



# San Juan Mountains Association

Spring 2020

EXPLORE ♦ LEARN ♦ PROTECT

The Newsletter for Members of SJMA

## Stronger Together: SJMA Welcomes Durango Nature Studies

by Brent Schoradt

For the past 32 years, getting youth outside on public lands has been at the heart of SJMA's conservation education program. This year, SJMA merged with Durango Nature Studies (DNS) in our continuing quest to build a sustaining conservation ethic in Southwest Colorado. The goal of the merger is simple: to inspire the next generation of land stewards through science-based outdoor education.

Over the years, DNS has built a model education program rooted in the local community and our public lands. The reach and impact of this educational programming is astounding. DNS has introduced tens of thousands of local kids to nature over the past 25 years. Last year, DNS provided standards-based science education to every 3rd, 5th, and 7th grade student in the Durango 9-R School District. We are honored to continue the DNS tradition of offering enriching outdoor summer camps, after-school programs, classroom lessons, and field trips for youth throughout Southwest Colorado.

*"By merging with DNS, SJMA is launching a re-envisioned education program that will serve youth of all ages and income levels throughout Southwest Colorado."*

SJMA's merger with DNS is a once-in-a-generation opportunity, expanding our educational program by an estimated 500% while pursuing a regional conservation vision rooted in citizen engagement and education.

Historically, both DNS and SJMA have empowered



local residents to connect with nature, learn about natural processes, and explore our local public lands. As a result, both organizations help foster an ethic of stewardship that empowers the public to protect the region's public lands.

Together, we will be more effective at protecting our public lands from the mounting threats of climate change, drought, catastrophic wildfire, and an ever-increasing stream of visitors. The DNS merger will allow SJMA to provide local youth with life-changing experiences in nature, with the goal of inspiring a new generation of conservationists. Meanwhile, SJMA continues to build upon its volunteer stewardship program that empowers volunteers to give back to public lands through on-the-ground projects that protect water quality, restore damaged areas, and improve outdoor recreation. In the years to come, our goal is to expand the regional scope of these programs to serve communities throughout Southwest Colorado.

Thank you for supporting this important work. We couldn't do it without you.

**Brent Schoradt** is SJMA's Executive Director. He loves exploring this beautiful area with his family. Reach him at [bschoradt@sjma.org](mailto:bschoradt@sjma.org).



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## *San Juan Mountains Association*

*SJMA empowers local residents and visitors to explore, learn about, and protect the spectacular public lands of Southwest Colorado.*

**Executive Director**  
Brent Schoradt

**Operations Director**  
Lexie Stetson-Lee

**Cultural Program Director**  
Ruth Lambert

**Conservation Director**  
David Taft

**Volunteer & Education Specialist**  
MK Gunn

**Education Coordinator**  
Kiley Smith

**Curriculum Coordinator**  
Mike Bienkowski

**Director of Visitor Services & Bookstore Operations**  
Priscilla Sherman

**Visitor Services Staff**  
Patti Brady  
Tom Ferrell  
Elizabeth Reid  
Karen Hickerson  
Alyce Walker  
Rachelle Fish  
Helen Smith  
Kim Wheeler

**Newsletter Editor**  
Rachelle Fish

## The Importance of Place-Based Education

by Mike Bienkowski

**D**rive north to Purgatory on any winter weekday morning, and along the way, you're likely to see a big yellow school bus or two parked at Rapp Corral. You may even see a large gaggle of schoolkids and chaperones donning snowshoes to head out into the forest. This scene is the basis for what SJMA educators consider a dream job - connecting local youth with nature on our public lands.



Thanks to your donations and membership, this winter SJMA hosted over 500 fourth and sixth graders from Durango, Aztec, Ignacio, Bayfield, and Mancos on National Forest land near Haviland Lake and Molas Pass. Students, on snowshoes, enjoyed hands-on experiences exploring winter animal survival, shelter-building, snow-science, and watersheds. None of this would be possible without the efforts of a dedicated core of volunteers, who donated hours of their time to work with these students on the land.

