ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

Senator Jeff Bingaman

Working to protect
New Mexico’s Enchanted landscapes

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FIGHTING FOR SANITY

by Wes Leonard and Stephen Capra

As 2007 ends, it is a sad and tragic commentary that we continue to deal with the possible second extinction of the Mexican wolf in our state. The Mexican wolf is a wild and beautiful animal. For thousands of years, it roamed freely from Arizona to New Mexico and south in Mexico. But with the introduction of livestock into the Southwest, the push to control and destroy the wolf began in earnest. In fact, the agency in charge of the extermination was so paranoid they even sent agents into Mexico to further the wolf slaughter. By the 1970’s, there were only seven living Mexican wolves and only one was female.

In 1976, the Mexican Wolf was listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. That is when the US Fish and Wildlife Service began the process of getting the wolf reintroduced into the wilds of New Mexico and Arizona. On March 29, 1998, captive-reared Mexican wolves were released into the wild for the first time. This should have been the beginning of the wolf regaining a foothold on its ancestral lands in New Mexico and Arizona. New Mexico Wilderness Alliance Board Member, Dave Parsons, was in charge of this worthy effort.

However, on that day and many since, extreme radicals in the livestock industry vowed that they would never accept wolves on public lands in New Mexico and Arizona. Since that time, they have engaged in a very well financed, coordinated and targeted campaign to have the wolf removed from the wilds. In some cases, their campaign has even motivated some to take it upon themselves to destroy this wild and beautiful animal. Recently, their efforts have entered the “theater of the absurd” with the construction of wolf-proof shelters for children at school bus stops. This clever PR stunt was designed to put fear in any politician who would dare support wolf reintroduction.

The very people, who claim to love rural living, being away from urban crime and traffic, suddenly fear an animal that weighs an average 60 pounds and has never killed a human in United States recorded history. Suddenly, it seems that fear an animal that weighs an average 60 pounds and has never killed a human in United States recorded history. Suddenly, it seems that suburban people are killed every year by urban crime and traffic, suddenly fear an animal that weighs an average 60 pounds and has never killed a human in United States recorded history. Suddenly, it seems that urban crime and traffic, suddenly fear an animal that weighs an average 60 pounds and has never killed a human in United States recorded history.

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Bowing to the demands of right-wing extremists, the Bush Administration has taken a promising wolf recovery effort and deliberately crushed it. They have ordered that the US Fish and Wildlife Service to put livestock interests first and ignore the clear mandate of the Endangered Species Act to protect the wolf. This is not the first time the agency has been driven by right-wing politics. Currently, the Interior Department’s Inspector General is expanding its investigation into the political manipulation of endangered species rulings to include 18 different species. The Inspector told Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) that he was investigating whether “improper political influence” played into reducing protections for these species.

While the federal agencies cave in to political pressure in Catron County, in the heart of wolf country, officials have become emboldened to pass laws stating they will defy the Federal Government and kill wolves themselves. Recently, two wolves from the Durango pack disappeared, meaning someone killed these wolves and removed their tracking collars. To kill an endangered species, a person faces a possible $50,000 fine and a year in jail. It is crucial that federal law enforcement officials go after the people responsible and if caught and convicted, be given the stiffest possible sentence and fine. Without that, we will never stop the vigilante justice that a small group of people in our state have been emboldened to take.

In meetings with our congressional delegation in recent months, we have been told that those opposed to wolf reintroduction are writing, calling, and demanding the removal of all wolves in New Mexico. Our voices are simply being drowned out by the hysteria these extremist groups have created on this issue. This must change. Senators Bingaman and Domenici, Congressman Udall, Congresswoman Wilson and Governor Richardson need to hear your voices in letters, calls and face to face meetings at their local offices. They need to be reminded that the vast majority of New Mexicans fully support wolf recovery efforts. They need to hear that public lands belong to all Americans and ranchers, who are getting dramatically lower grazing rates on public lands, should not dictate public policy or refuse to share land that is owned by all Americans! Ultimately, the fate of the Mexican wolf will be determined by those we elect to office in the years to come.

Mexican wolves are beautiful creatures, animals that belong in their native range on our public lands. This is a fight that we must win, not only for the wolf, but also for the future of our public lands. In the end, it is another example of how conservation battles devolve into cultural battles. But make no mistake, in the last year of the Bush Administration and with uncertainty related to the future politics of our state, there will be a major push to eliminate the wolf. We are down to 21 wolves and the clock is ticking, it’s time to be angry, it’s time for our voices to be heard.

Wes Leonard, the Board Chair of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, was a land owner in Catron County. Stephen Capra is the Executive Director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance.

“I included New Mexico Wilderness Alliance in my Estate Plan because I feel a responsibility to Wilderness. Young people should enjoy the same places that have touched my life.”

- Bob Howard

You can make Wilderness a part of your legacy too.

To find out how, contact Tripp Killin, Associate Director
(505) 843-8696 or tripp@nmwild.org
Addition to Bosque del Apache Wilderness Slated

By John Bertrand

A wilderness first is in the offing at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in central New Mexico, where the Friends of the Bosque del Apache has purchased Chupadera Peak with 140 acres of land and will donate it to the refuge for addition to the adjoining Chupadera Wilderness.

Regulatory requirements have been met, the 140-acre donated parcel will become ‘wilderness’ under Section 6 of the Wilderness Act, which applies to gifts or bequests of land within or adjacent to an existing wilderness. No donated land adjoining but outside the boundary of a national wildlife refuge wilderness has previously been awarded wilderness protection since the Wilderness Act became law in 1964, according to Nancy Roeper, Program Specialist in Washington D.C. for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Friends of the Bosque purchased the peak and surrounding land from Highland Springs Ranch and its parent company, Ben Brooks & Associates, LLC. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed its canvass & Associates, LLC. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed its canvass of possible obstacles and is working through internal procedural requirements to accept the parcel as part of the refuge.

Once the refuge has accepted the land, Refuge Manager Tom Molanson will file to add the donated property to its Chupadera Wilderness under Section 6 of the Wilderness Act, which requires that notice be given to the President of the U.S. Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The wilderness designation then can become final after sixty days.

The 5,282-acre Chupadera Wilderness adjoining the peak was created in 1975 under the Wilderness Act. Also created at the same time were the refuge’s 5,140-acre San Pascual Mountain wildernesses. New Mexico Wild Magazine profiled them in its Spring 2005 issue.

The Friends set out from scratch in July 2006 to raise the $63,000 needed to purchase Chupadera Peak. That goal was exceeded in the spring of 2007. Along the way, $10,000 was subscribed to a memorial fund for Deputy Refuge Manager Debra Davies, whose untimely death in 2006 shocked many friends. Katy Devine, a recent graduate from New Mexico Tech in Socorro, enrolled in Phoenix’s Rock ‘n Roll Marathon and challenged friends to contribute to the Chupadera fund through a personal web site, raising more than $8,000.

More than 270 individuals, service clubs and organizations contributed amounts from $10 to $4,500 to the Friends’ fund-raising campaign. Eighty-five donors each contributed the price of one acre ($450). A permanent bronze plaque honoring the donors is being installed at the Chupadera Wilderness Trailhead, which is outside the wilderness area.

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John Bertrand is a member of the Public Relations Committee of the Friends of the Bosque del Apache NWR, Inc.

Winter Birding in the Bosque

By Jerry Oldenettel

Bosque del Apache NWR is one of the premier winter birding locations in the United States. Renowned worldwide and observed by thousands of visitors every year, the sunrise fly-out of up to 32,000 Snow and Ross’ Geese and 14,000 Sandhill Cranes is a spectacle of continental proportions. The refuge is located on the Rio Grande River about 80 miles south of Albuquerque, New Mexico and 10 miles off of Interstate 25. Seasonal bird lists, maps and much other information about the Bosque del Apache can be found on the Refuge’s Bosque web site at: friendsofthebosque.org

The refuge has two auto/bicycle tour loops, each about 7 miles long, that cover a significant portion of the riparian area and refuge impoundments. An audio tour available on tape or CD is available at the visitor’s center bookstore. The tour stop signs also serve as handy markers for directions to locating unusual sightings around the tour loops. Unusual wintering passerines can often be seen in the dense riparian growth around Audio 8 or Audio 9 on the marsh loop.

During fall and winter, the tour loops provide excellent opportunities to study and photograph cranes and geese at close range, as well as seeing a large variety of ducks, hawks, eagles, shorebirds and the occasional wintering heron. The thousands of birds are relatively tame, providing easy viewing from the car or one of the several viewing platforms around the refuge. All through the season the spectacular flights of geese and cranes continues with dawn lift-offs and evening fly-ins. Bald Eagles are often seen soaring in majestic solitude. Watchful eyes also find Cormorants, Shrikes, Kestrels, Harriers and Yellowlegs.

As spring breaks in the Bosque, the migration of shore birds, pelicans, warblers and waders fills the marshes. There area also several hiking trails that include riparian and Chihuahuan desert upland habitats. The upland trails are good locations to see some of the desert birds such as Black-tailed Gnatchaters, wintering Sage Sparrows, Black-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, Cactus Wrens, Gambel’s and Scale Quail, Canyon Towhee, or Virden. Barn Owls and Great-horned Owls often roost in the bluffs just south of the Canyon Trailhead.

