

Cottonwood Gulch Expeditions 2019-2020 Annual Report



Report Summary

Our staff team recently decided on a theme for the upcoming newsletter, “News from Trek Country”:

Resilience. The last 18 months have brought test after test to Cottonwood Gulch, and despite those, we have reason to be proud of where we stand now. As you read through the following pages, there are a few things I’d like to highlight:

- Planning for 2021: this is the most prominent question on our minds. We are assuming COVID will still be with us, but are cautiously optimistic we can run pared-down programs in FY21.
- We are adapting to COVID now, and have programs on the ground, both in-person and virtual.
- We have increasingly diverse income streams, which has helped us navigate COVID.
- We have strong partnerships, both old and new.
- We have new, improved facilities - Basecamp is in good shape.
- We have a strong and highly skilled staff team, full of creative ideas and love for the organization.

2019-2020 Year in Review: Accomplishments and Challenges

Accomplishments

We adapted to COVID in creative, nimble ways:

- **Programs on the ground, both virtual and in-person**, all following COVID protocols:
 - [Youth Conservation Corps](#): 6-person crew working on National Forest land (photo at right)
 - [Small Group Teambuilding, in person](#): with local schools
 - [Virtual Programming](#): Students in Wilderness Initiative (SIWI) virtual classroom sessions.
- **Created CGE-specific COVID protocols**, in consultation with medical advisors
- **Invested in internal infrastructure**, and accomplished a great deal. See “Facilities and Operations Report” below for details.
- **Building partnerships that meet community needs:**
 - Food Relief, Wood Relief, EENM Fellowship (Jordan & newly-hired coordinator Olivia Marín are in an Outdoor Leaders fellowship sponsored by Environmental Education of New Mexico)
- **Behind-the-scenes administrative upgrades**: not flashy, but important: New parent/chaperone handbook for school programs, improved policies & procedures (in progress), improved hiring process for staff, website improvements (and more to come), improved health & waiver forms for school groups
- **We called upon the Gulch community to help us financially, and they did** (see Development section below for more details). We also received \$114,700 through the PPP program.



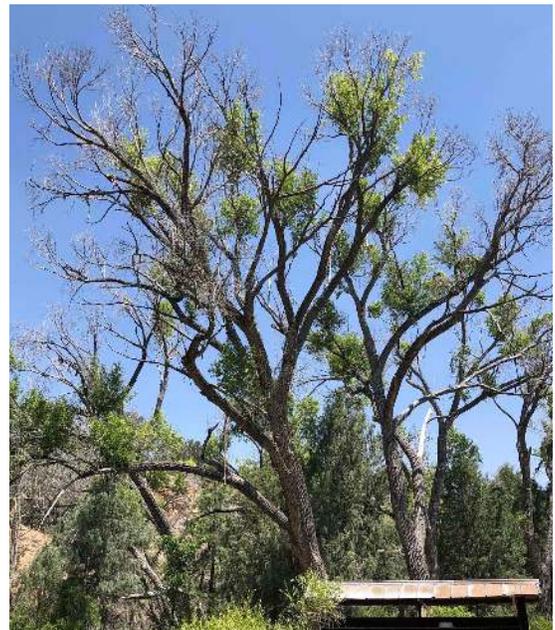
Other accomplishments from the last year include:

- **Wrapped up a successful Capital Campaign**, and received a Certificate of Occupancy for our newly constructed QM building; new solar panels
- **Embarked on Strategic Planning process** with Bonnie Chavez, scheduled completion Spring 2021
- **Technology Upgrades**: new computers & printer, improved internet service at Basecamp and ABQ office, shifted all organizational files to cloud-based Google Drive
- **Purchased 13 acres** near the Outfit Cabins, protecting the area from further development
- **Hired permanent Executive Director; retained administrative team through trying times**. We have a team of five year-round professionals who all hold deep knowledge of the organization.

Challenges

Below is a list of high-level challenges, which should influence our strategic planning discussions.

- **COVID**
- **Continued financial uncertainty due to COVID:** we have a plan for the coming year, and flexible options, but for obvious reasons there remains high levels of risk and anxiety.
- **Need for more Fundraising Dollars for Scholarships and Infrastructure Improvements**
- **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion:** the murder of George Floyd and others put a spotlight on questions of equity, and many organizations, including ours, are reflecting on our history, culture, and future direction.
- **Climate Change:** More frequent fires and fire restrictions; climate in general is becoming less predictable.
 - **Dying cottonwood trees at Basecamp (picture at right):** bad for ecology, safety, and morale. An assessment by a State of NM forester this summer attributed the problem to less water, more heat.
- **Database/CRM:** current homemade database is charming but limited; no longer adequate for development and enrollment needs.
- **Facilities and infrastructure:**
 - Second floor of QM building (currently a big open space)
 - Caretaker's house & Basecamp office need upgrades
 - Leftover rock/dirt piles from construction
 - Need more gear for school program participants
 - Cramped office space in Albuquerque (for people, vehicles, gear)



Financial Highlights, FY19-20

Please see accompanying financial reports for more detail.

