely,

Sarah Bauman

Grand Staircase Escalante Partners Executive Director

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Advisory Committee Member

Grand Staircase Escalante Partners (GSEP) – GSENM Draft RMP/EIS Comments

GSEP supports the goals, objectives, and management directions included in preferred Alternative C with the following recommendations for improvements.

Discretion and RMP Implementation Plan

The draft RMP places discretion for decision-making regarding specific actions with agency officials. Granting a degree of discretion to decision makers facing a complex and dynamic environment makes good sense. However, as much as possible, each exercise of discretion should be supported by a direct reference, available to the public, explaining how the decision supports the goals of protecting the Resources of Value (ROVs) and the objects within those resources identified in the Monument. In addition, we understand that a special implementation plan will be developed for the RMP and, due to the importance of this new implementation plan, we request that the BLM share with the public details about what will be included in the plan with the Proposed RMP/Final EIS.

Soil Resources

Alternatives recommendations:

Row 12: Protecting, restoring, enhancing soil resources. We suggest editing the goal of this section as follows (change in italics): “Protect, restore, and *enhance* soil resources, including biological soil crusts, to prevent damage to and degradation of soil resources.” “Diverse and unusual soils” are considered monument objects (Proclamations 6920 and 10286); however, degraded soil health in the majority of the decision area coupled with unknown pre-disturbance conditions for a restoration reference point, make it critical to be able to also enhance to support soil health. We also recommend that the RMP language explicitly states that “restoring” biocrust includes late-stage crust with all of its components (mosses and lichens as well as cyanobacteria).

Row 14: Rangeland Health Standards. We support Alternatives B-D, with the following modifications recognizing that current Rangeland Health assessments are inadequate to assess Monument ROVs and objects: “Protect and restore upland soils to meet the revised BLM Utah Rangeland Health Standards (Standard 1) as indicated by naturally occurring ground cover and the appropriate amount, type, and distribution of native vegetation.” Current Rangeland Health assessments should go further to assess ROVs and objects. Where the Standards call for upland soils to exhibit permeability and infiltration rates as indicated by cover and litter sufficient to protect the soil, the DEIS should specify that this means naturally occurring ground cover such as native vegetation, biocrust, litter, and rock. Litter from masticated trees and shrubs can protect soils from erosion, but it often forms a layer far deeper than litter that is naturally occurring. This can smother biocrust, which is a critical component of ground cover, and therefore would not meet Standard 1.

Row 15: Addressing soil health, productivity, infiltration. We support the language in Alternative D, which allows for more rigorous efforts to address soil health, productivity, and infiltration. This level of rigor is required to ensure that the soils are protected as Monument objects.

Row 19: Prioritization of allotment assessments. We support the language provided in Alternatives B/C but suggest prioritizing assessments in allotments that are not meeting rangeland health standards unless there is a rationale for prioritizing watershed allotments over those not meeting the health standards.

Rows 21-23: Soil-disturbing discretionary actions. We suggest the following language: “Prohibit soil-disturbing discretionary actions on erosive soils and slopes greater than 30 percent, with exceptions considered for research.” Many soils throughout the Monument are susceptible to erosion, so discretionary activities that can increase erosion should be prohibited except when research needs (e.g.,

paleontological excavation, ecological research) are justified. In Row 22, we prefer the language in Alternative D; however, exceptions should also be made for research and land health restoration actions that do not require mechanical methods. Mechanical methods for restoration (e.g., chaining) can cause erosion and negatively impact growth of biocrust. In Row 23, we support Alternatives B-D, and suggest that guidelines for soil mitigation and restoration plans be developed with input from soil scientists. Soil science is a complex field and input from a team of experts would be an asset when reviewing soil mitigation and restoration plans on a case-by-case basis.

Vegetation Management

Native Seeds: The final MMP should emphasize a priority for the use of native seed in vegetation projects, except in cases where seeds collected regionally or from different environments within the species range would be an asset to restoration, climate adaptation, or species resilience. For example, to prevent population bottlenecks due to lack of genetic diversity, or to facilitate climate adaptation by introducing seeds from native species growing in hotter/drier locations. We are defining native seed as seeds gathered from the Colorado Plateau. We suggest working with state and non-profit partners to source appropriate native seeds as necessary to properly protect Monument objects. When native plant seed is not available, reasonable alternatives found in the western US should be prioritized over exotics species (i.e., species native to other continents).

Mechanical treatments: Mechanical treatment techniques on GSENM are correlated with degraded soils, biocrust, and vegetation over time (Miller 2008). They also pose serious risk to cultural and paleontological resources. Mechanical treatments (e.g., chaining) are therefore not consistent with the protection of Monument ROVs and should be prohibited within the Monument.

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 25: Managing for a resistant, resilient mosaic of desired vegetation communities. We recommend Alternative B/C/D with the following modification: “Manage for a resistant, resilient mosaic of desired vegetation communities across the landscape with diversity of species, canopy, density, and age class in accordance with ecological site potential.” Functional native plant communities, including pinyon-juniper communities, relict grasslands, and sagebrush-steppe communities are protected Monument objects in Proclamations 6920 and 10286.

Row 26: Protecting ecological processes and functions. We prefer Alternative D because it most closely aligns with the protection of Monument objects. Natural processes and techniques are preferred over other methods because mechanical treatment methods have the highest levels of surface disturbance. Data on mechanical vegetation treatments at GSENM have shown that they have the lowest land health assessment scores due to high levels of soil erosion and compaction, overutilization of vegetation, increases in exotics, and shifts from native to non-native species, and changes in vegetation functional groups, including loss of biocrust and decreases in palatable cool season grasses to less palatable warm season grasses (GSENM 2008). In some cases, non-surface-disturbing manual methods of vegetation management may be needed, so we support the use of the word “prioritizing” in this alternative.

