

THE MESQUITE GRILL

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHWEST ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER · SUMMER 2015 · WILDMESQUITE.ORG

New Mexico's Shame

Wildlife Killing Contests Still Legal...For Now



SWEC's executive director Kevin Bixby surveys 39 dead coyotes dumped outside of Las Cruces last year, victims of a killing contest held the weekend before Christmas. Photo Lauren Villagran, courtesy of Albuquerque Journal.

Wildlife killing contests are still legal in New Mexico. A bill (SB253) to ban the most popular form of this sordid activity--coyote killing contests--passed the New Mexico Senate earlier this year by a wide 36-24 bipartisan margin, but died in a House Committee.

It might have passed the full House on a floor vote, even with Republicans in the new

majority in that chamber, but it never had a chance. It was assigned to the newly constituted House Agriculture, Water and Wildlife Committee, which was dominated by agricultural interests.

The chair, Candy Ezzell (R), is a rancher from Roswell who showed up for hearings wearing coyote fur-lined boots.

The "expert" witness she called to testify against SB253, Jim Schmidt, is the owner of Arizona Ammunition, which sponsors and profits from a major coyote

killing contest each year--a conflict of interest that was conveniently ignored.

The committee was a death trap for many good wildlife bills, and a launching pad for bad ones. One of the members, Representative Andy Nunez (R-Hatch), said he hoped the Mexican wolf would go extinct. Another mem-

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State Engineer Approves Permit for SWEC Wetland Project



SWEC's La Mancha Wetland Project will provide year-round aquatic habitat where fish can survive when the river is dry.

Finally! Last month the NM State Engineer approved an application submitted nearly four years ago, providing the Southwest Environmental Center with the groundwater rights (courtesy of the City of Las Cruces) needed to move forward with its La Mancha Wetland Project.

Located along the Rio Grande near Mesilla, the project is intended to provide year-round aquatic habitat for native fish and other creatures. It is about 80 percent complete but has

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SWEC's Annual Gala
WILD NIGHT
WILD LIFE
SAVE the Date!
Saturday, October 17th, 2015
6-10 PM • Live Music
Rockabilly Strangers
Las Cruces Ukies ★ Alison Reynolds
Great food by local restaurants
Beer & Wine
Dancing under the Stars

Upcoming Programs

Here are the upcoming Tuesday Talks at SWEC, usually scheduled for the second Tuesday of each month at 7 pm.

- July 14--Hidden Biological and Archaeological Treasures of White Sands Missile Range. Presented by staff with the WSMR Environmental Stewardship Branch.
- August 11--Reptiles of the Southwest, by Dr. Paul Hyder.
- September 8--Around the World with SWEC Members (see p. 7)
- October 13--Using Conservation Genomics to Stop The Illegal Trade in Wildlife, by Dr. Brook Milligan, NMSU.

All programs are free and open to the public. Dates are subject to change. Call (575) 522-5552 for more info.

Our Mission:

To protect and restore native wildlife and their habitats in the Southwest.

**Not a member?
Please join us! See page 7.**

How Much Water Does the Rio Grande Need?

Rivers need water, but how much? For the Rio Grande, this is not an academic question.

The river in southern New Mexico and west Texas is fully appropriated for agriculture. Every drop belongs to someone, but none belongs to the river itself.

Any water flowing in the river is there only incidentally, on its way to the next farmer downstream or because storms have delivered more water to the river than farmers can divert.

The river has been managed like this for the past 99 years, since Elephant Butte Dam was completed in 1916. Not surprisingly, the river ecosystem has suffered as a result.

The river dries to a trickle or entirely during winter months, when irrigation releases are curtailed. Two-thirds of the 22+ native fish species originally found in this reach have disappeared.

Determining how much water the Rio Grande needs to function is a first step towards restoring it to ecological health.

Kevin Bixby, SWEC's executive director, has been chairing an Environmental Work Group over the past year as part of a broader effort to update the Lower Rio Grande Regional Water Plan. The plan is supposed to identify water supply and demand for various uses, and if supply is less than demand, propose ways to bridge the gap.

Unfortunately, in the current plan completed in 2004, the environment is pretty much ignored. SWEC and others were determined not to let that happen again, so we developed a preliminary environmental water demand esti-



How much water does a river need? More than this. The dry Rio Grande near Las Cruces.

mate to include in the update.

By our calculation, the Rio Grande needs a **minimum** of 75,000 acre-feet annually be healthy, i.e. to sustain fish, wildlife, trees, and boating all year-round. This turns out to be roughly 10 percent of the volume of water released from Caballo Reservoir in a full supply year--not an unreasonable amount of water to leave for the river itself.

