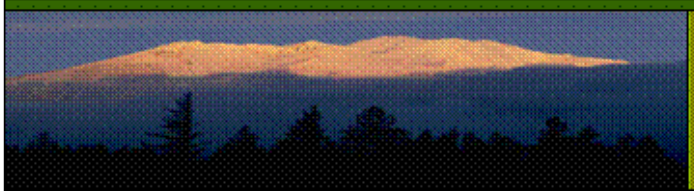
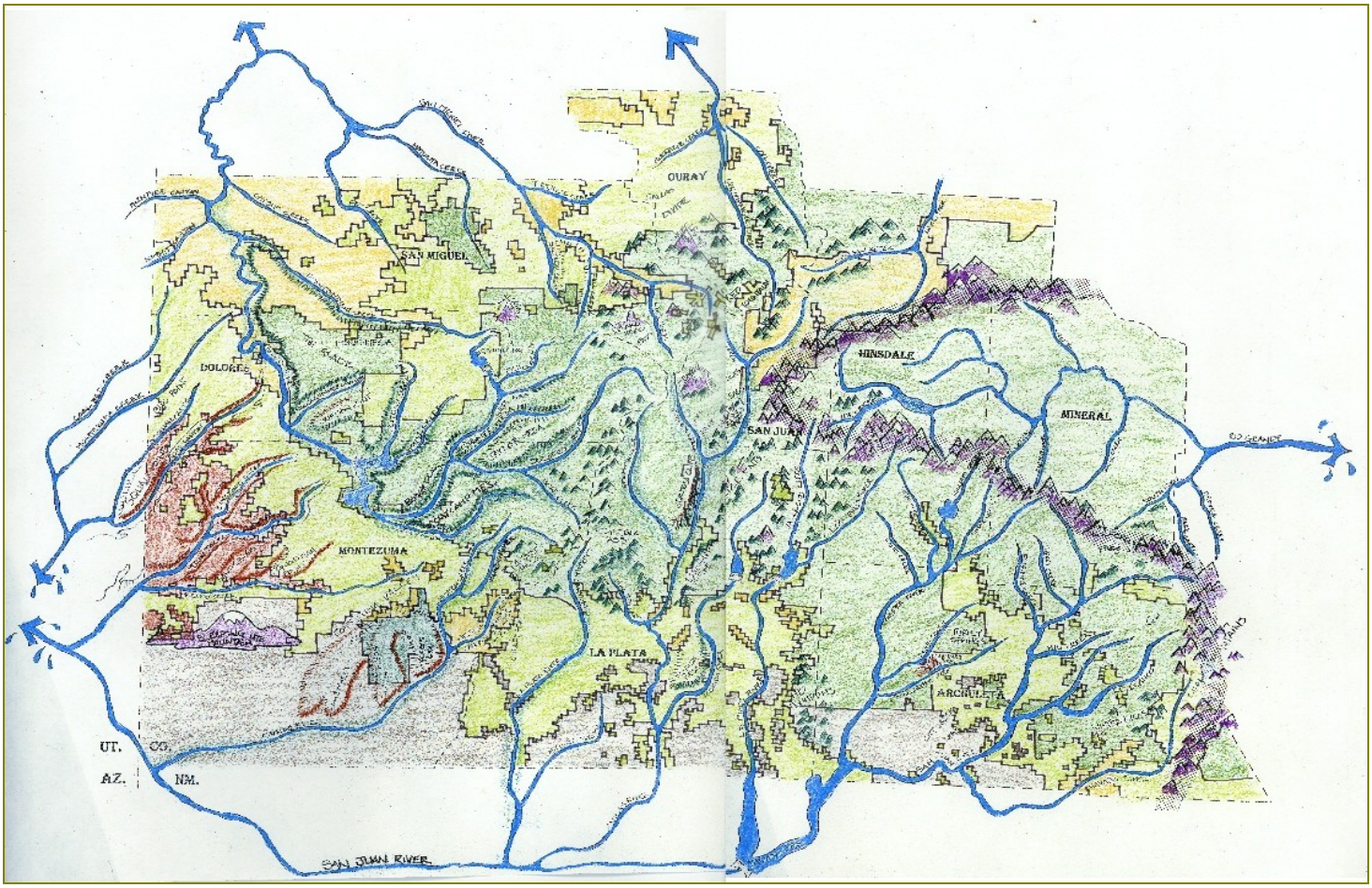
Cultural Descriptor



Geographic Boundaries and Natural Features



Cultural Descriptor: Geographic Boundaries and Natural Features

A geographic boundary is any unique physical feature with which people of an area identify. Physical features separate the activities of a population from those in other geographic areas.

