the GILA WILDERNESS

the heart of everything we fight for

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www.nmwild.org
The Gila Wilderness is the focus of this newsletter. If you live in New Mexico or care about wilderness, then you understand how extraordinary the Gila Country really is. Some go there to hike or paddle, others for a pilgrimage or quiet self-introspection. The Gila is a land that speaks to many and its message is the knowledge that can be discovered in a protected landscape. The lessons that we can learn from the land, from the wildlife - the gifts returned by leaving land in its natural state - are perhaps one of the lessons hardest to teach on a global level.

The concept of wilderness began in the Gila. It was formed by the thinking of many, but spearheaded by the gifted Aldo Leopold. It was here in the heart of the Gila, in the early 1920s, that Leopold began to question much of what was then the modern thinking on nature: ideas revolving around heavily managing land and wildlife. But Leopold, rather than accepting the norms of his time, continued to question. He did it in a West that was growing, but had yet to experience the explosive growth that would occur after WWII. This was the twenties, the cutting of our forests and building of roads was underway, and Leopold could envision the future. He wanted to maintain places where people could horse-pack for at least two weeks in a roadless landscape. He wanted to protect grand parts of wild nature because he understood that, in its purest form, there was nothing to improve. He also understood that society had a significant learning curve concerning the idea of wilderness. His was a true visionary, the voice in the wilderness that was the conservation movement of the 1920s.

Leopold also began to understand the importance of wildlife, especially predatory animals such as wolves, in a healthy ecosystem. The “green-fire dying” (see pg. 9) was his pivotal awakening that wolves were not just important for a healthy environment, but for the spirit of wild nature. His powerful words were written in a time when most people felt that the only good wolf was a dead wolf. It’s sadly ironic that today, here in New Mexico, that fight continues with ignorance and politics dictating a shameful policy of continual killing of wolves. The federal agency in charge, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, has deferred to a small and intransigent sector of the ranching community to define the wolf recovery policy, while biologists, conservationists, sportsmen and even some in the ranching community (those concerned with maintaining a healthy environment) are being ignored. Good people in the USFWS involved in wolf recovery are leaving the agency, speaking volumes about staff morale under the Bush administration. Consistently, wolves are being shot in our state (many by the agencies charged with protecting them) while the defined goal for wolf recovery by 2007 is not being met, not by a mile. Those responsible for illegally killing wolves continue to avoid prosecution.

Radical groups like the Paragon Foundation continue their relentless push to eliminate wolves from our state and we continue to fight back and demand justice for this great animal. We also expect agencies like the Fish and Wildlife Service to do their job, without succumbing to political influence. It would disgust Mr. Leopold to see how politics, not science, continues to control the wolf recovery program and how, in 2007, the broader public still fails to understand the importance of wild lands and wildlife to the overall health of Nature and humanity.

But let's get back to the positive: Leopold's vision for the protection of wildlands that began during his time in the Gila Country. That vision started a movement. It began with the creation of the Gila Primitive Area in 1924 and expanded into a wilderness preservation system today that spans more than 107 million acres in 44 states, featuring 702 wilderness areas. It has also expanded overseas with countries like Australia, Russia, Italy, Poland, Tasmania, Patagonia, Borneo, India, Africa, Mexico, Canada and many others developing their own system of landscape and oceanic protection. Perhaps the greatest wilderness remaining is Antarctica, and the struggle to protect its pristine nature continues. It's amazing to think that Leopold's vision may one day protect the wilderness of an entire continent.

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Whittling Away at the Gila Wilderness Area For over 80 Years

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“A wilderness,” Aldo Leopold wrote, “should be big enough to absorb a two-week pack trip without crossing your own tracks.” To early forester Leopold, the wilderness was the pine forest and sheer canyons of the headwaters of the Gila River in the Mogollon Mountains and Black Range in southwestern New Mexico. As I imagine myself on Holt Mountain looking into the wilderness, ravens quarking and wheeling below, it is easy to believe that I am sitting with Leopold. His words hang and spangle in the air below us like fall leaves of aspen.

During the second decade of the last century, he became enthralled with the freedom of this remote fastness and yet worried that it would soon vanish without positive action on the part of its manager, the United States Forest Service. With popular articles and through in-house discussions with Forest Service decision-makers, Leopold pushed his point that because of the sudden availability and spread of motor-cars in the National Forest backcountry after World War One there would soon be no place left for those so inclined to practice the primitive arts and skills of pioneer travel—primarily horse and mule packing. In 1924, his work bore fruit and Southwest Regional Forester Frank Pooler administratively designated a Gila Wilderness Area of nearly one million acres stretching west to east from Glenwood to Kingston, New Mexico. Like areas were soon set aside in other Forest Service regions and all were renamed as primitive areas.

A fair question to ask now, eighty-some years after Leopold and Pooler’s gift to the future, is how well have later generations of forest rangers, politicians, and the public carried out their responsibility of stewardship? Protecting the Gila Wilderness Area has been a personal passion of mine for the last thirty-six years, and I have carefully studied its history before that. In answer to my question, I can say that we have not done a good job. Had it not been for stout-hearted citizen conservationists like Jim Stowe and principled Forest Service employees like Sam Servis at key times, our caring for the Gila Wilderness would have been far, far worse—a travesty, in short.

More than any other single area, the Gila Wilderness epitomizes the never-ending struggle to protect wilderness and fulfills the conservationists’ watchword, “A wilderness battle is never won.”

The Gila was the first area specifically protected as wilderness by human civilization. But within eight years of its designation, the Forest Service cut the North Star Road through it north to south, slicing the Black Range to the east from the rest of the roadless country. The Gila National Forest claimed the road was needed for quicker communication between its ranger stations at Beaverhead and Mimbres, and for access for fire-fighting, private livestock management, and hunting. A key reason, however, was that this region of the East Fork of the Gila River was dusty, pinon-juniper steppe, and in the aesthetic eye of the Forest Service not pretty enough to be wilderness—this scenic bias drove Forest Service policy on the Gila’s boundaries for fifty years, and still plays a role in efforts to add other lower-elevation lands to the wilderness. Part of the Gila Primitive Area east of the new road was redesignated as the Black Range Primitive Area.

With the road came the extermination of the grizzly and lobo. The North Star Road ripped through high mesa country—gentle land rare in a roadless condition. Ranchers, hunters, and fuelwood cutters in early pickup trucks began to branch off on either side of the North Star Road and push deeper into the Gila Primitive Area to the west and the Black Range Primitive Area to the east during the 1930s, leaving a network of two-track routes. During World War Two, several thousand acres believed to have critical minerals were chopped from the primitive area boundary on the south where the Gila River flows out of the mountains. After World War Two, army surplus jeeps were brought home and were used to further pioneer two-track routes into the primitive areas while the Forest Service shrugged their shoulders.

The heart of the Gila is where the three forks of the river come together. This valley also held hot springs, private inholdings and ranch headquarters, and the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument. Every year the Forest Service led a jeep caravan twenty miles through their Gila Primitive Area to the Gila Cliffs, officially violating their management standards. This was a big, well-publicized event and attracted a lot of participants. During this time, the Gila NF Supervisor bet that he could drive his jeep some thirty-five miles farther across the Gila from the Cliffs northward to TurkeyfootPass to Willow Creek. He almost made it. I have a photograph of a crumbling little bulldozer deep in the wilderness that had been specifically designed to maintain primary wilderness trails.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Forest Service undertook a program to review all of the primitive areas that had been created during the 1920s and 1930s to determine whether they should remain protected and, if so, to draw firm boundaries for them. After study, the areas were to be called wilderness areas if over 100,000 acres and wild areas if under 100,000 acres. In 1952, the Forest Service issued their recommendations for the Gila. Already cut down from its original near-million to 560,000 acres, the Gila NF proposed to further reduce it to 300,000 acres by lopping off over 100,000 acres in the east alongside the North Star Road where, said the Forest Service, the gentle topography made defense against vehicles impossible. They would also chop out the Gila Cliffs Dwellings, the valley around it, and the access route from the south into it. They planned to build a paved road into the Cliffs Dwellings for tourists. In perhaps the most grievous cut of all, another 100,000 acres of towering old-growth mixed-conifer and ponderosa pine forest around Iron Creek Mesa in the north would be pulled out for full-on, industrial logging.

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In spite of the fact that local communities in southwestern New Mexico have not identified a need for this water project, the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission has been moving ahead with efforts to withdraw water from the Gila without examining the range of water supply alternatives available to the region. The groundwater supply of the Silver City area, the intended beneficiary of this project, is estimated to last centuries, even taking into account projected growth. According to a report conducted for the Gila Conservation Coalition by the economics consulting firm, ECONorthwest, the costs of extracting water from the Gila River are 16 times higher than the costs of purchasing unused water rights and developing new wells. Even if partially subsidized by federal coffers, it makes no economic sense for local governments to buy into infrastructure development that would provide water they don't need and at such high cost to water users and taxpayers.