Despite COVID and associated cancellations, we finished the year with a net operating income of approximately \$43,000. This can be attributed to several factors:

- Between March-September, received over \$150,000 in donations from individuals and foundations, ending up 46% better than budget in annual giving.
- The Wilderness Society committed to fully fund the Students in Wilderness Initiative, despite lack of in-person programs (\$145k).
- Cut expenses substantially

We have increasingly diverse income streams, which helped us navigate COVID. We received income through direct programs, donation, government (federal and local), grants, and other smaller venues (base camp rental, merchandise sales, etc.). A Payroll Protection Program loan in April helped us bridge cash flow and keep staff employed.

Development Highlights

The Development Committee is active and engaged, and pushing the organization in a good direction. We are seeking ways to increase capacity, especially through annual donations, foundations, and government agencies. Some highlights:

- FY 20: Received over \$500,000 from individual donations, foundations, & corporations:
 - The Wilderness Society, for SIWI program (\$145k)
 - Land acquisition, base camp improvements (~\$36k)
 - Program-specific support: Classrooms GO, scholarships (~\$40k)
 - Endowment donations (~\$20k)
 - Other individual donations & foundation support (~\$280k)
- Improved plan for Fall 2020 appeal, and plans to implement a recurring spring appeal
- Strong start to FY21 fundraising--over \$70k already committed from individual donors
- Development Committee & Jordan exploring avenues for additional foundation support
- ED completed development training with Nyra Klawer

2021 Plans: Charting a Middle Ground, Remaining Flexible

Planning for the coming year is difficult--we don't know what next week will look like, much less next summer. However, we are cautiously optimistic that we will be able to run programs over the next year. Our recent successes with YCC and small-group teambuilding are a good start. We also have an extensive COVID safety plan in place, and the Gulch can design outdoor, small-group programs that are relatively low risk. More importantly, we believe our programs are needed now more than ever. With that, we are charting a middle ground for the coming year, and planning to run programs at a lowered capacity. Our current budget and staffing plans reflect this. For example:

- FY21 summer enrollment projected at 50-60% of our capacity, with an emphasis on programs that can more easily be adapted to a COVID world (less travel, smaller groups, etc.)
- FY21 school group revenue projected at ~50% of FY20 Pre-COVID budget
- Exploring additional COVID-friendly programming: local programs (spring break, weekend, after school); virtual programs; small group teambuilding, etc.
- Planning on increased revenue from local and federal partners (Bachechi, Forest Service)
- NOT planning on large capital expenses (vehicles, large renovations)
- Staffing and program budgets reflect needs of our reduced capacity

FY21 Programs confirmed or very likely: Students in Wilderness Initiative, YCC, Small-group teambuilding with local schools

FY21 Programs with high COVID-related unknowns: Summer treks, in-person school treks, Wilderness Medicine courses

We are also maintaining a flexible mindset, with the understanding that our programming capacity could increase or decrease significantly as time goes on. We have the ability to hire more or fewer seasonal staff, and increase or decrease program-specific costs (fuel, food, supplies, etc).

Industry/Sector news

As you can imagine, this was a difficult year for programs like ours. A few notes and links to explore:

- Most programs like ours are planning to run in 2021, and are currently enrolling participants.
- The [Wilderness Risk Management Conference](#) was virtual this year; Gulch staff attended. NOLS, the primary host of the WRMC, has an excellent summary of [COVID practices and philosophy](#) on their website.
- A [Georgia YMCA camp](#) had a massive COVID outbreak. This is a good cautionary tale, though this is a different program model than CGE's, and the severity of the outbreak was preventable.
- Four summer camps in Maine ran COVID-free programs in 2020. Here is a [Washington Post article](#) about them, and a [CDC report](#).

How (else) can you help?

Beyond the time, talent, and wealth you've already shown, we can use help in the following areas:

- **Recruiting:** Trekkers and staff! Send them to us directly. Most people hear about us through word of mouth.
- **Fundraising:** the Development Committee is taking a lead on this, but we need all board members to take part in fundraising. Please reach out to individuals, businesses, and other organizations who may be supportive of our mission and willing to contribute.
- **Connect us to Foundations & Corporations:** If you have connections to foundations or corporations interested in supporting our mission, please reach out to them!
- **Skills:** you may have skills, or you may know people with skills. Specifically, we can use help with the following:
 - Digital media: website design, marketing videos, photography
 - Human Resources support
 - Manual labor (plenty to do at Basecamp!)

