

# Sandia Mountains

## Outdoor Education and Natural Area



## Cibola National Forest – Sandia Ranger District

# Sandia Mountains Proposed Outdoor Education and Natural Area

## **Size**

3,157 acres

## **Area Overview**

The proposed Sandia Mountains Outdoor Education and Natural Area is located immediately east of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness in Bernalillo County, NM. The area is about 15 miles from Albuquerque and 50 miles from Santa Fe, with easy access on paved roads and approximately one third of New Mexico's population living within 20 miles of the area.

The proposed area is uniquely suited to serve as an outdoor learning and natural area. Its purpose would be to forge stronger human connections to the forest, encourage outdoor recreation and exploration, and share current thinking about the ecology, history, and management of the Sandias. It is an easy-to-access gateway to the Sandia Mountains, with towering ridge lines, dramatic views, spectacular geology, bird-watching, hiking, biking, horseback riding, and wilderness. With picnic areas, bus and car parking, and a variety of trails from easy to more challenging, the area could serve as a visitor and learning hub to the Cibola National Forest with minimal additional investment.

By designating this area, the Forest Service will strengthen community connections to the national forest and enhance opportunities for youth and underserved populations to learn about and access the forest. It will also provide a mechanism to help tackle serious and well-documented social issues, including the growing disconnect between humans and the environment around them, high obesity rates,

especially amongst youth, and low environmental literacy rates.

Schools, families, individuals, and community and outdoor educational organizations would be encouraged to visit, participate in educational programs, and utilize the facilities. The Forest Service would provide a variety of interpretive programs and materials, and facilitate utilization of the area by community and education organizations including schools. Interpretive topics would likely include geology, ecology, natural history, forest dynamics and climate change, land ethic, and social history, including the role of indigenous and Hispanic populations in inhabiting and shaping the landscape.

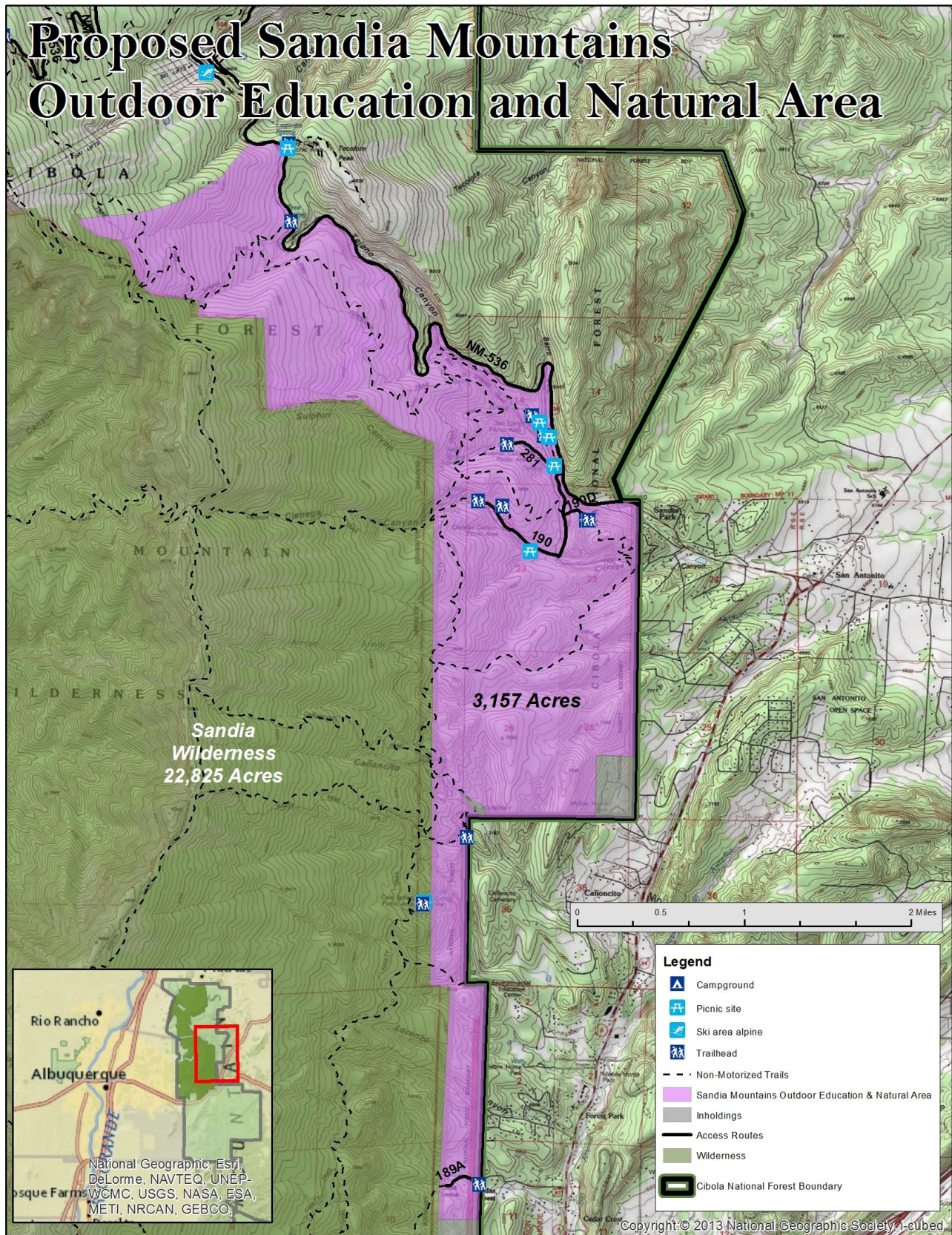
Elevations range from 7,200 feet near the picnic grounds to 9,800 feet at the northeastern boundary with the Sandia Mountain Wilderness. The boundaries of the proposed area are specifically defined by all lands south of the crest road beginning at the Sandia Mountain Ski Area and terrain east of the Sandia Mountain Wilderness. Additional acreage west of the Forest Service boundary near Sandia Park that includes the developed picnic grounds as well as other lands south of these developed sites are included within the boundary.



