



Working to Manage the Trails

A massive project by the Bureau of Land Management documented some 900 miles of the West's most important historic trade and travel routes.

By Tamara Stewart

THE National Trails System consists of more than 800 national recreation trails and 11 scenic and 19 historic trails. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has the formidable task of managing over 5,340 miles of 11 of the national historic trails, including legendary ones such as El Camino Real and the Old Spanish Trail that cross some of the most rugged and least developed terrain in the West, areas increasingly targeted for proposed utility corridors, wind and solar farms, and oil and gas production facilities. Especially in southern Nevada and eastern California, much of the desert landscape along the trails is being eyed for energy development, putting the trails and their settings at risk.

Protecting these trails is all the more challenging because for long stretches there appears to be nothing to protect, as segments

This trail marker is found on the Old Spanish Trail in southern Nevada.

of the trails have essentially disappeared. “Most of the 2,700 mile route of the Old Spanish Trail holds little physical evidence of the passage of mule pack trail caravans today,” said Sarah Schlanger, the BLM’s associate manager for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah. “Although the traders made one or more round trips each year during the 20 years the trail was an economic force for the Mexican colonies, they left little behind.”

In addition to protecting the trails, one of the primary goals of the National Trails Systems Act, which was passed in 1968 and led to the creation of the trails system, “is to be able to provide visitors with high quality trail experiences, including the opportunity to experience historic landscapes that evoke the period of trail use,” according to Schlanger.

To fulfill these responsibilities, BLM used stimulus money from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) of 2009 to study some 900 miles of the Old Spanish Trail and five other historic trails that cross seven Western states. “The BLM has been working to develop bureau-wide trail management and administration policy and guidance, and saw the advent of ARRA funds as an opportunity to develop some much-needed baseline data for its two co-administered trails, El Camino Real and the Old Spanish Trail, and to field test some documentation methods that it could eventually apply for the benefit of trail management and administration,” said Schlanger, who was one of the project’s leaders. (The BLM co-administers the two trails with the National Park Service.)

She commended the “heads-up thinking” of BLM’s National Scenic and Historic Trails Lead Deb Salt and trails’ program managers in other states for developing a \$2.2 million proposal that led to the research, field inventory, and documentation of the hundreds of miles of trails. The project covered 367 miles of the Old Spanish Trail in California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado, and 28 miles of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (The Royal Road of the Interior Land) in New Mexico. It also covered 250 miles of the California and Oregon National Historic trails, 125 miles of the Pony Express Trail, and 115 miles of the Mormon Pioneer Trail, all of which are in Utah and Wyoming.

Congress has the authority to add new trails to the system, and when it adds a historical trail, the only thing that’s been verified is its historical significance. The condition of the trail and its associated resources and landscapes and the extent of its documentation may be unknown. “BLM, like other federal agencies, has been managing the trails under federal cultural resource law,” Schlanger said. “That law addresses responsibilities for historic resources, but does not address the protection of trail experiences.”

Prior to the ARRA-funded study, the BLM was meeting most management responsibilities on a project-by-project basis. “Consequently, we had good information on those sections of trails that were in the immediate path of development projects, but we hadn’t had much opportunity to step back and look at the trail resources on a trail-wide basis,” she said. With the stimulus money the BLM developed a



The BLM project covered six historic trails in seven Western states. This map shows where those trails began and ended. The segments of the trails that BLM studied are shown in black.



A trace of the Old Spanish Trail can be seen in the center of this picture, which was taken in west-central Colorado. This section of the trail, which began as a mule caravan route and later became a wagon road, are among the best preserved segments of the route.

systematic management program for the historic trails that incorporates identifying and documenting trail resources, including settings and viewsheds, and creating a database of this information.

“Protection of viewsheds is an important endeavor so that the public can gain an understanding of the vastness of the territory that the trail passed through and to get a sense of what it may have been like to be in a situation where you had only yourself and your traveling companions to ensure your safe passage for the hundreds of miles between northern New Mexico and southern California,” said Jon Horn, an archaeologist with Alpine Archaeological Consultants in Arizona, one of several firms hired by BLM to work on the Old Spanish Trail and other routes.

Working in consultation with historians, historic landscape architects, mapping and modeling experts, geographers, trail experts, and Native American and Hispanic groups, the BLM’s study included archival research to locate historic trail documents and maps; identifying and documenting physical traces of the trails and evaluating trail conditions; establishing a system for recording archaeological sites, trail segments, and associated features; and identifying and documenting trail-related cultural landscapes and their scenic quality. A separate effort to develop the Old Spanish Trail Comprehensive Management Plan has involved consultation with over

50 tribes and Hispanic communities with traditional ties to the lands the trail crossed.