**Governor Vetoes Gila Appropriation**

During this year's legislative session, Governor Richardson vetoed a $945,000 appropriation for "Gila Basin Water Development" in response to hundreds of calls from throughout the conservation community. The Governor's office stated, "The appropriation language was problematic and didn't include the proper balance. The different parties have not reached consensus yet on this issue, and, until that happens, it's going to be hard to move forward. The Governor remains committed to helping the parties reach consensus in the months ahead." The conservation community believes that the Gila-San Francisco Coordinating Committee process has been biased toward study of potential impacts of water withdrawal from the Gila River. The Governor's veto underscores the need for a new process that examines the full range of water supply alternatives that meet the water needs of the communities in southwestern New Mexico and that is not focused solely on Gila River diversion and consumption.

The Gila Conservation Coalition and its partners will continue to promote a common-sense approach that can satisfy the future water needs of the region while also maintaining the free flow of the Gila. The AWSA allows for $66 million of the $128 million federal subsidy to be expended for any "water utilization projects that meet a water supply demand." This funding could go to improving municipal conservation, increasing irrigation efficiency, buying water rights, digging new wells, or to a host of other practical measures that would meet the future needs of the entire region in a cost-effective manner and conserve the Gila and San Francisco rivers.

With river systems around the globe increasingly under threat from water development, the Arizona Water Settlements Act provides New Mexico with a rare opportunity to find a balance between human and environmental needs. The $66 million federal subsidy from the AWSA should be used to meet the region's future water demand at least cost and keep the Gila a wild, free-flowing river.
This is a Big, Wild Place

National Conservation Area Proposed for Taos County

by Jim O’Donnell
Northern Director
New Mexico Wilderness Alliance

One of the wildest places in New Mexico can be found in Taos County.

The area is massive, sprawling over more than 300,000 acres. How you name it depends on who you talk to. NMWA calls it by a group of individual names: Rio Grande Gorge, Ute Mountain, Sunshine Valley, Wild Rivers, Cerro de la Olla, Cerro Chiflo, Rio San Antonio, Cerro del Aire...other names are Windmill, the Punche Valley, el Llano, Upper Gorge, Lower Gorge, Rio Grande Corridor, the Ute Mountain Run...the challenge in naming it has everything to do with its size and diversity – as does the challenge in describing it.

So, let’s begin with the river.

The Labatos Bridge marks the beginning of the Rio Grande Gorge. The bridge can be found in Colorado where the Rio Grande begins its cut into the Servilleta lava flows that make up the Taos Plateau. Eight miles later, at the New Mexico state line, the river is 200 feet down, the gorge 150 feet across. West of Questa, where Big Arsenic Spring bubbles from the rock and pinyon jays heap in the winter, the river is a glaring green ribbon 800 feet down. The opposite rim is over half a mile away where, on summer mornings, bald eagles soar southward in pairs. At John Dunn Bridge the river enters The Box, an 18-mile stretch of 900 foot cliffs, famous among boaters.

This is also the Rio Grande Migratory Flyway – one of the great migratory routes in the world. Eagles, falcons and hawks make the basalt walls of the Gorge their nesting homes. Ospreys, scaups, hummingbirds, herons, avocets, merlins and willits all traverse the Gorge. The sound of Sandhill Cranes, migrating from the San Luis Valley to places like Bosque Del Apache, can be deafening during an October hike in the tablelands west of the river.

It’s that western plateau that is perhaps the most wild. From the edge of the Gorge, vast grass and sagebrush mesas intersperse with the forested slopes of volcanic intrusions such as Cerro Chiflo, Cerro del Aire, Montosos and Cerro de la Olla. It is on these mesas where vast herds of pronghorn and elk find winter forage and calve and fawn along the rim in late spring. A rancher swore to me he’d heard a wolf howl out there just a few years ago.

This substantial chunk of wild country is bordered by the Gorge Rim on the east and Highway 285 on the west. The northern portion spills over 285, encompassing the broad, gently rolling grass and sagebrush plains of the Rio San Antonio Gorge WSA, bisected by yet another gorge where raptors nest in 200-foot high lava walls and conifers clamber down to the Rio los Pinos.

Perhaps the crown jewel of this whole area is Ute Mountain, a 10,093 foot high volcanic cone rising nearly 3,000 feet above the surrounding plain. Ute is something you can’t miss. Located about ten miles west of Costilla, it is the dominate feature for those driving north from Taos along highway 522.

The steep slopes of Ute are covered in pinyon at the base, as well as pockets of ponderosa, aspen, white pine and Douglas Fir in the higher elevations. From grassy meadows of blue grama, western wheatgrass and Indian ricegrass where the trees thin, the Gorge is a jagged, inky slash dividing Ute from its sister cones to the west. Snow-capped Blanca rises to the north, just across the state line. The whole Sangre de Cristo range falls to the east, terminating, view-wise, at Wheeler Peak.

There are people here too --- Lupe, Bobby, Esther, Rudy, Ron, Dennis... Descendants of the land grantees run cattle all along the Gorge and out into the table-lands between the rim and Highway 285. Vehicle routes tend toward sparse and are, more likely than not, unmaintained two-tracks. On the slopes of Cerro de la Olla, locals collect firewood to heat their homes. Hunting and fishing are common. Hikers climb to the bottom of the gorge for a swim and a picnic. The Box is a popular rafting area and bird watching draws – well, not as many as it ought to. It is fabulous birding!

This is wild land, important to the culture and character of our county and vital, in its wilderness, to our economy. We learned two main lessons during the battles over the Valle Vidal. One, no chunk of public land is secure from mineral development or other forms of exploitation – no matter how safe you may think that land is, no matter how ‘lacking’ in exploitative possibilities it may be, someone, sometime is going to come after that land. Our second lesson was this: our economy in north-central New Mexico is dependant on Wilderness. Wilderness feeds the rivers that feed the acequias. It nurtures our rural lifestyle. Wilderness is the ‘bank’ from which we hunt, fish and explore. It’s presence offers a tremendous economic development opportunity. Perhaps most importantly, these wildlands create and nurture the character of the people of Taos County. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages the whole thing. This is public land. Our land.

It is invaluable.

For over a year now, we have been in discussion with the BLM and Senator Bingaman’s office to find a way to give this massive area the protection it deserves. We have wide-ranging support on this effort from the ranching community, the local elected officials, the acequias, the sportsman community, the boaters and the biologists.

We hope that by the time you read this legislation will have been introduced to assure the wild character of this land forever as a National Conservation Area (NCA). The highlights of this legislation should be the placement of Ute Mountain and the Rio San Antonio Gorge within the Wilderness Preservation System.
New Study Says Large Aquifer is under Otero Mesa

by Nathan Newcomer

Otero Mesa has been in the news for several years now. For many, it has been a fight about protecting a wild and beautiful Chihuahuan Desert grassland. But more specifically, it is about protecting the largest and wildest Chihuahuan Desert grassland on federal public lands from the ravages of oil and gas development.

It may not be widely known that the state’s largest, untapped fresh water aquifer lies just beneath this vast wilderness, and that drilling would likely contaminate this vital resource. Recently a study entitled “Knowledge of the Salt Basin in South-central New Mexico and Future Study Needs” was made public. This preliminary report was authored by Sandia National Labs and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

This study focused on the water resources in the New Mexico portion of the Salt Basin and made some important preliminary findings, as well as recommending important next steps to quantify and locate the amount of recoverable water. The main findings of the report are:

1. The volume of potentially potable groundwater under Otero Mesa is much greater than the original estimates of 57 million acre-feet of ground water, the amount first estimated by the State’s Regional Water Plan, (in laymen’s terms, 57 million acre-feet equal more than 18 trillion gallons of water.)

2. The study indicates that there may be additional aquifers in the New Mexico portions of the Salt Basin.

3. Recharge for the Basin comes in large part from surface water runoff, including the Otero Mesa area. Recharge areas of the Salt Basin are generally vulnerable to the introduction of contaminants.

4. The Basin also contains areas of rapid groundwater movement, which can make the entire system vulnerable to the rapid spread of contaminants.

5. Further study is imperative to define the location and characteristics of the groundwater, so that risks to water quality can be limited and the value of this resource can be protected.

In 2004, John Shomaker & Associates Inc., water-resource and environmental consultants, presented the findings of another study showing the federal agencies’ drilling plans for Otero Mesa would jeopardize the Salt Basin aquifer. The study’s conclusion said the agencies’ plan “makes no special provisions for protection of ground-water resources” including existing and future public water wells.

The report explained why the agencies’ plans for permitting oil and gas development lack sufficient protective measures. The Salt Basin aquifer is highly fractured limestone, which is susceptible to contamination resulting from the injection of oil- and gas-related waste into underlying rocks. The limestone is also vulnerable to the inevitable spills and leaks from oil and gas operations.

Last year, the Oil Conservation Division, a state agency within the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, issued a report that found approximately 1,800 cases state-wide of oil- and gas-related waste into underlying rocks. The limestone is also vulnerable to the inevitable spills and leaks from oil and gas operations.

All of this evidence lends credibility to the argument that allowing oil and gas drilling to move forward in Otero Mesa would be a blunder of insurmountable proportions, with far-reaching negative impacts.

