EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Uncompahgre River Basin is experiencing a period of rapid growth. Citizens of eastern Montrose and Ouray counties have expressed concerns over the loss of open space, wildlife habitat, and their unique natural surroundings. They have recognized the need to plan for the conservation of plants and animals that are native to the Uncompahgre River Basin, especially those that depend on this area for their survival.

The Umcompahgre River Basin contains a diverse array of wetlands that support a wide variety of plants, animals, and plant communities. At least 32 major wetland/riparian plant communities, 10 birds, 1 plant, 1 fish, and 1 amphibian from the Colorado Natural Heritage Program's (CNHP) list of rare and imperiled plants, animals, and plant communities are known to occur in, or are associated with, wetlands in the Umcompahgre River Basin. In addition to their biological significance, these wetlands perform many functions that provide value to the residents of the county and the communities down river. Uncompahgre River Basin wetlands maintain water quality, provide wildlife habitat, provide recreational opportunities, and add to the aesthetic quality of eastern Montrose and Ouray counties.

In 1998, CNHP received funding to inventory wetland areas within the Uncompahgre River Basin. Wetlands occurring on private lands were given the highest priority for inventory. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provided the funding for this project to the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (CDNR), which selects projects and administers funding. The purpose of the funding is to provide local planners, resource managers, and citizens with information on the status and value of their riparian and wetlands areas, as well as restoration potential. This report presents the results of a comprehensive wetland survey designed to better understand the types of wetlands that occur in the Uncompahgre River Basin, along with their distribution and their natural heritage value.

In 1998, CNHP scientist began their research by updating the Biological and Conservation Data System with existing information. These data were drawn from previous studies by various individuals and organizations, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) database, regional and local herbaria, local experts, federal agencies, and others. Areas supporting wetland vegetation types in the study area were analyzed and mapped on 7.5 min. quadrangles using aerial photography. CNHP selected a representative number of Targeted Inventory Areas (TIAs), within a range of elevations and locations to survey during the 1998 field season. TIAs were characterized in terms of plant associations, hydrology, and wetland class, then prioritized for on-site inventory based on these criteria. Wetlands heavily impacted by roads, building, weeds, agriculture, or grazing were eliminated from the inventory. CNHP initially identified 77 wetlands and riparian areas that merited inventory. More than 40 areas of interests were added to this list during the field season.

A function and value assessment was conducted to provide finer details for each TIA that merited on-site inventory. Fourteen functions and values were evaluated using the Montana Wetland Field Evaluation Form (Berglund 1996) and the hydrogeomorphic approach (HGM) (Brinson 1993). Function and value data will be incorporated into Microsoft Access and GIS databases created for the Statewide Wetlands Characterization and Classification project scheduled to begin the summer of 1999.

Twenty-five wetland and riparian sites of biodiversity significance are profiled in this report. These sites represent the best examples of 32 types of wetlands and riparian communities observed on public and private lands. CNHP believes these sites include those wetlands that most merit conservation efforts, while emphasizing that protecting only these sites will, in no way, adequately protect all the values associated with wetlands in the Uncompahgre River Basin. Additionally, four areas of local significance have been identified based on the local importance of their functions and values within Ouray and eastern Montrose counties. The delineation of Potential Conservation Area boundaries in this report does not confer any regulatory protection on recommended areas. They are intended to be used to support wise planning and decision making for the conservation of these significant areas.

Recommendations for a comprehensive approach to wetland conservation in the Umcompahgre River Basin are presented. Rapid growth throughout much of the valley continues to pose a threat to wetlands through encroachment, fragmentation, altered hydrology, and weed introduction. Historically, some of the most profound impacts on Colorado's wetlands have resulted from changes in hydrology imposed by reservoirs, diversion, irrigation ditches, canals, and ground water pumping. As water becomes an increasingly valuable commodity in western Colorado, more changes of this type are anticipated.

In addition to providing important information for Ouray and eastern Montrose counties, this inventory will advance efforts to evaluate and manage wetlands on state and regional levels. Wetland plant community information gathered during this project is being assimilated into Statewide Wetlands Characterization and Classification Project and Terrestrial Vegetation of the United States (Anderson et al. 1998). Policy makers, land use planners, and resource managers can use information in the classification to make informed decisions governing the use and conservation of natural heritage resources.

Information from this effort will also be used to enhance the development of a program for hydrogeomorphic (HGM) wetland function assessment. This report can be used to help identify wetland subclasses in the area, and to better characterize the range of variation within a subclass. Additionally, several of the sites profiled in this report have the potential for use as reference sites, or to be part of the reference standard.