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*“It is astonishing to observe how naturally kids learn when the place itself is the teacher.”*

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For example, when learning about animal shelters, it's one thing to learn about the ingenuity of the Abert's Squirrels in constructing nests that trap body heat while keeping wind and water out. It's quite another to experience the thrill of seeing a set of tracks disappear at the base of a ponderosa pine, only to look up and see a globe of sticks and pine needles nestled high above, with a live occupant undoubtedly inside. Being there not only delivers that lesson but makes it unforgettable due to the excitement of discovery. One can always ask a class of fourth graders to quiet down and listen, but to watch them go into minutes of silent amazement as a noisy flock of mountain chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches surrounds them, would convince anyone of the power of place-based education.



While the COVID-19 crisis has paused SJMA's in-person programming, we recognize that students need nature education and outdoor time now more than ever. Your continued support enables our staff to continue working on videos, online lessons, and nature-exploration kits that help parents, teachers, and children

explore the natural world. Furthermore, a partnership with the Montezuma Inspire Coalition allows us to provide these programs free of charge for schools in Montezuma County. We believe that the developmental and mental health benefits of a connection to the outdoors will be central in helping our community through these times, and we are moving forward with optimism and innovation to leverage your support toward this end.

Thank you for making it all possible!

**Mike Bienkowski** is SJMA's new Curriculum Coordinator. His passion for getting kids outdoors is contagious! Reach him at [mbienkowski@sjma.org](mailto:mbienkowski@sjma.org).



# Wilderness Efforts in the Time of COVID-19

by David Taft

**A**s spring turns to summer, here at SJMA we are getting excited for mountain air and long sunny days. Despite the challenges our community and nation face, we are hopeful that our plans for this summer will proceed, continuing our positive impact on our local public lands.

This season we will be upping our efforts in the Weminuche Wilderness, and we continue working hard to ensure that these plans go forward. Last fall we rolled out the new Weminuche Wilderness Stewardship Fund. Our amazing community met the challenge by providing a huge amount of support at our San Juan Mountain Jam fundraiser. We were then able to match these donations through grants from the National Forest Foundation and the VF Foundation, a gear drive hosted by Durango Outdoor Exchange, and our Noel Night fundraiser through Pine Needle Mountaineering, doubling your contributions!

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*“SJMA believes there will be an influx of visitor to our public lands this summer, making outreach more important than ever.”*

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In a collaborative effort with the San Juan National Forest (SJNF), we will help manage a new wilderness stewardship crew thanks to the Weminuche Wilderness funds raised. This crew will backpack through heavy use areas, document and maintain trail conditions, restore heavily impacted areas, engage with the public (according to CDC guidelines), and ensure that the SJNF has the information they need to make informed management decisions. We will provide reports from the field over the course of the season so that we can all keep an eye on their progress.



Pending social distancing protocol and developments, we are still planning on deploying Volunteer San Juan Rangers (formerly Wilderness Information Specialists or WIS) to heavy use areas of the wilderness. These volunteers promote Leave-No-Trace ethics, share wilderness regulations with the public, and act as the eyes and ears of our land managers. The fundraiser-supported wilderness stewardship crew and the Volunteer San Juan Rangers are part of a multifaceted approach towards proactive wilderness land management by SJMA. If you are interested in participating in this program contact David at [dtaft@sjma.org](mailto:dtaft@sjma.org).

While in-person volunteer events are off the table in the near term, there are still ways to get involved. Sign up for a webinar and stay informed about future volunteer outings through our E-News at [SJMA.org](http://SJMA.org).

**David Taft** is SJMA's Conservation Director. He divides his time between working for and playing on the land he loves. Reach him at [dtaft@sjma.org](mailto:dtaft@sjma.org).



## *Thank You to our Outstanding Volunteers!*

**TREE LOT:** Each year SJMA's Christmas Tree Lot is more and more successful thanks to our dedicated volunteers!

This annual fundraiser has become a community affair and holiday tradition. Every year we are inspired and awed by the amazing dedication of SJMA's committed volunteers. This year, 92 volunteers put in over 400 hours.

