

BROWNS CANYON WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

The Study Area– 6,614 acres

The Browns Canyon WSA (CO -050-002) is located in Chaffee County approximately 6 miles south of Buena Vista and 7 miles northwest of Salida. The north and south borders of the WSA go through BLM lands and were delineated during the inventory process to exclude a roadway and a narrow area with no outstanding wilderness qualities, respectively. Beginning in the southwest corner of the WSA, the western boundary follows the eastern edge of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad right-of-way which is 100 feet from the track center line. North of the point where the track crosses the Arkansas River, the boundary follows the water's edge along the east bank of the river until reaching T.15S.R.78W. The boundary leaves the water's edge in this section and follows a legal subdivision line between public and private lands until it reaches the northwest corner of the WSA. The WSA is bounded on the east by the San Isabel National Forest. These lands are shown on the map.

The WSA varies in elevation from about 7,400 feet along the Arkansas River to about 9,000 feet near the eastern boundary. Topography of the area is very rugged with many mountains, canyons and gulches. Drainages generally cross the WSA in an east to west direction and empty into the Arkansas River. Overstory vegetation is mostly pinon pine and juniper on the lower slopes with some ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir in the higher elevations and more sheltered coves. Broadleaf species including aspen, willow and cottonwood also occur in scattered pockets within the drainages. Understory vegetation includes rabbitbrush, blue gamma grass, mountain muhly, Indian ricegrass, prickly pear cactus, cholla and yucca.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Canon City District Wilderness Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) published in December, 1987. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS; all wilderness which is the recommendation of this report, and a no wilderness alternative.

Recommendation and Rationale

-6,614 acres recommended for wilderness

-0 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The entire Browns Canyon WSA is recommended for wilderness designation. This is the environmentally preferable alternative as it will result in the least change from the natural environment over the long-term.

In recommending this WSA for wilderness designation, the area's spectacular scenery and the outstanding opportunities it offers for primitive, unconfined recreation and solitude were primary considerations. The rugged topography and groupings of vegetation within the WSA create a variety of settings ranging from canyons and gulches with enclosed intimate qualities to open ridgetops with sweeping views of the Arkansas River valley and the nearby Sawatch Mountain range, the highest group of peaks in the Rockies. Numerous rock spires located throughout the area make Browns Canyon particularly scenic. The WSA's relatively low elevation and proximity to a major highway also make it accessible for recreation activities during the winter season when nearby high-elevation wilderness areas cannot be reached by most potential users.

Designation of this WSA as wilderness will enhance the recreation experiences of users along the adjacent Browns Canyon segment of the Arkansas River by ensuring that a pristine wilderness backdrop will be maintained along the eastern side of the river corridor. Browns Canyon is the most popular white water rafting area in Colorado and received approximately 90,000 visitor days of use during 1990. To help foster an interest and appreciation of wilderness values among these users, the *Arkansas River Recreation Management Plan* calls for developing wilderness interpretive displays at trailheads adjacent to the WSA if it is designated as wilderness.

There has been strong public support for designating the Browns Canyon WSA as wilderness throughout the review process. During formal review of the Draft EIS, 41 of 44 commenters supported wilderness designation, while none favored releasing the area from wilderness consideration. Wilderness designation would help protect the area's diverse natural qualities. The WSA represents a transition zone between semi-arid pinon/juniper woodlands and the Rocky Mountain pine/Douglas-fir forest. Due in part to its remoteness and rugged topography, this WSA is important habitat for numerous wildlife species such as mule deer, mountain lion and bighorn sheep, and several species of raptors including redtailed hawk and prairie falcon. The rocky cliffs, remoteness, and abundance of prey combine to make this WSA suitable habitat for the endangered peregrine falcon which the Colorado Division of Wildlife plans to reintroduce into the area.

