

THE MESQUITE GRILL

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHWEST ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER • SUMMER 2012 • WILDMESQUITE.ORG

Restoring the Rio Grande, one wetland at a time

Despite obstacles, progress continues on SWEC's restoration project

Progress is continuing on SWEC's precedent-setting La Mancha Wetland project near Mesilla (NM), despite unforeseen bureaucratic and physical obstacles.

The tons of excess dirt that were stockpiled on the site when it was donated to SWEC have been hauled away. A berm around the property has been constructed, and the 4-acre pond has been excavated to 80 percent completion. It is becoming much easier to envision the wildlife oasis it will soon become.

The goal of the project is to restore spawning and nursery habitats for native fish, and provide year-round aquatic habitat where fish can survive when the river is reduced to a trickle or dries up, as it does each winter when irrigation releases are curtailed.



SWEC's La Mancha Wetland Project will provide year-round habitat for native fish, allowing them to survive when the river dries up each winter.

The concept is simple: create slow-water habitat that fish need by replicating a side channel of the river that is periodically connected to the main channel. These types of habitats were

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SWEC Steps Up Efforts to Get More Mexican Wolves on the Ground

SWEC has been at the forefront of recent efforts to convince federal officials to release more endangered Mexican wolves into the wilds of New Mexico and Arizona.

In February, we ran six full-page ads in the *Las Cruces Sun-News*, each consisting of a letter signed by more than 1500 people calling on U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Regional Director Benjamin Tuggle to use his authority to revoke an outdated and politically-motivated rule that prohibits the direct release of wolves into New Mexico.

Most of the best remaining unoccupied wolf habitat is located in New Mexico's Gila National Forest, yet current rules stipulate that wolves from the captive breeding popu-

lation must first be released into a relatively small area of Arizona before they can be subsequently relocated into New Mexico. Releasing suitable wolves from the more than 300 in captivity directly into New Mexico is the quickest and most effective way to boost numbers and genetic diversity in the wild population, and ensure that Mexican wolves do not go extinct in the wild again.

At the same time, we circulated an online petition calling for direct releases that garnered more than 26,000 signatures. Each time somebody signed, Tuggle received an email message urging him to clear the way for direct releases of Mexican wolves into New Mexico.

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How much nature do we need to protect?

See page 4 for the surprising answer.



Are big fires the new normal?

See page 5.

SWEC staff takes to the air to view border fence

See page 3.



Las Cruces woman wins Prius in SWEC raffle

See back page.

Raft the Rio draws crowds to the river

See page 6.



SAVE THE DATE

October 13th is SWEC's 20th Anniversary Gala. Mark your calendars! See insert in this issue for details.

Wetland Project

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once common but largely disappeared after the river was channelized in the 1920s and 1930s. To do this, we plan to enlarge an existing pond and connect it to the river. The pond will hold water year round. The river connection will exist only when flows in the river are at 1200 cubic feet per second or higher. These flows typically happen several weeks to months during the late spring and early summer, which corresponds to the spawning season for many native fish species.

Although simple in design, implementation has been challenging. This type of project has never really been attempted before for the lower Rio Grande in New Mexico. SWEC's previous restoration project, the Picacho Wetlands (now part of the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park) was similar but lacked some of La Mancha's complicating aspects.



NMSU student volunteers help plant native trees at SWEC's La Mancha Wetland.

For example, because the pond will be located on SWEC owned property outside the flood control levee, we had to get permission from the International Boundary and Water Commission--U.S. Section to install a concrete culvert through the levee that will allow for the passage of water and fish from the river to the pond.

Because the pond will be excavated into the shallow groundwater, the NM Office of State Engineer (OSE) is requiring us to obtain groundwater rights to offset evaporative losses from the pond. We have plenty of surface water rights, but no groundwater rights which tend to be expensive and hard to come by.