The annual Festival of the Cranes is held at mid-November, not long after wintering cranes and geese have arrived. The festival includes lectures, commercial and artist’s exhibits, refuge tours, and other activities in additional to great birding. See the web site above for detailed information and a calendar of events.
By Michael Scialdone

On September 15, 2007, three horse riders were quietly making their way toward Jicarita Peak in the Pecos Wilderness. Due to high winds, they took lunch in the shelter of a rock outcrop. As they dined, an obnoxious roar began and then increased in volume. They were surprised to see a group of dirt bike riders come up the trail and park near the peak. They went over and briefly talked with the motorcyclists, innocently asking if they were allowed to be there (the horse riders knew they weren’t). The motorcyclists replied that they didn’t pass any signs stating that vehicles weren’t allowed.

After talking to the motorcyclists, who were cordial, the horse riders learned that the motorcycle group was planning to continue up the trail. The horse riders wisely kept their peace and left. They documented motorcycle tracks on the trail as they headed out, proving the motorcyclists’ peace and left. They documented motorcycle tracks on the trail as they headed out, proving the motorcyclists were not going to do the right thing and help deal with the management headache they have created. Reversing this trend and getting the law enforcement presence needed will take increased public involvement.

The horse riders followed up with an incident report to the Camino Real District of the Santa Fe National Forest. A photo snapped on a cell phone camera unfortunately lacked the quality to identify any of them. They recognized some of the motorcyclists as part of a club that attends Forest Service meetings on the Travel Management Rule (TMR). This rule will designate where off-road vehicles are allowed to go in our National Forests. This means this that club advocates for more trails to be opened to motorized vehicles through a public process. However, this activity is disingenuous, because they knowingly lead outings to places illegal for them to ride.

The horse riders did exactly what they should have done when illegal off-road vehicles are encountered. Confronting these guys in the backcountry could have been very dangerous. Instead, they gathered as much information as they could and reported it to the Forest Service.

Nationally, off-road vehicles have become the largest enforcement problem on our National Forests. Unfortunately, the number of law enforcement officers continues to decline. There is one officer for every 231,000 acres of forest and 733,000 visits. The industry that profits from these machines has made it clear they are not going to do the right thing and help deal with the management headache they have created. Reversing this trend and getting the law enforcement presence needed will take increased public involvement.

The Forest Service TMR is a good place to start. Through the TMR, routes open to motorized travel will be designated and made readily available through a Motor Vehicle Use Map. Though it doesn’t increase enforcement, it will clarify exactly which routes are open to motorized use and when. To learn more about the Rule, what NMWA is doing, and how you can get involved, contact Michael Scialdone at 505-843-8696, scial@nmwild.org. May your next journey to the wilds of New Mexico be a quiet one!
Why the Oil & Gas Industry Thinks They’re Above The Law

By Nathan Newcomer
New Mexico Wilderness Alliance & 5th Generation New Mexican

It has now been more than 10 years since the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has proposed opening the Serengeti of the Southwest – Otero Mesa – to oil and gas development. Likewise, it has been more than 10 years since a strong coalition of conservationists, sportsmen, ranchers, businesses and religious leaders have joined forces in calling upon the Bush Administration and Congress to protect the wildlife, water and wildlands of Otero Mesa.

The public support for preserving Otero Mesa as a wild Chihuahuan Desert grassland and conserving its large, fresh water aquifer is strong and constantly growing. County Commissions in southern New Mexico are passing resolutions in support of a moratorium on drilling in the area. Citizens from across the state and nation are lending their voices to the cause in urging our representatives to protect this vast grassland. The editorial boards of major newspapers, including papers as diverse as the New York Times and the Alamogordo Daily News, are calling for a common-sense approach in dealing with how oil and gas operations impact our most sensitive landscapes.

Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM), Congressman Tom Udall (D-NM) and Governor Bill Richardson (D-NM) have all asked for a halt to oil and gas mining and drilling in Otero Mesa. Furthermore, many state representatives, senators, city councilors, and mayors have sent letters to our congressional delegation in support of preserving Otero Mesa.

In spite of this tremendous local support, the BLM continues to pursue and issue oil and gas leases in the grasslands of Otero Mesa.

The BLM faces tremendous pressure from this administration to make drilling the number one priority on our wildest public lands, over the values of archeology, wilderness, water and wildlife.

Sadly, this is just another example of this administration’s failed attempts at curbing our fossil fuel dependency, while allowing a few well-connected companies to reap profits at the expense of our water and wildest lands.

Over the past several years the oil and gas industry has been quick to put itself on the back for all the great work they do in protecting our water, wildlife and wilderness lands. Industry uses well-tuned rhetoric like “working to be a good neighbor” and that “compliance with applicable laws and regulations is an important component of being a good neighbor.” What is so disingenuous about these statements is that industry has a proven track record of ignoring property owner’s rights, degrading the environmental landscape, polluting water resources and constantly fighting regulations that seek to protect our most valuable treasures.

Take for instance the Oil Conservation Division’s (OCD) rules that ban waste pits in places like Otero Mesa. Theses rules were adopted by the OCD back in 2006 due to a report which documented more than 1400 cases of groundwater contamination caused specifically by industry operations. During the public hearings portion of the waste pit rules, industry packed the rooms with representatives crying foul over the new regulations, while common-day ranchers, hunters and conservationists could only stand aghast at the audacity of industry.

In early November, 2007, OCD held more public hearings in Santa Fe to discuss additional changes to the waste pit rules. Much like the previous rules that govern Otero Mesa, the new changes would prohibit unlined waste pits from being near groundwater, wetlands, rivers, floodplains, domestic and municipal water wells, homes, hospitals, schools and even churches! What would seem like common-sense turns out to be yet more disdain from industry.

At the same time this is occurring, Harvey E. Yates Company (HEYCO), the sole remaining company vying to drill in Otero Mesa, went to the OCD trying to get a waiver from the waste pit rules.HEYCO seemed to have missed the memorandum that these new waste pit rules are not subject to negotiation. Thus, after having their request for a waiver denied, HEYCO took their case to the New Mexico State Supreme Court, arguing that they have to have a waste pit in order to drill. As of December 2007, the outcome of the appeal to the State Supreme Court has not been resolved. However, in early November 2007, the BLM notified the public that the Harvey E. Yates Company was seeking an Application for Permit to Drill (APD) in Otero Mesa, even though the agency knows that HEYCO must comply with the new waste pit rules.

So we’re faced with a situation where the oil and gas industry continues to fight laws and regulations that seek to protect our valuable water, wildlife and wilderness resources while the federal agencies in charge of our wildest public lands continue to ignore public sentiment and move forward with a process that remains driven by politics, rather than science or public sentiment.

TAKE ACTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has released an Environmental Assessment (EA) on a proposed new oil and gas well in New Mexico’s Otero Mesa. YOUR COMMENTS ARE NEEDED! Comment Deadline is January 15th.

There are two premises upon which the entire APD is based: (1) BLM is not considering denying the permit or imposing any strict conditions on drilling to protect Otero Mesa; and (2) BLM is ignoring both the findings of the New Mexico Oil Conservation Division regarding the risks to water from drilling on Otero Mesa and the rules enacted by the State of New Mexico to protect it.

Neither of these premises is acceptable and it is frankly outrageous that the BLM is centering its environmental analysis on the assumption that HEYCO will get a waiver from the New Mexico rules prohibiting uses of pits to hold hazardous materials on Otero Mesa. The Oil Conservation Division (OCD) determined that the use of waste pits poses too great a risk to Otero Mesa and has ruled that there is no waiver available from the rule, leading HEYCO to sue the State of New Mexico. Yet, somehow, the BLM assumes that there will be pits used to drill this well – ignoring the position of the State of New Mexico and its own obligation to ensure consistency with state laws and policies.

Other key issues:

The BLM needs to 1) consider the no action (no drilling) alternative, 2) needs to consider a directional drilling alternative, 3) needs to redo the analysis to assume compliance with the rule prohibiting the use of pits on Otero Mesa – not assume that HEYCO will prevail in a lawsuit, and 4) the APD assumes that if a pit is used, then it will “reduce or eliminate seepage of drilling fluid into the soil and eventually the groundwater”. The OCD has decided that it’s not okay to “reduce” seepage through waste pits, and we agree!

Comments can be mailed to:
John Besse
BLM Las Cruces District Office
1800 Marquess Street
Las Cruces, NM 88005
Fax: 575-525-4412
Send A Free Fax Online: http://ga1.org/campaign/bennetranchunit6

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There has never been a wilderness or conservation campaign without detractors. Even the Wilderness Act itself took 10 years to wind through Congress before finally passing in 1964. Because land use and resource issues arouse such strong passions, the diverse coalition supporting wilderness protection for special wild places in Doña Ana County is all the more impressive.