The New Mexico legislative session has just ended and the state authorized $1 million to be spent studying the aquifer beneath Otero Mesa. This is the beginning of a proposed three-year study of the Salt Basin that many in the water field feel will clearly show the massive extent of this groundwater resource. Recently, a coalition of sportsman and conservation groups asked our congressional delegation to put in place a three-year moratorium on all oil and gas development in Otero Mesa. The reasoning is clear—modern day oil and gas development is not benign; in fact, it remains a process that no matter the regulations, can and often does contaminate our precious groundwater.

New Mexicans have continued to support oil and gas development on almost 6 million acres of land in our state. In contrast, only 1.6 million acres have been permanently protected. To date, the oil and gas industry has held only one position when it comes to Otero Mesa - they want the right to drill all of it. Almost anyone who has studied the geology of the area can tell you the odds of finding recoverable amounts of oil and gas under Otero Mesa are slim. Why risk the inevitable contamination of this precious fresh water?

It comes down to power and money, with common sense the loser. Let’s find out how much water there is and how it might benefit southern New Mexico. More than anything, let’s be realistic. Oil and gas drilling will continue on millions of acres of land in New Mexico without debate, but some places hold far more value in beauty, wildlife and pure water than they do in oil. Such a place is Otero Mesa.

SPEAK OUT FOR OTERO MESA

A Voice for Wilderness!

Take a few minutes to call in and voice your concerns for our wildest public lands. Our objective is to get as many voices as possible speaking out on protecting wilderness. Please be concise and short in your comments. It is important that we get as many voices as possible speaking out on wilderness. Our objective is to create a CD of voices and present them to our congressional delegation, letting them hear, directly from you, how important wilderness is.

Our Current Voices for Wilderness Campaign is focusing on Otero Mesa.

Please call (505) 333-0420 and leave a message today for our congressional delegation, urging them to support a moratorium on drilling in this wild Chihuahuan Desert grassland. To learn more about Otero Mesa please visit: www.oteromesa.org
by Nathan Small

In Dona Ana County, spring is synonymous with wind. This year’s gusts did not disappoint, reaching 92 mph one day in early March. Similarly, the winds of wilderness are steadily gathering. A diverse group of local citizens—ranging from a horse trainer to a bed and breakfast owner, a retired engineer and teacher to telephone repairman—have made a commitment to bring permanent protection to the area’s outstanding natural areas. They’ve lead walks, written local papers, and now are starting to see some of 2007’s first successes hitting the ground, like raindrops in a parched desert.

In late March, the region’s largest circulation newspaper, the El Paso Times, editorialized in favor of protecting Dona Ana County wilderness. The Times editors eloquently recognized the strong connections between West Texas, especially El Paso, and Dona Ana County, opining, “it’s in everyone’s best interests to safeguard the natural, and irreplaceable, treasure that is our wilderness areas.”

Local horse trainer and riding lessons instructor Pat Buls knows firsthand the power of wilderness. Pat, owner of Shining Heart Farms and Equestrian Center in Radium Springs, NM has been exploring and educating in wild places much of her life. In a piece published by the El Paso Times, Pat recounted “Thirty years ago, I rode my horse from Las Cruces to Durango, Colorado...Surrendering myself completely to the Creator of all things developed in me an unshakable faith that has carried me through three decades of sometimes difficult times with a happy heart and positive attitude”.

Wilderness has long been recognized as a spiritual fountain, full of renewal for modern lives drained by life’s daily drudgeries. However, more and more recent attention has been given to the economic value that protected public lands, especially wilderness, can bring to local and regional communities.

The Sonoran Institute is a non-partisan economic research group. They studied the potential economic effects of wilderness designation in Dona Ana County, and concluded that generally protected public lands benefit a region’s long term economic health, including Dona Ana County.

Recognizing the alignment of long term economic health and protected public land, over 100 local businesses support the Dona Ana County wilderness proposal. Ranging from restaurants to retail, car-dealerships to doctor’s offices, these establishments support community conservation values. We encourage anyone who similarly values the lasting legacy of protected natural areas to support these same businesses. A full list can be found at: www.DonaAnaWild.org.

From the divine to the dollar, wilderness covers many values. However, each value is rooted in place. Recognizing this, the Dona Ana Wilderness Coalition, led by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, committed to helping lead “wilderness walks” every weekend beginning in mid-January. This commitment is yielding impressive results. Groups ranging from 8-20 people gather every Saturday and sometimes Sunday to explore wild places one hour or less from Las Cruces. They’ve seen Broad Canyon, spotted purple and blue with Verbina wildflowers, and watched eight mule deer graze along the north side of Cueva’s Rocks, in the Needles Wilderness Study Area (WSA).

On top of Cox Peak, walkers gazed over the expansive West Potrillo Mountains, New Mexico’s largest WSA. This intact landscape supports outstanding wildlife populations and healthy livestock operations. In the Robledos Mountains walkers viewed a wild bee colony’s honey combs hanging from a cliff face, and house sized boulders strewn in a wild canyon bottom.

Momentum is building. NOW is the time to fly to Washington D.C.? We’ve set up a unique phone line, where you can leave a message stating who you are and why you value wilderness. This message will then be downloaded onto a CD featuring regular people talking about protecting special places. Your call will make this effort a success. Please call: 505-201-4318.

We’re proud to announce our monthly campfire cookouts at the beautiful Happy Trails Inn, located in Mesilla and owned by wilderness supporter Sylvia and Harry Byrnes. They boast a beautiful Organ Mountains view surrounded by shade trees. The Inn is a celebration of art, culture, and southwestern heritage—an ideal setting for Wilderness Work and celebration. All are welcome to attend, vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals will be available. Save the date: May 19.

With Southern Director Jeff Steinborn back home in Las Cruces after fulfilling his State Representative duties, the campaign is moving forward. See page 21 for important Dona Ana County action alerts, and stay tuned as wilderness—America’s Common Ground progresses in Dona Ana County.
Keeping the Wild Spirit of the Gila
Demanding Justice for the Wolf

by Stephen Capra

The Mexican wolf is the rarest subspecies of gray wolf in North America. It is the famous "Lobo" of the southwest. When Aldo Leopold, in his "Thinking Like a Mountain" essay, talks of watching the "green fire" die from the eyes of a wolf he and his companions had just shot in the early 1900s—that animal was a Mexican wolf. The landscape was the Blue Range country of Arizona, just west of the Gila National Forest. This experience changed Leopold's attitude towards wolves and led to his understanding of the ecological importance of the wolf and its role in maintaining the health of deer herds and, ultimately, the land. Following restoration of wolves to Yellowstone National Park and surrounding areas, studies are demonstrating the strength of the connection between wolves and ecosystem health and biological diversity. The wolves' return has restored stream-side vegetation (formerly browsed to oblivion by elk), enticed beavers to return and build their dams once again, and recreated habitats for trout, song birds, and myriad other species.

By the mid-nineteenth century, private and government-sponsored predator control programs had completely extirpated Mexican wolves from their wild Southwestern haunts in order to make the landscape safe for cattle. In a couple more decades they were wiped out in Mexico for the same reason, but five of the last remaining wolves were captured alive and placed in captivity to save the Mexican wolf from complete extinction. Passage of the Endangered Species Act gave the lobo a new life. Breeding was ramped up and a program to return Mexican wolves to the Gila and Apache National Forests began in 1998 and continues today. Somewhere around 55 wolves now roam the Gila and Blue Range country—25 to 30 are known to occur in New Mexico. But all is not well in wolf country.

Project objectives called for slightly over 100 wolves and 18 breeding pairs by the end of 2006. Slightly over half that many wolves exist and only 5 breeding pairs are currently documented. In addition, far more wolves than originally thought would be necessary have been released; and releases have continued four years longer than planned. The problem is an unsustainable "failure rate" for wolves. The failure rate is the combination of illegal and natural deaths and the killing and removal of wolves by the managing agencies to address human-wolf conflicts, mainly the depredation of livestock by wolves. To date, the agencies have lacked the imagination or political resolve to address these conflicts by any other means than killing and removing wolves. While the Endangered Species Act allows the flexibility of taking some wolves to resolve conflicts, it still requires that meaningful progress be made toward conserving and ultimately recovering the Mexican wolf to sustainable population levels. It is this "conservation" requirement of the Endangered Species Act that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and cooperating federal and state agencies have lost sight of. What appears to be impairing their vision is the politics of livestock grazing on our public lands, including our public wilderness areas, such as the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness areas.

Livestock and related organizations have twice sued to stop the wolf reintroduction program and lost. But meetings convened by Representative Steve Pearce in 2005 to give wolf opponents access to top regional U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials were followed by a moratorium on additional releases of wolves and stricter measures for killing or removing wolves that prey on livestock. In February the Catron County Commission passed an ordinance that defies federal law and grants authority to the county to kill Mexican wolves for problems as they define them (including psychological trauma) if the federal government can't get the job done in 24 hours. Several conservation organizations recently filed a notice of intent to sue Catron County for violating the Endangered Species Act with the passage of the ordinance. And more recently, the Grant County Commission passed an ordinance recommending the compensation of county residents for broadly defined (but poorly supported) damages caused by wolves, including nebulous, undocumented effects such as lost hunting opportunities. These actions demonstrate little interest by anti-wolf groups—primarily livestock and non-ecologically oriented hunting organizations—in compromising in any way to allow the lobo to live free on our public lands in the Southwest, including our wilderness areas.