A heartfelt thank you to the tree lot managers, tree-cutters, cashiers, and volunteers that year-in and year-out brave the elements and give their time to spread holiday cheer and help us raise funds to support SJMA's programs. We couldn't do it without you!

**TREE TRAIN:** Thank you to the 35 volunteers put in over 238 hours to help holiday revelers safely harvest trees from the San Juan National Forest.

## *A Special Thank You to our Corporate Sponsor for 2020*



## Staff Spotlights—Introducing Kiley Smith and Mike Bienkowski

**T**hanks to SJMA's merger with Durango Nature Studies, we are thrilled to introduce both Kiley Smith as our new Education Coordinator and Mike Bienkowski as our new Curriculum Coordinator.

### Where are you from? What brought you to this area?

Kiley - I grew up in Missouri and moved to Durango to work in outdoor/experiential education in 2011.



Mike - I grew up near Boston, MA, and spent most of my life living in New England--Maine, Western Massachusetts, and Connecticut. I was ready for something new, and set out to ride my bicycle coast to coast in the Fall of 2016, from Portsmouth, New Hampshire to San Francisco. I



passed through Durango en route, and the place left quite a deep impression on me, particularly the trails, the palpable sense of community,

and the value people place on the open space surrounding the city. I felt I belonged and made the leap to move here not long after.

### What attracted you to conservation education?

Kiley - I've always enjoyed sharing my passion for the natural world with others. Through intentional place-based and experiential learning, the natural world becomes a container to educate and inspire community members across the region. I do this to provide opportunities for people to better understand, connect with, and take care of themselves, each other, and our ecosystems.

Mike - I have always felt a deep connection to place. When I was teaching high school in my 20s, I found that my favorite--and students' favorite--experiences involved learning on the land. I quickly found an opportunity to return to that work in Durango as a volunteer naturalist for Durango Nature Studies. This turned into a full time job, and now with the merger, I get to continue and expand that work as

part of SJMA. I have never felt such power in a landscape and sensed the complex integration of systems as much as I do here, and I am so excited to continue connecting youth to the spectacular lands around us.

### What is your favorite outdoor activity?

Kiley - Anything that connects me to the natural world. I love moving through it, observing it, and sharing that passion with others!

Mike - So many! I love the meditative rhythm of running through the woods, the flow of mountain biking, and the peace I feel walking a trail and taking note of the wildflowers, the bugs on the ground, the treetops, and the birdsongs around. I think skiing is my favorite though, particularly in the backcountry. Backcountry touring combines aspects of all those things--there's time to slowly soak things in on the uphill, and then pure adrenaline on the down. I live for skiing each winter.

### Do you have favorite local trails or areas?

Kiley - I really enjoy Animas City Mountain and Dalla Mountain Park.

Mike - My favorite trail in town is Skyline. I can never get over the way that the light filters through the tall fir trees with Silver Mountain in the background. Outside of Durango, definitely Vestal Basin. It feels so raw and powerful, and going there is a mini pilgrimage back to nature in its wild state.

### Bonus question –What is the funniest experience you've had in the outdoors?

Kiley - On a backpacking trip, I continuously woke up to a deflated sleeping pad. Morning after morning I spent hunting down and patching what I suspected to be slow-leaking pinholes. At the end of the trip, my co-guide admitted to me that each night he'd secretly been letting the air out!

Mike - I spent my senior year in college doing research on a lake in the interior of Maine. From a pontoon boat, we collected water samples from the depths for analysis. To get to the pontoon boat mooring, we needed to take a canoe. One day, after our field work, we were getting back into the canoe when I noticed a

(continued from page 4)

garter snake in the bottom of the canoe. It was fleeing from me toward the bow, right toward my unknowing research partner. Before I could warn her of the coming surprise, the snake had presented itself right at the bow of the canoe. Chaos followed--we flipped and ended up in the water. Amidst all this, we noticed the snake booking it straight for shore. I had no idea land snakes could swim so well. We watched, from the water, until the snake was almost to shore, when a giant splash came up from underneath and it disappeared into the *mouth of a largemouth bass*. All in the span of about 30 seconds.