Numbers tell part of the story. Over 200 local businesses, 32 organizations, and thousands of local citizens comprise the coalition supporting wilderness. Seminal moments include: the November 2, 2006 meeting where over 400 residents showed up at the Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum; the Sportsmen and Community Group Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreeing upon revised boundaries; and the MOU with the Las Cruces Homebuilder’s Association. These accomplishments stand tall in the nearly two year campaign to protect places like the Organ Mountains and Broad Canyon.

Numbers alone cannot convey the personal connections local residents and community members have with the desert mountains, grasslands, and canyons that define Doña Ana County. With that in mind, please read the following excerpt from a story written by Jim Bates. Jim moved to Las Cruces as a boy, played basketball at Las Cruces high school, started and runs his own construction and remodeling business, and has spent time in every proposed wilderness area in Doña Ana County.

Desert Meanderings

by Jim Bates

Growing up on the edge of the Lincoln National Forest and spending most of my outdoor youth hunting and fishing in the mountains of south-central New Mexico, it was a definite shock to my forest-oriented system when my parents uprooted our family and moved to Las Cruces in the mid-60’s. The deserts surrounding my new environment, and the desert mountain ranges that jutted upward from them, were as foreign to me as if I had been dropped on the moon. For years after, I would give these seemingly desolate areas no more than a second glance as I headed for more distant and high mountains to pursue my hunting and fishing pastimes. Too, the distant desert mountain ranges looked small and insignificant when viewed at any angle from any of the highways leaving town.

It wasn’t until years later, during my college days, that I became truly acquainted with these desert areas and their treasurers. The rigors of school and its inherent associated financial limitations kept me anchored fairly close to New Mexico State University, but my longing for outdoor pursuits was still strong. I found myself looking for recreational opportunities that were within my means, both in terms of time and money.

The early 70’s found me (and a few friends) developing an interest in the near-by desert mountains. Our early excursions to the surrounding deserts slowly began to unlock the secrets of what could be found in these dry climes. We found, in our meanderings through the desert badlands, that there was much more to be found here besides coyotes, rattlesnakes, rabbits, and scorpions. Delightfully, we regularly encountered mule deer and antelope, quail and mourning dove, the occasional bobcat or mountain lion, and even ibex that had wandered off of the Florida Mountains. Also, these areas that had appeared so small and insignificant from distant highways were found to contain huge expanses of mountains, canyons, mesquite thickets and arroyos, as well as desert grasslands and rolling sand hills. Evidence of ancient volcanic activity was discovered in many places, with outcroppings of lava rock and entire mountains of cinders and pumice jutting above the desert floor.

In any event, our eyes had been opened. Soon, our attitudes changed about the desert. We were no longer heading for the distant National Forests. Here we were finding plentiful game and few hunters competing with us. It was not unusual for our hunting group to spend an entire weekend, and sometimes an entire hunting season, without encountering another person, much less another hunter in these areas. Often we were successful in our quest for game, although filling tags or bag limits has never been the focus of our endeavors.

Little has changed over the years. I still spend a great deal of my free time exploring and hunting our southwestern New Mexico deserts with friends. Wildlife numbers fluctuate up and down relative to rainfall patterns and the associated habitat conditions, as does our hunting success. We do now occasionally run into other hunters who have discovered our secret, although there are still far fewer of them here than in the more popular forested areas.

And the good news is that many of the areas that we have hunted and explored are being considered for protection in the form of wilderness designation. They deserve that protection, as do the wildlife species that inhabit them. The recreational opportunities that are available in these areas now will only get better if we have the foresight to protect them.
Late last April, I scrambled through the pionon and juniper along the rim of the Rio Grande Gorge well above the John Dunn Bridge. The air was already hot despite the late winter snow that had fallen the week before. A local ornithologist accompanied me; a lanky, grey-bearded autodidact who specialized in raptors and teared up when he saw the stakes for a new house that was to be built on the rim of the gorge. Ron and I were looking for a nest; a particular golden eagle nest that he insisted was over two-hundred years old. “You gotta see this, man. One of the biggest nests I’ve ever seen.”

The Rio Grande is one of the great migratory bird routes in the world. Eagles, falcons and hawks make the basalt walls of the Gorge their nesting homes.

“Wait here,” I was told as Ron donned his kneepads, secured his binoculars and dropped into the opuntia and sage, crawling slowly towards the Gorge. “I don’t want to spook them.”

I waited on my knees. Looking into the Gorge, I realized that I’d camped under this nest the summer before.

Early one morning the July before, I’d set off from my house, fly rod in hand, and passed along a dirt road that terminated at the rim. The day was wet and cool and every rooftop and gatepost hosted a Say’s Phoebe that darted at the bugs kept low by the incoming monsoons. A feast was underway.

The first mile was fairly straightforward. I scrambled down several hundred feet to the riverbank and set off north over silty water-smooth lava rocks, scrambling through sedges and brambles of mountain mahogany that lined the water. There were deer tracks in the sand. A muskrat worked his way through a pool and up onto a jumble of black boulders. Soon the bridge was gone from sight. Thunder rumbled to the west but in the narrow strip above, there was nothing but blue. Violet-green Swallows mixed with Cliff Swallows cutting the air like a swarm of bees. The descending trill of the Canyon Wren was omnipresent. A Spotted Towhee sat on a rock.

The river narrowed and splashed over a small spill of stones. I stepped out onto a riffle and began casting upstream, trying to land my fly just beyond the rocks that pillowed the water in the middle of the river. I hooked two small rainbow trout, released them, and then moved upstream – where I fell face first into a shallow pool.

I have a particular issue with falling. I slip off rocks, tumble into streams and slide from trails. Thus far, I’ve escaped serious injury. I hooked a few more rainbows and one brown trout. All were stocked fish from the Red River fish hatchery and none were big enough to keep.

Slipping down a grass embankment, I stumbled across a sand bank and took a break next to a hundred foot tall Ponderosa as the sky darkened.

Thunder ratted off the canyon walls. The wind powered from north to south. I scrambled underneath an overhang as rain poured down. It took about five minutes after the rain began for the waterfalls to flow. The canyons and ravines up on the tablelands channeled the water to the rim and suddenly, hundreds of gallons of water came spilling over the edge in silvery threads. Lightening creased the sky. The thunder was deafening. Then it was gone, returning to rain twice more that day.

I ate lunch and continued north. By late afternoon I found myself miles up the Gorge. Turning back would mean an hour-long stumble doing the final miles home in the pitch black. I located a deep side canyon and climbed east through thick stands of juniper and pionon, aiming towards State Highway 522. It was there I had unknowingly passed the eagle’s nest. I never made it to the highway.

On the rim looking at Ron below, I got the wave. I approached slowly, crawling through the dirt on my belly. I left a juniper between myself and the nest. Ron alternately slowed then waved me forward until I was just above the nest. I glassed the basalt and the two eaglets huddled in the nest. They weren’t small.

Eagles are well known for large nests measuring several feet across and this one was no different. They often use the same nest year after year – adding a new layer of green. By counting these layers, one could, theoretically, determine the age of the nest. This one was, Ron said, about two-hundred years old. A newborn baby golden eagle weighs only about 3 ounces. But these two were the size of chickens. We couldn’t see the parents. “Momma knows we’re here,” said Ron. “Goldens are territorial. It’s possible for a pair to maintain their 100 square mile territory for their lifetime of 25-30 years. They’re incredible, man.”

Late that afternoon, we again bellied up to the rim of the gorge and glassed another nest, spilling down the basalt on the western side of the Gorge.

Unfortunately, a small blue-roofed house sat in the grass and sage next to the rim.

“Man…” Ron mumbled, his eyes moistened, “over the years, I’ve seen more than one-hundred falcons raised in that nest. I don’t know, just a really productive pair of parents. They’re just going for it, man. But since that house went in, they haven’t nested once. I haven’t even seen them in two years.”

I thought back to my night in the gorge. I never made it to the highway. It rained again and a flood nearly took me away. I camped on a wide and sandy beach above the flow and in the morning climbed out onto the rim.
Border Walls Opposed in Wildlife Corridors

U.S. Agencies, conservationists to ask Congress to ensure compliance with environmental laws

By Kim Vacariu
Western Director, Wildlands Project

An under-the-radar screen rush by the federal government to wall off the U.S.-Mexico border in southern Arizona and New Mexico has now concerned even the federal land managers whose refuges the walls are partially designed to protect. As a show of that concern, U.S. land managers, university scholars and conservation organizations participating in a “Border Ecological Workshop” have jointly authored a request to Congress and Department of Homeland Security decision-makers urging them to re-think the construction of border wall segments in sensitive borderlands and wildlife corridors, and to ensure compliance with environmental laws.

The diverse groups that have signed on as endorsers include Borderlands Jaguar Detection Project, Friends of the Jaguar, Defenders of Wildlife, Wildlands Project, University of Arizona School of Natural Resources, Sierra Club, Sky Island Alliance, The Wildlife Society, Huachuca Audubon Society, NABA International Butterfly Park (Texas), Groundwater Awareness League, and several individual scientists.