Row 27: Native Functional Vegetation Communities. We prefer Alternative D because it provides the most options for achieving native functional vegetation communities and specifies native vegetation in contrast to Alternative B/C which only specifies functional vegetation. In addition to the native vegetation listed as Monument objects, native vegetation supports the ecological functions and services for water resources as well as at-risk habitat, birds, and wildlife.

Rows 30 and 31: Protect, maintain, enhance, and/or restore riparian areas. Alternative D is preferred

for its ability to protect Monument objects (including wildlife and native plant communities), riparian areas, uplands, and waterways, which should be protected, maintained, enhanced, and/or restored to proper functioning condition. Only 23 percent of riparian sites were functioning at risk with no apparent or a downward trend as of 2015 (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2015).

Row 32: Managing relict plant communities and hanging gardens. We prefer Alternative D but encourage the addition of language from Alternative A to read: “Manage reference plant communities, relict plant communities, and hanging gardens, to protect, maintain, enhance, and restore biological diversity.” Relict plant communities and hanging gardens are specifically listed as Monument objects to be protected in proclamation 10286 and are not necessarily included in the category “reference plant communities.”

Row 33: Protect, maintain, enhance, and/or restore native perennial and annual vegetation. Alternative D is preferred because it is the only alternative which specifies native vegetation and allows for maintaining and enhancing vegetation communities in addition to protecting and restoring.

Row 36: Landscape-scale ecosystem restoration projects. We suggest the following edit to Alternative C that includes language from Alternative D: “Implement landscape-scale ecosystem restoration projects to restore native functional vegetation communities, with a prioritization of natural processes and techniques over other methods.” Justification for the prioritization of native plants has been previously stated. We encourage the BLM to adopt an objective and widely used decision-making procedure like soil type and Ecological Site Descriptions, which are based on the best available science to determine whether and where to conduct treatments.

Row 37: Promote and encourage the use of native vegetation. We prefer Alternative D. The RMP should promote and encourage the use of native vegetation by disallowing the use of non-natives seeds except in the circumstances described in Alternative D; however, what constitutes an “emergency” remains currently unclear and undefined. Nonnative species should only be used in the short term and when native species are unavailable or inadequate to stabilize soils and prevent establishment of non-native invasive species. Specific guidelines for the use of non-native species should be developed.

Row 38: Post-seeding management practices. Alternative C does not define what the site objectives are for the resting periods. We suggest that site objectives be defined and measured. This is the only way to measure impacts, progress, and promote the survival of plants.

Row 39: Prohibiting discretionary actions for relict plants and hanging gardens. We support Alternative B-D with the addition of “relict plant communities and hanging gardens.” Relict plant communities and hanging gardens are specifically listed as Monument objects to be protected in Proclamation 10286 and are not included in reference plant communities.

Row 44: Weed control methods. This language should be edited to state that weed control methods should be tailored to the site and prioritize Monument ROVs and biodiversity. For example, chemical applications should be avoided in areas where runoff could impact wildlife (e.g., riparian zones). If treatments need to be done near or in riparian areas, ensure that mitigation procedures are done to ensure protection of aquatic species (for example, use of approved aquatic safe compounds); mechanical techniques should be avoided in areas with healthy soil crust, paleontological resources, and/or cultural resources.

Water Resources

In order to prevent impacts to Monument ROVs and objects, we recommend designing a method to adequately assess the condition of and potential impacts to Monument resources and objects. This would include conducting field assessments specifically to identify places where water quality is impaired, establishing measures to maintain watershed health, identifying and monitoring conditions of ecologically and culturally important springs, and determining how new and existing infrastructure or activities within the Monument might impact water quality and/or impair Monument ROVs and objects.

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 45: Protecting, maintaining, enhancing, restoring water quality and quantity. We recommend that Alternatives A and D be combined as follows: “Protect, maintain, enhance and/or restore the quality and quantity of water resources, and ensure that appropriate quality and quantity of water resources are available for the proper care and management of GSENM objects.”

Alternative D provides the greatest number of options for high-quality water resources but does not mention that adequate water be available for Monument objects.

Row 46: We support Alternative B/C/D and recommend that the BLM develop a climate mitigation/adaptation plan for water resources that outlines how the agency will address and triage climate change impacts to water resources.

Row 47: Natural hydrologic function of watersheds. We support Alternative D with the following modification: “Protect, maintain, enhance, and/or restore natural hydrologic function of watersheds to meet, *at minimum*, BLM Utah Rangeland Health Standards (Standard 2).”

We suggest that the BLM develop methods to assess watershed hydrologic health which are additional and more rigorous than rangeland health standards. This should include field assessments to identify places where water quality is impaired and standard metrics to assess natural biologic factors. For example, the BLM should assess streams using the full set of measures used in the proper functioning condition (PFC) assessment for lotic areas (Dickard et al. 2015). An equally thorough method should be used in lentic systems.

Rows 48-51: Riparian ecosystems, hanging gardens, rivers and streams. We support Alternative D in. Riparian ecosystems, hanging gardens, rivers and streams are Monument objects (Proclamation 10286) and so it is important not only to protect and restore them, but also to maintain and enhance as necessary.

Row 57: Water resources. We prefer Alternative C with an addition along these lines: “Hydrological analyses will be conducted prior to development of water resources to ensure that water quality and quantity will not be diminished. Wherever possible, recreational facilities will use low- or no-water using alternatives (e.g., composting toilets).”