## How You Can Make A Difference: Donate Today and The Payroll Department will Double Your Impact

**S**JMA and Durango Nature Studies are the perfect match to build a sustaining conservation ethic in Southwest Colorado. For a limited time, all donations to SJMA will be matched by Durango's The Payroll Department, *doubling your impact*. Your donations will go farther than ever to help launch a re-envisioned education program that provides outdoor education to children of all backgrounds, regardless of ability to pay.

Thank you to *The Payroll Department* and the *Community Foundation Serving Southwest Colorado* for offering a ray of light during these tough times. We are so grateful for all of you who have already made a donation.

All donations of \$50 or more will receive a free "Wild for the Weminuche Wilderness" t-shirt. And if that's not enough, our Conservation Director, David Taft, will personally deliver the t-shirt on his bicycle to your door step if you live in Durango. He has been sheltering-in-place and can't wait to get out!



Donate by sending a check using the enclosed envelope or online at:  
<https://sjma.org/get-involved/donate>

## Your Membership Dollars at Work

**Thanks to your support**, here is some of what SJMA has recently accomplished:

\* Merged with Durango Nature Studies to launch a re-envisioned conservation education program serving youth throughout the Four Corners. SJMA will now reach every 3rd, 5th, and 7th grader in the Durango 9-R school district and hundreds of kids in Montezuma County as we seek to inspire and empower the next generation of land stewards.

\* Launched a re-envisioned San Juan Ranger program to put "boots on-the-ground" in the Weminuche Wilderness. This year's crew will help improve access along the Elk Creek and Needle Creek trails.

\* Expanded outdoor educational programs from approximately 30 to 250 service hours in Montezuma County to connect youth to outdoor careers and bring public lands experts into classrooms.

\* Distributed to-go nature kits to 60 kids in Montezuma County during the COVID-19 school closures to help them get out and explore.

\* Launching Forest Fridays for Montezuma County kids to explore public lands when school isn't in session.



## Adopt-a-Road Program

### “Eyes and the Ears of the Forest”

Did you know that for *20 years*, SJMA has organized a group of dedicated volunteers to take care of Forest Service Roads?

These are everyday citizens getting involved in stewarding their lands!

In 2019 alone: 76 volunteers patrolled and cleaned up 28 Forest Roads for a total of 410 miles.

#### What do they do?

- Pick up trash from roadsides
- Clean up dispersed campsites
  - Clear culverts of debris
- Connect with visitors while encouraging responsible behavior
- Upgrade Forest Service signs

If you are interested in adopting a forest road, contact our founding member Patti Brady at [patti.brady@usda.gov](mailto:patti.brady@usda.gov)



## Research Into the 1776 Dominguez-Escalante Expedition

by Ruth Lambert

As many of you know, the Southwest Colorado Site Steward Program (CSSP) has been a key component of the SJMA cultural program since 2001. Over the years, approximately 250 stewards have been trained to monitor prehistoric and historic sites across the San Juan National Forest (SJNF) and local Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. This partnership has allowed stewards to participate in monitoring, recording, mapping, and photographing important archaeological sites. For some stewards, ‘adopting’ a site has led them to learn more about the area’s history and prehistory as well as their site.



Tom West, SJMA Volunteer

One such steward is Tom West. Tom has been a site steward for over nine years, and for the past four years he has monitored a large prehistoric site known as Reservoir Ruin. Reservoir Ruin is located overlooking McPhee Reservoir near the town of Dolores. The site is prominent and large with several room blocks, kivas, and midden areas. In addition to regularly monitoring the site, Tom has assisted archaeologist Kristie Arrington with archaeological mitigation measures for rodent disturbances at the site.

