WHERE WILDERNESS, WILDLIFE, WATER, HISTORY AND CULTURE MEET

You’ve likely seen the Caja del Río as you come up to Santa Fe on I-25. It is the enormous open area to the west starting at La Bajada and extending up to Bandelier, White Rock, and to within a few miles of Santa Fe.

You may not have realized what a treasure these lands hold, from deep canyons filled with petroglyphs to grassland savannas with elk, bear, mountain lion, eagles, and even a small herd of wild mustangs. The plateau’s connections between adjacent natural areas are vital. But the connections to our past increase the importance of this land even more.

This vast plateau is under threat on many fronts but the most immediate is a proposed highway from Los Alamos across the White Rock Canyon that would literally bisect these lands, harming everything in its path. We’re on a mission to work with the pueblos and traditional Hispanic land users to get the Caja del Río protected with National Conservation Area status and with parts under Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River designations.

We’ve had one of the most successful years in decades for land protection in New Mexico with the addition of 13 new Wilderness areas, and our goal is to continue that pace.

Thanks for your continued support!

Mark Allison
Executive Director

THE CAJA AT THE CROSSROADS... LITERALLY

If the plans for a highway, utility lines and the country’s highest bridge come to pass, the Caja del Río will be drastically altered. The 107,068 acres on this plateau are managed by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. However, these are sacred lands for the area’s pueblos who must play a key role in how the lands are used. Caja del Río is principally piñon-juniper savanna and blue grama grassland, with canyons plunging into the Santa Fe River and other tributaries of the Rio Grande. The land is dotted with cinder cones and features a dramatic basalt escarpment. Caja is one of the most ecologically rich and significant wildlife corridors in New Mexico. As part of the Western Wildway Priority Wildlife Corridor, Caja plays a critical role in connecting a vital wildlife corridor that runs along the Upper Rio Grande Watershed from the state of Colorado through New Mexico. The plateau and canyons are vital habitat for a diverse range of plants and animals. Beyond the large, iconic predators and prey, the Caja is home to gray fox, badger, burrowing owls, mountain plover, long-billed curlew, and spotted bat. A threatened songbird, the gray vireo, can be spotted among the junipers and piñons on the plateau. The Caja is one of the last great opportunities to protect the West as it has existed for thousands of years.
THE LAND OF THE CAJA PLATEAU MATTERS FOR ITS HISTORIC AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The human story of the Caja begins with prehistoric Puebloans who farmed on the mesa top using complex irrigation systems and fished and hunted in the canyons below. The land supported many villages with archaeological stories yet to be told. Countless well-preserved petroglyphs cover the black basalt escarpment and canyon walls: thunderbirds, elk, spirals, stars, hand prints, fish, hunters, and many, many more.

The Spanish came to the Caja as well. The historic route of the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro from Mexico City to New Mexico passed through the canyons of the Caja. The original Route 66 also transverses the mesa top and is now a seldom-used dirt road. The history of the American West exists on this plateau in all of its complexity. It remains a spiritual place for many of the nearby pueblos and its importance to those communities cannot be overstated. We must do all we can to save this remarkable landscape for people today but also for the generations ahead.

THREATS BEYOND A HIGHWAY

While the proposed highway to the Los Alamos National Laboratory is an immediate threat, the Caja region is facing ongoing challenges—from illegal dumping to vandalism of sacred sites. From poaching to unregulated shooting and off-road misuse, these threats have been recognized in the past and other attempts to protect the plateau have not succeeded. We believe this is the right time to take on the challenge of permanent protection for the Caja del Rio.

WHAT WE ARE WORKING ON

The Caja del Rio is a national treasure and deserves permanent protection. We are working with pueblos and local communities to determine the most appropriate combination of administrative and legislative designations. One such designation is a National Conservation Area (NCA), which is designated by Congress to conserve, protect, enhance, and manage public land areas for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations. NCAs feature exceptional natural, recreational, cultural, wildlife, aquatic, archaeological, paleontological, historical, educational, and/or scientific resources. We also believe that parts of the Caja plateau would be eligible for Wilderness designation and are exploring the possibility of Wild and Scenic River status for the area as well.

Visit our website for more information on this important natural, historical, and cultural treasure, and sign-up for our updates on the project.

bit.ly/cajadelrio

Please help us continue the work to protect wilderness, wildlife and water in beautiful New Mexico. To give, complete the enclosed form or donate securely online at bit.ly/protectcaja.

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