Row 58: Existing water developments. We prefer Alternative D and suggest that the following language be added: “*Existing water developments will be evaluated to ensure consistency with the protection of Monument objects and values.*” New water developments may protect GSENM objects in the short term by relocating impacts from, for example, grazing. However, in the long term this just increases the overall impact.

Row 59: New water developments. We prefer Alternative B/C with the following modification: “Prohibit new water developments in natural plant communities that *have low relative percentages of non-native invasive species*. Allow maintenance of existing developments in a manner that minimizes impacts on natural plant communities and to best conserve multiple resources, *or remove existing developments which are no longer needed so long as this would not additionally harm resources.*” It is possible for healthy natural plant communities to have low or managed levels of invasive species—if

water developments are allowable anywhere invasives are found, we are concerned that few healthy plant communities would meet this extremely high bar.

Row 60: Prohibit degradation of water resources. We support Alternative D which provides the strongest protection of water resources in the face of a changing climate, drought, and erosion.

Fish and Wildlife

Given the steep declines in pinyon jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) population over the last few decades, its current proposed listing under the ESA, and its status with US Fish and Wildlife as a Bird of Conservation Concern and in the state of Utah as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need, we recommend that the BLM add the pinyon jay to the list of special status species. Specific conservation measures in Appendix C should be defined and could be modeled on those for Southwestern willow flycatcher and yellow-billed cuckoo: “Habitat disturbances (such as organized recreational activities requiring special use permits) would be avoided within 0.25-mile of suitable pinyon jay habitat during the breeding season.”

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 86: Invertebrate Species and Habitat connectivity. We prefer Alternative B/C/D and suggest the following modification: “Manage the biological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems for the benefit of native aquatic, avian, and terrestrial wildlife habitats and populations, *including invertebrates*, with emphasis on ecosystem health, *habitat connectivity*, resiliency, and biodiversity.” Invertebrates are critical components of healthy ecosystems—they pollinate native and agriculture species; provide food sources for other species including imperiled birds, bats, and fish; contribute to soil health; and many other services. However, the term wildlife in common usage often does not include invertebrate species. Also, the interconnectedness of habitats will be increasingly important as the climate continues to warm and species are forced to shift their historic range. Maintaining intact and functional migration corridors will be crucial to supporting climate adaptation for GSENM’s wildlife populations.

Row 87: Enhancement of native habitat. The language of Alternative D, which lists habitat enhancement as an objective, should be adopted as part of Alternative C with the following additions (in italics):” Maintain, enhance, and/or restore *native* aquatic, avian, and terrestrial wildlife habitat quality and quantity, including seasonal, migratory, and connectivity habitats, to provide for biologically diverse and healthy ecosystems.” Efforts should be focused on native wildlife and their native habitat. It is not only the habitats on GSENM that are in a degraded state that should be prioritized for restoration. Enhancement of existing lesser-impacted habitats will also be necessary for species migration, adaptation, and survival and to meet climate adaptation goals. This goes beyond meeting Rangeland Health Standards and supports the continued existence and survival of all wildlife populations, which utilize Monument resources differently than cattle. A healthy rangeland does not guarantee that the needs of wildlife are being met. The most recent and relevant scientific research should be used to inform implementation-level planning, including identification of priority habitat corridors (e.g, riparian areas, canyons, ridgelines) where restoration and enhancement activities will occur.

Row 92: Maintain, enhance, and/or restore native habitat. Adopt the language for Alternative D for the Outback Areas as well as the Primitive Areas. The proposed Outback Areas cover an enormous amount of area, much of which will overlap with priority habitat corridors, once they are identified. BLM should retain the option, as listed in Alternative D, to use natural processes and low-tech process-based methods in ways that “enhance” habitat for wildlife species in those areas. Further, Alternative D specifies native habitat (in contrast to B, which does not).

Row 95: Enhancing habitat. We suggest the following (addition in italics): “Maintain, *enhance*, and/or restore habitat connectivity...” to Alternative C. Some enhancement may be necessary to support wildlife migration and climate adaptation goals.

Cultural Resources

Proclamation 10286 recognized the important connection that Tribes have to GSENM and archeological and cultural resources are repeatedly identified in the Proclamation as Monument objects. It is important to recognize that GSENM is abundant with resources and objects, beyond archaeological sites, that are culturally significant for Tribes. The RMP and subsequent implementation plans must include consultation to understand which resources and objects are culturally significant for Tribes so that they can work with the Tribes to ensure protection and care of these objects. Consultation must consist of “meaningful dialogue where the viewpoints of Tribes and the Department, including its Bureaus and Offices, are shared, discussed, and analyzed” (E.O. Departmental Manual 512 DM Part 4, Section 4.6). Furthermore, BLM must utilize the consensus-seeking approach as outlined in the Department’s revised Tribal Consultation policies and procedures (512 DM 4, 512 DM 5), which were finalized in December of 2022, and Executive Order 13175. We appreciate the work the BLM has done to increase communication and facilitate tribal engagement, and yet more work is necessary to protect Monument objects that have significance for tribal cultures and to meet the objectives and goals for Tribal consultation provided by the Department of the Interior. It is unclear from the matrix how culturally significant objects will be protected. We recognize that the BLM intends to develop a cultural resources management plan that seeks to address this; however, it is unclear what will be included in this plan, how Tribes will be consulted, and if it will be subject to public participation. The cultural resources management plan should be subject to public and Tribal participation under both Section 106 and NEPA, and it is important for the BLM to work closely with the Tribes on the framework and the plan before and throughout its development.