A big thank you

To all staff and board members, who have guided the Gulch through a very difficult period. The last 18 months have been very hard, and we are still standing strong and proud thanks to all of you. I feel lucky to be part of this team, and this community. Thank you.

Jordan Stone
Executive Director
October, 2020

Program Reports

Below are a series of program reports prepared by Gulch staff, summarizing our accomplishments and challenges over the last year, with an eye toward the future.

School Programs Report, prepared by Matt Baker-White



Students at Tech Leadership High School (TLHS) practice communication skills during COVID-modified programming, fall 2020.

Accomplishments

1. In the late fall/winter of 2019, we completed 900 user days with 776 participants, largely day trips in Oct. and Nov. through our Classrooms Get Outdoors program (included ~\$15k in scholarships).
2. Modified and completed our Students in Wilderness Initiative curriculum in spring of 2020 after we cancelled in-person programming due to COVID.
3. Awarded \$15,000 in scholarships to TLHS to develop a nature-based social emotional learning program for all students in the 2020-2021 school year; other schools are requesting similar programs.
4. Adapting programming to remote setting with hands-on, nature-based curricula such as take-home gardening kits.
5. Our Students In Wilderness Initiative (SIWI) program is being facilitated remotely with roughly 300 students, with hopes to add in-person programming in 2021.
6. Shifted staffing structure for SIWI; hired two excellent SIWI coordinators who are working directly with classrooms.

7. Secured Every Kid Outdoors agreement with the USFS to take 250 4th grade students to public lands.
8. We are evaluating each of our school and community partnerships during this “down time,” which we hope will lead to stronger partnerships over time.
9. Last year, we piloted an afterschool program with two Albuquerque schools and found it to be successful; we are hoping to offer this program to more schools this coming year and beyond.

Challenges

1. COVID-19 restrictions are limiting capacity
2. After years of underpricing our school and partnership programs, we are working to bring our pricing more in line with our costs; however, this process will need to be slow so as to not create a price shock to our partners.
3. Limited staff housing at ABQ bunkhouse; as year-round programs expand, so will our staffing needs.
4. Our ABQ property is cramped for staff, vehicles, gear.
5. Lack of fuel-efficient vehicles for local programs and partner meetings.



As part of our social emotional learning curriculum, we ask students to look closely at the world around them, and build connections with natural spaces closer to home or school.

School Program Overview:

For those of you less familiar with this aspect of the Gulch, here is a brief overview of different programs:

SIWI: Students in Wilderness Initiative

SIWI is an interdisciplinary classroom learning and field expedition program for eighth graders. The program includes twelve classroom sessions, field days, and a culminating five-day backpacking expedition, with a focus on public lands and wilderness. The program is supported primarily by The Wilderness Society, and currently has approximately 300 students.

CGO: Classrooms Get Outdoors

CGO provides NM schools with a demonstrated financial need access to Cottonwood Gulch programs. The program has a “step-down” model for funding, where a school gets 75% funding their first year, 50% their second year, 25% their third year, and 10% thereafter while they secure other funding streams. We have established 8 Classrooms GO programs since 2013; the program relies on annual donations to provide scholarships.

EKO: Every Kid Outdoors

Federally funded initiative to give 4th grade students access to federal public lands, with a focus on science education, land stewardship, and understanding federal public lands management at an age-appropriate level.

Customized School Programs

We work with individual schools to design custom programs that get kids outside while meeting the needs of teachers and their students

Summer and Other Open Enrollment Report, Prepared by Tori Baker-White

Current Enrollment Status: 20+ trekkers with reserved spaces for summer 2021; 20+ trekkers who deferred from last summer

Biggest Challenge: Coronavirus uncertainty

Goals, Opportunities, and Needs for 2020-2021

Ideally, we will have strong enrollment, though with coronavirus uncertainty it is challenging to predict. We are remaining flexible and making plans for ways to reduce risk, e.g. smaller groups, less time spent in vehicles, etc.