The timing of the joint request coincides with a recent Department of Homeland Security decision to waive 19 laws, including environmental laws, public health laws such as the Safe Drinking Water Act and historical preservation laws that might delay construction of a border wall across the San Pedro National Riparian Conservation Area (SPNRCA) in southern Arizona. That waiver also negated a temporary restraining order issued by a federal judge that had halted fence construction across the conservation area due to lack of compliance with federal laws.

Their “Consensus Request for Action Regarding Ecological Impacts of Border Security Operations” says in part: “We recognize that national security must be a high priority in this process. However, we assert that effective security can be accomplished without permanently degrading the ecological health of the region.” The groups go on to ask decision-makers to avoid construction of “impermeable barriers” in wildlife corridors, replacing them with “virtual fencing technologies, vehicle barriers, and other creative security solutions.” The request also urges Congress to “apply and implement environmental laws, such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), in order to fully understand and address environmental impacts and provide opportunities for public input relating to border security infrastructure and operations.”

The joint request is the result of a series of collaborative workshops, sponsored by the Wildlands Project and Defenders of Wildlife, designed to raise awareness of ecological concerns related to construction of border walls. These walls present an obstacle to the continued survival of a number of endangered species in the U.S. and Mexico, including jaguar, ocelot, pronghorn antelope, wolves, and several birds, fish and amphibians. Past workshops have identified necessary cross-border wildlife “linkages” and have led to recommendations aimed at protecting borderlands ecosystems.

One of those wildlife linkages, connecting the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge/Tumacacori Highlands region with the wildlands of Sonora, Mexico, was identified as a well-documented crossing point for jaguars. The Department of Homeland Security announced last month, without public comment, that it would immediately begin construction of a double-layered, solid barricade across 7 miles of that corridor. That wall is already under construction, with work continuing around the clock.

Tis the Season

This is the time of year when most Americans give gifts to their favorite charities, institutions and advocacy non-profits like the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. Motivated by a combination of religious conviction, spiritual belief, civic responsibility and tax implications, folks give more in the fourth quarter than at any other time of the year.

And Americans are amazingly generous! In 2006 Americans gave over $295 billion to non-profits in a variety of categories, according to Giving USA, a publication of the Giving USA Foundation. Contrary to popular belief, it isn’t corporations and large foundations that are giving the majority of this money. Almost 76% of this ($222 billion) was from individuals like you and me: people who support the groups and causes that we care about.

The implications of this are often interesting, and subject to fierce debate. On the one hand, what could be more democratic than letting everyone give to those causes and groups about which they feel most passionate? On the other hand, does this result in a distribution of resources that supports the status quo and fails to create the change necessary to solve some of society’s most pressing problems?

For example, the U.S. Government gave tax deductions on that $295 billion given away in 2006. This amounted to well over $40 billion in revenue that “We the People” chose not to collect. This amount is more than our government spent on managing public lands, protecting the environment and developing new energy sources combined. And in return, the $295 billion was given primarily to religious organizations, hospitals and health care, and education. The category of “Animals and the Environment” represented less than 4% of this total.

Now, you can see how this type of analysis might lead to fierce debate. Who is to say that this isn’t the best way to distribute resources? And if there is a better way, who gets to decide?

Here at the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, we don’t spend too much time on this debate. We’d obviously love to see more money given to environmental organizations like ours. And we work everyday to ensure that our government does more to protect the wild places of our state.

But we’re too busy being very grateful that we’re supported by almost 6,000 members. And they give time as well as money, giving voice and strength to our advocacy work. So, in this time of giving, we would like to give thanks to those who make our work possible: those who care about the wild beauty of our state and want to see it protected.

You have all our deepest gratitude! Everyone at the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance wishes you a Happy Holiday Season and a wonderful New Year!
LightHawk is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to champion environmental protection through the unique perspective of flight. Through LightHawk flights, conservation groups, municipal planners, scientists, landowners, researchers, decision-makers and others have the unique opportunity to see the impact of their decisions, the results of land management practices or the promise of protection efforts. The power of this experience – to inform, to transform perceptions and to change minds – has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout LightHawk’s history.

LightHawk is not an advocacy organization, but instead they provide an aerial platform so that the water, land and air can be seen in their true condition. Their flights are conducted by more than 140 highly skilled and experienced volunteer pilots who donate their own aircraft, their time, and their expertise. LightHawk’s educational tours and technical flights are valuable for many conservation issues such as: conducting species surveys; gathering data on animal migration patterns; monitoring impacts from logging; documenting illegal off-road vehicle use; developing improved public use plans; and increasing public understanding of environmental issues.

They are funded by individuals and foundations that support a collaborative approach in working to protect the environment. Since 1979, the flights provided by LightHawk have made them a critical player in the environmental community. Founder Michael Stewartt became increasingly alarmed at what he saw from aloft. Crisscrossing the country as a professional pilot he witnessed serious degradation of the quality of our air and water and shockingly poor stewardship of our public lands. Recognizing that an aerial view told the story of the condition of our land, air and water far more effectively and dramatically than any other, he created LightHawk.

LightHawk also allows limited financial and staff resources to be more efficiently allocated. LightHawk has conducted thousands of flights at no charge to their conservation partners. Their clients range from small local organizations such as the Downeast Lakes Land Trust, to government agencies like the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, to university partners like New Mexico State University, to large international non-profits such as the Wildlife Conservation Society.

LightHawk’s experienced program staff members make conservation work even more efficient and effective by providing extensive technical support before, during and after each flight. LightHawk offers assistance in route planning as well as initiation of collaborative efforts among environmental groups. They help with media support and involvement; provide contacts to professional photographers, satellite imagery experts, and GIS specialists; advise on effective surveying, ground-truthing, aerial photography and videography; and even conduct post-flight follow-ups to determine the impact of the flight.

LightHawk flies in the pursuit of environmental conservation and sustainability throughout much of the United States, Canada, Mexico, and in seven Central American countries. To learn more about LightHawk, arrange for a flight in support of conservation, become a LightHawk volunteer pilot, or make a donation to LightHawk, visit our web site, www.lighthawk.org or call 307.332.3242.

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Mark your calendar today for Friday evening, January 25, and all day Saturday the 26th, 2008, and take the nature-lover’s journey of a lifetime.

For more information, call Carol Lynn Tiegs, 575-418-8642.
My Personal Chaco

By Lorene Jayson

The Portuguese believe there are certain hours of the day when invisible doors will open to those aware. A person can slip into another world if they believe in magic. Sometimes these “open” hours are at dawn when we are sleepy and the light is soft; sometimes mid-day when the sun rests briefly in the sky; often at night when reflective moonbeams illuminate a dark land. My “moment” came at sunset, around a distant kiva in Chaco Canyon.

It was years ago. My first visit. I was alone. The roads had not yet been improved. Coming from NY, ignorant of the area and the canyon, I launched into a 30 mile ordeal on a “road” with running washes, rocks, ruts and caverns waiting to swallow any vehicle foolish enough to venture this route. The front grill of my old Chevy AstroVan fell off during the trek. I was able to wire it back on. The A/C unit that dislodged and fell through the engine was a lost cause. I also left the driver’s side running board and all the other car debris that littered a landscape laughing at the intrepid traveler.

Finally I was in the canyon, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of summer, camping in my van with no A/C and a small amount of melting ice in a tiny cooler with little food. Who knew? Who knew that I had come to a place that few wanted to go to—or dared—to a place so remote and difficult to get to, it challenged the faint of heart. There was no food, no gas, no ice to buy. Only a few tents scattered around the campground. Looking like weathered and wind-washed pyramids, they pointed up ominously to a scorching sun.

Yet, mysterious Chaco nurtured in other ways. In the short time I survived there with my dwindling provisions, I went to their lectures on archeoastronomy, watched the two films offered, one famously narrated by Robert Redford with Anna Sofia and the Sun Dagger discovery, bought all the books I could about the canyon, hiked to astonishingly preserved petroglyphs and cooled off in the air-conditioned Visitor’s Center.

Each hour I spent became timeless and embracing. This Place. This Center Place. By day the nilch’i, Holy Life-Giving Wind, swirled around and through me. Ancient Wind-Souls, who inhabit the shadows of ruins at night, whispered secrets in my ears, but left me knowing less. By night, I showered under dripping meteors, then cloaked myself in pinon-scented air. This Place. This Center Place. Each day I surrendered more to the silence, the power and energy of the canyon. Each day these enormous rocks radiated shelter in a vast, ancient spirit-sea.

At the end of my stay, I watched the sun descend at a remote kiva, as I imagined the long-ago people had. Two forms approached on the horizon. Both surgeons from a cold-weather state, they hoped to re-locate to Santa Fe sometime in the future. It was their first time as well, and they brought their didgeridoo to share in the quiet, still canyon air. And so he started to play, this doctor. He played his medicine and healing into kivas and canyons, potsherds and pinions, into the thousands of years of soil and subsistence. He played and played until the rocks rippled in waves of sound and scudding, iridescent clouds circulated and conversed. All was alive and singing.