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 61: Process for protecting cultural resources. We suggest editing Row 61 to read “in consultation with Tribes, identify, document, preserve, protect, and/or enhance cultural resources to ensure that they are available for appropriate uses for present and future generations of Tribal communities on BLM-managed lands.” Depending on input from the Tribes, BLM may be able to enhance cultural resources, not just protect them. The removal of cow dung or an invasive plant species from an archaeological site could enhance it, beyond just protecting it. Additionally, it is our understanding that Tribal Nations often hold an earth to sky perspective of the landscape in which many, if not all, of the resource areas are considered a cultural resource, thereby making something such as a springs restoration project the enhancement of a cultural resource. However, because there are a wide range of cultural beliefs and best practices regarding restoration of cultural resources, BLM should consult with Tribes before undertaking enhancement of cultural resources.

Row 64: Site stabilization. We recommend Tribal consultation during identification, to establish monitoring plans, and before undertaking any site stabilization. Due to different cultural beliefs regarding site stabilization, objectives involving site stabilization should be developed in consultation with Tribes. In Row 65, we recommend the following edits: “in consultation and collaboration with Tribes, avoid, reduce, and/or remove imminent and long-term threats to cultural resources. These threats include but are not limited to threats from livestock, vegetation management, visitor impacts, and climate change.” Tribes may wish to contribute Traditional Knowledge or practices surrounding care and management of cultural resources.

Tribal Stewardship

The goal to “Honor Tribal Nation’s stewardship, interests, and uses of GSENM” and the objectives listed under preferred Alternative C in the Tribal Stewardship section are critical to BLM’s ability to protect Monument objects and reflect a commitment from the BLM to honor its obligation to work collaboratively with Tribes. Similar to the Cultural Resource Protections goal, objectives, and management directions, there are details missing (e.g., process, timeline, cultural trainings, dedicated staff, etc.) about how the BLM will work with the Tribes to ensure co-stewardship and complete the co-stewardship plan.

The outline for the Tribal Stewardship plan does not fully adhere to the DOI Permanent Instruction Memorandum No. 2022-011 because it reduces the decision-making authority of Tribes and does not fully commit to or embody the guidance as set forth in the permanent IM on how to fulfill Secretarial Order 3403: Fulfilling the Trust Responsibility to Indian Tribes in the Stewardship of Federal Lands and Waters. The BLM needs to more fully align the proposed plan with SO 3403 and DOI Permanent Instruction Memorandum No. 2022-011. We have provided some recommendations for how this could be achieved in Row 77, though we defer to Tribal input.

Because the BLM has not had the level of consultation with Tribes regarding this RMP needed to understand what objects should be protected from each Tribe’s unique perspective and also because so little of this Monument has been surveyed for cultural objects and sites connected to the Tribes histories, it is currently impossible to know which areas should be prioritized by the BLM for specific co-stewardship activities.

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 74: Threats. We suggest the following modifications: avoid, reduce, and/or remove imminent and long-term threats to sacred sites, important landscapes, native plants, and other resources important to Tribal nations based on input from Tribes in consultation. These threats include but are not limited to threats from recreation, livestock and cattle grazing, vegetation management, and climate change.

Row 77: Development of Co-Stewardship Plan. We support the following modifications: To ensure that management decisions affecting the monument reflect the expertise and traditional and historical knowledge of interested Tribal Nations and people, consult with Tribal Nations to develop a Tribal Nation Co-Stewardship Implementation-Level Plan to provide for specific co-stewardship relationships between the BLM and Tribal Nations. This implementation level plan will address, but may not be limited to, addressing the following:

- Cooperate and collaborate in project-level planning, land use planning, and implementation-level decision-making.
- Cooperate and collaborate in program development (including education and interpretation about species, Tribal uses, cultural site protections, and other Monument objects), resource protection, and public land access concerning GSENM. To the degree the Tribes desire, Traditional Knowledge will be integrated into program development, resource protection, and public land access issues.
- Regularly coordinate, consult, and engage on resource management priorities including project planning and joint management opportunities within GSENM.

- Cooperatively seek additional partnerships, funds, and authorities to achieve shared tribal and federal land management goals.
- Work collaboratively to ensure Tribal Nations have access to sacred sites and other areas of tribal importance in GSENM for cultural purposes.

Permanent Instruction Memorandum No. 2022-011 explicitly identifies land use planning and implementation level decision-making as the two levels of decision-making for co-stewardship, whereas the agency here identifies project-level planning as the designated level of co-stewardship. The Agency should take appropriate action to ensure that it identifies co-stewardship opportunities at the land planning level as well, such as incorporating Tribal priorities into the designation and management of resource management areas, and prioritizing agency actions (such as habitat restoration projects) that are proposed by Tribes. Definitions are needed for “cooperate” and “collaborate” to ensure the actions included in these activities are aligned with SO 3403.

Special Status Species

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 97: We prefer Alternative B/C/D with the following modifications: “Ensure that special status species (BLM-Utah sensitive, federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate plant, *vertebrate*, or *invertebrate* are recovering and support sustainable populations and the diversity of habitats in GSENM.” The text as written was confusing: fish are animals, after all. By editing this to say vertebrate and invertebrate, it is clear that mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, and amphibians will be included, as well as invertebrate species like arachnids, insects, and mollusks.

