The San Juan River

The San Juan River is a place of spiritual powers, cultural teachings, and a sacred understanding of the natural environment.

◆ The San Juan River remains an active cultural site on the landscape.
◆ The San Juan River is still revered today as a place for many Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs). TCPs include the river corridor’s rock art, trails, shrines, and archaeological sites. Not as easily seen, but equally important, are the ceremonial practices, plant gathering, oral tradition, and vision quests that are still practiced today.
◆ The sites may appear unused, but they are just as important today as they were hundreds of years ago.

How to Care for the Landscape

Although this beautiful river appears to have been forgotten through time, it continues to be a place of great importance and cultural identity. Please respect the archaeological sites by enjoying with your eyes and cameras only.

Enjoy the sites and rock art, but touching or removing any material, natural or human, is against the law.

Artifacts still belong to and encompass spiritual meaning for today’s native people.

The smallest crumb of microtrash can draw insects, which may attract larger animals that can damage the archeological sites and river ecology.

• Do not climb on the sites.
• Do not touch or rub the rock art.
• Do not remove any natural or human-made artifacts.
• Do not trespass on the Navajo Reservation, the left side of the river bank.
• Do not leave trash at any point along the river.
• Do carry out all human waste.
• Do camp only at designated sites and avoid camping on top of vegetation.
• Do use a camp stove instead of a campfire and carry out all ash.

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For more information:
For more information about San Juan River trips at Northern Arizona University, visit NAU Outdoors at http://home.nau.edu/outdoors.

To learn more about the Department of Anthropology at Northern Arizona University, visit http://home.nau.edu/sbs/anthro.

The San Juan River is managed by the Bureau of Land Management, Monticello Field Office. To learn more about the BLM’s work on the San Juan, visit http://www.blm.gov/ut/st/en/fo/monticello.html

Other Publications


History of Human Inhabitation

The San Juan River has experienced a 12,000 year history of human use and occupation.

10,000 BC: Clovis Hunters, the first verifiable group of humans identified in North America, arrived at the San Juan to track mammoths and mastodons.

8,000 BC: The Folsom culture hunted the ancestors of modern-day buffalo along the San Juan.

1500 BC to 1300 AD: Ancient Puebloan People, or Hisatsinom, ancestors of the modern Hopi and other Pueblo cultures, inhabited the region. This group cultivated corn, beans and squash. The Ancient Puebloan People created extraordinary basketwork.

12th Century: Chaco Canyon ceased to be the center of the Ancient Publoan culture, most likely due to extensive resource depletion, including timber, and socio-political tensions.

16th Century: Utes and Paiutes arrived along the San Juan. The Utes and Paiutes formed numerous, nomadic bands, instead of one cohesive group.

1500s – Present: The Navajo, or Diné, joined the Utes and Paiutes along the San Juan, living off of wild onions, turnips, threeneedle sumac, ricegrass, beeplant, and goosefoot to supplement their crops. The Navajo Nation currently occupies the land along river-left of the San Juan.

18th Century: Spanish arrival altered indigenous peoples’ relationship with the land and each other. Exploration, colonization, settlement, and trade impacted the land and Native ways of life. The Spanish introduced new technologies to Native Americans, including: livestock, foodstuffs, farming methods, tools, and guns, which were selectively incorporated into indigenous use.

1850s: Cattlemen interested in inexpensive grazing land arrived in the area. Mormons settled the region in search of a warm climate, religious freedom, and converts.

1890s: Gold miners arrived at the San Juan River. Mineral, oil, and gas extraction has been an inconsistent, but significant, part of the river’s history since this time.

1950s: Uranium boom increases resource extraction in the region.

Contemporary Human Impacts

Since the earliest settlement of the region, human inhabitants have continually competed for access to the rich riparian wealth offered by the San Juan.

Livestock
The presence of livestock within the riparian corridor increases the rate of erosion on riverbanks, significantly changing river habitats and reducing food availability for native species. Livestock can decrease the occurrence of certain plant species due to overgrazing and trampling, while perpetuating the growth of other, often invasive, species.

Resource Extraction: Timber, Mining, and Oil
Resource extraction practices can greatly affect the river ecosystem. Mine tailings impact the health of river flora and fauna. Increased sedimentation due to mineral and timber extraction compromises water quality and collects downstream, which increases the potential for flooding. The construction of roads and other infrastructure disrupts the habitat of native plants, animals, and fish, and increases the risk of landslides and slope erosion due to soil compaction.

Dammimg and Diverting
Navajo Dam, near Farmington, New Mexico, is located on the San Juan River. Dammimg increases sedimentation and alters the flow and temperature of the river. The populations of some native species, like the endangered Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker, have drastically declined. The San Juan Recovery Program is making progress towards protecting the fish.

Introduction of Non-Native Plant Species
Despite removal efforts, non-native species, including Russian olive and tamarisk, dominate the San Juan River shoreline. Invasives change the ecosystem by altering fire regimes, nutrient cycling, and river hydrology, and often reduce overall diversity of native species by outcompeting native varieties for water and space.

Recreation
Irresponsible camping, all-terrain vehicle use, and other recreational activities like rafting and hiking can decrease vegetation and wildlife diversity and abundance, as well as increase erosion through soil compaction and trampling. Recreationists should uphold “Leave No Trace” ethics while enjoying the San Juan.


Inside photos courtesy of the Cline Library Digital Archives at Northern Arizona University. Line illustration by Zack Zdinak. Front cover photo by Pam Mathues.