

San Juan River

Findings

INVENTORY UNIT ACRES		
Federal	State	Total
With Wilderness Characteristics		
14,200	500	14,700 (96%)
Without Wilderness Characteristics		
500	100	600 (4%)
Inventory Unit Total		
14,700	600	15,300
Contiguous Area-Wilderness Characteristics		
None		

Most of the San Juan River inventory unit (14,700 acres) has wilderness characteristics. The area is predominantly natural in appearance and offers outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation centered around the San Juan River. However, the western edge and several other small parts of the inventory unit (600 acres) are unnatural or otherwise lack wilderness characteristics because of the presence of old oil field developments, rights-of-way, or limestone quarrying.

Unit Description

The San Juan River inventory unit is located in south-central San Juan County 10 miles west of Bluff. The inventory unit boundary follows powerlines and an old road down to the San Juan River on the west, powerlines and a bladed semicircular road on the north, the road and vehicle way down Comb Wash to the San Juan River on the east, and the Navajo Indian Reservation boundary (the middle of the San Juan River) on the south. The terrain is dominated by Sugarloaf Butte (elevation

5,535 feet) and the 1,000-foot gorge of the San Juan River. Mormon tea and rabbitbrush, along with a variety of grasses, are the most common plants on the upland mesa. Near the San Juan River, saltbush and tamarisk are plentiful. Both Lime Creek and Comb Wash have groves of cottonwood as well as tamarisk.

Several mining claims exist within the inventory unit, but only a limestone quarry on state land shows any signs of activity. The upland mesa of the unit is grazed, with stock ponds being present as well as one underground water pipeline that links several stock developments near the center of the unit. There are several outstanding scenic views from the rim of the San Juan River gorge.

Wilderness Characteristics

Naturalness

Most of the unit appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature. However, the area from west of Lime Creek to the western boundary of the unit is unnatural in character because it is crossed by the old highway and several constructed routes that access plugged and abandoned oil wells. East of Lime Creek, an old route paralleling the San Juan River is not significantly noticeable, due in part to the route's extremely narrow construction. However, the plugged oil wells at the end of this route are a significant sign of human activity; the boundary of the unit excludes them. The north-central boundary delineating wilderness characteristics excludes a water pipeline, and two routes of approximately 1.25 and 1.75 miles in the same area have been cherry-stemmed from the unit. In addition, nearly a quarter section of State

land currently being used as a limestone quarry is unnatural in character. The eastern portion of the unit having wilderness characteristics excludes the buildings on the State land in Comb Wash.

Outstanding Opportunities

Solitude

The unit provides varied opportunities for solitude. The mesa tops are open and exposed but so infrequently visited that opportunities for solitude may exist. The area around Sugarloaf Butte is extremely rugged; here solitude is almost guaranteed. The opportunity for solitude in the San Juan River gorge is generally very high, lessened only by passing boaters.

Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

The unit provides varied opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The mesa top offers stunning scenic views of the San Juan River gorge. Sugarloaf Butte and the broken land around it offer ample challenge for any level of climbing skill. The San Juan River offers exceptional opportunities for rafting, kayaking, or canoeing.

Supplemental Values

The scenic quality of the unit is exceptionally high. Views of Monument Valley and the San Juan River are breathtaking. The central portion of the unit includes a hanging abandoned rincón formation from the river's past. The beautiful, complex erosional patterns of interbedded gray limestone and red mudstone around Sugarloaf Butte are visually striking.

SAN JUAN RIVER—The colorful formations of the Rapplee anticline are a striking feature within the inventory unit.



Jerry Sintz

San Juan River