Row 98: We prefer Alternative B/C/D with the following modifications: “Protect and recover special status species (BLM-Utah sensitive, federally listed threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate plant, *vertebrate*, or *invertebrate* habitats and populations. Actively promote recovery to the point that provisions of the ESA are no longer required or to avoid a need to list them under the ESA.” See justification for Row 97.

Row 101: Actions to support sustainable populations of special status species. In order to truly protect native habitat for special status species, we suggest adopting the language in Alternative D revised as follows: “Maintain, enhance, and/or restore native habitat through vegetation management or other actions to support sustainable populations of special status species, prioritizing natural processes and techniques over other methods and utilizing the best available science for such species.” The goal is to provide flexibility while ensuring that the least disruptive, science-based actions take place. This is important because 1) the outcome of natural processes are likely to have better ecological integration and fewer unintended consequences (such as spread of non-native species or soil compaction from heavy machinery), and 2) natural processes require less upfront investment and less continued maintenance.

Rows 107, 110, and 112: Avoidance. Please define “avoidance” of surface use or disturbance activities that would impact nesting raptors and songbirds, or other special status species. How is avoidance different from prohibition? What are the criteria to be considered that would determine whether such activities would go ahead?

Row 105: ROWs. Adopt the language in Alternative D but omit the exclusion of areas open to ROWs. If a proposed ROW contains locations or critical habitat for a special status species or, in the case of plants,

their pollinators, an alternate location should be found. Proper protection of Monument objects should take precedence over ROWs.

Visual Resources

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 12: Temporary Projects. The language for Alternative C allows temporary projects such as research projects to exceed VRM standards in Class II and III areas if the project terminates within 2 years of initiation. It also states that rehabilitation will begin at the end of the 2-year period and the manager may require phased mitigation to better conform with prescribed VRM objectives. We suggest that clear parameters and criteria for temporary projects be defined in the final MMP and that limits to how the standards described for Class II and III areas can be exceeded. We also suggest that any known mitigation measures needed are implemented at the beginning of each temporary project.

Dark Night Skies

As Proclamation 10286 and the draft RMP/EIS recognize, extraordinary dark night skies are one of the Monument's premier natural resources that must be protected. We support Alternative C and the management direction to seek International Dark Sky Place status. The draft plan points to best management practices (BMPs) for controlling standards for dark sky management, but the draft plan does not clearly spell out what those BMPs would be. We suggest identifying which practices will be employed by the BLM in the final MMP and encourage the inclusion of all BMPs applicable to ensuring that the dark night skies are protected. We also encourage working with adjacent property owners and community members to provide night sky education and prevent light pollution from adjacent lands.

Natural Soundscapes

Proclamation 10286 recognizes that "The Grand Staircase-Escalante area also provides a remarkable natural soundscape with infrequent human-caused sounds. From popular recreational destinations to remote, isolated locations, acoustic baseline research has found that some of the quietest conditions found in protected areas across the United States can be found in the Grand Staircase-Escalante landscape." Protection of natural quiet, a Monument ROV, requires plan direction designed to limit human-caused noise from allowed uses and actions. The final MMP should include management direction for the development of a soundscape management plan that includes a schedule for soundscape monitoring; a plan for working with local community businesses and government agencies to sustain natural soundscapes; and a public education campaign to educate visitors about the importance of natural soundscapes to wildlife and human health.

Fire Management

Fire is a natural ecological driver, but one that is expected to become more prevalent under future climate scenarios. Allowing for the natural ecological functions of wildfire while simultaneously protecting Monument ROVs will be a management challenge, considering differing needs across the landscape and seasonal/yearly climatic variation. Scientific research should be conducted to better understand the long-term history of fire on GSENM, how historic policies of fire suppression may have led to vegetation change (e.g., encroachment of pinyon-juniper woodlands), the relative and differing ecological effects of wildfire versus mechanical vegetation treatments (such as hydro-axe or lop-and-scatter), and how fire regimes may be altered under plausible future climate scenarios. BLM should identify priority areas in need of prescribed burn or where fire would result in a beneficial ecological outcome. Existing research should also be used to determine fire risks, such as this research in the Quaternary Science Reviews that

indicates that the GSENM landscape, in P/J/S ecosystem, is not conducive to fire, but rather it is the cheatgrass and other invasive species: Quaternary Science Reviews: D'Andrea et al. 2023. *Climate and human impact on vegetation and fire in an arid Colorado Plateau ecosystem in Western North America.*

Alternative Recommendations:

Row 140: Restoring landscapes. We suggest revising the language from Alternative B/C/D as follows: “Rehabilitate and restore landscapes after wildland fire, *with the aim of restoring native functional vegetative communities.*” Restoration should go beyond soil stabilization and reseeded to include the reestablishment of plant functional groups that provide necessary ecosystem services that existed pre-fire and that support a healthy and diverse natural ecosystem. BLM should prioritize the use of natural processes and materials, including native seeds, in post-fire restoration.

Lands with Wilderness Characteristics

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 138: Managing LWCs in primitive and outback areas. We request that the BLM modify the language in Row 138 with a combination of Alternative C and Alternative D: “Manage LWCs in the primitive and outback areas to protect lands with wilderness characteristics while providing for compatible uses; manage LWCs in the passage area to minimize impacts on wilderness characteristics while providing for compatible uses that are consistent with the protection of GSENM objects; and manage LWCs in front country areas for other compatible uses while not protecting wilderness characteristics.” This allows the BLM to manage units within both the primitive and outback areas for protection of LWCs, to manage portions of LWC units within the passage area (where more disturbance can be expected to occur and where impacts to LWCs are not likely to disqualify a unit for size issues) to minimize impacts to LWCs, and then, as currently planned in Alternative C, to continue to manage LWC in the front country area for discretionary use while not protecting LWCs. This protects overall unit integrity, the highest-quality units where solitude, naturalness, and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are abundant, and adds predictability and consistency on the ground to BLM’s management of the Monument.