Fortunately, the City of Las Cruces came to the rescue by making some of its unused groundwater rights available for the project. An application was filed with the OSE in May, 2011, but the woefully understaffed OSE has



Ducks on the existing pond at La Mancha. When the project is completed, this pond will be connected to a larger new pond, and both will be connected to the Rio Grande.

yet to process it. We had no choice but to stop work on the pond in April of this year, with the work about 80 percent completed.

We anticipate an even lengthier delay when we submit an application to the OSE to change the point of diversion for our surface water rights. Currently, our water is diverted about 15 miles upstream at the Leasburg Dam, and delivered through the irrigation canal system. We obviously need a more direct connection to the river to make the project work for native fish so they don't end up flopping around in someone's pecan orchard or chile field.

Bureaucratic delays were not the only challenge we faced. The project site was donated to SWEC in 2005. Unbeknownst to us, the donor (now deceased) had used the property to bury concrete waste from a local street reconstruction project.

Dealing with the enormous quantity of large concrete pieces slowed construction and caused considerable additional expense. We couldn't afford to haul it away. Instead we used it to line the perimeter of the pond which we



NMSU graduate student Neeshia Macanowicz samples for aquatic invertebrates at La Mancha.

then buried with a layer of dirt so vegetation can get established.

In the meantime, we are going ahead with revegetation of areas that will not be affected by the final dirt work. The first planting was done by a dozen NMSU students in Dr. Wiebke Boe-

ing's Principles of Fish and Wildlife Management class, who installed about 30 cottonwood and black willow poles donated by Kevin Cobble of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

You can see more photos of the La Mancha Wetland Project at www.wildmesquite.org.

How you can help:

- Want to volunteer? If you would like to help plant trees, install bat houses, build trails, identify plants and animals, etc. please contact kevin@wildmesquite.org. There will be many volunteer opportunities coming up.
- Are you a hydrologist? Attorney familiar with NM water law? We could use your help in preparing our application to the OSE.
- Can you make a special donation to help us finish this project? You can do so at www.wildmesquite.org.
- Not a member of SWEC? Join us at www.wildmesquite.org and help us restore Rio Grande habitats.

SWEC receives support from Darden Foundation

Thanks to the staff of the Olive Garden Restaurant in Las Cruces, SWEC recently received a \$1,000 grant from the Darden Foundation, the charitable arm of Darden Restaurants Inc. The donation will support Southwest Environmental Center's efforts to restore the Rio Grande.



SWEC staff and board members accept donation from staff at Olive Garden Restaurant in Las Cruces.

The Restaurant Community Grant Program is a new local grants program intended to help support nonprofit organizations in the hundreds of communities Darden and its restaurant brands serve. The staff at each restaurant decide which nonprofit they want to support, financially and with volunteers.

SWEC very much appreciates the support of the Darden Foundation, and we can't give enough thanks to Olive Garden manager Russ Hernandez and his hardworking crew who volunteered at this year's Raft the Rio.

The True Cost of the Border Wall

Border fences are big business. According to an industry group, the market for border security barriers could be worth an estimated \$178 billion by 2015.

The nations with the most installed border barriers are India, China, Saudi Arabia and the U.S., which to date has built roughly 650 miles of security fencing along its border with Mexico.

Of this total, approximately 350 miles consist of "pedestrian" fencing that is typically 16-18 feet tall with openings too small for humans to squeeze through. Various types of vehicle barriers comprise the remaining 300 miles. Most of the border fence was erected in the wake of 9/11.

The cost of installing and maintaining this fencing is staggering. According to the Government Accounting Office (2009), taxpayers paid an average of \$6.5 million for each mile of pedestrian fencing and \$1.8 million per mile of vehicle barrier. Total maintenance cost for border fencing, lights and roads is estimated at \$325 million annually.

Money is only part of the cost. The U.S./Mexico border region is a place where temperate ecosystems meet the tropics--a big reason for the region's extraordinary biological diversity. The fence has been constructed through many important wildlife areas including national wildlife refuges, national conservation areas, and wilderness areas.