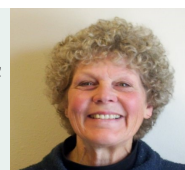
Tom’s first-hand knowledge of the site, gathered from years of monitoring combined with a lifetime of scientific research, sparked his on-going research into the history of the site relative to the famous 1776 Dominguez and Escalante Expedition. His research raises interesting questions about the expedition’s possible observations of Reservoir Ruin during their journey. In addition to Escalante’s diary of the journey, cartographer Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco accompanied the expedition. He created an important historic map of the route. The portion of the map of the Dolores River area is shown to the right.



Miera's 1776 Map of the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition Near the Bend of the Dolores River

We are grateful for Tom’s research into the history of Reservoir Ruin. His work is on-going and we look forward to additional information in the future and a possible publication. His work to date is included in his article “In Search of the Small Settlement Observed by the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition on August 13, 1776”. If you are interested in learning more, please read the full article on the SJMA website at <http://sjma.org/learn/cultural-program/site-stewardship>. I encourage you to read this article from one dedicated SJMA steward volunteer!

**Ruth Lambert** is the Cultural Program Director for SJMA. Her passions are historic archaeology, genealogy, and historic cemeteries. Reach her at [rlambert@sjma.org](mailto:rlambert@sjma.org).



# A New Partnership with the Rio Grande National Forest

by Helen Smith

**S**JMA is now the interpretive educational partner of the Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF) with SJMA staff representation in the Divide Ranger District in Del Norte and the Supervisor's Office in Monte Vista. This new agreement is an important step forward which will allow SJMA to bring the mission of "Explore, Learn, Protect," to the San Luis Valley. Looking ahead, we hope to expand our Weminuche Wilderness stewardship program to incorporate the entirety of the wilderness area, which extends into the RGNF.

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*"Thanks to your support, SJMA helps the public explore and protect over 3.5 million acres of National Forest land."*

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"We are excited to engage in this partnership with the San Juan Mountains Association here on the RGNF," said RGNF Supervisor, Dan Dallas. "Combining our resources will serve to provide better customer service to the San Luis Valley and our visitors."

Kim Wheeler and Helen Smith are the new SJMA team members for the Rio Grande. Both are San Luis Valley natives who bring a unique set of skills and experiences. Wheeler brings a background in administration and forest management having previously served with the USFS in the Saguache District office. Smith brings a background in water administration, communications and journalism.

While the COVID-19 situation has proven challenging for the RGNF team, work is still being done. Plans to hold a regional VIS training later in the year as well as the design of an outreach program for area school districts and



students are in progress. Each of these new opportunities are expected to bring a great deal of potential new brand awareness for SJMA. New possibilities to shape the conversation around the responsible enjoyment of the RGNF lie ahead.

"SJMA will be providing critical visitor information services in both Del Norte and Monte Vista," said Divide District Ranger, Martha Williamson. "I'm really looking forward to this partnership as an opportunity to find new ways to serve our public."

Because of your support, the message of enjoying public lands while protecting them will be able to reach a new audience and help to ensure the continued sustainability of the RGNF for future generations.

Next time you're in the area, stop by and let us help guide your adventures on the Rio Grande National Forest.

**Helen Smith** is SJMA's new Visitor Information Special for the Rio Grande National Forest. Reach her at [hsmith@sjma.org](mailto:hsmith@sjma.org).



## Visitor Information Services

"Our mission is the same as it has always been: to engage the community and visitors in responsible use of public lands. We are glad to do our part to encourage social distancing, while still promoting recreation and healthy activities." -Priscilla Sherman, Director of Visitor Services and Bookstore Operations

*Let us help you prepare for your future adventures!*

- Call us at 970-247-4874
- Visit our online bookstore at [www.sjma.org/store](http://www.sjma.org/store)
- Email us at [psherman@sjma.org](mailto:psherman@sjma.org)





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Association**

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residents and visitors to  
explore, learn about and  
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*“SJMA encourages everyone to get  
outside and enjoy your public lands in a  
safe and meaningful way. Look around,  
think of those who came before and left  
this magnificent natural legacy in  
Southwest Colorado. Think of what  
you can do to inspire and empower the  
next generation to care for our public  
lands and pass on a legacy of  
conservation through the ages.”*

*Brent Schoradt,  
SJMA Executive Director*