But they also reflect the work of one non-profit organization - The Paragon Foundation in Alamogordo, New Mexico, an organization whose mission statement is: "By engaging people to honor and enforce the rights given to them under the Constitution of the United States, by upholding laws that define our existence. This obligation is satisfied through the collaborative research, education and sharing of knowledge and experiences." Translated: they are a private property rights and consumptive land use organization that is opposed to public lands, wilderness and government regulation. They have organized intensely in New Mexico, especially with some fringe sportsman groups, in a determined effort to remove wolves and all predatory animals from the wild. In their relentless effort to support private use of public lands (such as ranching) and an ultra-conservative agenda, the organization has staunch followers.

Paragon sponsors radio programs like the Derry Brownfield Show, airing across the mid-west and in New Mexico. Brownfield spends much of his time spewing an endless stream of anti-environmental rhetoric. Immigration and private property rights are choice subjects, but his favorite is the removal of predatory animals from our public lands. For his fear-based audience, mountain lions, bears, wolves and other indigenous/magnificent wildlife are the enemy and must be extirpated forever. Public lands and any federal regulations designed to protect endangered species should be abolished. Conservationists, enlightened sportsmen, the federal government and anyone not aligned with their 19th century thinking are fair game, and the wolf has become their latest and strongest rallying cry. The Paragon Foundation is determined to stop the wolf reintroduction program and
have invested heavily in outreach and misinformation. Congressman Pearce recently advanced their cause with a "Dear Colleague" letter to his fellow congressmen entitled "STOP THE HORSE SLAUGHTER." Among other things Congressman Pearce speculates that eventually there will be "an attack on a child." He erroneously states that the wolf reintroduction program was "established against the wishes of the people of New Mexico." A majority of New Mexicans support wolf reintroduction, even in rural areas.

Opposition to reintroduction is often focused on wolves decreasing the elk population - fewer elk might translate into less hunting — or so the thinking goes. But statistics from Idaho, a state with more than 600 wild wolves, paint another picture --- in 2006 the success rate for Idaho hunters was more than 19.5%, which is considered a banner year, with more than 20,257 elk taken. In 2004 some 20,925 elk were bagged. In 2005 the number climbed to 21,520. Despite an increasing wolf population, sportsmen's ability to take elk has not been impacted. The numbers point to a relatively stable take that fluctuates slightly up or down year-to-year. The same could be expected in New Mexico, but the key benefit that goes unreported is the overall increasing health of the environment and indeed, the overall health of the elk themselves.

On March 28, the New Mexico Game Commission held a public listening session in Las Cruces to hear public concerns about the Mexican wolf recovery program. The Paragon Foundation organized aggressively for this hearing, helping to create the Mesilla Valley sportsman organization. Members of this new group spoke out against wolf recovery and gave the commission a petition with more than 700 names opposing reintroduction. The large crowd was about equally divided between those who support the wolf and those who want them removed from our public lands. Those in opposition spoke about their fears for the safety of their children, their fear of losing their "way of life," and their unwillingness, as hunters, to share the large Gila elk herd with wild wolves. Wolf supporters spoke to the legal and ethical reasons for restoring wolves and the importance of wolves for maintaining healthy, biologically diverse ecosystems. A Silver City high school student speaking in support of the wolves said "The Gila is the wildest public lands she has experienced." It was clear from her comments that she wanted it to stay that way.

Aldo Leopold learned from the mountain. He learned because he spent time in nature observing the relationship between wildlife and a healthy ecosystem. Leopold came to his conclusions by spending years in wild nature and discovering the contradictions with the lessons he had been taught in university. But he trusted his judgment, and began the major endeavor of his life --- changing the average person's perspective of wild nature. Today we carry on with his work and, not surprisingly, there still are people fighting the truth. Wild nature calls for wild wolves; a healthy environment requires wolves. We will continue to fight for the wolf --- the mountain demands it.

One particular afternoon, Leopold and another crew member spotted a wolf and her pups crossing the river. They shot into the pack and then scrambled down the rocks to see what they had done. One pup was crippled and trying to crawl away. The old mother wolf lay snapping and growling. Aldo baited her with his rifle, and the wolf lunged at him, snatching it in her teeth. The men backed away, but kept their eyes on her, watching her die. Many years later, Leopold wrote:

"We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain."

Leopold's road-to-Damascus change of view would not come to fruition until some years later in his so-called "land ethic".
by Michael Scialdone

We all have hobbies, activities to fill our free time and engage our creative side, and for most, hobbies are quiet pursuits that don't involve degrading the environment or the experiences of others. Enter the hobby of riding off-road vehicles (ORVs). As ORV use has increased since the 70’s, so have the conflicts that inherently go with this activity: disruptions to wildlife and their habitat; erosion; damage to rivers, riparian areas and wetlands; scarred and denuded landscapes (especially sand dunes); and displacement of quiet recreationists on our public lands.

As reported in previous newsletters, the Forest Service has responded to the ORV problem by declaring the Travel Management Rule (TMR). The TMR directs each National Forest to designate routes that will be open to motorized travel. Every National Forest will engage in a public process to take a hard look at their system of roads and come up with a map showing which roads will be open to motorized travel. Each NF in New Mexico is in a different stage of their process, but all aim to have a map printed by early 2009. When this happens, all routes not shown on the map and all cross-country travel (with a few exceptions), will be closed to all motorized vehicles, including ORVs.

The Forest Service has been holding meetings across the state to gather input from the public about which routes would we like to see open or closed to motorized travel. These meetings are considered the ‘scoping phase’ where public input is gathered. Motorized-use enthusiasts have been attending these meetings in force. Fortunately, those that care about wildlife and quiet recreation have also started to attend. This is very important. The TMR is a step in the right direction, but if the FS only hears from ORV folks then the final map will reflect their interests. Whether you have site-specific information about conflicts and/or environmental damage or you are there to voice support for wildlife and quiet recreation in general, attending these meetings and submitting written comments will be crucial to keeping the FS on the right track.

An easy way to keep up with the TMR is to join our email list. Once a week or so NMWA sends out an email with news and updates about important conservation issues. It will include updates on the TMR and what each National Forest is doing as well as where meetings are planned. Signing up is easy - just go to http://ga1.org/nmwildaction/join.html. Each NF has information on their website. If you would like to ask questions or get involved here at the NMWA office in Albuquerque, the person to talk to is Michael Scialdone, 505-843-8696, scialemwild.org. On our webpage is information about submitting written comments to the Santa Fe and Carson National Forests. We will update this information for other forests as needed.

After the scoping phase of the process, each National Forest will consider public input along with their own internal analysis of routes. From this, they will release a proposed action (or a range of proposed actions) showing which routes they propose to close or leave open. The public will then have a chance to comment specifically on the alternative(s).

New Mexico National Forests – at what stage are they in the process?

• The Gila has no meetings planned at this time. On their website under Travel Management you can sign up to be on their mailing list.
• The Lincoln just announced they will be holding their first round of meetings. Come to our Las Cruces office on Monday, April 23 from 4 - 7 at 275 North Downtown Mall. We are joining the Southwest Environmental Center, Forest Guardians, and the Center for Biological Diversity in an effort to seek input and increase attendance to the following Lincoln National Forest meetings:
  • Tuesday, April 24, 6:00-8:30 at the Carlsbad Public Library
  • Monday, May 7, 5:30-8:00 at the Ruidoso Convention Center
  • Wednesday, May 9, 6:00-8:00 at the Red Brick Schoolhouse in Cloudcroft (location may change)
  • Thursday, May 10, 5:30-7:30 at the Alamogordo Convention Center
• The Cibola is breaking down the process to the district level with the Sandia Ranger District already holding meetings. On May 8 and 9 they will host two more in Albuquerque and Tijeras. Visit http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/cibola/travel-management/index.shtml for more details.
• The Santa Fe is wrapping up a second round of meetings. They are aiming to have a proposed action by this fall.
• The Carson has completed their second round of meetings. They are aiming to have a proposed action by this fall.

NMWA has been actively involved in the TMR since it was put in to motion in 2006. Through our newsletter and email alerts, we have been educating and alerting our members and the interested public about the TMR and when each NF is having meetings related to it. We have teamed up with conservation partners across NM and the southwest to develop strategies on how best to keep the Forest Service moving in the right direction. We have joined ‘working groups’ set up by the Forest Service to try to reach compromise among different user/interest groups. We have conducted field work and will use this information to submit detailed comments.

This is a huge undertaking by the Forest Service that will continue for two more years. Please get involved in any way you can. The decisions that come out of this process will affect our forests for years to come.
Taking a different trail to the same peak

by Craig Chapman

“Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far” Theodore Roosevelt.

I have always supported the environment. Having lived in New Mexico for over 25 years, I have backpacked in the Gila, San Mateo’s, Jemez, Manzanos and the Pecos Wilderness area. I do trail maintenance yearly. One summer I spent 10 wonderful days in the Gila rerouting the Continental Divide Trail. I Mountain bike spring, summer and fall; I ski and snowshoe in the winter. I moved to Albuquerque for the quick and convenient access to the outdoors. When necessary I can revive my Wild-erness spirit over a weekend. Most of my friends feel and do the same. Most of my friends vote Republican.