The most egregious example may be in south Texas, where 70 miles of impermeable



The endangered ocelot is one of many species whose habitat is fragmented by the border fence in south Texas.

barriers along the Rio Grande cut through the habitat of endangered ocelots and jaguarundis. The barriers affect 60 to 70 percent of the South Texas Wildlife Refuge Complex, where the federal government, state of Texas, and conservation organizations have spent more than \$150 million over several decades to pur-



More than 50 miles of pedestrian fencing installed along the Rio Grande below El Paso prevents wildlife from reaching the river.

chase 200,000 acres to protect rare species and restore habitats. Construction of the wall has seriously undercut that effort.

Most of the fence was built under an exemption allowed under the Real ID Act of 2005 to all federal, state and local environmental laws. It's been called the "broadest waiver of law in American history" by one expert. As a result, there were no opportunities to assess impacts to wildlife and habitats, or suggest alternatives or mitigation before the fence was constructed.

The detrimental effects on wildlife are likely significant. For starters, there is the disturbance caused by construction, lights, and traffic. Then there's the blockage of movement corridors, preventing access to water, food and mates, as well as preventing adjustments in geographic ranges in response to environmental factors such as fire and climate change.

Finally, there is the fragmentation of habitats and the isolation of wildlife populations on both sides of the border. Habitat fragmentation is the leading cause of the current global extinction crisis.

Some recent studies have begun to shed light on the effects of border barriers on wildlife. Bobcats whose home territories were bisected by the border fence in south Texas have been killed by vehicles while searching for new territory.

In Arizona, researchers concluded that the fence may be an impediment to the movement of endangered pygmy owls, which fly close to the ground and tend to avoid areas cleared of vegetation, such as found next to the fence.

Another study warned that the fence would isolate black bears near the border in Arizona, which are more closely related to bears in Mexico than elsewhere in Arizona.

Lighthawk takes SWEC flying to see border fence and elusive bison herd

SWEC staff were treated to a small plane flight along the New Mexico/Mexico border in March by volunteer pilot Dan Meyer with the nonprofit group Lighthawk.

We had requested the flight in order to view the status of the border fence in the rugged "Bootheel" region of southwest New Mexico, where access by vehicle is difficult.

This is an important wildlife area because of its high species diversity and because of its importance as a movement corridor for animals such as jaguars and Mexican wolves.



The rugged Sierra San Luis in Mexico, just south of the New Mexico/Arizona border, is an important corridor for wildlife such as jaguars and wolves. Photo Ken Stinnett.

Because of its significance to wildlife, we were concerned about the impacts of border fence construction in the region. Fortunately, it appears that very little border security fence has been installed so far. Pedestrian fencing--the kind of border fence most detrimental to wildlife--appears to be limited to a few miles on either side of the border crossings at Columbus and Antelope Wells.

We were also hoping to glimpse one of the last free-roaming bison herds in North America. Until recently this small herd crossed freely between the U.S. and Mexico in the Bootheel. It's not clear if this herd is a remnant of the huge bison aggregations that once roamed the grasslands of the continent, or are the feral descendants of ranch escapees.

Unfortunately, it appears their roaming days are over. A rancher on the U.S. side of the border has reportedly appropriated them as "live-stock." We did not see any bison on our flight.

We are grateful to Dan and Lighthawk for making this flight possible.

T-shirt contest highlights Apache connection to Otero Mesa

SWEC recently teamed up with a new grassroots group in Otero County to hold a t-shirt contest for fifth graders at the Mescalero Apache School on the Mescalero Apache Reservation.



Winners in the Mescalero Otero Mesa T-shirt Contest with organizer Styve Homnick.

The contest was organized by the Otero Mesa Preservation Society (OMPS) under the direction of Styve Homnick as part of its efforts to build local support for the permanent protection of Otero Mesa. SWEC provided funding support and encouragement.