No major resource conflicts or manageability problems would result from wilderness designation. There are 9 mining claims (post FLPMA) located in the northwest portion of the WSA. However, surveys completed by the U.S. Geological Survey and Bureau of Mines indicate minimal mineral potential. The two existing grazing allotments have received little use in the past and are considered marginal for grazing because of the rough terrain, limited forage, and because the railroad tracks which parallel the area are unfenced and pose a danger to livestock.

Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

Naturalness

The Browns Canyon WSA is predominantly natural with negligible human imprints. Topography of the area is rugged with many mountains, canyons and gulches. Vegetation consists primarily of pinon and juniper with some ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir in the higher elevations. Mountain daisy, scarlet gilia, early larkspur and a number of other wildflowers bloom in the area during the spring and summer months.

The majority of human imprints, associated with past mining activities and access routes, were excluded from the WSA during the wilderness inventory process. A few small abandoned mine sites and old cabin foundations remain in the southeastern and northcentral portions of the area, however, these are generally not visible from more than 75 feet because of topographic and vegetative screening. An old way enters the northwest corner of the WSA near Ruby Mountain

and crosses portions of the Middle Cottonwood and Cottonwood Gulches before exiting through the western boundary. The way is approximately 3 miles long and was legally closed in 1976. About three-quarters of a mile of the way is cut and filled, but the disturbance is not visible except from the immediate site.

Solitude

The Browns Canyon WSA offers outstanding opportunities for solitude. Canyons and gulches including Middle Cottonwood Gulch, Cottonwood Gulch, Spring Gulch, Sawmill Gulch and Green Gulch block out sights and sounds and create many private settings. In addition, the vegetation screens other uses and provides opportunities for seclusion and intimacy. Sounds from the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad tracks can sometimes be heard up to a mile within the WSA. However, they are generally not perceptible from within the side canyons.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The Browns Canyon WSA, with its rugged topography and spectacular views, contains outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The numerous gulches provide access for hiking, backpacking, horseback riding and snowshoeing. The way which connects Middle Cottonwood Gulch with Cottonwood Gulch provides a three mile loop trail. The 14,000 foot peaks of the Sawatch range, located directly west of the WSA, provide a majestic background for photography and scenery viewing.

Many opportunities exist in the area for viewing birds and wildlife. Numerous species of songbirds and raptors have been identified in the WSA. These include the cliff swallow, warbler, Canada jay, mourning dove, robin, flicker, magpie, bluejay, nighthawk (migratory), raven, great horned owl, screech owl, saw whet owl, Swainson's hawk (migratory), prairie falcon, redtail hawk, golden eagle and turkey vulture. Mammals found within the WSA include mountain lion, bighorn sheep, mule deer, bobcat, black bear, several varieties of ground and tree squirrels, cottontail rabbit, raccoon and an occasional elk.

The numerous rock outcroppings are outstanding features of the WSA and serve as interesting subjects for geology study, photography and climbing. The outcrops include rounded formations composed of softer granites and sharper-edged formations made up of hard, less decomposed granite. The Ruby Mountain area is very popular among rock hounds who search for garnet, topaz and black obsidian nodules commonly called Apache tears.

Special Features

Although the Arkansas River is not inside the WSA, it has an obvious interrelationship with the area. The river contains an outstanding brown trout fishery. The Browns Canyon section of the Arkansas is also the most popular whitewater rafting area in Colorado receiving over 90,000 visitor days of boating use annually. The naturalness of the WSA enhances the recreation experiences of those using the river. Several areas along the river in the northwest corner of the WSA are popular lunch stops for boaters.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife has determined that the Browns Canyon WSA is excellent habitat for the endangered peregrine falcon which it plans to introduce into the area. The WSA also contains a herd of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep and may contain a plant species (*Ergonium brandegi*) found in only two other locations.