Then it happened. He put the didge to the part of my back behind my heart. And he played me into the canyon. Like a time-traveler in another world, my bones and Being dissolved into what was. Layers upon layers of civilization peeled away like onion skins. I crossed the threshold into another world. I became part of it.

Over the years, I have returned to this sacred space and sacred place. I now live in Santa Fe, and plan to celebrate my sixtieth birthday there this spring. Though I have arrived in better vehicles, stocked with adequate food, gas and ice, on an improved road, there is still the canyon to reckon with. Sand storms, wind and lightening storms all contribute to its charged energy and challenge.

Now there are other challenges as well. Improved access roads invite more vehicles with more people. The campground is always full, but there are more RV’s than tents. Last Spring, a truckload of drunken tourists offered me money for my camp spot. Petroglyphs are graffitied and altered to announce unnamed selfish gods. To many, the standing ruins are just old rocks rooted in scorched earth. They do not hear the voices or see the spirits.

When Chaco was active and thriving, offers of corn pollen were left in keyhole-shaped doorways for blessings. WE need to leave our offerings in the form of volunteerism and contributions to this canyon that holds forth its own offerings to us. Perhaps then, when we offer ourselves for initiation, when we learn to honor the rites and rituals of other dwellings and their peoples, can we connect with the worlds that came before and after. Only then will we be able to see invisible doors open and slip into the magic of other worlds. The time must be right. The clock is ticking.
Jeff Bingaman — Our Conservation Senator

by Stephen Capra

For more than 25 years, Jeff Bingaman has been New Mexico’s conservation Senator. During his tenure, the Senator from Silver City, has worked on legislation to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; the California Desert; to stop the Bush Administration’s public land sell-off; and has worked tirelessly to uphold the Clinton-era National Forest Roadless Rule. He has also been a champion of the Youth Conservation Corp and has consistently worked to increase annual funding for the program.

Senator Bingaman is known for his attention to detail and legal mindset, a reflection of his background in law and his days as New Mexico’s Attorney General. The quiet Senator is a thoughtful legislator who has shown a desire to find consensus on issues of landscape protection. Given the generally rural geography, and the complexity of multiple stakeholders within such proposals, achieving consensus can be difficult.

The Senator, both behind the scenes and in public, remains a strong supporter of wilderness designation and has put in place a strong and knowledgeable senior staff working towards the designation of solid wilderness proposals. Perhaps most importantly, the Senator tries to create what are known as “clean” wilderness proposals—meaning the proposal is limited to wilderness and does not include other legislative directives such as “land disposal.”

The concept of attaching land disposal measures to land protection bills is popular among Republican and even a few Democratic members of Congress because it can raise revenues by selling public lands outside the normal process. Senator Bingaman has viewed this agenda as a short-sighted attempt to hide the Bush Administration’s irresponsible fiscal policy and means of shoring up our federal debt. He has made sure that the bills he controls are designed to protect public lands, not sell them off for short-term gain.

Perhaps the key quality of this Senator is his humble ego and his “out of the spotlight” approach to legislation. From the start, his priority has always been getting legislative accomplishments, not getting personal glory for the passage of particular bills. With many landscape protection bills, from the passage of the Petroglyph National Monument, to the Ojito Wilderness Act, to the protection of the Valle Vidal, the Senator was the leader in crafting legislation. He and his staff worked tirelessly behind the scenes to work out differences amongst the delegation, but often in the end allowed others to amend a bill and to take credit for the passage of specific legislation.

One example is the Ojito Wilderness Act of 2005. Senator Bingaman wrote and introduced legislation to protect this beautiful landscape an hour northwest of Albuquerque. He pushed hard for, what was at that time, the first wilderness bill in New Mexico in more than 17 years. Late in the process, Senator Domenici insisted that any water rights for the Ojito Wilderness be stripped from the bill. Though the Senator would never have initiated such a move, he understood that in order for the bill to pass in the Republican-controlled Senate of that time, he would need to concede this point. He did and the legislation passed with Senator Domenici receiving tremendous praise for its passage. But it was Senator Bingaman who crafted and guided this legislation forward, and its passage has opened the door to more wilderness legislation statewide.

When it comes to the protection of Otero Mesa, the support of Senator Bingaman has played a key role in its preservation to date. Many in the conservation community have been frustrated that the Senator has not introduced legislation, similar to the Valle Vidal protections, which would forever remove the oil and gas threat to Otero Mesa. However, it was Senator Bingaman who was the first to call for a water study of the Salt Basin Aquifer, which underlies Otero Mesa. In fact, the Senator’s call for the Bureau of Land Management to hold off on drilling until the water study was complete came months before other members of the delegation followed suit.

Sometimes the quiet actions of the Senator make real differences in landscape conservation. Perhaps this is best exemplified by his actions as Chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. In years when Republicans were in power, opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge had been a virtual cliffhanger, with some votes coming down to one or two members. Tremendous pressure was placed on senators to get the votes to open the Refuge to drilling. In the years that Senator Bingaman has been in a leadership position, you have heard very little about the Refuge. That’s because he has made clear to other senators he will never allow Arctic drilling to leave his committee, thus never getting to the floor for a vote. That has for many years protected what many consider America’s Serengeti. It has protected the 150,000 caribou that migrate every year to this stretch of the coastal plain, along with the polar bears, musk ox,
rather than focusing on tired, outdated energy policies or put untold billions into the false hope of nuclear power, Senator Bingaman has always promoted the development of alternative energy sources. In 2003, when Republicans regained control of the Senate, Senator Pete Domenici became the Chairman of the Energy Committee. Domenici quickly locked Democrats out of any new energy bill negotiations. He was pushing hard to get an energy bill that included a taxpayer-financed windfall for the nuclear and oil and gas industries. Just a year earlier, Senator Bingaman was pushing a much different energy bill, one that was heavy with alternative energy, conservation and energy efficiency. Though his bill passed the Senate, the bill was killed in the Republican controlled House. However, a year later when Domenici was moving aggressively on an energy bill and refusing to discuss the bill with Democrats, Bingaman’s colleagues rallied to his side and successfully stopped the legislation, forcing Senator Domenici to scale-back his ambitious plans.

Perhaps Senator Bingaman’s low water mark with the conservation community occurred with the passage of the 2005 energy bill. That bill gave billions to the nuclear, coal and oil and gas industries and was considered by many a travesty. Bingaman argued that he was able to get some key concessions, the most important of which was expanded tax credits for consumers to purchase solar panels. He also got tax incentives for the renewable energy sector to make them competitive with fossil fuels, specifically tax credits for wind, solar and geothermal power. These tax incentives have helped the expansion of wind power on the east side of our state. Bingaman also put the Senate on record for the first time ever by recognizing the existence of climate change with an amendment to the 2005 energy bill.

Today, the Senate is poised to pass a new energy package, one the Senator has played a pivotal role in. This bill will create the first increase in fuel economy standards for passenger cars since 1975. The package includes: a 15 percent renewable energy portfolio standard; increases to the renewable fuel standard to 36 billion gallons by 2022; and expansion of tax incentives for solar, wind and other renewables. Once again, though it is not flashy, Senator Bingaman pushed for energy efficiency in this new package – something that by itself – will force a large reduction of our country’s use of fossil fuels. Another important aspect of this bill is the National Efficiency Standard for light bulbs. This simple measure has the potential to save more than 65 billion kilowatts hours of electricity in just 18 months. However, Senator Domenici has played tough on this important legislation. For example, the bill lacks repeals of oil and gas provisions that have potentially harmful impacts to riparian areas and wildlife, and the renewable energy standard remains in jeopardy.

Here in New Mexico, Senator Bingaman has played a key role in restoring and protecting the state’s natural resources. He has been the guiding light in the Rio Puerco Watershed Act, which became law in 1996. This ecologically damaged watershed is now being restored in a collaborative manner, thanks to the creation of the Rio Puerco Management Committee, which brought the public together with federal, state, local, and tribal governments. Restoration has come in all sizes, from Youth Conservation Corps erosion control projects to a bold, large-scale project to restore the natural meander in a section of the river that was altered in order to build US 550.

There are many more landscapes that the Senator has played a vital role in preserving. He secured protections for Lechuguilla Cave near Carlsbad, New Mexico in 1993, the 5th longest cave in the world. He helped expand the boundary of Bandelier National Monument in 1998, and led the effort, starting in 1997, to bring the privately-owned Baca Ranch/Valles Caldera into public ownership.

In 1995 and 1996, the Senator held the line against GOP efforts to weaken the Endangered Species Act, and in 1995 he also helped prevent similar efforts to weaken the Clean Water Act. In 2000, Bingaman created the Community Forest Restoration Program which brings New Mexico $5 million annually for responsible forest restoration activities. The program has helped create new forest product industries using small-diameter timber while reducing the threat of large, high intensity wildfires.