We all share the same love for the outdoors. When I explain that I now work for New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, one friend, a thirty-year-old environmental scientist, responds without affection, “You work for the tree huggers?” Another friend who is retired from the military, states “Craig, I grew up in Washington State. I have been pro environment my whole life. I support your cause, but the constant partisan politics just turns me off.” Another friend that works in the sporting goods industry selling backpacks, tents and outdoor goods “Yes the Enviros can be a little extreme in their political views.”

If I had to explain my political views I would say that I am Roosevelt Republican. While Theodore Roosevelt was President (1901-1909) he established the US Forest Service, created five national parks and proclaimed 18 national monuments. He established the first 51 bird reserves, 4 game preserves and 150 national forests. Altogether, in the seven-and-one-half years he was in office, he provided federal designation for almost 230 million acres, a land area equivalent to that of all the East coast states from Maine to Florida. Many consider him the first conservationist President.

Some other facts that may surprise you. Richard Nixon signed the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and also established the Environmental Protection Agency. President Reagan signed into law 38 bills that added more than 10.6 million acres of forests, mountains, deserts, and wetlands to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

President Bush’s house in Crawford Texas is passive solar, and utilizes geothermal heat from pipes buried 300 feet into the ground. It has a 25,000-gallon underground cistern to collect rainfall. Wastewater is collected from sinks, toilets and showers then purified and funneled into the cistern. The water is then used to irrigate the indig-enous, grasses, shrubs and flowers that complete the exterior treatment of the home. It is a 4-bedroom house that consumes 25% of the energy of an average American home.

I am not trying to influence your vote or change your party affiliation. I’m providing some facts with a little history and suggesting that you might be surprised by who your allies for Wilderness might be. When you support partisan politics – i.e. Democrats are more environmentally friendly than Republicans - two things come to mind: 1) it may not always be true. 2) if it is, you are preaching to your own choir. Ignoring a large group that is environmentally friendly and supports Wilderness is just not good, in any environment.

I say, do not be anti oil, be pro-Wilder-ness; do not be anti-development, be pro-Wilderness; do not be anti-Repub-lian or Democrat, be pro Wilderness. We need to stop bickering and begin to work together. Let us all do the right thing and be pro Wilderness.

Service Projects

May 11, 12, 13, 2007—Limestone Canyon in the San Mateo Mtns Service Project

The San Mateo Mountains are a remote range in central New Mexico with two areas already designated Wilderness and most of the range suitable for more designation. We will work on a stream restoration project in Limestone Canyon on the northwest portion of the range, near the Plains of San Agustin. We will camp at the site. 2.5 hours from ABQ, 3 hours from Las Cruces. Contact: Michael Scialdone at 505-843-8696, scial@nmwild.org for more info.

May 18, 19, 20, 2007—Cebolla Canyon Service Project

Cebolla Canyon is just east of El Malpais National Monument, south of Grants. Albuquerque Wildlife Federation, who will host this trip, has been doing projects in the area since the Bureau of Land Management acquired much of the canyon in the early 1990’s. The focus will be stream restoration with an eye toward beaver re-introduction. We will camp at the site. 2 hours west of ABQ. Contact: Gene Tatum at 505-255-1960, gtatum3@msn.com for more info.

June 1, 2, 3, 2007—National Trails Day Service Project, Pecos Wilderness

This is an annual project on the north end of the Pecos Wilderness. Once again we will be working with Karen Cook of the Carson National Forest, so it is certain to be a worthwhile and well organized project. In previous years we have installed barriers to prevent illegal ATV access in to the Pecos Wilderness and to protect a riparian area at the Trampas Lakes trailhead. We will camp at the site. 2.5 hours north of ABQ. Contact: Michael Scialdone at 505-843-8696, scial@nmwild.org for more info.

June 15, 16, 17, 2007—Rio de las Vacas Service Project

Hosted by the Albuquerque Wildlife Federation, this is a follow-up project to one done in April. With its headwaters in the San Pedro Parks Wilderness up near Cuba, Rio de las Vacas is an important tributary in the Jemez River watershed. Stream restoration will be the focus of this weekend outing. Good spot for fishing. We will camp at the site. 2 hours north / northwest of ABQ. Contact: Gene Tatum at 505-255-1960, gtatum3@msn.com for more info.

June 29, 30, 1, 2007—Red River Service Project

The first of our three annual projects with Amigos Bravos to help in Red River Watershed restoration. For this one, we will be working down in the Red River Valley. Projects will include closing off illegal ATV routes and fencing off riparian areas. We will camp at the site. 3 hours north of ABQ. Contact: Rachel Conn, at 505-758-3874, rconn@amigosbravos.org for more info.

July 14, 15, 16, 2007—Middle Fork Trail Service Project

We will join with Amigos Bravos at this beautiful canyon at the base of the Wheeler Peak Wilderness. We will work on erosion control on an old road that leads to an alpine lake. The road was so messed up by ATVs that it had to be closed to motorized vehicles. We will camp at the site. 3 hours north of ABQ.

Contact: Rachel Conn, at 505-758-3874, rconn@amigosbravos.org for more info.

July 20, 21, 22, 2007—Valle Vidal Service Project

We won! Valle Vidal is now protected from the threat of oil & gas development. Previous and continuing efforts to restore its streams will not be in vain. This year we will move our restoration project to the east side of the Valle Vidal. Come join us as we celebrate a victory and learn more about the next steps needed to insure the Forest Service develops a management plan that is appropriate for an area so many wanted protected. This is the 25th year that this project is held by the Albuquerque Wildlife Federation and they will have special “doings” to commemorate. 4.5 hours north of ABQ.

Contact: Glenda Muirhead at 505-281-2925, g.muirhead@usfamily.net, for more info.

July 27, 28, 29, 2007—Burro Basin, Pecos Wilderness Service Project

Burro Basin is located just outside the southern boundary of the Pecos Wilderness. It drains quickly to Gallinas Creek which heads on toward Las Vegas. We will work with the Santa Fe National Forest to install a trailhead sign, do some general clean-up, and some trail maintenance. A good chance to beat the summer heat as we’ll camp at the project site at 8,500 feet. 2.5 hours northeast of ABQ. Contact: Michael Scialdone at 505-843-8696, scial@nmwild.org for more info.

August 10, 11, 12, 2007—Bitter Creek Service Project

The third of our three projects teaming up with Amigos Bravos to help in Red River Watershed restoration. This will be a great time to be up at 10,000 feet working on Bitter Creek. Projects will include closing off illegal ATV routes and fencing off riparian areas. We will camp at the site. 3 hours north of ABQ. Contact: Rachel Conn, at 505-758-3874, rconn@amigosbravos.org for more info.
Whittling away at the Gila
-continued from page 3

The Forest Service’s silver-tongued flimflam justifying the “slight” boundary revisions almost won over the far-away Wilderness Society and Sierra Club. But local hunters, fishermen, hikers, and horse-packers knew better. Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, gun clubs, women’s clubs, gardening clubs, chambers of commerce, and service clubs from southwestern New Mexico didn’t just say no. They said, “Hell, No!” and they drew a line in the sand. This brought national groups like The Wilderness Society and Sierra Club around, and New Mexico Senator (and former Secretary of Agriculture) Clinton P. Anderson stepped forward as the conservationists’ champion. The Forest Service quickly backtracked and came out with their revised proposal in 1953: a 429,000 acre Gila Wilderness Area (including Iron Creek Mesa), and a 130,000 acre Gila Primitive Area for further study. The locals, including some good boosters, hadn’t objected so much to the paved road and exclusion to the Cliff Dwellings, so a twenty-mile-long, one-mile-wide corridor was whittled out between the wilderness and the primitive area. Alas, the Forest Service took the knife and exclusion to the Cliff Dwellings, including some good boosters, hadn’t had enough to fly) as a citizen representative of the Wilderness Study Committee to coordinate the back-and-forth between the House and Senate at the end of the session. I made clear to my friends Domenici and Lujan that we had to bring the wilderness boundaries for the Gila and Aldo down to half-a-mile of the North Star Road. Otherwise, we would ask to kill the entire bill. We ended up with a 570,000-acre Gila Wilderness Area and a 211,300-acre Aldo Leopold Wilderness Area. Pretty small potatoes in some ways as were other wilderness boundaries elsewhere in the state. The significant victory was that the two wilderness boundaries were each brought down to one-half mile from the North Star Road, leaving only one mile between them. Had the Forest Service boundaries prevailed in 1980, the non-wilderness gap would have been up to ten miles. Knowing what we now know about the importance of connectivity for wildlife movement between protected areas, this was a real victory.

In 1964 the Wilderness Act became law and all existing national forest wilderness areas became “instant” units of the new National Wilderness Preservation System. The Act directed the Forest Service to study the remaining primitive areas and give Congress recommendations by 1974 on how much should be designated as wilderness. In 1969, the Gila NF proposed a paltry 188,179 acre Aldo Leopold Wilderness for the 169,356 acre Black Range Primitive Area and some high-elevation additions. The New Mexico Wilderness Study Committee (NMWSC) and other groups, reflecting their high-country, recreational bias, countered with a better but (as we shall see) inadequate 231,000-acre wilderness line.