Here are the components of that figure:

- Base flows to keep the river running during the non-irrigation season (4 months in a full water supply year)--47,000 acre-feet
- Peak flows to overflow the banks, regenerate cottonwood bosques, trigger fish spawning, and maintain wetland habitat--1900 acre-feet (average--more is needed, but not necessarily every year)
- Maintain floodplain plant communities (bosques, meadows, wetlands and ponds)--26,000 acre-feet
- Total--74,900 acre-feet

For more details about how we derived these estimates, visit www.wildmesquite.org.

Wetland Permit

(continued from front page)

been on hold since 2011 while we awaited the green light from the State Engineer.

The project is part of SWEC's overall strategy for restoring the Rio Grande to ecological health by creating off-channel wetlands and ponds that are periodically connected to the river and to each other, where fish can survive when the river is dry.

Panel Urges Rio Grande Fish Recovery Plan

A board that advises the President and Congress on U.S.-Mexico border environmental matters has recommended that the federal government develop a plan for recovering native fish in the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico and west Texas.

The recommendation is one of a number contained in the Good Neighbor Environmental Board's 16th annual report, which was issued last December and focuses on ecological restoration. SWEC's Executive Director Kevin Bixby served on the board and helped write the report.

"I am very pleased that the Board included a number of recommendations to address one of the greatest restoration needs along the border--the poor ecological condition of the Rio Grande," said Bixby.

"The fish reflect the health of the river. We've lost two-thirds of the native fish species from this reach of the Rio Grande. We can bring them back, but we need a plan and we need federal leadership. It was the federal government that built the water projects over the past century that have been so destructive to the river. It is appropriate that the feds take the lead in fixing it."

The report is online at http://www.epa.gov/ocem/gneb/gneb_president_reports.htm.

Raft the Rio Cancelled

After 17 years, we reluctantly decided to cancel Raft the Rio this year.

Costs, declining participation, and the huge staff effort involved were all factors in our decision, but the main reason was that we felt we had achieved our goal for the event of reconnecting people to the river.

The event has brought thousands of people down to the river over the years to enjoy a day on the water and appreciate an undervalued community asset. An entire generation has grown up with it. It's time to move on and concentrate our limited resources on other ways to help the river.

For those of you who loved the event (as we did), fear not. It appears that another community group will take it over next year.

Did you know...?

Sturgeon once swam in the Rio Grande in New Mexico. A museum specimen was collected near Albuquerque before 1875, and archeologists have uncovered sturgeon remains in Santa Fe and at Cochiti Dam.

What is the NM Game Commission, and Why Does It Hate Wolves?

In New Mexico, as in many other states, the governor appoints a commission to oversee wildlife management.

Members are appointed to up to four-year terms by the governor and confirmed by the State Senate. Not more than four of the seven members can be from the same party.

Five of the members represent different geographical areas of the state. The other two members are appointed "at large." At least one member is supposed to represent agricultural interests and another is supposed to represent "conservation" interests, i.e. non-hunters and anglers.

The Commission has traditionally been a place for governors to reward campaign supporters. It is widely understood that members do what the governor wants, or they will be quickly replaced.

Here is the current Commission line-up:

- Paul M. Kienzle III (chair)--Albuquerque attorney and hunter.
- Elizabeth Ryan (conservation seat)--oil and gas attorney, Roswell. Hunter, member of National Rifle Association (NRA) and Safari Club International (SCI), both of which are strongly opposed to predators.
- Ralph Ramos--middle school principal, Las Cruces. Hunter, hunting guide, member of NRA, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and Mesilla Valley Sportsman's Alliance--all anti-predator groups.
- William Montoya--former director, NM Dept. of Game and Fish.
- Robert Espinoza, Sr.--Farmington businessman and hunter. Active in NRA, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and SCI. Organizes coyote killing contests.
- Thomas "Dickie" R. Salopek (agriculture seat)--Hunter, pecan grower, Las Cruces. Member of Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and NRA.
- Robert Ricklefs--Ranch superintendent, Colfax County. Board member, NM Cattle Growers Association, which opposes Mexican wolf recovery.

Given the backgrounds of its members, it is not surprising that the current Commission holds a dim view of wolves. Of course, it is really the governor's views that matter, and it seems clear that she is not a fan of wolves either.



Mexican wolves being released into holding pens on the Ladder Ranch. The Ladder Ranch facility serves an important function in the Mexican wolf reintroduction effort. Photo Turner Endangered Species Fund.

NM Game Commission to Ted Turner: No Permit for Wolves

Since the first Mexican wolves were reintroduced into the Southwest in 1998, billionaire Ted Turner has offered his Ladder Ranch in southern New Mexico to help in the recovery of this endangered species, providing critically needed services at no cost to taxpayers.