It was also Senator Bingaman who convinced Interior Secretary Babbitt of the beauty and importance of protecting Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks. Because of his efforts, this magical place of eroded volcanic tuff became a National Monument by means of the Antiquities Act in the closing days of the Clinton Administration,

His list of achievements is long and his support of conservation and landscape protections is clear. His votes for conservation issues year after year are close to 100%. The Senator remains a quiet and detailed-oriented man. In New Mexico, currently he and his conservation-minded staff are working on several wilderness proposals. These include: the very important 330,000 acre proposal for Doña Ana County; the 303,000 acre El Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area near Taos; and Congressman Udall’s Sabino Wilderness proposal near Las Vegas, New Mexico. The Senate is also nearing passage of Bingaman’s bill to create the Prehistoric Trackways National Monument near Las Cruces, New Mexico.

There are other crucial issues: wolf recovery; Otero Mesa; the fate of Chaco Canyon; and controlling the explosive growth of off-road vehicles on our public lands, that we will look for his leadership on in the future. We should also expect to see Senator Bingaman continue his strong leadership on global warming. He has already shown his strong determination to address this issue by drafting a detailed, bipartisan climate change proposal with the hope that the framework could be put in place now, even under a Republican president.

Senator Bingaman will certainly be deeply involved in future negotiations to lead our country in a new direction. As Senator Domenici enters his final year in office, we will soon be looking at Senator Bingaman as our senior senator. The Senator has been a good friend to conservation. Our hope is that he will continue to make wilderness a real priority and leave a legacy for generations to come. The future of our land and wildlife in New Mexico will depend on his bold actions in the days and years to come.

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New Mexico WILD!
Sarah Cottrell

By Stephen Capra

When Sarah Cottrell came to work as the Environmental Aide for Governor Bill Richardson, she had some big shoes to fill. The former environmental aide for the Governor was Ned Farquhar. During Ned's tenure, conservation issues were one of the Governor's top priorities. The Governor made bold moves to protect Otero Mesa and was a driving force in the protection of the Gila River. But with the Governor moving more into the national spotlight, he was looking for someone who could work on policy and develop bold positions on issues like global warming and alternative energy development, in addition to public lands protection.

That person is Sarah Cottrell.

Sarah grew up amid the beauty of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. In her earlier years she found herself interested in water quality issues, but was also fascinated by politics. The Yin of biology and the Yang of politics have come together in her new position with the Governor. Sarah's journey to New Mexico came by way of a degree in political science from Davidson College. She worked for a time at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change. After short stints with the Grand Canyon Trust and working as an intern with the White House Task Force on Global Climate Change, she received a Masters Degree in Public Affairs at Princeton University.

With such an impressive background, Sarah has moved quickly to create a global climate change initiative. As part of the Governor's clean energy mission, she has worked in the state and across the West. Sarah was able to get state agencies here in New Mexico moving on innovation. Also, as a founding member of the Western Climate Initiative, she worked with western states and two Canadian provinces, to develop a West-wide set of goals which includes the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to 15% below 2005 levels, by 2020.

In December of 2006, the Governor issued an executive order calling for emissions reduction strategies to address climate change here in New Mexico. This included the adoption of CA clean pipe standards, green building codes, and GHG emissions registry. It also established an interagency team, on which Sarah Cottrell sits to insure they remain on track.

In the 2007 legislative session Governor Richardson was able to pass:

HB 188: Renewable Energy Transmission Authority (RETA). This established the nation's first Renewable Energy Transmission Authority to develop needed electric transmission infrastructure, with the focus on renewable energy development for export to out-of-state markets. It also made clear that 30% of a transmission project's energy must be renewable-derived electricity.

SB418: Increased the renewable Portfolio Standard for investor owned utilities, established a new 2015 requirement of 15% renewable energy and 20% by 2020. It also brings rural electric cooperatives into the statute, requiring them to have up to 10% alternatives by 2020.

The Governor was also able to push Sustainable Building Tax Credits, which establishes income tax credits for building sustainable energy-efficient commercial and non-profit, institutional and residential buildings. It utilizes the US Green Building Council's "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design" (LEED) building rating system.

Other noteworthy bills included SB 463 Renewable Energy Production Tax Credit Amendments. This helped make tax credits more "accessible" to renewable energy project developers and enhanced the opportunity for large-scale solar projects. It increased the incentive for solar from 1 cent/kwh to a graduated scale that averages 2.7 cents/kwh. It also allowed personal income taxes to be credited. HB 827: Surface Owners Protection Act established the duties and requirements for oil and gas operators and surface land owners to negotiate surface access agreements and determine compensation for property damages from oil and gas operations.

Working for the Governor is more than a full-time job. Many work for him like he was a non-stop worker, who rarely sleeps, with the energy of a 20 year old. I asked Sarah, what working for him was like. She said "I love working with the Governor, he demands only the biggest and boldest ideas." When it comes to energy issues, the Governor is well suited for his years as our country's former energy czar.

Otero Mesa remains an important issue to the Governor and for Sarah; this was one of her first challenges. "In my first week, we were releasing Aplomado Falcons on the Turner Ranch (Armendaris Ranch). The question the Governor was asking me was how will this effect Otero Mesa?" She says the Governor keeps asking about the litigation and making sure that full funding for the Salt Basin aquifer study moves forward.

Sarah also played an important role in the continued protection of the Gila River. When some elected officials were pushing for diversion projects, the Governor made sure that the river remained wild. He vetoed monies earmarked for diversions that could have changed the river's wild nature forever.

On Mexican wolves, Sarah has been the liaison to many of us in the conservation community that continue to express outrage at the number of wolf killings. In fact, the Governor just declared October 15-19, 2007 Wolf Awareness Week. This was the first time an acting Governor signed such a proclamation.

Sarah's days are long and the challenges are constant. Her phone never stops ringing. But her heart is in conservation and she enjoys hiking and camping with her boyfriend whenever the opportunity presents itself. Earlier this year they joined us for several days in Otero Mesa and came back even more committed to its long-term protection. Recently Sarah told me, "We have to find a way to make New Mexico a clean energy state." Such a lofty goal suddenly seems within our reach.
The Importance of Diverse Grasslands

by Steve West

While there are a million reasons as to why grasslands are important (economically, culturally, and aesthetically), maybe it’s time for an examination of grasslands and why they are important to us as fellow occupants of this planet.

The prairie of North America extended across at least 18 states in the United States and into Canada and Mexico. This largely cohesive unit is not the same today as it was at the turn of the 19th century. The great prairies are replaced with monoculture agriculture, highways, and cities.

It wasn’t until the time of the Dust Bowl in the 1930’s that people began to realize the value of these grasslands and took steps to stabilize their deterioration and in some cases to even restore and preserve them. By then, however, the wild American grasslands formerly populated with 20 to 70 million Bison, 10 to 25 million Pronghorn, hundreds of millions of prairie dogs, Elk, and Gray Wolves were only a memory. The view of endless rippling grassland filled with wildlife was gone.

Today we live in a world with a continually expanding population, increased competition for resources and, in this country, an administration bent on extracting oil and gas out of the last pristine places in the nation. Sadly, many have forgotten the lessons of excess and uncontrolled growth (or never learned them in the first place).

Grasslands have contributed greatly to the history and culture of this nation. Because New Mexico developed on lines somewhat different than much of the rest of the nation, we still have expanses of grassland that are magnificent. Unfortunately it cannot be said that they are safe or that the threat has passed. New Mexico’s grasslands are missing much of the large fauna (Bison, Elk, Gray Wolves) and the smaller creatures are largely or completely absent (Aplomado Falcon, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Black-footed Ferret). Yet with what is left, there is still hope of healing and regenerating these lands—with the proper decisions by government officials and vocal input from citizens.

Anyone who has paid attention to the activities of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance has heard of Otero Mesa. NMWA has been the leader in protecting this largest remaining expanse of Chihuahuan Desert grassland. That fight continues, and will until the area receives the protection it is due. But, there are other grasslands in New Mexico, largely off the radar screen of most people, which are also under severe threats of development.

In northeastern New Mexico, the Kiowa and Rita Blanca National Grasslands are federal land managed by the US Forest Service under the Department of Agriculture. These lands are rich with living things, history and solitude. Largely degraded during the Dust Bowl years, the lands have come back slowly and are now some of the richest grasslands left in New Mexico. Like Otero Mesa, the Kiowa grasslands are located far from population centers and known by few. These grasslands support Pronghorn, Black-tailed Prairie Dogs, a high concentration of birds of prey including Prairie Falcons, Long-billed Curlews, and cattle. The history of these grasslands is also present. Looking closely, you can see the wagon trails from more than a century ago. As settlers passed through this area, only a few ranchers stayed behind and tried to eke out a living, with many of them leaving during the Dust Bowl period.

Recent management has greatly improved these lands. Natural grasslands are highly productive areas molded by soil deposits from long ago and by the activity of Bison a century ago. Now they serve as the best hope for grassland birds, which are in serious decline. With less disturbance, they offer fewer opportunities for invasive species. For many threatened and endangered species, grasslands are their last hope. And for those humans desiring solitude, grasslands can be as remote and distant as a far away mountain peak. All of these characteristics can be used to describe the Kiowa Grasslands.

