

Friends of the Missouri Breaks Monument Spring Newsletter

Protecting and preserving the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument through advocacy, education and stewardship.



2019: A Year in Review

The Friends had another successful year as the organization moved toward the new decade. During the year, we continued our advocacy work for the monument, built upon years of stewardship projects, and educated Montanans across the state about the monument and central Montana's other public lands.

Highlights:

Advocacy:

2019 brought many changes for management of public lands to the south of the monument. The Friends took action to advocate for stronger conservation measures with partners throughout the state (more on page 3).

Stewardship:

For the first time in the project's history, the Friends held our annual cottonwood planting event - our seventh - in the fall (picture below). At the event, 24 volunteers planted 130 young cottonwoods on private land between Fort Benton and Loma.

Education:

During the summer the Friends hosted the organization's first adult education courses. Courses ranged from astronomy to ecology (ecology float pictured left). Additionally, 1,200 Montanans learned about the monument at educational outreach events across the state in early 2019.



Friends of the
**MISSOURI BREAKS
MONUMENT**

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Thank You, Lacey and Tori

Throughout 2019 many aspects of the Friends were up in the air and changes were all around. During that time the work of two individuals kept the Friends on track. Lacey Gunther and Tori Hill spent the year as Big Sky Watershed Corps members working for the Friends. During their AmeriCorps term with our organization the two held outreach presentations across the state, led summer adult education workshops, and spearheaded our on-the-ground stewardship work.

Both Lacey and Tori have moved on to pursue careers in other fields, but we wish to thank them for their hard work and dedication to the organization and the landscape. The Friends and the Breaks will never forget you!



Introduction from our New Executive Director

Where is your favorite place in the world?

It's a question that gets asked often. Every time I hear that question I smile. I start to think of warm summer nights spent sitting under cottonwood trees, hunting sharptail grouse in rolling coulees, or hiking with friends in slot canyons.

The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument is my favorite place in the world.

I first explored the monument more than a decade ago on a family canoe trip as we endeavored to retrace the footsteps of a long-departed relative (George Drouillard) as he headed west with the Lewis and Clark Expedition. That first trip had such a profound impact on me that I have returned to the Breaks every year since.

Each year that I returned I had a new connection to the Breaks: first as a student studying the monument's cottonwood trees, then as a new hunter tracking deer, next as the stewardship director for the Friends, and finally as a guide sharing my love of place with visitors from all over. On my next trip into the Breaks I will again be returning with a new connection, this time as the executive director of the Friends.

I am very excited to be a part of the organization as we continue our work as trusted stewards of the land, but, perhaps more importantly, as we focus on returning to our past position as the foremost local advocate for public lands in central Montana.

To complement our on-the-ground work restoring the monument's riparian habitats and upland prairies, we have begun a concerted effort to be a part of the monument's gateway communities of Fort Benton, Lewistown, Havre and Great Falls.

As we continue this new push I hope to see you soon at one of our events in the region or somewhere on the monument enjoying our public lands.

-Joe Offer
Executive Director



Lewistown Resource Management Plan

In the late spring of 2019, the Bureau of Land Management released the first draft of an updated resource management plan (RMP) for the Lewistown Field Office. The RMP, once finalized, will guide land management decisions for over 650,000 acres of public land in central Montana for the next 20 to 30 years. Unfortunately, the plan as it was released did not include many protections, if any at all, for natural resources.

Luckily, because of hard work from conservation groups in the past, the public was allowed a period of 90 days to comment on the proposed draft. During the initial comment period, the Friends worked with our members from the impacted communities to submit over 20 individual comments, as well as an organizational comment, asking for more conservation measures in the plan. In total, over 800 comments were submitted with a vast majority of those supporting more conservation.

Last month, the BLM released the final draft for the area's RMP. In the new draft, Backcountry Conservation Areas (BCAs) were added to "promote public access to support wildlife-dependent recreation and hunting opportunities and facilitate the long-term maintenance of big game wildlife populations." This is a nice addition and something the Friends support wholeheartedly. However, BCAs have no management teeth and nearly all of the protections that have been in place for the last 30 years are completely absent from the new plan.

In our last opportunity to influence the plan outside of a courtroom, the Friends worked with our conservation partners throughout the state to submit protest comments. Over the next few months the BLM will analyze all of the submitted protest comments and release the new plan. We are hopeful that our voice will be heard before the final plan is released, but if not we will continue to fight with our partners any way we can.



Montana Wildlife Federation Affiliation

The Friends built upon our already strong working relationship with Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF) by joining MWF as an affiliate organization. By doing so, the Friends will be able to utilize MWF's extensive legal and lobbying abilities during legislative sessions and expand our capabilities in advocating for wildlife protections in the Breaks. Together the partnership ensures a stronger voice for the Breaks.

The Year Ahead: 2020

After a year of change in 2019, the Friends hope to get back to many of the actions that have been a part of our character for nearly two decades.

Unfortunately, as the world faces the current health crisis related to COVID-19, the Friends are feeling the impact as well. Just last week, we made the tough decision to hold our eighth annual cottonwood planting without volunteers. We hope, instead, to complete the planting with staff from the Friends and BLM, while changing many procedures to follow CDC guidelines. However, as the crisis continues to unfold, we will be gauging the viability of safely completing the project and may have to cancel completely.

Beyond our cottonwood project, the Friends plan to hold numerous volunteer stewardship days later in the summer to benefit the monument and its surrounding lands. Projects are slated to include fencing removal for deer and antelope, Wilderness Study Area monitoring, and campsite maintenance days.

We will also be present through the summer at community events in Fort Benton, Lewistown, Havre, Great Falls, and Helena. Keep an eye on our website, social media and your email for more information in the coming months.