In 1972, the Gila NF combined their study of the Gila Primitive Area with an overall boundary revision of the Gila Wilderness. True to history, they proposed most of the gentle mesa country near the North Star Road for deletion once again, just as they had done for the corresponding part of the Black Range Primitive Area in 1969. Their new proposal totaled 543,474 acres of wilderness. My first task for the NMWSC was to work with Jim Stowe and the Gila Wilderness Committee to develop “The Joint Conservationists’ Gila Wilderness Area Proposal” and organize support for it, including turnout at the public hearings in late 1972. We conservationists proposed 614,000 acres. While Congress dragged its feet during the 1970s, conservationists and the Forest Service enlarged their recommendations. The enlargements were significant for the conservationists (around 400,000 acres for the Aldo Leopold Wilderness and around 700,000 acres for the Gila Wilderness) and slight for the agency. Throughout this time I was insistent that we look at the Gila and Aldo Leopold together as parts of a single wilderness complex and not as separate island-like units as the Forest Service did.

In 1980, Senator Pete Domenici and Representative Manuel Lujan, Jr. were ready to move on a New Mexico wilderness bill for national forest areas. The main opponent to wilderness in southern New Mexico, Democratic Representative Harold Runnels had passed away and the seat was temporarily empty. We saw it as a window of opportunity. Our other senator at the time, Harrison Schmitt, a geologist and moon-walking astronaut from Silver City was no friend of wilderness and kept acreages small, but would at least go for some wilderness. Although I had left employment with The Wilderness Society by that time, I took the bus back to Washington (I didn’t have enough to fly) as a citizen representative of the Wilderness Study Committee to coordinate the back-and-forth between the House and Senate at the end of the session. I made clear to my friends Domenici and Lujan that we had to bring the wilderness boundaries for the Gila and Aldo down to half-a-mile of the North Star Road. Otherwise, we would ask to kill the entire bill. We ended up with a 570,000-acre Gila Wilderness Area and a 211,300-acre Aldo Leopold Wilderness Area. Pretty small potatoes in some ways as were other wilderness boundaries elsewhere in the state. The significant victory was that the two wilderness boundaries were each brought down to one-half mile from the North Star Road, leaving only one mile between them. Had the Forest Service boundaries prevailed in 1980, the non-wilderness gap would have been up to ten miles. Knowing what we now know about the importance of connectivity for wildlife movement between protected areas, this was a real victory.

Most of the other lands conservationists proposed for addition to the Aldo Leopold and Gila in 1980 still qualify and are even more important now for biodiversity. The two largest redesignated national forest roadless areas in New Mexico are the 190,000-some acres around the Aldo Leopold Wilderness and the 130,000-some acres around the Gila Wilderness. As political conditions change, New Mexico conservationists must be alert for any opportunities to enlarge the big wilderness complex of the Gila National Forest.

Maybe by the time of the 100th Anniversary of the 1924 designation of the Gila Wilderness, we will have finally added enough land to the Gila and Aldo Leopold so that in connection to surrounding wildlands they are large enough to once again play as “the theater of evolution” as Leopold wrote in 1937.
Mike Fugagli:  
Riverside Sanctuary

Three years ago, my family moved near the banks of the Gila River in the upper portion of the Cliff-Gila Valley. We wanted to be where the action was, ecologically speaking. The Cliff-Gila Valley is the first broad, alluvial floodplain that the Gila River spills into after it leaves its headwaters up in the Gila National Forest and Wilderness areas.

It is an ecological jewel supporting one of the best remaining examples in the southwest of native riparian forest. The secret of the Gila is its natural hydrologic regime. It still flows naturally and, most importantly, floods naturally.

Because the ecological process of overbank flooding is still intact on the Gila, native, flood-dependent trees like cottonwoods and willows still germinate in spades and maintain a competitive advantage over non-native exotics like salt cedar. Though the Gila escaped the specter of a high wall dam in the twentieth century, in the 1950s the Cliff-Gila valley was channelized.

Periodic large floods were forced down a narrow, straightened channel between levees. Because of the increased velocity of the flows and the paucity of riparian vegetation resulting from year-round, unmanaged grazing of cattle on the river corridor, catastrophic scouring resulted.

Now, in the upper portion of the valley, particularly on preserve areas managed by The Nature Conservancy, a dramatic recovery is taking place. Life begets life, especially on a desert river. Where stressors have been removed, new bosques are emerging, capturing sediment, absorbing the energy of floodwaters, increasing the topography of the floodplain, and allowing new channels to form. For the first time in 60 years the river has had the freedom to cut off a meander resulting in a naturally occurring oxbow lake. In short, the patient is on her feet and walking the halls with a twinkle in her eye.

My family chooses to live next to the Gila River not only because it is a sanctuary for nature, but for ourselves. It is one of those very rare places that truly is getting better day by day.

—Mike Fugagli

Nora Fiedler:  
Mogollon View

The Gila National Forest has been a powerful influence in my life. Having lived in the Gila Valley, “The Gateway to Turkey Creek and The Gila N.F.” for the past 22 years, my daily view to the north of my home is the upper Gila. The nearby Mogollons maintain their strong steady presence, my daily view to the north of my home.

For the first many years we lived here, my husband and I camped and hiked frequently in the forest. Andrew, particularly, spent a great deal of time out there - solo journeys exploring inner and outer terrain - the experience changing with the moods of the mountains.

In the early nineties a number of friends and myself were involved in “community dialogue meetings” - an attempt to bridge the communication gaps between local enviros and ranchers. (Though definitely some good resulted, its ultimate success after many meetings was limited). I was a founding board member of the Upper Gila Watershed Alliance, UGWA, which is still alive and well. During the lobo reintroduction debates and controversies, I attended countless meetings, along with others trying to have our voices heard.

Time has passed, some things have changed. As our lifestyle sometimes resembles one long camp-out, I am now less inclined to “go camping” and we both spend far less time in the forest. I am now rarely actively involved in environmental or socio/political groups, though I lend them my moral, and when possible, financial support.

The power and influence of the forest and mountains has perhaps only increased in my life. To witness the mountains changing colors and moods throughout the seasons remains an awesome daily spectacle, a never-ending and ever changing show, which I find far more entertaining and inspiring than any big screen plasma TV complete with 600 channels.

Due to the size of the forest and its sparse human population, it is nature and the mountains, not humans, that are the dominant energy here. The mountains seem to dictate the tone, to set the stage for the dramas of our little two-legged lives, to help us put those dramas - usually trite and trivial - into perspective. By reflecting on these beautiful looming mountains and the great space surrounding them, it is easier to keep in mind that there is a reality far greater than “me”.

The six million acres of the Gila National Forest are a blessing and a sanctuary - not just for myself and the local residents, but for all the people who live within its boundaries - the animals, plants, rocks and waters; a sanctuary for the two-legged people who visit from other areas and are soothed and inspired by experiencing these forests, canyons, and mountains; a sanctuary worthy of respect and protection just for being itself. I believe that we humans need this sanctuary (and the others that remain) for our sanity, for our balance and well-being, and for a sense of what it is to truly be human.

—Nora Fiedler
by Stephen Capra

Over three years ago, voters elected Martin Heinrich to be City Councilor for south-east Albuquerque. Since being elected, Heinrich’s term has been nothing but positive, not only for the environment, but for moving Albuquerque toward a bolder vision of a greener community. Heinrich’s vision and policies will attract the kinds of businesses that value quality-of-life for opening and relocation decisions.

Before running for office, Heinrich served on the Board of Directors for the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, including some time as President. He is also the former Executive Director of the Cottonwood Gulch Foundation, a non-profit organization providing experiential outdoor and environmental education. During those days, Martin’s hair was a little longer and his tan a bit darker, thanks to time spent outdoors exposing young people to the history, art, science and cultures of the southwest.

However, Heinrich always maintained a strong desire to be engaged in the political process. He used his burgeoning political instincts as the primary organizer in the successful campaign to protect the Ojito Wilderness Area. His tireless efforts were crucial in gaining the necessary support of our congressional delegation and overcoming earlier opposition by local ranchers. Ojito became the first new wilderness in our state in over 18 years; this effort has opened the door to other ambitious wilderness efforts currently underway.

Many politicians like to “talk green,” far fewer actually make the environment part of their core agenda. Since his election, Heinrich has led by example, working hard on an array of issues, but making the environment an important part of his work as City Councilor. Governor Bill Richardson discovered Heinrich’s talent and knowledge of environmental issues, and in 2006, appointed him Natural Resources Trustee for the State of New Mexico. Heinrich was recommended for the position by former Natural Resources Trustee Jim Baca.