The fieldwork, which was done between 2010 and 2011, was coordinated and largely carried out by the international environmental consulting firm AECOM, which subcontracted with Alpine Archaeological Consultants, Statistical Research, Inc., and Metcalf Archaeological Consultants for portions of the fieldwork and analysis. Experts from trails associations such as the Old Spanish Trail Association (OSTA) and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro Trail Association were also consulted for help in locating and identifying certain trail segments, such as the Old Spanish Trail’s famous “Crossing of the Fathers” route, which was first taken by Spanish missionaries in the 18th century and later used by traders crossing the Colorado River.

COVERING some 1,200 miles, the Old Spanish Trail had its heyday between 1829 and 1848, when it served as a mule-pack trade route linking Santa Fe, New Mexico, with Los Angeles, California. It was considered one of the country’s most arduous trails, crossing high mountains, arid deserts, and deep canyons. The trail is so named because Spanish Colonial missionaries and explorers used parts of it as early as the mid-1500s. Sections of the trail in southwest Colorado and southeast Utah were explored by

Juan María de Rivera in 1765 and by Franciscan missionaries Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante in 1776. From Santa Fe, the trail split into three routes: the North Branch, the Northern, and the Armijo routes. The North Branch Route proceeded north into Colorado's San Luis Valley, crossing west over Cochetopa Pass to follow the Gunnison and Colorado rivers to meet the Southern Branch near Green River. The Northern Route headed northwest past Colorado's San Juan Mountains to near Green River, Utah. The Armijo Route is named after Antonio Armijo, who took mule caravans over the Colorado River at the Crossing of the Fathers.

"There were few places to cross the Colorado River and Santa Fe merchant Antonio Armijo chose to cross at a site in Glen Canyon known as the Crossing of the Fathers used by the 1776 Dominguez-Escalante expedition which explored a route to Monterey, California, but (the expedition) ran out of time due to snow in Utah and then turned back to Santa Fe," explained former Arizona OSTA director Paul Ostapuk. While Lake Powell currently covers the likely location of the crossing site, OSTA members, in a project unrelated to the BLM's work, decided to explore the north and south approaches to the crossing that would still be above the lake's surface.

In 2006, James Page, president of the Armijo Chapter of the OSTA, took a group of volunteers to a site near Padre Bay where they thought the old trail might be found, and there they discovered an inscription: "Paso Por Aqui - Año 1776" (passed by here—year 1776), the only known recorded site related to the Dominguez-Escalante expedition. Experts have done extensive testing; including analysis of lead deposition and layers of desert varnish, to authenticate the inscription,

and the site is now under consideration for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

From central Utah, the Old Spanish Trail trended southwest, crossing southern Nevada and passing through the Mojave Desert to San Gabriel Mission and Los Angeles. The middle part of the trail that stretches through Nevada and California was blazed by trappers led by Jedediah Smith around 1827. In 1829, stitching together a southern variant of the route that connected those of earlier Spanish expeditions with Smith's explorations, Armijo led a party of 60 men and 100 mules to California, officially opening the trail to trade. After his return to Santa Fe, the governor of New Mexico announced his success, naming Armijo "Commander for the Discovery of the Route to California." Beginning in the 1830s, Mexican and later American traders brought their woolen goods west over the Old Spanish Trail by mule train, returning east with mules and horses from California for markets in New Mexico.

New Mexico-California trade continued along the trail into the mid-1850s, when a shift to freight wagons and the development of wagon trails made the old pack trail route obsolete. In the 1850s and 1860s, the western portion of the Old Spanish Trail witnessed Mormons migrating to Utah and beyond. The trail braided and changed over time as its use changed, making it hard to determine the original route and the actual trail segments in use during the trail's period of historic importance.

When religious persecution prompted Mormon Church members to migrate from their headquarters in Nauvoo, Illinois, to Salt Lake City, Utah, the great Mormon migration of 1846-1847 created the Mormon Trail across Iowa, Nebraska,



Several of the historic trails used the same path before veering off to their ultimate destinations. This historical photo shows a segment of the Pony Express and Oregon trails that crossed the Big Sandy River in Wyoming. The building is a Pony Express station.



By 1850, numerous shortcuts, which were then called cutoffs, were added to the trail networks. The Dempsey-Hockaday cutoff is a shortcut that formed where the California and Oregon trails came together in Wyoming.