The ranch is home to acclimation pens that serve as a sort of halfway house for wolves on their way to being released (or rereleased) into the wild.



The Turner Endangered Species Fund has made major contributions to the recovery of New Mexico's wildlife, including desert bighorn sheep. The sale of bighorn sheep hunting tags now brings in hundreds of thousands of dollars to NM Dept. of Game and Fish annually.

In the past, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has routinely granted an annual permit to the Ladder Ranch to provide these services. In May, however, the NM Game Commission denied the Ladder's permit, to express its opposition to Mexican wolf recovery

in general. The commission had already voted in 2011 to withdraw the state from participating in the wolf recovery program.

The Southwest Environmental Center is one of more than 40 conservation groups that have sent a letter to NM Governor Susana Martinez asking her to reverse the Commission's action. More than 150 wolf supporters attended a rally at the state capitol in Santa Fe on May 19 to protest the Commission's action.

Ted Turner has also helped with the conservation of many other species in New Mexico, including some of great interest to the NM Department of Game and Fish, such as Rio Grande cutthroat, endangered black-footed ferrets, aplomado falcons and Chihuahua leopard frogs.

He's done it all at his own expense, at a huge savings to taxpayers and great benefit to all New Mexicans. It is unfortunate that the Game Commission chose to reward him for his generosity over the years by denying him a permit just because they--and the governor--don't like wolves.

Did you know...?

Notwithstanding the Game Commission's dislike of wolves, the Mexican gray wolf is currently considered a "species of greatest conservation need" in New Mexico, according to the State's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy.

NM's Shame

(continued from front page)

ber, Rep. Bealquin "Bill" Gomez (D-Sunland Park), suggested that wildlife advocates were responsible for dumping dozens of dead coyotes in the desert outside Las Cruces in order to cast coyote killing contests in a bad light.

With the exception of Reps. Bill McCamley (D-Las Cruces) and Bobby Gonzalez (D-Taos), listening to the committee members talk you'd have thought that coyotes were responsible for everything from bathtub rings to world hunger. It was a veritable hatefest of carnivores. McCamley distinguished himself as an eloquent voice of dissent on most committee votes.

Still, there are reasons to be encouraged despite the bill's defeat. To our knowledge, passage by the NM Senate marked the first time such a measure has passed any legislative chamber in any state, and it passed by a healthy margin.

The bill's sponsors, Senator Mark Moores (R-Albuquerque) and Rep. Jeff Steinborn (D-Las Cruces) were great champions and seem ready to do battle again.

And unlike 2013, when a similar bill was considered, the hunting community did not oppose the bill. The largest hunting organization in the state, the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, did not take a stand for or against the measure, and many individual hunters spoke in favor of it during committee hearings.

It makes sense for mainstream hunters to oppose wildlife killing contests. Most Americans (about 94 percent) do not hunt, but accept sport hunting for meat, and to a lesser extent for trophies. However, although poll data is lacking, it is a safe bet that most people find killing animals primarily for fun and prizes morally repugnant.

Wildlife killing contests reflect badly on the hunting community at large, even though only a tiny fraction of hunters engage in them. Mainstream hunters risk a backlash against

all forms of hunting if they don't distance themselves from killing contests.

Although opposition to wildlife killing contests is growing, they remain legal in every state. Three states have placed limits on them.

In 2014 the California Fish and Game Commission banned the awarding of prizes for killing coyotes, foxes, and other carnivores, but not the events themselves. Colorado restricts the number of animals that can be killed to five per contestant, and Washington limits the total value of prizes that can be awarded to \$500.

NM near top in number of contests

Getting accurate data on how many contests are held and how many animals are killed is challenging. Contests range in size from well-publicized, corporate-sponsored events with substantial prizes that draw contestants from multiple states, to impromptu weekend contests announced on Facebook.

Making it more difficult is the growing realization within the killing contest community that much of the public disapproves of their activities, with a resulting trend towards greater secrecy. Nonetheless, you can still find plenty of gory photos and videos of their exploits on the internet.

Among all the states, New Mexico appears to rank at or near the top in the number of killing contests held. There were at least 246 such contests held in the nation between September 2014 and May 2015, according to Wildlife Conservation Advocacy Southwest, with at least 32 happening in New Mexico alone.

Texas was the leader with 33 contests, including the West Texas Big Bobcat Contest (which is actually three contests held in consecutive months). In 2015 it attracted more than 1000 teams and paid out more than \$200,000 in prize money, including more than \$34,000 to the first place winners. (The contest was to see who could kill the largest bobcat, but to win you also had to shoot at least five coyotes or foxes.)