The Doc Long Picnic Grounds with several facilities that contain educational information.  
Photo SENAI01



# Proposed Sandia Mountains Outdoor Education and Natural Area





## Outstanding Opportunities for Learning & Outdoor Recreation

The proposed area is uniquely suited to serve as an outdoor learning and natural area. First, the area already has much of the infrastructure that would be needed, including easy paved road access, multiple parking areas for cars and buses, covered shelters, five picnic areas, campsites, trails of all levels including those for children, bathrooms, interpretive kiosks and trails, and access to spectacular geology, scenery, bird-watching, hiking, biking, horseback riding, and wilderness. With only a little additional investment and strategic planning, the area could become a center for learning and exploration. In addition, it could serve as a model for other urban interface forests across the nation for forging stronger human connections to the forest and reducing barriers to accessing, enjoying, and learning about national forests – especially those facing underserved and urban populations.

Second, the area has great potential to serve as an educational, citizen science, and outdoor recreation hub for the local schools and communities and help tackle serious social issues (e.g., the growing disconnect between humans and the environment around them, high obesity rates, especially amongst youth, and low environmental literacy rates). Given its close proximity to the greater Albuquerque area, numerous opportunities exist to forge or expand upon existing partnerships with schools, nonprofit/community organizations, and communities. Partnerships advance the purposes of the area by leveraging funding and capacity.

Third, the area has the potential to serve a huge audience, with one-third of New Mexico's

population living within 20 miles of the range and easy access on paved roads.

Fourth, with a mile of vertical relief, visible geology, and high quality habitats, the area offers wonderful opportunities to explore, observe wildlife, and interact with nature. Current recreational opportunities include hiking, wildlife watching, horseback riding, picnicking, photography, and mountain biking. Bird-watchers love this area in particular. *Birding Hot Spots of Central New Mexico*, by Judy Liddell and Barbara Hussey, identifies both the Sulphur Canyon and Cienega Canyon picnic grounds in the unit as outstanding locations for bird watching.

### Examples of Existing Infrastructure

The Sulphur Canyon Picnic Area lies adjacent to the Sandia Mountain Scenic Byway. Just 15 miles away from the City of Albuquerque, the area provides visitors immediate access to day-use activities, as well as access to multi-day adventures in the surrounding Sandia Mountain Wilderness.

The Cienega Canyon Picnic Area boasts a number of nature trails that provide families, organized groups, and adventurers outstanding opportunities to experience nature and learn about the surrounding ecosystems.