Wyoming, and Utah. Later known as the Church of Latter-Day Saints, the Mormon religion was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith. After Smith and his brother were killed by an

angry mob in 1844, church member Brigham Young and the thousands of Mormons living in Nauvoo planned their exodus, and by 1846 the Mormon migration had begun. Over the next 20 years some 70,000 Mormons migrated along the 1,300-mile trail to settle Salt Lake City.



The BLM has installed exhibits at Point of Rocks, shown here, and Yost Escarpment, two landmarks on El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, in southern New Mexico.

THE Oregon and California Trails were both established in 1841 by the same emigrant group, the Barleson-Bidwell Party, which set out from Missouri, but split when they reached Soda Springs, Idaho, with half the party proceeding to the Willamette Valley in Oregon and the other half continuing on to California. Part of the general route that crossed Nevada was used for the Central Pacific portion of the first transcontinental railroad, and in the 20th century the route was used for modern highways such as US 40 and later Interstate 80.

The trickle of emigrants along the California and Oregon trails before 1848 became a torrent when gold was discovered in California. Gold rush traffic continued along the trail through the following year, combining with the numerous settlers that came by sea to form a sufficient population base for California to become a state in 1850. The first large-scale cholera epidemic in the United States hit in 1849, and is thought to have killed thousands along the trail on their way to California, most of whom are buried in unmarked graves in Kansas and Nebraska. Plains Indian attacks were the second leading cause of death along the trails, with an estimated 500 to 1,000 people killed between 1841 and 1870. The practice of burying the dead in unmarked graves along or even in the trail was common and served to protect them from being dug up by the Indians or animals.

Because so many people were moving westward in the

mid-1800s, there was a need for a fast mail service beyond the Rocky Mountains. Thus the Leavenworth & Pike's Peak Express Company, subsequently known as the Pony Express, was created. Though it operated for only 18 months between April 1860 and October 1861, the Pony Express played a vital role connecting the East to the West.

In the era before electronic communication, young men rode horses on the Pony Express Trail carrying mail from Missouri to California in a remarkably fast 10 days. But shortly after it began, Congress authorized the building of a transcontinental telegraph line to connect the Missouri River and the Pacific Coast, creating a faster means of communication that led to the demise of the Pony Express.

UNLIKE some of the other historic trails, about which travelers wrote extensively in their journals, there are few accounts of journeys on the Old Spanish Trail, and therefore little is known of this route other than certain documented historic events that took place there, making the archaeological evidence even more significant. About 200 miles of the Old Spanish Trail cross Utah, and for the most part no vestige of it can be seen. The BLM study did find 25 miles of trail, consisting of two tracks or narrow swales, that are exceptionally well preserved. Sections of the trail were also found in several other states. Features and artifacts identified along the trail include rock cairns, glass bottles, mule and horse shoes, nails, petroglyphs, as well as combs and other domestic artifacts.

"We had critical work to do—documenting what BLM lands had in the way of historic trail resources, and what condition those resources were in, including the landscape settings that are so much a part of an historic trail experience—before we could protect the resources and manage them efficiently," Schlanger said.

While most cultural resource management projects are driven by Section 106 of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, which requires that federal agencies take into account the effects of their undertakings on significant historic properties, this project was much broader. "Being able to do this project in the manner that it was done was a wonderful situation to be in and is rare in cultural resource management," Horn said. "We would not have been able to do what we did if we were not given the ability to take a landscape approach and to fully assimilate all of the historical data and other resources."

"This is the single biggest field project ever put together to investigate and document the historic trails that cross BLM-managed lands," Schlanger said. In addition to the huge amount of data the project generated, "the documentation protocols developed that integrated standard archaeological field recording with assessments of trail condition, cultural landscapes, and trail settings, will not only change the way the Bureau is able to manage trail resources, but provide a model for all others, including federal, state, and tribal agencies, to manage historic trails for the benefit of the public and future generations."

All of this information has been entered into a geographic information system database where it will assist land managers with further trail documentation, condition assessments, and long-term management. Signing and interpreting the trails for the public will be undertaken in the future.

"Developing these trails for public use requires not only a good management plan, but local interest, energy, and of course, some financial commitments," Schlanger said. "The national historic trails, and the Old Spanish Trail in particular, give us the chance to explore, to challenge ourselves to learn, and to experience history-soaked landscapes. These trails help to keep the story of how our country came to be alive for us and for generations to follow."

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Researchers conduct a field inventory along the Dempsey-Hockaday segment of the California and Oregon trails.