The involvement of the Mescaleros in the campaign to protect Otero Mesa is a promising development. Otero Mesa was once part of the vast Apache homeland, used for seasonal villages, hunting, and for gathering of plants for food and medicines. Many current tribal members are unaware of this connection.

The students were asked to come up with a unique design based on Mescalero Apache sacred beliefs surrounding Otero Mesa.

The first place winner was Lewis Chino, whose drawing incorporated a rock art design found on Otero Mesa as a symbol for the Apache mythical figure known as Child of the Water who made the earth safe by killing four monsters that were preying upon human beings.



The winning design, based on a petroglyph found on Otero Mesa (below).

What is the sixth extinction?

And why should we care?

There have been five times in the history of earth when a majority of species suddenly disappeared. The last time this happened was about 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs went extinct. We are currently experiencing a sixth such episode.

Unlike the previous episodes which were caused by things like meteors and volcanos, the current episode is caused by another life form—humans.

The loss of species by the destruction of natural habitats is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us.

-- E.O. Wilson

Humans are driving other species to extinction by myriad activities, including over-harvesting (e.g. fish in the ocean), pollution, facilitating the movement of invasive species that crowd out natives (such as tamarisk in the Southwest), and, especially, fragmentation and destruction of natural habitats (see article about the border fence on p. 3).

Scientists say that plants and animals are currently disappearing at a rate perhaps 1000 times or greater faster than normal because of humans. Ten to 50 percent of well studied life forms are currently threatened, including tigers, gorillas and Mexican wolves, to name just a few.

Why should we care? There is obvious self interest. Species are the building blocks of ecosystems. Ecosystems provide humans with numerous free services which would be expensive if not impossible to replicate, such as providing clean water and air, nutrient recycling, useful products such as food and medicines, and soil.

There are aesthetic and moral reasons for wanting to protect "creation" as well. Some of us just don't want to live in a world where humans run amok and cause other life forms disappear.

What can be done? The first step is to limit human population growth. If every couple

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How much nature is enough?

A growing number of scientists now say that 50 percent of any given land or water ecosystem needs to be protected to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Many scientific assessments over the past 20 years have demonstrated that nature needs at least half of a given ecoregion to be protected, and interconnected with other such areas, in order to maintain its full range of life supporting ecological and evolutionary processes, the long-term survival of the species that live there, and to ensure the system's resilience in the face of environmental change.

A protected area is defined by the IUCN as a "clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values." There are various categories based on how much human use is allowed, but they are all managed primarily to preserve biodiversity.

Some nations are closer than others to

achieving this ambitious but vitally necessary target. According to the World Database on Protected Areas, Venezuela currently has 53 percent of its territory protected. Costa Rica has 21 percent. Worldwide, 12.7 percent of the land surface of the planet excluding Antarctica is protected.

The U.S. is distinctly average in this department. About 13 percent of the U.S. is protected under the IUCN definition, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. When Alaska and Hawaii are excluded, this figure drops to a pitiful seven percent.

There is also considerable variation among individual states. Alaska leads all with 45 percent of its territory protected. California has 24 percent, New Jersey has 18.

Only six percent of New Mexico is protected. When you consider that New Mexico is the fifth largest state and ranked fourth in overall biodiversity, the need to protect more of the state is clear.

Mexican wolves

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Finally, SWEC's Executive Director Kevin Bixby helped to author a letter to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, signed by 30 conservation organizations, calling for more wolves to be released into Arizona to prevent further loss of genetic diversity in the wild population, as well as a rule change allowing for releases into New Mexico.

A copy of the newspaper ad, online petition and Salazar letter can be found on our website at www.wildmesquite.org.

Will Gila fire hurt Mexican wolves?

As of this writing, the lightning-started Whitewater-Baldy fire has burned nearly 300,000 acres in the Gila National Forest, making it the largest fire in recorded history in New Mexico. It is still not fully contained. How will it affect endangered Mexican wolves?