Goals:

- Strong summer enrollment
- Open enrollment programs offered during other seasons (spring break, family camping weekends, etc.)
- Excellent staff so that we can run excellent treks

Opportunities:

- Gulch treks are well positioned to mitigate coronavirus risk (outside, small groups, etc.)
- Could be a good time to revisit some family programs

Needs:

- Reaching a wide audience and heavy recruiting

Facilities and Operations Report, Prepared by Austin Kessler

FY19-20 Accomplishments

1. Received Certificate of Occupancy for newly constructed QM building
2. Updated the farm: fencing and gates, irrigation system, reinforced hoopouses.
3. Built 20 bunk beds, using lumber harvested from Basecamp
4. Pool Deck: Reinforced structure and flipped decking; 8ish year fix
5. Built a new latrine at the TT Cabin Loop
6. Dismantled the “Intern Mansion” and repurposed its decking for the TT Lattie.
7. Pushed over and faded 60% of the dirt piles into the landscape to beautify and prevent channelizing.
8. Re-seeded disrupted areas from construction with native plants
9. Painted, stained and polyurethaned final parts of the new building.
10. Partnered with Ancestral Lands CC and Chizh for Cheii to thin forest and clear wood from property
11. Removed several truckloads of leftover construction debris and other trash
12. New office chairs; painted Basecamp office
13. Completed solar installation at Basecamp (one array at Caretakers, one on new QM building)
14. Purchased two new buses

Challenges

1. Completing the construction of the QM Building with contractors, subcontractors, and working through problems that originated from decisions from previous years.
2. Prioritizing where to spend our money and time.

Overview of Facilities, Summer / Fall 2020

Most of my summer was spent on Basecamp projects, working to improve our facilities and transition the new building to a programming space that would be effective for the coming year. The largest struggle was figuring out what to prioritize. The things that generally ended up at the top of the list were projects that would either extend our operating season (bunk beds on the second floor), or were immediate utilitarian (new workshop) or risk management concerns (pool deck).

Goals, Opportunities, and Needs for 2020-2021

Our goals for the coming year are to complete projects surrounding the functionality of the new building, and addressing risk management concerns, such as new mattresses, furniture, and removing hazard trees.

We greatly appreciate all those who volunteered this summer, especially Gregg Henry, who ensured the structural integrity of the TT Lattie. Opportunities to help this coming year will come in donations for materials, in expertise, and in tools that will continue to elevate our property to a professional, unified look that functions the way that we dream. If you are interested in donating toward a specific project or program area, don't hesitate to contact us about what is most needed.

Bachechi Report, Prepared by Marnie Rehn

Overview of Bachechi

Bachechi Open Space is a 27+ acre property located along the Rio Grande less than a mile from the Gulch's Abq. office. Bernalillo County owns the property and contracts with the Gulch to plan and facilitate Environmental and Outdoor Education programming. We also serve as caretakers for the property and provide on-site presence from the caretaker's residence. Bachechi often serves as a wonderful in-the-city location for our school trek program. Some school partners are within walking distance of the park.

Live Streamed videos of each Speaker Series event that we've hosted since April 2020 can be viewed on the Bachechi Open Space Facebook page, [here](#).



Accomplishments

1. Live Streaming our Speaker Series events brought workshop attendance from about 30 attendees up to between 200-1,000 attendees for each event. We are collaborating with state and local organizations, which helps cross-pollinate our event awareness!
 - a. Organizing and facilitating the Speaker Series events establishes and deepens partnerships with various local and statewide organizations.
2. Brought our Sunday Family Funday activities online and digitized the Nature Pack program. Online exposure has increased our community presence (along with our partners'), and our social media following is growing each month.

Challenges

1. Due to COVID, we haven't been able to host school groups on site yet this fall.
2. Due to COVID, our Sunday Family Funday events are mostly virtual, though we do offer in-person access to check-out Nature Packs, microscopes, binoculars, etc...
3. Due to COVID, our speaker series events are now virtual. We have been asked to consider ways to run a hybrid event in the future, so that we maintain an online presence with each event somehow.

Goals, Opportunities, and Needs for 2020-2021

2021 is unpredictable. Goals for moving forward are to develop protocols for handling shared items, to keep each participant healthy and safe while still providing people access to resources they wouldn't necessarily have at home. And, to develop our programming delivery options (online/in person) so that we stay relevant and become more and more valuable to the community in ways that further the Gulch's mission/vision.

Communications and Marketing Report, Prepared by Tori Baker-White

Accomplishments

1. Created a shared communications and development calendar with key messages identified
2. Generally high open rate and click-through rate for e-newsletters
3. Positive response when we engage in advocacy work with our partners

Challenges

1. Creating the volume of high quality content that is needed to engage audiences
2. Video content is effective, but expensive and time consuming to produce
3. Identifying best places to spend marketing budget
4. Maximizing word of mouth marketing

Goals, Opportunities, and Needs for 2020-2021

Goals:

- Consistent and engaging content
- Growing audience and brand awareness
- Reaching more diverse audiences

Opportunities:

- Virtual information sessions could make it easier for more people to attend
- Engaging younger alumni to assist with social media marketing
- More administrative time to plan and create content

Needs:

- More visibility in New Mexico community
- Improved website
- Adequate marketing photos, videos
- High quality camera for staff to take out on treks



Olivia Newball-Thayer, hip Gulch alum, who is helping us create a social media marketing plan