Forestry and Woodland Products

In addition to the definition for “old-growth trees” provided in the glossary, we request that “mature trees” be clearly defined in the final MMP and the plan includes examples of measures that may be taken to ensure old-growth and mature tree retention and their benefits for bird and wildlife habitat as well as carbon sequestration. In addition, noncommercial harvest of forestry and woodland products should be limited to only those activities that further the protection of GSENM objects and/or are essential to Tribal culture and/or traditions.

Livestock Grazing

We support Alternative C for its potential to protect Monument objects and ask the BLM to work with Tribes and other partners to ensure that culturally significant resources and other objects identified by the Tribes, such as significant plants, springs and cultural sites are protected from the impacts of livestock grazing.

Recreation

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 194: Conflicts with Monument Resources. We recommend modifying the objective to state the following: “Manage recreation management to prevent conflicts with Monument resources in accordance with prescriptions in Appendix E, which shall be subject to review every three years to ensure that they are adequately protecting Monument ROVs based on new findings and inclusion of Traditional Ecological Knowledge.” Second, modify Appendix E by adding a provision that clearly states that protection of Monument ROVs shall be the primary management focus (as established in Proclamations 6920 and 10296) in specially designated areas, and recreation related activities shall be allowed only to the extent they are compatible with care and management of Monument ROVs.

Travel and Transportation Management

Due to confusion in the RMP/EIS about approved travel routes within GSENM, we request that the BLM clarify in the final Monument Management Plan (MMP) that until travel management planning is completed, the route designations in the 2000 MMP still apply. Motorized use in the Monument is authorized only on those routes that have been specifically designated for such use. BLM has been operating under the original Travel Plan (TMP) conducted during the first Monument management plan process, completed in 2000 which limits motorized and mechanized travel to 888 miles of designated routes. In 2020, BLM analyzed and designated as open to motorized travel two additional routes through implementation-level route evaluations and analysis during the NEPA process. As such, motorized travel is only authorized on the 888 miles designated in 2000 and the two additional routes designated in 2020. In addition to making the designated travel routes clear, we suggest the following changes to what is proposed in the draft RMP/EIS: 1) Close Inchworm Arch Road to motorized travel as suggested in Alternative D and 2) returning the V Road to administrative access only, also listed in Alternative D. In order to protect ROVs and the objects within these ROVs, travel management planning needs to be done with those specific resources and objects identified. It is unclear still how the BLM has inventoried/mapped these objects that need to be considered. In addition, in order to protect soundscapes (an ROV listed in Proclamation 10286) there should be restrictions on all new landing and takeoff areas for aircraft.

Future Travel Planning: Travel management planning should establish a process for reviewing existing and proposed travel routes and identify those that are (or could in the future) create impacts for bird and wildlife habitat, cultural sites, or fossil sites and other ROVs listed in the Proclamation 6920 and Proclamation 10286. Protecting the ROVs must be prioritized for all designated or proposed travel routes.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs)

Warm Creek and Willis Creek: We recommend ACEC designations for Warm Creek and Willis Creek (with Lick Wash). ACEC designation is warranted for both under the criteria for relevance and importance as defined in 43 CFR 1610.7 and BLM Manual 1613, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (BLM 1988). They both meet criteria with rare plant species, sensitive or otherwise significant animals, documented archaeological resources, and scenic values. Lick Wash alone has six disjunct, endemic, or BLM Sensitive plants within a two-mile canyon. These areas continue to receive increased visitation and would benefit from additional protections under ACEC designation. Furthermore, without a

Cultural Resources Management Plan in place or input from the Tribes about the strategies for protecting archaeological resources, ACEC designation is the best option to prevent damage or loss of these resources.

Science

In addition to the recommendations below, we advocate for the creation of a Climate Change Adaptation Plan that recognizes the need for climate adaptation over mitigation in planning for predicted future climate change on the Monument. This plan should consider species migrations, changes in species composition, extinctions, novel habitat types, invasive species, and changes to underlying environmental conditions (precipitation, hydrology, temperature, etc.), possible impacts on cultural sites and traditional practices, and would take into account predicted climate change in GSENM, the long term viability (100 years) of populations and occurrences of conservation targets, using assessments and the most recent available scientific literature. Predicted changes should be considered against the R-A-D (Resist-Accept-Direct) framework, in which actions and interventions that work toward the building and establishment of new modes of environmental and ecological adaptation are prioritized, rather than struggling to maintain historic modes that are no longer viable under a changing climate.

Alternatives Recommendations:

Row 293: Expert input and peer review. We support Alternative B/C/D but recommend the following addition: “Ensure best available scientific information and indigenous knowledge are the foundation for all management decisions. Utilize input from expert panels and peer review by qualified individuals when developing scientific guidelines for management decisions.” Leveraging expert input and peer review in the development of guidelines for management will improve transparency as well as the quality and longevity of science-based guidelines. This will also strengthen partnerships between BLM and the research community and foster more opportunities for collaborative science.

Although western science and indigenous Knowledge overlap, they are different domains of knowledge generation and Indigenous Knowledge should be integrated into management decision making to the maximum extent possible in consultation with Tribes. Importantly, and in contrast to scientific knowledge, Indigenous Knowledge must only be used and shared in a manner consistent with Tribal wishes.