It is too soon to tell, but it appears that the two dozen or so wolves in the Gila, including two packs with pups, have escaped immediate harm. The long-term effects remain to be seen. With such low numbers, any negative impacts would be a blow to recovery of the critically endangered lobo.

The good news is that the Gila blaze appears to have burned at a relatively lower intensity than last year's Wallow fire that scorched 538,000 acres on the Arizona New Mexico border, or the Las Conchas fire that burned 156,000 acres near Los Alamos (NM). This is probably due to the progressive fire management policy practiced by Gila managers for decades, in which lightning-sparked fires were allowed to burn as nature intended, preventing the build-up of fuels that feed catastrophic fires that kill trees and damage soils.

Sixth extinction

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only had two children, the world's population would slowly decrease because some of those offspring would not reproduce.

Make nature preservation a priority in your life. Vote for candidates who believe in protecting nature, and support organizations that work to protect nature.

Mexican Wolves by the Numbers

- Size in square miles of the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA): 6,845 (Gila NF: 5150; Apache NF: 1695)
- Size of Yellowstone National Park: 3,468
- Times larger BRWRA is than Yellowstone: 1.97
- Estimated number of Mexican wolves in the BRWRA (at end of 2011): 58
- Estimated number of gray wolves in Yellowstone NP (at end of 2011): 100
- Percent of BRWRA that is federal public land: 95.5 (Apache NF: 1593 sq. mi.; Gila NF: 4944)
- Number of livestock in the BRWRA (Authorized in 2011): 43,132 (U.S. Forest Service data)
- Number of livestock killed by Mexican wolves since 1998: 196 (USDA data, reported by USFWS)
- Number of Mexican wolves illegally shot since 1998: 43
- Est. cost of Mexican wolf reintroduction program since 1977: \$30 million
- Net annual increase in revenues to local communities attributable to the return of wolves to Yellowstone: \$35 million (Duffield et al, 2008)

Hike and bike the "Path of the Wolf" to the Grand Canyon

Paseo del Lobo is an event that offers a unique opportunity for volunteers to hike and bike along a natural dispersal corridor that conservationists hope wolves will one day follow to recolonize the Grand Canyon.

The Grand Canyon Wolf Recovery Project is hosting Paseo del Lobo from July to October 2012. The route connects the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (where Mexican gray wolves currently live) to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon (where conservationists are advocating for their return). Mexican wolves are capable of traversing hundreds of miles, and need room to roam in order to avoid inbreeding and survive over the longterm.

For more information, go to <http://gcwolfof-recovery.org>.

Are big fires the new normal?

If you think that big, catastrophic fires are becoming more common in the Southwest, you're right. Since the mid-1980s, the West has experienced a dramatic increase in the frequency of forest fires, and in the length of time they burn.

Some of this increase is attributable to past forest management policies, i.e. fire suppression, logging and grazing, but much of it is correlated with higher temperatures, earlier onset of snowmelt and longer summer dry seasons during this period.

The current drought covering much of the



The Whitewater-Baldy Fire is the largest fire in New Mexico history--so far. Photo U.S. Forest Service.

Southwest is at least as severe as any in the past 100 years. And it's going to get worse. Pretty much all climate model simulations indicate the Southwest is likely to become warmer and drier due to human-caused climate change, with droughts becoming more severe and prolonged, which means more big fires. It also means an increase in outbreaks of forest pests such as bark beetles that kill trees and provide more fuel for wildfires.

Of course, at some point, climate change and high intensity fires have the potential to drive Southwestern forests past the point of recovery, to where trees will be replaced by some other vegetation type, like grassland or scrub.

Raft the Rio 2012 brings crowds to the Rio Grande

June 9th was a hot one - but that didn't stop over 250 rafters and hundreds of onlookers from coming out and participating in SWEC's 15th Annual Raft the Rio extravaganza. Individuals of all ages got on the water and had the opportunity to experience the mighty Rio Grande as the important community resource it is--when it is allowed to flow as it should.