Here are just a few of the important pieces of legislation that Heinrich has shepherded through the City Council. Heinrich sponsored legislation to…

- acquire and protect of 327 acres of Open Space in Tijeras Canyon from the NM State Land Office; not only will the area remain Open Space, but easements for roads, power lines and other development are not allowed.
- appropriate $650,000 to purchase and protect the Hawkwatch Site in the southern Sandia Mountains; this is part of an important corridor between the Sandia and Manzano Mountains crucial for bear, deer, lion, bobcat and other wildlife.
- make Albuquerque an energy independence leader by requiring all new city buildings be LEED Silver certified (green built); this may reduce city building power usage by as much as a 50%.
- create some of the nation’s first proposed green building codes for all new Albuquerque construction.
- protect important archeological sites from new housing development under the guidance of a new City archeologist
- conserve Albuquerque’s water supply by requiring low-flow toilets in houses when sold, allowing people to xeriscape even when home owner convenants prevent it, and other water conservation measures.

For the conservation community, Martin Heinrich has been a champion. Heinrich works with us and shares our values—values that have led to wilderness protection and restoration of wildlife habitat. He’s not afraid to take on those who would jeopardize our rich conservation heritage in New Mexico.

When he’s not serving the public, Martin enjoys hiking, hunting, and camping with family and friends. He and his wife enjoy the outdoors and our wildest landscapes with their two sons Micah and Carter, ensuring their boys have exposure to the outdoors from a very early age.

Martin’s political star continues to soar and that’s good news for our wildest public lands! We thank him for his vision and support and look forward to working with him in future, to wherever that star may lead him-- we hope, to even bigger and brighter opportunities.
by Phil Carter, President, UNM Wilderness Alliance

On March 10-14, UNM Wilderness Alliance led an expedition of ten UNM students and four others on a wolf-tracking expedition in the Gila National Forest and Wilderness. It was an idea that germinated in email conversations between Darryl Dolan, assistant to carnivore conservationist Michael Robinson at the Center for Biological Diversity, and me. In our discussions, we agreed that supporters of New Mexico’s struggling wolf reintroduction program must show their willingness to get out and experience wolf country.

And so, we set out on a spring break trip to the northeastern part of the Gila, near Beaverhead Work Center, just north of the wilderness. Every participating student was instructed to help document the expedition in order to develop a media packet to share our experiences with the public. Our intention was to track the Saddle Pack, a unit of three adults and several pups. As we prepared for the trip, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service implicated the pack in an injury to a calf and its resultant death, and a removal order was issued on Feb. 22 for wolf M1007. The wolf was still alive while we were in the Gila, and the removal order cast an urgent tone beyond that of simple wildlife-viewing.

The urgency of it all was evoked in talks by Robinson and Dolan, who graciously met us at the campsite on the first day. From this site, we split up every day into separate groups to cover maximum land area in our tracking. Of no small assistance in leading the groups were Casey MacFarland, an experienced wildlife tracker, and Natalie Dawson, a Ph.D. student who has worked with wolves in Alaska.

Ultimately, we saw a lot of wildlife but no lobos, which is hardly surprising given how transient wolves are in the springtime before denning. We did come across many wolf tracks and other signs—the presence of wolves in such wild country was unmistakable. As the days of the expedition went by, the buzzing of the patrolling airplanes of Wildlife Services, New Mexico Fish and Game’s predator exterminators, became more common. After we returned to Albuquerque, there was an announcement on March 17th that M1007 had been killed.

Opponents of Mexican gray wolf reintroduction have long contended that advocates of wolves are urbanites merely supporting an abstract ideal, unwilling to actually coexist with the animals. In undertaking the wolf-tracking expedition, we at UNM Wilderness Alliance hope to use the documentation of our experience in the Gila to add our voice to New Mexico’s wolf debate. The following are writings from some of the participants of the trip. Look for further reports in this and other publications, and please lend your support in making UNM Wilderness Alliance a major force in New Mexico wolf advocacy.

The loss of cattle need not seem to be a very good reason to keep a species from existing. Mr. Robinson pointed out that cows originated from Southeast Asia and we have adapted our surroundings to support their current needs. In the Gila, the federal government has blocked off a mountain, he asked us to understand “the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men”. My sense is that Leopold was giving a warning to our modern world. His message was more complex, but one clear aspect was to slow down and take the time to listen to wild nature. So with this special issue focused on the Gila, let me say simply - Go to the Gila. Go and listen, breathe its air, experience its wild beauty, and you too can begin to think like a mountain. In the meantime, we will continue to work to expand Leopold’s vision and fight to protect the remaining wild acres and wildlife that define the Gila Country.

Notes from the Executive Director

continued from page 2

Today the Gila suffers new threats that Leopold could not envision. It begins with off-road vehicles, the locust plague of the modern world that is systematically carving up and despoiling our wild public lands. In the Gila Country, they are beginning to take a serious toll. Illegal roads, well-organized off-road vehicle groups and an over-burdened forest service are creating a difficult environment for wildland protection. The Gila River, our state’s largest remaining wild river continues to be threatened by diversions and potential dams. Housing development is beginning to encroach more and more into wild land as people look to escape their urban environment. All of this is occurring in an area that still holds close to 1.45 million roadless acres that are not protected. With the closing of a road or two, we could dramatically increase the amount of protected land.

The Gila National Forest is a wild and beautiful land covering more than 3.3 million acres, with 796,178 acres designated as wilderness. It represents all that our organization is about: wild lands, rivers, wolves and large intact protected landscapes. Several weeks ago I had the chance to listen to a talk by famed nature writer Barry Lopez and I asked him what the value of wilderness was in his eyes. He said that wilderness areas, much like native peoples, are the genius and holders of wisdom that have often been lost in a modern society - that undeveloped or wild landscapes are the lands that still speak to us as people. They are the places one can return to in order to find solace and perhaps comfort in the familiar, in that sense of unspoiled. He said much more, but it was all about what makes wild places like the Gila so special; why walking, not driving is good for the soul; why the howl of the wolf, a cold stream and a warm fire are good for the spirit.

Leopold understood so much of this, and when you hike in the Gila, you too can experience and feel the sense of history, that sense of wilderness. Leopold asked us to “think like a mountain”, he asked us to understand “the hidden meaning in the howl of the wolf, long known among mountains, but seldom perceived among men”. My sense is that Leopold was giving a warning to our modern world. His message was more complex, but one clear aspect was to slow down and take the time to listen to wild nature. So with this special issue focused on the Gila, let me say simply - Go to the Gila. Go and listen, breathe its air, experience its wild beauty, and you too can begin to think like a mountain. In the meantime, we will continue to work to expand Leopold’s vision and fight to protect the remaining wild acres and wildlife that define the Gila Country.
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The Wilderness Land Trust is a non-profit organization whose mission is to acquire private lands (inholdings) in current and proposed Wilderness Areas from willing sellers and transfer them to public ownership. In 2002, the Trust’s Board of Directors adopted the goals of eliminating inholdings within units of the National Wilderness Preservation System over the next 10 years and helping to address inholding issues in proposed Wilderness Areas. According to recent estimates, more than 400,000 acres of privately owned lands remain within designated Wilderness Areas. As long as this is the case, the essential wilderness character of these areas is at risk, as private land owners retain the right to develop their land as they see fit, including timber production, mineral extraction and building homes, roads and utilities.

In early March, the Wilderness Land Trust purchased a 320-acre parcel in the El Malpais National Monument Wilderness Study Area. The owner of the inholding, Nick Juskiewicz, wanted the land preserved, although he could have sold it as a homestead, cabin site, or recreational retreat.

“The Wilderness Land Trust acquired this property from Mr. Juskiewicz to protect critical wilderness values and give Nick the fair deal he deserved,” said Reid Haughey, president of the organization.

“We have worked on this acquisition for three years, clearing up title issues and finding financial support to acquire the property. With the help of a loan from Norcross Wildlife Foundation, we now own the property and will undertake the transfer of it to the National Park Service,” he added.

The wilderness study area will be adjacent to the 114,848-acre El Malpais National Monument, which the trust describes as, “an exceptional example of a dormant volcanic landscape. El Malpais consists of five major lava flows, which spewed over the valley at different times during the past 115,000 years, most recently 3,000 years ago.”

To date the Wilderness Land Trust has protected more than 245 parcels comprising over 20,000 acres of wilderness inholdings in 61 designated and proposed wilderness areas.
The Gila Wilderness: 
Anchor and Compass of America’s Wilderness System

by Chad Hoeppner

Ponder if you will these two adages: 1. The only constant is change. 2. The more things change the more they stay the same. Which is it? Both? Probably.

Last month I traveled back to my childhood home in Colorado to celebrate my father’s 80th birthday. He’s old now. I’m a full-grown man. In some ways, I take his place. That's the way of the world -- generation after generation. The more things change, the more they stay the same. This is change as a cycle, as a repetition that has been occurring for thousands of years.

But on that visit I noticed some other things that have also changed. The fields and rural areas that surrounded my home as a child are now strip malls and suburban sprawl. What undeveloped land that is left has been so subdivided that it is basically a patchwork of small dirt plots. And most of the animals – owls, snakes and foxes – are gone. For eons and eons that land was in a cycle not unlike the one my father and I are now going through – birth, growth, death, and rebirth. But these changes are “new”, and often final. In a few human generations, we have transformed the world. Consider all the changes that have happened in the span of my father’s life. In 1925, the year my father was born, the following things didn’t exist: chemical fertilizers, the federal highway act, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, concentrations of carbon above 400 parts per million in the atmosphere, PCBs, DDT, chloro-fluorocarbons, and on and on…..