However, just this year the US Forest Service announced they were considering allowing oil and gas exploration and development over most all of these grasslands. Virtually none of the area is exempt from consideration and the result will likely be a complete transformation of one of the last expanses of native grassland into oil fields. Even if nothing marketable is found, the destruction caused by roads, habitat fragmentation, lines, pits and pads will change the land forever. Reclamation is always promised but all you have to do is fly over southeastern New Mexico to see how frequently this promise is kept.

It will take involvement and diligence on the part of NMWA and other organizations and the public to protect these rare grasslands and preserve the natural and rural communities which are found there now. Native grasslands are almost gone in this country, grasslands that once covered about a third of the nation. We have a chance to preserve a small fraction of a formerly huge area of grassland and we have an obligation to do so.
Santa Fe Singles

By Deborah Stephens

Two years ago I returned to New Mexico after living in Botswana. Managing a clinic for AIDS patients, dealing with tourists injured by hippos and elephants, and living in a village overrun by wild donkeys were exciting aspects of life near the Kalahari Desert. During my absence, my Santa Fe friends had moved away and I found it very hard to develop new ones.

Late last year, my roommate and I decided to do something about it. We invited eight single acquaintances to our house for an informal BBQ. The next month, we asked them each to bring a friend. Now, there are 425 of us in the group we call Santa Fe Singles and it continues to grow by 10-15 people a week.

We originally started Santa Fe Singles to meet Mr./Ms. Right, but it has become so much more-a community of single friends. We have discovered that many of us feel isolated and often don't participate in activities we enjoy, leaving few avenues to meet others with similar interests. We also found that a great many of us moved here for a closer connection to nature. So, in addition to our monthly parties and weekly coffee/cocktail get-togethers, we started leading hikes in the Pecos and Jemez mountains, and making weekend adventures by traveling to nearby places of great natural beauty, like Chaco Canyon, Canyon de Chelly, and Carlsbad Caverns.

In April, a group of us traveled to a remote bay in Baja to spend time with the Gray Whales, and to understand the need for protection from commercial development. But, it was a trip to Monarch Pass in Colorado last month that made several of us realize how important it is to preserve wild areas as well as to enjoy them.

Wild areas of such quiet beauty are becoming more difficult to find. That trip motivated each of us to spend more of our time and energy in helping to protect the wild areas we still have to enjoy. This year we'll be contributing to NMWA's 2008 Wild Guide and will be leading snowshoe and hiking trips around Santa Fe. We want to introduce others to our spectacular wilderness areas and in the process, help them to understand the need for wildland preservation. We have found, too, that participating in activities that promote nature conservation has helped us develop a better sense of community and friendship.

Deborah Stephens
505/466-3263
timelessjourneys@gmail.com
www.sfsingles.org

Wheeler Peak Adventure: The Video

In January 2008, Girl Scouts of New Mexico Trails, Inc. (formerly Chaparral and Sangre de Cristo Councils) is launching an exciting and ambitious high adventure program for girls in grades 9 through 12—Wheeler Peak Adventure: The Video. Girls will create a nature/travel documentary showcasing the flora, fauna, geology, weather, and the human experience and impact.

The program is being developed and led by Christina Frain, author and photographer of New Mexico Campgrounds: The Statewide Guide (Westcliffe Publishers 2004). Volunteers are needed to advise, teach, and/or participate in activities related to:

- Wheeler Peak flora & fauna
- History & politics of wilderness protection
- Geology

Through theadventure, girls will learn new skills and develop existing talents to create a film from start to finish, including: researching, writing, musical scoring, editing, directing, producing, acting, and filming. The ultimate goal will be to have a film with a fantastic story and professional quality visuals that the team will be able to share with people across the country.

What makes this a true high adventure program will be the filming portion of the project. Girls who are interested can complete a special application, separate from committing to work on the other aspects of the project, to be part of the Film Crew. This select team will spend six days and five nights in the Wheeler Peak Wilderness capturing the essence of the spectacular area on digital video— the flora, fauna, geology, weather, and the human experience and impact.

One of the objectives of the program is to make sure that it is open and accessible to girls throughout the council’s jurisdiction, which includes northern and central New Mexico. To achieve this, many of the meetings, training activities, and working sessions will be conducted live via video conference. Hubs will be set-up from Farmington to Clovis and many sites in between.

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- History & politics of wilderness protection
- Geology

Through the adventure, girls will learn new skills and develop existing talents to create a film from start to finish, including: researching, writing, musical scoring, editing, directing, producing, acting, and filming. The ultimate goal will be to have a film with a fantastic story and professional quality visuals that the team will be able to share with people across the country.

The program is being developed and led by Christina Frain, author and photographer of New Mexico Campgrounds: The Statewide Guide (Westcliffe Publishers 2004). Volunteers are needed to advise, teach, and/or participate in activities related to:

- Wheeler Peak flora & fauna
- History & politics of wilderness protection
- Geology

Girls who are interested in participating are invited to attend an introductory meeting at the Girl Scouts of New Mexico Trails Program/Service Center and via video conference on Friday, January 18, 2008 from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. For more information, visit http://web.mac.com/cfrain/iWeb/WPA/Blog/Blog.html or contact Christina Frain at cfrain@mac.com.
Representative Kathy McCoy (R)

By: Stephen Capra

When it comes to conservation, wildlands and wildlife do not care if you are a Republican or a Democrat. The need for protection and understanding defies party lines. For state representative Kathy McCoy (R) of the East Mountains, conservation and the protection of our resources is part of the responsibility she feels in her work and in the way she leads her life.

Kathy describes herself as “sort of native.” Her mother’s family came to New Mexico in the 1800’s and her father met her mother while stationed in Albuquerque. However, Kathy grew up in New Jersey and traces her love of wild nature to time spent hiking and canoeing in the beautiful Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey.

After returning to the East Mountains several years ago, Rep. McCoy saw that sprawl and unchecked growth threatened to overwhelm the East Mountains. She and a friend started the East Mountain Legal Defense Fund to better understand the carrying capacity of the East Mountains, get better zoning and work to maintain the quality of life people moved to the East Mountains to enjoy.

The East Mountain Legal Defense Fund took on Wal-Mart who had plans for a giant box store in the East Mountains. Two years later the mega company raised the white flag and the store was not built. It was about that time that her predecessor Ron Godby decided not to run for re-election and asked Kathy to run for his seat.

Since 2004, Rep. McCoy has been working hard to make conservation part of the norm for her Republican party in Santa Fe. I asked her about the Republican Party of today and how she is viewed for her conservation ethic. She reminded me that the Republican Party historically was the party of conservation with Teddy Roosevelt. Additionally with Richard Nixon they were breaking barriers with the passage of the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Legislation and wilderness expansion. She believes the turning point that began to change Republican thinking on the environment was Ronald Reagan’s appointment of James Watt as Secretary of the Interior. She calls it an “unfortunate time.” Suddenly environmentalists were associated with being bad for business, a view that Rep. McCoy clearly does not agree with. She told me there must be a balance between environmental protection and business. One area that she clearly sees this balance is with the oil and gas development in our state.

She calls the oil and gas industry “the life blood of our state” in terms of monies for state coffers. She feels at times the industry is hit with unfair regulations that in time could force them out of the state. In contrast, she fully supported the protection of the Valle Vidal and felt strongly that no oil and gas development should ever occur there. When it comes to Otero Mesa, she admits she has never spent time on the grassland and being a lover of mountains and rivers says “it’s not my idea of wilderness.” However, the fresh water aquifer below it is of great interest and she feels the state must do what it can to protect that resource, even if that means potentially saying no to oil and gas development.

Rep. McCoy maintains a good working relationship with Democrats in the Round House and works with them on important legislation like the Land, Wildlife and Clean Energy Bill. Bills such as this have found Rep. McCoy at times the only Republican vote in support of such conservation measures. These votes and many others have earned her the praise of many in the conservation community and she received a score of 69% from Conservation Voters of New Mexico for her votes in the 2007 legislative session. By far the highest score of any Republican in the legislature.

When she is not working in the round House or meeting with constituents, Rep. McCoy enjoys hiking, camping and rafting in New Mexico and across the West.

Rep. McCoy is also active with Republicans for Environmental Protection and pointed out that a pollster at their conference said that because of the environmental policies of the current administration, many Republicans have become Independents. Historically that meant moving to the right, but their polling shows many of these Independents shifting to the left out of concern for the environment.

Rep. McCoy summed it up by saying “people intuitively want good conservation, as long as it’s not digging into their pocket.”

Rep. McCoy and I may not agree on all things related to the environment, but her efforts to support wilderness, wildlife and places like the Valle Vidal, make her a representative that is working for conservation and incorporating into her way of life.

**CONSERVATION BILLS SUPPORTED IN THE 2007 SESSION:**

- **Surface Owners Protection Act:** gives surface owners additional protection when oil & gas is extracted from their lands.
- **Renewable Energy Portfolio Standards:** increases current standards so that utilities must include at least 15% renewable energy in their portfolios.
- **Land, Wildlife and Clean Energy Act:** Establishes a permanent, dedicated funding source for clean energy and land and wildlife conservation projects.
- **State Engineer Permits for Subdivisions:** Strengthens evaluation of water availability for new subdivisions by requiring county commissions to adhere to state engineer’s recommendation.