Each year the themes, engineering and use of recycled materials just seem to get more impressive. The judges had a tough time awarding the winners in each category, but some, like "Least Likely to Finish" were a little easier than others. The Finish Line Festival was lively, with plenty of vendors and great music before the awards ceremony.

The number of entries this year--75--was about half of last year's participation, but pretty good considering that the river was dry two weeks before the event!

A big thanks to our sponsors: MountainView Regional Medical Center, EcoThink, Positive Energy Solar, Andele Restaurante, and NMSU Outdoor Recreations for making this event possible!

There were no big problems this year, but there were a few minor glitches. Somehow we managed to lose five life jackets that we had borrowed from NMSU for our safety boats. If anyone knows where they might be, please let us know.

Also, it looks like we'll be needing a new dock next year for the finish line. Sometime between the end of the event on Saturday afternoon and the following Monday when we went back to retrieve it, it disappeared! Go figure.



Crowds of onlookers viewed the race from shore and the Picacho Bridge.



Plastic water bottles were a popular building material this year, as always!

Plenty of watercrafts create a fun and festive atmosphere.



Judging is not easy! Six categories, two divisions, one hot sun!



SWEC volunteers serve watermelon and lemonade at the finish line.

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Who we are

Opened in 1992, the Southwest Environmental Center works to protect and restore native wildlife and their habitats in the Southwestern borderlands.

We speak for wildlife and wild places. We work to protect and restore vital habitats, like Otero Mesa, and endangered species, like the Mexican Grey Wolf. We're the group whose work on the Rio Grande resulted in the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park.

There is an extinction crisis and we are working hard to prevent plants and animals from disappearing here in the Southwest.

We've had 20 years of success and we cannot do it without our members.

Not a member? Please join us today!

Lucky Las Cruces Woman Wins Car in SWEC Raffle

Connie Welles was not reachable by phone on Earth Day, April 22nd, when we called her to let her know that she was the lucky winner of a 2012 Toyota Prius, made possible by Las Cruces Toyota. So, we left a message and waited a little while, and then we called her back. What ensued when we got her on the line was a mix of laughter and tears and confusion and "really?!"



Connie Welles in the driver's seat of her new car.

Connie was able to make it down to the Earth Day Festival in record time to view her new car, which she was able to drive home from the dealership just a few days later. This was Connie's first time participating in our raffle, having heard about it in a local paper,

and she only bought one ticket. She promises to purchase a ticket each year from here on out saying "it's the least I can do."

This was our first year giving away the car at the Earth Day Festival, but we felt the match was ideal. We thank New Mexico State University's Oasis Club for putting on the event and for allowing us ample stage time to give away our prizes.

As many of you may remember, in years past we have postponed (and postponed, and postponed) our drawing to make sure that all 400 tickets are sold. This year, however, we picked a date and stuck to it and everything turned out just fine - even if we had a bit of anxiety when the last 200 tickets weren't sold until the last three days!

The annual Prius raffle is a major fundraiser for SWEC, raising almost \$15,000 this year for the organization. Thanks to everyone who made this possible by buying a ticket.

Don't miss out

Do we have your email address? The best way to stay informed about SWEC events and issues is to sign up for our weekly eNewsletter. You can do it at wildmesquite.org or call us at (575) 522-5552.

Participants learn the basics of wildlife tracking in SWEC workshop

Under the tutelage of instructors Janice Pryzbyl and Jean Ossorio, participants in SWEC's Wildlife Tracking Workshop held in May learned how to distinguish canid and felid tracks and other basic techniques for identifying wildlife based on tracks.



The group found many tracks along the Rio Grande, including these of a racoon and her cub.

After an evening session at SWEC's office, the participants then applied their new skills to identify tracks found along the Rio Grande on a beautiful Saturday morning.

SWEC would like to thank Janice, Jean and her husband Peter for making the workshop possible.

SAVE THE DATE

October 13th is SWEC's 20th Anniversary Gala. Mark your calendars! See insert in this issue for details.

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