To be fair, not all of the changes in the last eighty years have been detrimental to the environment. In 1924 the world’s first wilderness area, the Gila Wilderness, was established here in New Mexico due to the visionary leadership of Aldo Leopold. Ironical, isn’t it, that I’m talking about establishing a wilderness area as a “change,” when all that designation would hope to do is to allow an area to continue to exist as it has for eons? Nevertheless it was Leopold’s voice that gave language and urgency to the wilderness movement. He was convinced that certain areas should be kept free of all modern intrusion, for many reasons, but in part to remind us of what is eternal, of what is unchanging. He was determined to prevent final change from spoiling certain areas, putting words and action to this concept 40 years before the federal government validated his vision by creating the Wilderness Act in 1964.

We have much to thank Leopold for. And we could use his vision and leadership now. If the changes of the last eighty years seem overwhelming, just consider what the next eighty could bring. The earth’s wild areas are under new, diverse, and changing threats – threats that people in 1924 would be hard-pressed to even imagine.

Who could have predicted that Global Warming would put the entire conservation paradigm on its head? It used to be that our species changed things – albeit irrevocably – one forest or one ecosystem at a time: a clear-cut here, a toxic mine there. But we could work to mitigate some of the damage by protecting and preserving certain areas. This was, after all, Leopold’s vision – pristine places set aside to protect the species that inhabit them and to be eternal reminders for us of what the earth once was.

Tell that to the pine beetle. Unleashed by the mild winters and rising temperatures of the last decade (traditionally pine beetle populations have been controlled by freezing temperatures each winter), the pine beetle has wreaked havoc on the great conifer forests of North America. How do you maintain the biodiversity of wilderness areas when the pine beetle destroys entire forests? How does the conservation community protect landscapes from a threat that knows no societal or political borders? We work for years to raise the money and harness the political will to buy or preserve large areas of land; global warming and other modern threats could render this work obsolete, as entire protected ecosystems are degraded and we end up preserving what are essentially dead zones.

So what changes will our generation have to make to protect the lands we love? Undoubtedly we will have to change with the times. In that spirit, I’ll offer three suggestions for confronting the coming challenges to wilderness, both in the Gila and across the country: visionary thinking, proactive involvement in land management, and vaster areas of wilderness.

Visionary Thinking:

For this, Leopold is an excellent inspiration. His work and his writing are testaments to how important language is in framing an issue. We will have to be as visionary. This is even more important in our sound-byte world than it was in Leopold’s time. We must find compelling language and arguments to advocate for wilderness protection. We already have some powerful new ideas and concepts: wildlife corridors, roadless areas, and sustainability. But we have to combat green-washed language that conceals and muddles the issues. Much of this disingenuousness emanates from the Bush Administration: so-called entities like the Healthy Forests Initiative, the Clear Skies program, and the White House Council for the Environment. We should speak, write, and think more about conservation in order to create and disseminate new visions of what wilderness can and should be.

Proactive Involvement in Land Management:

This is an area in which we can improve dramatically. We spend a lot of energy trying to stop development. That is essential. But we also need to be engaged in setting a positive agenda. It’s no longer enough to be against destructive development; we must be pro-positive management.

What do I mean by positive management? Traditionally wilderness areas have been thought of as oases of protected ecosystems. Along with our National Parks, they have often been envisioned as precious arks, ferrying a substantial amount of our endangered wildlife and natural heritage through a particularly difficult ecological era. It may profit us more to shift that view to a larger scope that incorporates far more land – both public and private. We could think of our wild places in terms of a series of concentric circles. National Parks and Wilderness Areas would be the innermost circle; National Forests the next; private ranches, farms, and BLM land would be the outermost. Of course the health of the inner circle should remain our first priority. But the outer circles can be integrated more into our conservation agenda. They can provide greater habitat for endangered species, corridors and connections between existing wilderness areas, and a vaster resource base from which to negotiate and create forward-thinking conservation models. Nature doesn’t recognize a wilderness area boundary; neither should our management plans.
Here is one example: Use some of our already developed lands – particularly federal and BLM land that has been opened to oil drilling – to develop wind farms. This could potentially:

- Create energy profits for local communities
- Undermine the arguments for the necessity of more oil exploration (wind power could provide a portion of our energy needs)
- Further our efforts to eliminate fossil fuel emissions
- Create additional revenue that could be channeled into conservation work
- Create a model for other positive development projects
- Replace plans for potential energy development in unspoiled natural areas
- Improve conservationists’ reputations as problem solvers instead of obstructionists

Further, any development plans should be created with two fundamental guidelines in mind:

- Involve local shareholders and communities. The lesson that conservation teaches us over and over is that conservation plans work better when they include local populations – be they indigenous peoples in the Amazon, local ranchers or farmers in the American West, or inner city community gardeners in the Bronx.

Harness the power of the free market. One simple yet powerful idea in this arena is known as “ecosystem services,” which basically attempts to put a financial value on the services that healthy ecosystems provide for us at “no cost.” A perfect example of this can be seen in the potent argument that NMWA is using to combat opening Otero Mesa to oil development: that the integrity of the underground aquifer there is worth more in the long term than for one-time oil profits.

Fittingly, the world’s first wilderness is a perfect place to craft a new agenda for positive change. The Gila is a symbol and example of how ideas can change the world, it is blessed with ample surrounding areas of viable wilderness and wilderness corridors, and it stands to be profoundly affected by Global Warming. Let’s start the next 80 years of positive change, and let’s start in the Gila. Let’s celebrate Leopold’s vision by creating a profoundly new vision of our own. A vision that is as old as the hills, but brand new for a society that is only just now beginning to show signs of growing up.

Vaster Areas of Wilderness:
This is important for all of the traditional criteria of wilderness vitality, but it is even more essential now that global warming is altering the climate and forcing rapid adaptation. And it is even more essential for the Gila. The latest UN report on global warming details how the Southwest will be the hardest-hit area in the US (New England is a distant second). The entire Southwest is likely to get drier and more prone to floods and droughts. We will need vaster areas of wilderness to give endangered species a fighting chance to adapt and to migrate in a Global Warming world. One vision of such an area is the greater Sky Island Wilderness, which would incorporate large parts of southwestern New Mexico and Southeastern Arizona. Much of this is already happening. Biologists study wildlife in terms of large bio-regions and wildlife corridors. We should do everything we can to make our policy and planning reflect this expansive view.

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I’m Mike Sauber, one of the principal owners of Gila Hike and Bike and a longtime New Mexico wilderness advocate and environmental activist. During my thirty years in Grant County, I was involved with the Gila Conservation Coalition, which fought against the proposed Conner and Hooker Dams on the Gila River. I’ve served as president and conservation chair of the SW New Mexico Audubon Society, but I’m just beginning to consider myself a birder now that I live on the edge of town closer to good birding habitat.

While a member of the New Mexico BLM Wilderness Coalition, and with the urging of Wilderness legend Brant Calkin, I adopted the Cooke’s Peak Wilderness Study Area and helped keep it on the table during discussions with all of the various user groups, a hesitant state Land Commissioner and the BLM. On one of my many excursions to the area, I was almost knocked over by a golden eagle attempting to take off in a narrow canyon. Having just eaten a rabbit, it was so heavy it couldn’t take off uphill with the wind at its back. It looked around for a second, raised its wings and took off directly towards us. After a quick attempt to take the picture of my life, I hit the ground to avoid a collision with this magnificent bird.

Perhaps my first significant personal success was to rally people to go to the County Commission meeting where the topic of discussion was renewing the traditional $10,000 the County would spend to kill coyotes. I soon discovered getting people to attend the meeting was the easy part. After a quick attempt to take the picture of my life, I hit the ground to avoid a collision with this magnificent bird.

Joining others, I stood up at a city council meeting and asked for a resolution for “strict and meaningful” reclamations laws to help protect the region’s environment if the mines closed. (New Mexico was, at the time, one of only two states in the nation without laws mandating that a mining corporation must clean up after itself as a cost of doing business – before they permanently leave). After the vote passed, the mayor refused to sign the resolution and it had to be signed by the Mayor Pro tem.

Defending the Gila Country; Growing into Activism

Of course, Wilderness needs the howl of the native lobo, and its very necessary role as a large predator. I have gone to numerous meetings, written letters to the editor and invited wolf educators to speak to packed houses. Speaking as part of an elk/livestock conflict task force, suggesting that wolves are a very logical solution to the “problem” of too many elk on the forest grazing allotments was a comment not well received. If I’ve learned anything from experience it’s that we must speak up and don’t back down.

I am a strong advocate of writing letters to the editor, and suggest that more environmentalists do it. Often enough our voice is underrepresented in mainstream media. Be concise and to the point. Assume people have no idea what you are talking about and always slightly understate the problem. When your opposition replies with criticism, you increase your credibility by returning with the full set of facts, saying “actually the situation is more dire than I stated - the reality is . . .” When you write your letter, make sure you follow all the guidelines for publication. Provide numerous ways to be contacted. If your letter isn’t published, call the paper and respectfully ask why. Argue your point, and explain why it should be published. It will, and you can make a difference.

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