Row 294: Research projects. We support Alt B/C/D. In a changing world and as the first science national monument specifically designated for science, it is the BLM’s responsibility to maintain a commitment to protection of Monument objects and values, and creativity and intellectual innovation in the process of doing so. We look forward to the research that will be done in the monument in the service of protecting Monument objects and values.

Row 295: Applied, and indigenous research. We support Alt B/C/D/ with the following modifications (in italics): “Prioritize inventory of and basic, *applied, and indigenous* research on GSENM objects in danger of being lost over short timeframes (100 years or less) over those that are more stable in the long term.”

Row 296: Basic and applied science and indigenous research. We support Alternatives B/C/D, with the following modifications (in italics): “Actively promote basic and applied science on GSENM resources and objects and disseminate the findings of such research. *Actively promote indigenous research on GSENM resources and objects and support the dissemination findings as appropriate and in consultation with indigenous knowledge holders.*” Basic research is important for fulfilling the vision of GSENM as a living laboratory where we can discover fundamental truths about our planet and life on Earth. However, applied research may more likely lead to the critical information we need to make management decisions under changing circumstances. Indigenous research is an important part of basic

and applied understanding of our environment, and also connects to traditional knowledge generation and sovereignty—it is a crucial part of Tribal co-stewardship. Applied science and indigenous research should also be integrated into the science plan.

Row 297: Group sizes. We support Alternative B/C/D. Group sizes for research can vary because many individuals are needed to conduct the work, and also for educational purposes. The duration of research is also highly dependent on the project. The flexibility to increase group sizes and camping stays is thus important for successful research and education.

Row 298: Science plan reviews. We support Alternative B/C/D but suggest the following modifications (in italics): “Maintain a GSENM Science Plan that directs the administration of a science program and is informed by Indigenous Knowledge. *The science plan and program will be periodically reviewed by qualified scientists and by indigenous representatives.*”

Science and Indigenous Knowledge are not static bodies of information and so periodic review of the science plan by qualified scientists and indigenous representatives is necessary to ensure that the Science Plan and program remain current and timely. We suggest that the initial science plan be developed in partnership with Tribal representatives and qualified scientists.

Grand Staircase Escalante Partners (GSEP): NHPA Section 106 Consulting Party Status Comments for GSENM Draft RMP/EIS

It is unclear from the draft RMP/EIS for GSENM how the BLM intends to work directly with the Tribes to ensure meaningful consultation regarding the selection and management of historic sites. Without knowing more details about how the implementation level plans (e.g., cultural resource, co-stewardship) will be developed with Tribes or what these plans will include, the following points continue to be a concern that we would like addressed in the RMP/EIS. Some of these concerns were also shared in our comments submitted during scoping.

Missing data for site consideration and management:

As we (GSEP) understand it (from conversations with BLM Archaeologists Matthew Zweifel and Doug McFadden), an estimated 5-7% of GSENM has been inventoried for culturally significant sites. In addition, almost all existing survey information is over 10 years old. Following the completion of a 2022 cultural resource inventory supported by GSEP and the BLM and conducted by the Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) at Collet Top, it was discovered that the area surveyed had “an extremely high site density, even greater than what has been found in nearby survey blocks and greater than anticipated” (MNA). It was also reported that at least two sites had historic components. These survey results indicate a need to dedicate resources to develop a plan in partnership with the Native American Tribes to complete Section 110 surveys throughout GSENM. Known sites that should be given extra attention include all historic properties close to trails and roads that are vulnerable to impacts from human and animal disturbance as well as impacts of climate change. The determination about how to protect and manage culturally vital and sensitive properties should be done in consultation with all Tribes with known connections to GSENM.

Missing ethnographic, scientific, or cultural data or information:

“Tribal perspectives are extremely rare in any of the reports synthesized in this overview, and hence they are sorely lacking in the following discussions.” *Deep Roots: A 10,000-Year Indigenous History of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument* by Jerry D. Spangler and Matthew K. Zweifel.

This statement from the *Deep Roots* publication is a call to action for the BLM, which argues for more Tribal engagement and consultation to increase their representation in the future. Tribal voices, perspectives, and knowledge are essential to our ability to protect and care for culturally vital historic sites.

In order to understand and manage historic properties with cultural significance for the Tribes, the following data gaps must be addressed in consultation with Tribes.

Ethnographies: Both the BLM and the Tribes with identified connections to this landscape have articulated a need for ethnographies. Ethnographies could provide critical information about how to best manage cultural resources and sacred sites within the monument, and completion of ethnographies driven by consultation with the Tribes should be included as part of land management plans.

Cultural Resource Inventories: There is a lack of detailed information about the cultural resources within the monument and therefore the management plan and all Section 106 agreements should

include provisions for completing additional cultural resource surveys in consultation with the Tribes and ensuring that Tribes have input regarding if/when a new survey is warranted.

Proposed Management Actions:

Based on language in the [2020 State Protocol Agreement between the BLM and the State Historic Preservation Office \(SHPO\)](#), there is little to no required meaningful consultation with Tribes on selection and management of historic properties with cultural significance, or the management of BLM projects that may impact these properties.

Without meaningful consultation with Tribes regarding the identification, assessment, protections, and management of historic properties with cultural significance, all management actions carry the risk of adversely affecting historic properties of importance to the Tribes and the cultural significance of these properties.

Recommendations:

The Protocol Agreement (regarding the manner in which the Bureau of Land Management will meet its responsibilities under the National Historic Preservation Act) and all policies and implementation plans included in the GSENM RMP that are related to NHPA should be updated in consultation with the Tribes and be responsive to the Memorandums of Understanding and Secretarial Order Issued by the Biden Administration as well as tribal input received during the planning process for this RMP.