The Cienega Nature Trail, nestled amongst a meadow and babbling stream, in particular provides rewarding nature viewing and learning opportunities. Illustrated signs translated into Braille for the visually impaired educate explorers about the natural environment; travelers have the opportunity to learn more about ponderosa pine, alligator juniper, boxelder, and a host of other species common throughout the unit. The trail provides

outstanding opportunities for casual walkers, strollers, and small children to get out in nature. You can also follow several other trails in the immediate vicinity up or down the mountain.

The Doc Long Picnic Area lies adjacent to the Sandia Mountain Scenic Byway. This picnic area is situated amongst tall pine trees and mountainous terrain. Three adjacent hiking trails provide visitors with many loop trail alternatives. The picnic area has two covered shelters which are replicas of a mid-1930s CCC design.

## **Natural History**

The Sandia Mountains provide plentiful opportunities to learn about geology and natural resources. The mountains formed as the Precambrian granite slab's western end rose upward relative to the strata in the Rio Grande valley. The Pennsylvania limestone layers on the 10,000-foot crest are also found 10,000 feet beneath the Rio Grande, a vertical displacement of about four miles. This geology is the reason for the gentle eastern slopes and the steep and craggy western escarpment.

The Sandia Mountains' mile of vertical relief means climate and vegetation varies widely. The foothills receive about 8 to 10 inches of precipitation a year; the mountains' upper regions receive 25 to 30 inches. While most drainages have small, intermittent streams, explorers can find a few springs and other reliable water sources throughout the area.

The large variation in elevation results in diverse vegetative types, from upper Sonoran shrublands to fir and spruce forests. The upper Sonoran zone includes desert grasses and shrubs such as bear grass, apache plume, blue gramma, cholla and prickly pear cacti, and

mountain mahogany. Tree types include pinyon-juniper, ponderosa pine, spruce fir, aspen, and Douglas fir. The area sustains numerous species of wildlife that include black bear, mountain lion, mule deer, Abert's squirrel, and an assortment of bird species.

## **Proposed Management**

Upon designation of the Sandia Mountains Outdoor Education and Natural Area, the Forest Service, in coordination with stakeholders, would develop a management plan designed to protect and enhance the area's educational, outdoor, laboratory, and recreational purposes. This necessarily means disallowing uses that would compromise those purposes, including new road building. Other than at existing facilities such as roads, parking lots, and pullouts, the area would be managed for non-motorized uses. Existing developed recreation facilities would be maintained and enhanced as necessary to facilitate the purposes for which the area is designated.

Schools, families, individuals, and community and outdoor educational organizations would be encouraged to visit, participate in educational programs, and utilize the facilities. The Forest Service would provide a variety of interpretive programs and materials, and facilitate utilization of the area by community and education organizations, and schools.

## Forest Service Direction

The sixth goal of the USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan FY 2007–2012 is to engage urban America with Forest Service programs.<sup>1</sup> The outcome for this goal is “Broader access by Americans to the long-term environmental, social, economic, and other types of benefits provided by the Forest Service,” and the supporting objective is to “Promote conservation education to increase environmental literacy through partnerships with groups that benefit and educate urban populations.”

The Forest Service planning rule encourages actions that forge stronger human connections to nature.<sup>2</sup> It also provides the explicit authority for the Forest Service to establish designated areas within the land management planning process such as the one proposed here.<sup>3</sup>

## Field Data Supporting the Proposal

We conducted field work to assess the special and unique character of the area over the course of two months during the winter of 2013 by traveling Forest Service routes via motorized vehicle and exploring the trails and campgrounds in the area on day hikes.

We tracked and recorded all of the routes that we traveled using mobile GPS software and taking photo waypoints of educational and natural characteristics, as well photos of as the conditions of Forest Service infrastructure within the unit. Detailed GPS data, photographs, and field notes are available upon request.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fs.fed.us/publications/strategic/fs-sp-fy07-12.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> 36 CFR 219.8(b)(6) and 36 CFR 219.10(a)(10)

<sup>3</sup> 36 CFR 219.7(c)(2)(vii) and 36 CFR 219.19

## Access Information

Primary access to the proposed Sandia Mountains Outdoor Education and Natural Area is via the Crest Road. Sulphur Canyon Picnic Ground, Cienega Canyon Picnic Ground, and Doc Long Picnic Ground all provide easy access to would-be explorers, as does the Acequia Trail, Bill Spring Trail, and Tree Springs Trail.