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**IT’S NOT TOO LATE TO PROTECT OUR MOST PRECIOUS WILD NEW MEXICANS. TAKE ACTION. SEE PAGE 20 FOR DETAILS.**
Governor Bill Richardson declared October 15th through the 19th the first annual Wolf Awareness Week for New Mexico. Organized by UNM Wilderness Alliance, the week provided an opportunity to tell the community about the endangered Mexican Gray Wolf. The week was also an opportunity for the UNM student group to raise awareness for the wolves on the UNM campus.

"I believe that the UNM Lobos have a responsibility to the Mexican Gray Wolf, and I've tried to structure major group activities around wolf advocacy," says UNM Wilderness Alliance President Phil Carter.

As part of the Wolf Awareness Week, UNM Wild hosted a Wolf Day on campus October 17th to gather support from the UNM community. Many local and national groups came out to show their support, including Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, La Montañita Coop, Wild Spirit Wolf Sanctuary, Albuquerque Wildlife Federation, Sandia Grato and Stone Age Climbing Gym.

The groups gathered signatures on a resolution urging the UNM Board of Regents to make an official stand to protect the Lobo. The UNM Bookstore helped by collabrating in sale of a "Save the Wolf" T-shirt. A percentage of the profits will go to wolf advocacy.

The Wolf Awareness Day received varied responses from the UNM community, with many shocked to learn that only 21 wolves remain in the wilds of New Mexico. Some were well informed and engaged in discussions, while others were surprised to learn the Lobo was a real animal and not just a cartoon on an athletic jersey.

The Great Old Broads for the Wilderness made a guest appearance, wearing red capes and Lobo Louie masks, and carrying signs stating "The big bad wolf is a fairytale." Children visiting the campus looked on curiously, giggling, and jumping away as a masked wolf supporter approached. UNM Wild hopes to bring this issue to an audience that still has misconceptions about wolves, to increase education, and dispel myths surrounding the wolf.

Many people are concerned about the toll wolves might take on livestock. However, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, problems such as respiratory disease and calving complications were the leading causes of cattle deaths in 2005, with wolf predation accounting for one of every 1000 deaths in that year.

Far from being aggressive, wolves are naturally wary of humans. There has never been a documented case of a healthy wild wolf killing a human in North America, compared to 10 to 20 killings by domestic dogs each year, according to the Center for Disease Control.

The basis of the conflict between the wolf and livestock industry stems from the current dual use of our public lands for both livestock production and wolf recovery. The wolves learn that cattle can be an alternative food source and, although wolves are not a significant threat to cattle populations or to humans, the stigma of the animal being potentially dangerous still remains as an undercurrent in society, causing some people to oppose their existence in the wild.

Wolf Awareness Week worked to calm these fears, widen the discussion, and create a movement of community pride for the wolf. "I am so glad there are others out there as passionate about wolves as we are," says Catherine Embrey, Treasurer for UNM Wild. "It's a community effort that will save the wolves."

As part of Wolf Week, Michael Robinson, from the Center of Biological Diversity, visited Albuquerque and spoke about the possible changes to the wolf reintroduction policies of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. He said that humans are responsible for deciding the wolves' future. "We want our kids to be able to sit around a campfire and hear the wolf howl and know that somewhere in the world things are just the way they should be."
In October, the Forest Service (FS) released a Draft Wilderness Evaluation Report for the Mills Canyon area on the Kiowa National Grasslands. The Forest Service is currently seeking public comment on the Draft Report.

Mills Canyon is a spectacular series of sandstone canyons along the main stem of the free-flowing Canadian River. It is located about 40 miles upstream of the Conchas Reservoir and about 15 miles NE of Roy, NM. The canyon rim is dominated by piñon-juniper forests with stands of ponderosa pines on cooler slopes with more moisture. Spacious grasslands lead away from the rim. Seven-hundred feet below, the river corridor hosts cottonwood groves and other riparian vegetation. Mills Canyon is an Inventoried Roadless Area and is currently used for hiking, horseback riding, fishing, hunting, bird watching and visiting historic sites. The area is threatened by continued unmanaged and illegal ORV use. Routes are proliferating up and down the Canadian River.

We would like to see the Forest Service recommend Mills Canyon for Wilderness designation in this planning process. Your comments will help achieve that goal.

Talking Points:
The FS should recommend Mills Canyon for Wilderness designation;
Due to its location on the edge of the Great Plains, Mills Canyon is a unique area, worthy of designation;
Given its distance from large population centers, highways and flyways, as well as its breathtaking scenery, vegetation, and permanent water source, Mills Canyon is prime for primitive recreation opportunities, solitude and other Wilderness related activities;
Threatened species such as peregrine falcons regularly use the area;
Mills Canyon is a very manageable area given its remoteness and its constricted access points. To increase manageability of the area, the FS must increase and expand enforcement and signing of the area as well as construct new barriers to deal with ATV use;
The FS needs to hire a permanent employee to monitor and manage the Mills area. This will increase overall manageability of the area;
The FS should close all unneeded, un-used, redundant and illegal routes in and around the Mills area;
The FS should seek ways in which the Wilderness evaluation boundary could be extended to the piñon-juniper forests and the grasslands above the rim;
The road to the cottonwood gallery on the west side of the river should remain open;
The presence of tamarisk along the river need not detract from the Wilderness quality of the area as it can be removed prior to any possible Wilderness designation;
The FS needs to rapidly initiate a comprehensive restoration action for the tamarisk inflicted areas. This should include removal and restoration of native riparian species. Certain restoration activities, such as targeted, on the ground removal of invasives are allowed in Wilderness areas.

Send Comments to:
Sara Campney
Cibola National Forest
2113 Osuna Rd. NE
Albuquerque, NM 87113
or by email: comments-grasslandsplan@fs.fed.us
Comment Deadline: January 11, 2008

The 2008 NMWA WILD GUIDE is now available!
At under $10, it makes the perfect gift for all your friends and family who love the Wild Side of life! You can pick up a copy at Sportz Outdoors, REI or contact Craig Chapman at (505) 843-8696 craig@nmwild.org.
In 1998, before the first Mexican wolves were reintroduced to the wilds of the southwest, the rules that govern the program were adopted in accordance with the Endangered Species Act. The reintroduction program has been operating under those same rules to this day. But we now know that if things continue the way they have, the wolves are unlikely to ever get beyond a stagnant population of a handful of packs. Fortunately, wildlife officials are exploring changes to these rules and we need your help to ensure that they reflect the lessons we’ve learned.

Under the current rules, Mexican wolves must stay within the boundaries of the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, which includes the Gila National Forest in New Mexico and the bordering Apache National Forest in Arizona. But with good habitat outside of these areas, wolves often cross the political lines in search of new homes and prey. When they choose to live outside the boundaries, they are captured and relocated back into the Blue Range, which thwarts expansion of the population, disrupts packs, and sometimes causes serious injuries to individual wolves.

Current rules do not require ranchers using public lands to remove or render inedible livestock carcasses that die from disease and starvation. Wolves are attracted to and often scavenge on these carcasses, and then begin to prey on live cattle or horses nearby. After three livestock kills in a year, the wolf is either killed or placed in captivity for the rest of its life.

After nearly 10 years of management under the 1998 rules, only about 60 Mexican wolves exist in the wild. Expanding wolf populations to healthy, sustainable levels will require a new approach that supports Mexican wolf recovery. We should learn from past failures and adjust the recovery rule to assure a long-term future for Mexican wolves in our wild lands.

Changes to the Final Rule will have the force of law for many years, so it is extremely important that we propose the positive changes necessary for recovery and that we send a loud and clear message to the decision makers that the citizens of New Mexico and Arizona want the Lobo to stay and make a full recovery.

In November, the Fish and Wildlife Service held “scoping meetings” to find out what the public wants in the new Final Rule. Written comments are also being accepted for the scoping process. They can be submitted via any of the options below. Deadline to comment is December 31, 2007. Be sure to include “Attn: Mexican Gray Wolf NEPA Scoping” in the subject of your email, cover of your fax, or envelope. Also be sure to include your full name and your return address in your message.

MAIL
Brian Millsap, State Administrator
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
New Mexico Ecological Services Field Office
2105 Osuna NE
Albuquerque, NM 87113
FAX
(505) 346–2542
EMAIL
r2fwe_al@fws.gov
ONLINE
www.mexicanwolfeis.org

Now more than ever, the Lobo needs you. We hope you will take part in this important political process.

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Tory & Meredith Taylor, 6360 Hwy 26, Dubois, WY 82513
307-455-2161 or metaylor@wyoming.com

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Dawn Wilson-Enoch
Saltdance Studio
1 Sage Hill Drive . Placitas, New Mexico 87043 . 505-771-0717
email: phosphene1@earthlink.net

Dawn Wilson-Enoch, visual artist and jewelry designer, has been a Placitas resident for over 11 years. Her “maverick style” jewelry is inspired by the forms, colors and textures of the desert, and incorporates a wide variety of unusual and ancient materials from all over the world.

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