- [Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\) regarding Interagency coordination and collaboration for the Protection of Indigenous Sacred Sites](#)
- [Tribal Treaty rights MOU and related to co-management of federal lands with Tribes and DOI](#) • Direction for implementing provisions of Joint Secretary's Order 3403 (SO 3403), Fulfilling the Trust Responsibility to Indian Tribes in the Stewardship of Federal Lands and Waters. [BLM guidance \(Permanent Instruction Memorandum 2022-011\)](#)
- [National Cultural Resources Procedures Handbook](#)

The following is a relevant excerpt from the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition Land Management Plan that describes the importance of the inclusion of Traditional Knowledge (led by the Tribes) during the process of assessing eligibility for historic properties as well as identifying, evaluating, assessing, and resolving adverse effects to historic properties of religious and cultural significance:

Although the term “traditional knowledge” is not defined in the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) or its implementing regulations, its role in the Section 106 process is obviated by the requirement, at 36 CFR Section 800.4, that agency officials “acknowledge that Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations (NHOs) possess special expertise in assessing the eligibility of historic properties that may possess religious and cultural significance to them.” Traditional knowledge is an integral part of that special expertise. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) applies the term “traditional knowledge,” for purposes of Section 106, to the information or knowledge held by Indian tribes and NHOs and used for identifying, evaluating, assessing, and resolving adverse effects to historic properties of religious and cultural significance to them (ACHP 2021:1)

Concerns and recommendations related to protocols for assessing for adverse impacts and protecting historic properties:

Throughout the State Protocol Agreement Between the Bureau of Land Management Utah and the Utah State Historic Preservation Office published in 2020, the guidance outlined for if, when, and how to take

action to protect historic properties fails to recognize the important role the Tribes play in these determinations. This is relevant to these comments because the agreement has an impact on the protection and management of historic properties with cultural significance for Tribes and it is unclear how/when the Cultural Resource Management Plan will be completed and what will be included in that plan. The agreement essentially provides a decision tree without whole cultures impacted by the decisions being at the table to build the decision tree.

For example, under Section III. PROCEDURES FOR CONSIDERATION OF EFFECTS TO HISTORIC PROPERTIES FROM BLM UNDERTAKINGS, the agreement outlines identification methods for Areas of Potential Effects (APEs), including (1) Review Existing information, (2) Desktop Review, (3) Seek Additional Information, (4) Conduct Surveys, and (5) Survey Exemptions. Tribal input is only required if/when the BLM determines, in partnership with SHPO, that their input (through a severely limited definition of consultation) is warranted.

In addition, there is a significant lack of information available to carry out the objectives listed in the agreement and insufficient policies included to protect sensitive information.

1. Lack of information and consultation with Tribes: As previously mentioned, an estimated 5-7% of GSENM has been inventoried, therefore the existing information to review is insufficient to make determinations within an APE. In addition, almost all existing survey information is over 10 years old and the description to use this data to make determinations throughout the 106 process is articulated in the agreement as follows “If the agency official determines that the prior survey information is adequate to identify historic properties, no survey is needed. In cases where the agency official will be using field surveys that may be approximately 10-years or older in replacement of conducting a new survey, informal consultation (e.g., phone call or email) with the SHPO is required. After such consultation, the BLM may conclude that the previous survey is adequate, needs supplementation, or is not adequate.” This language in the agreement does not require consultation with Tribes regarding potential impacts to sites that are vital to their cultures and family histories and needs to be revised in consultation with the Tribes.

2. Lack of consideration of tribal perspectives and cultures: The agreement between the Bureau of Land Management and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) provides discretion for the DFO and SHPO to make decisions related to how historic sites that are culturally important to Tribes are identified and protected, but it does not provide any discretion to the Tribes. For example, in the agreement it states “Field Manager Discretion: If areas are difficult to access for topographical, geological, ecological, or safety reasons, such areas may be exempted from survey. However, a good faith and reasonable effort should be made to visually assess these areas by aerial photographs, binoculars, spotting scopes, etc. and include background research such as described in Section 111.D...” Much of GSENM is difficult to access, and therefore a large degree of discretion will be afforded to the field manager. And, as it currently stands, the Tribes do not have an opportunity to weigh in on these critical decisions about the historic sites that are vital to their cultures.

Recommendations:

- Create a new agreement done in consultation with the Tribes using the resources and directives listed under question 4. above and provide financial compensation for Tribes to participate in this process.
- Ensure that there are opportunities and mechanisms in place to ensure that decision making includes meaningful tribal input regarding if, how, when to conduct surveys.
- Ensure that all implementation level plans (e.g., Cultural Resource Management Plan, Co-

Stewardship Plan) include tribal consultation to determine identification, management, monitoring of culturally significant historic sites.

3. Lack of protections for sensitive information: The agreement allows for the sharing of sensitive information without consultation with Tribes or a formal agreement with Tribes about if or how this information is shared. For example, the agreement states: “A Governor of any state may make a written request to receive certain otherwise protected information about resources in his or her state as long as he or she commits to adequately protect the confidentiality of such information to protect the resource from commercial exploitation.” There is no definition provided for what is required to “adequately protect confidentiality” or assurances to the Tribes about how sites that are culturally vital to them, will be protected.

- **Recommendation:** Consult with Tribes on all information-sharing policies and procedures and incorporate the findings from this consultation into a new agreement between the BLM, SHPO, and the Tribes.