Two aspects of the WSA contribute to its importance for cultural values. First, it is located in the intermountain region between two major prehistoric cultural areas-the Great Basin and the plains. Second, the Arkansas River valley offered a wealth of resources and habitats and a transportation route for prehistoric people. The area surrounding the WSA contains a high concentration of archaeological artifacts spanning a period from 10,000 years ago up to the historic period. Recent surveys completed by BLM archaeologists indicate that the WSA itself has a high probability of containing significant sites.

Balancing the geographic distribution of wilderness areas

The Browns Canyon WSA would not contribute to balancing the geographic distribution of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System. The WSA can be reached within one hour of driving from four designated or administratively recommended wilderness areas including the Sangre De Cristo WSA (188, 362 acres recommended), Collegiate Peaks Wilderness (80,000 acres), Hunter-Frying Pan Wilderness (72,450 acres) and Mount Massive Wilderness (26,000 acres). All of these areas are administered by the U.S. Forest Service.

Manageability

Browns Canyon WSA can be reasonably managed to preserve its wilderness character. The area does not contain any inholdings, therefore, there are no potential access right of way problems. Manageability would be enhanced because physical access is limited by the Arkansas River to the west and rugged topography to the east and south. In the past the WSA has received backcountry vehicle use along a way traversing the area. However, this should not cause any significant problems since it would not be difficult to restrict the access points.

Currently there are nine mining claims totaling 180 acres within the WSA. However, except for a perlite deposit on the east side of Ruby Mountain, the entire WSA is considered low in mineral potential. It is not expected that this site would be developed because of the small size of the perlite deposit, lack of nearby processing facilities, and since only one of the claims is located near this deposit.

Energy and Mineral Resource Values

The Geological Survey and Bureau of Mines prepared a mineral resources assessment for the Browns Canyon WSA in 1983 and 1984. The perlite deposit on the west side of Ruby Mountain is suitable for use as a lightweight aggregate. However, prospecting in the area has not revealed any other significant mineral deposits. Geological, geochemical and geophysical studies indicate low potential for undiscovered mineral resources and oil and gas deposits.

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Designation of the WSA as wilderness would have negligible impacts on local economic conditions. It is highly unlikely that an additional annual mineral extraction of large enough proportion would occur to significantly affect Chaffee County income and employment. Social factors were not considered a significant issue in the study.

Summary of WSA Specific Public Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Certain comments received during the inventory process and early stages of the EIS were used to develop significant study issues and various alternatives for the ultimate management of those lands with wilderness values. A total of 22 comments were received during the inventory stage, with 17 supporting WSA designation, 3 against WSA designation and 2 with no position.

During formal review of the Draft EIS, a total of 44 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Of these, 35 were written and 9 were received at 4 public hearings on the EIS. In general, 41 comments supported wilderness designation while none favored releasing the area from further wilderness consideration. Three commenters took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Some of those favoring wilderness designation commented on the rugged nature of the area, its varied animal and plant life, opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation, and accessibility to metropolitan areas. Others cited that the semi-arid ecosystem of Browns Canyon WSA is not well represented elsewhere in the wilderness system, or that the terrain is too rugged for economical development of the limited mineral and timber resources. A final commenter listed that wilderness designation would increase the popularity of the Arkansas River as a rafting area and thereby support the local economy.

The Colorado Natural Heritage Inventory stated that this WSA could potentially contain a plant species (*Ergonium brandegei*) found in only two other localities. The Colorado Department of Corrections indicated concern that restricted vehicle access could hamper apprehension of escaped inmates while the Chaffee County Sheriff cited that restricted access could also hamper search and rescue operations and the removal of downed plane wreckage.

No comments specifically addressing this WSA were received from federal or local agencies during the official comment period on the Draft EIS. However, after the EIS was finalized, the City of Colorado Springs expressed concern that designation of the area as wilderness could affect their water rights if a segment of the Arkansas River were included within the WSA boundary.

Although the Arkansas River makes up a portion of the WSA's western border, no part of the river is included within the area. A complete boundary description can be found in *The Study Area* section.