The primary jurisdictional focus for this analysis are the five Counties in Southwest Colorado (La Plata, San Juan, Archuleta, Montezuma and Dolores Counties), and the Federal Lands that fall within the Boundaries of these Counties, including the San Juan National Forest and BLM Resource Area (including Canyons of the Ancients National Monument), and Mesa Verde National Park. The distinct geographic boundaries and natural features that define the region are fundamental to the settlement patterns, recreational activities and the evolution of the local economy and work routines.

When one looks at the "Human Resource Units" or HRUs (Figure 1 on page 6) defined by the cultural descriptors that drive this analysis, it is striking how closely the county boundaries, the ranger districts on the San Juan National Forest, and culturally defined HRUs are aligned:

- The Dolores Ranger District corresponds with the Montelores HRU, which encompasses Montezuma and Dolores Counties.
- The Columbine Ranger District corresponds with the La Plata HRU, which encompasses La Plata and San Juan Counties.
- The Pagosa Ranger District corresponds with the Pagosa HRU, which encompasses Archuleta County and the southern part of Hinsdale County.

The consistency of these jurisdictional alignments is reflective of the distinctiveness and dramatic variation of geographic features that have shaped settlement patterns, as well as economic and recreational uses of the landscape including:

- The dramatic range of elevations (from 14,000 to 5,000 feet);
- the variation in terrain from Alpine, to red-rock canyon and high desert;
- the related variation in vegetation types including high altitude spruce/fir forests, mixed conifer forests, ponderosa pine/gambel oak forests, pinyon juniper forests, sage brush, and developed farmland, and
- The San Juan and Dolores River systems from headwaters to river bottom valleys.

Under the Settlement Pattern Descriptor, the analysis will focus on how the settlement of high altitude hard rock mining communities were supported by timber, agricultural and trade communities in the lower valleys and connecting transportation networks. Subsequent migrations were driven by oil and gas development, tourism and amenity migration. Geographic and natural features have shaped all of these migrations and the way in which settlement has been placed on the landscape. The interface between settlement patterns, geographic features and land ownership is profoundly relevant to the trends that will be discussed under the Settlement Patterns Descriptor.

In the Recreational Activities Descriptor the role of geographic and natural features are primary shapers of the range of recreational activities that attract tourists and migrants, and support livelihood and lifestyle for local residents. In the Work Routines Descriptor the ties of livelihood and work routines to the land will also be apparent.

The Geographic Boundaries and Natural Features map on page 8, depicts key features, boundaries, and "place names" that will provide the geographic foundation upon which Settlement Patterns, Recreational Activities, and Work Routines will overlay.

San Juan Plan Revision Applications:
Geographic Boundaries and Natural Features

1. A major component of the community involvement process in the San Juan Plan Revision has been Community Study Groups organized around the Montelores, La Plata and Pagosa Human Resource Units (HRUs) depicted in Figure 1.
2. The three HRUs are shaped by a combination of natural and human geography and correspond very closely with the three Ranger Districts on the San Juan.
3. The San Juan Forest and BLM Resource Management Plans are being developed congruently using a landscape based approach to gather knowledge and input from the community study groups.
4. Each of the three San Juan Districts were divided into approximately 10 “landscapes” based on a combination of geographic features and “sense of place”, to provide a structure for Study Group discussions and the integration of Study Group input with natural resource information.
5. Geographic Information Systems (G.I.S.) provide a critical tool in integrating social and ecological information input and analysis.