



Summer Newsletter

An Interview with Monument Manager Zane Fulbright

We recently interviewed Zane Fulbright, who was appointed permanent manager of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument in March.



Fulbright

How do you feel when you think of your role in managing one of the country's most iconic national monuments?

I feel blessed. I first started working in the Missouri Breaks on a detail assignment recording homesteads along the wild and scenic river back in 1996 and 1997. I told my wife then that when the opportunity presented itself I was going to apply to work here. That was prior to the monument designation. Then in 2005 that goal became a reality and I became the archeologist for the monument, the position I held until becoming the monument manager in March.

There are so many remarkable facets of the monument, from the natural features to the history and culture that course through this landscape. Most people think of the river and the experience of paddling through the White Cliffs. I appreciate the discoveries in the side canyons, from “bonsai” pines anchored in the eroding sandstone, to invertebrate fossils and shark teeth exposed in a cut bank, to bighorn sheep sheltered from the sun in bentonite nests perched above the river. It's an amazing place.

What do you anticipate being some of the greatest challenges in 2019?

Staffing and funding continue to be a couple of management challenges. We still have five vacancies; we do have a tentative offer for the park ranger position, and I'm hopeful we'll also fill the wildlife biologist and range technician positions this year.

What will be the main objectives for monument management for the next five years?



Along the Sun River, Rocky Mountain Front. Photo provided by Zane Fulbright.

Keeping and retaining qualified staff who are excited and enthusiastic about working in the monument. We also need to make certain everyone understands the purpose for the monument, recognizes the values that it contains, and understands our management objectives as outlined in our Resource Management Plan.

I also want to meet with the monument's partners. The Friends group, the county commissioners, conservation districts, other federal and state agencies, the ranching community, other advocacy groups and NGOs. We identified gateway communities in our RMP; I would like to work with Fort Benton, Winifred and Big Sandy to determine what that label means to them, and what role they would like to have in promoting, or simply accessing, the monument.

How can FMB and other groups/individuals get involved to help the BLM protect the monument and implement the conservation goals outlined in the

RMP?

First and foremost, appreciate the objects of the monument. We all need to recognize the resources and resource uses that can coexist in the monument. We can all work to make conditions better on the landscape, and we need to work to manage the resources wisely. One of the priorities of Department of the Interior Secretary Bernhardt is to enhance the visitor experience on public lands by meeting our infrastructure and maintenance needs. The Friends and other groups and individuals can be good stewards on the land when they visit the monument. They can volunteer as well as campground hosts, site stewards, presenters at the Interpretive Center, participants in National Public Lands Day events. Friends and others can serve as advocates for maintaining public access to public lands.

Issues of long-standing concern for FMB are inventorying of cultural resources, sustainability of cottonwood galleries by way of releasing upstream dams, and the lack of a monument watershed plan. What steps is the BLM taking to address those in 2019?

The monument is leading the state, and much of the BLM, in its amount of cultural resources inventory that we have accomplished. We completed large block inventories in the monument in 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010 (two inventories), 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016 (two inventories), 2018 (two inventories), and 2019. Not counting the geoarchaeological assessment completed in 2005, that totals over 40,000 acres of inventory along the river and in the uplands in the last 10 years.

I believe the answer to long-term sustainability of the cottonwood galleries has to take into consideration spring flooding and human factors that could mimic or replicate natural flow conditions.

That's a longer-term process and will require coordination and cooperation between federal, state, local and private partners.

What is the BLM's timeline for filling the currently six open permanent monument positions?

Now that we have the manager position filled, we're down to "only" five vacancies. The park ranger position should be filled by late summer, by this winter we plan on selecting people for the wildlife biologist and range technician positions, and hopefully we'll get permission to fill the maintenance worker and front desk position at the Interpretive Center early in 2020.



Prospecting for invertebrate fossils. Photo by Ray Rogers.

How has the shortage of staff affected your ability to manage the monument, and has it affected the experience users have on the monument?

We have been relying on the BLM staff in the Havre and Lewistown field offices to assist in managing some of our programs (specifically range, engineering/force account, and wildlife). The recreation program has felt the greatest impact, both in the field and at the Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center. We hired an interpretive lead (Bruce Davis), who arrived in November, and then we shut down during the furlough. Our hiring process for permanent and seasonal employees suffered a setback with the government shutdown, and due to some unforeseen circumstances our seasonal staff has been limited to two employees and two campground hosts, at Kipp and Coal Banks. They're scrambling to keep visitor services operating, especially with an increased workload following the ice damage in March and summer storms that have limited our ability to service other recreation sites.

Introducing our 2019 Big Sky Watershed Corps Members

Our 2019 Big Sky Watershed Corps members have been keeping busy. Last winter they gave educational presentations to the general public and to college groups, K-12 and outdoor clubs. They talked about the ecological, historical and biological significance of the Breaks and how people can become engaged with the monument. Stay up to date on their presentation schedule by checking out our online calendar, missouribreaks.org/get-involved/volunteer/.

This summer they are responsible for watering cottonwood trees planted by Friends of the Missouri Breaks Monument along the Missouri River at the Bailey-Hazlewood site. In addition to watering duties, they are gathering baseline data at all previous planting sites in order to calculate overall site survival rate, growth rate and projected growth rate. They are also developing a standardized cottonwood index for overall site health. Past planting sites include: Bailey-Hazlewood, ABN Ranch, Little Sandy Campground, Terry Ranch, Eagle Creek Campground, Dark Butte Primitive Boat Camp, Slaughter River Campground and Judith Landing.

This year the Friends will be planting cottonwoods in the fall. We will have more details on the planting days in the coming month. Stay on the lookout for emails and notices.

Greetings from our Big Sky Watershed Corps members

Tori Hill, 2019 BSWC member: I was born and raised in Sidney, one of the easternmost towns in Montana. I earned my bachelor's degree in biology from Carroll College in Helena. After working as a biological science technician for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, I felt the mountains pulling me west again. Having debated for four years at Carroll, I'm a politics nerd and enjoy (friendly) conversation about any domestic or international policy topic, preferably on the chairlift at Great Divide or hiking up Mount Helena. I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve with the Friends of the Missouri Breaks Monument to get us all out to enjoy Montana's public lands.

Lacey Gunther, 2019 BSWC member: Hello and many greetings! My name is Lacey Gunther, and I am one of the Big Sky Watershed Corps members serving with Friends of the Missouri Breaks Monument this year. I was born and raised in Oregon on the banks of the Willamette River. After a childhood filled with muddy hikes in the rain, sunsets at the beach, and chasing dogs (lots of dogs), I earned a B.S. in environmental science from Oregon State University with a specialization in water resources and aquatic biology. Post-graduation I spent a year working for Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, until I decided it was time to "break" with my home state (pun intended) and experience Montana.

I am thrilled to be serving with FMB to protect and preserve the UMRBNM. I have already learned so much about one of Montana's best-kept secrets, and I can't wait to educate more people about the Breaks and explore it during the field season. I look forward to meeting as many of you as I can, whether it's getting our hands dirty at cottonwood plantings, talking at one of our outreach presentations (a big shout-out to the members who have already attended one!) or paddling through the Breaks together this summer.

In my spare time I enjoy skiing, backpacking, biking, coming up with bad puns, and reading. Looking forward to what we can accomplish together this year.