Texas and New Mexico accounted for about 25 percent of all the contests held nationwide during that period.

Who participates, and why is it legal?

What motivates people to participate in these contests? Why do some people think it's okay to kill animals just for fun, when most



This killing contest took place in Belen, NM, just days after a bill to ban such events died in the Legislature. Sixty coyotes were killed.

of us view such behavior as wrong, even sociopathic? We would be horrified if somebody went around shooting the neighborhood dogs. Why is it okay to do so if the target is a wild animal?

There is certainly a strong element of sadism in this crowd, combined with an undeniable enthusiasm for using semi-automatic guns and gadgetry. The lure of money and prizes can't be dismissed either.

Whatever the reasons, it is clear that two factors encourage the proliferation of wildlife killing contests. The first is the attitude that carnivores are "bad" animals and need to be "managed" if not eliminated entirely, as Rep. Andy Nunez expressed. This outdated view still holds strong in certain circles.

Hunters of coyotes and wolves, especially, often express a righteous hatred of their victims and believe they are doing the world a favor by getting rid of them.

The second is the inadequacy of state wildlife laws. The species killed in contests enjoy little if any legal protection. In New Mexico, for example, there are no bag limits or seasons for coyotes.

Many rural residents don't think twice of shooting a coyote whenever they see one. It is an easy progression from this casual, habitual killing to organized killing contests.

If there is a good side to wildlife killing contests, it is that they are calling public attention to the underlying problem in New Mexico and most states: the lack of legal protection for the full range of native wildlife.

The Southwest Environmental Center will continue to work with our allies to end wildlife killing contests while leveraging the opportunity they present to bring about broader reforms needed to protect all of our native wildlife.

Did you know...?

As many as 690 species of plants and animals may be going extinct each week, due almost entirely to human activities, according to a recent report in the journal Nature. More than a quarter of all mammal species are threatened.



Why We're Putting SWEC in Our Will

John and Linda Douglas moved here from Florida. They're avid birders and hikers, love jazz and blues, have a dog named Gracie, and have been members of SWEC since 2003. John was even on our board for a time.

They intend to leave a gift in their will to the Southwest Environmental Center.

"We've been supporters of SWEC for many years, and we are pleased to include a bequest to SWEC in our wills. It's great to have an organization that is local and whose purpose is to conserve and protect the environment and wildlife in our region."

A legacy is not a donation, it's an investment in the future. If you would like to join John and Linda in including SWEC in your will, please call Kevin at (575) 522-5552.

SWEC Receives Sustainability Award

The Southwest Environmental Center received the 2014 Rio Grande Award for Excellence in Nonprofit Sustainability from the Community Foundation of Southern New Mexico at the Foundation's 14th annual awards ceremony last fall.

The award recognizes nonprofits that have endured and grown during economically hard times and have a message that resonates with the public in a way that supports their growth.

"We could not have lasted this long without the steadfast support of our members," said Kevin Bixby, SWEC executive director. "They are the ones that really deserve this award."

SWEC Director to Speak at Yellowstone Event

SWEC's executive director, Kevin Bixby, has been invited to speak at the 2nd annual Speak for Wolves in West Yellowstone, on August 7-9. The event will examine current policies towards carnivores and speak to the growing need to reform wildlife management at the state and federal level. Bixby will be part of a panel that will discuss the growing problem of wildlife killing contests targeting wolves, coyotes, bobcats and other species.

Pope Calls for Sweeping Action to Save Planet

Pope Francis established himself and the Catholic Church as major players in the effort to solve global environmental problems with his recent release of the first papal encyclical devoted solely to the environment.

The report addresses climate change as well as many other interrelated issues including water, biodiversity, poverty and inequality.

Here are a few of our favorite quotes from the document:

- "Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right."
- "We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us...we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures."
- "If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously."

You can read the entire encyclical at www.wildmesquite.org.



Tucson Says No to Predator Masters

Last year, SWEC was instrumental in convincing the carnivore-hunting group Predator Masters to move its annual "hunt and convention" out of Las Cruces to Tucson. Now it looks like it will have to move again.

Tucson did not waste any time telling the group it was not wanted. First, with help from SWEC, local advocates organized two large rallies against the event in February.

Then, the Pima County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution opposing "any and all future" hunts by the group. Then the Tucson City Council passed a similar resolution.

Finally, in response to many negative reviews on Trip Advisor, the International Wildlife Museum--the venue for the event--announced it would no longer make its facility available for multi-day events or trade shows.

No word yet on where the group will go next year.

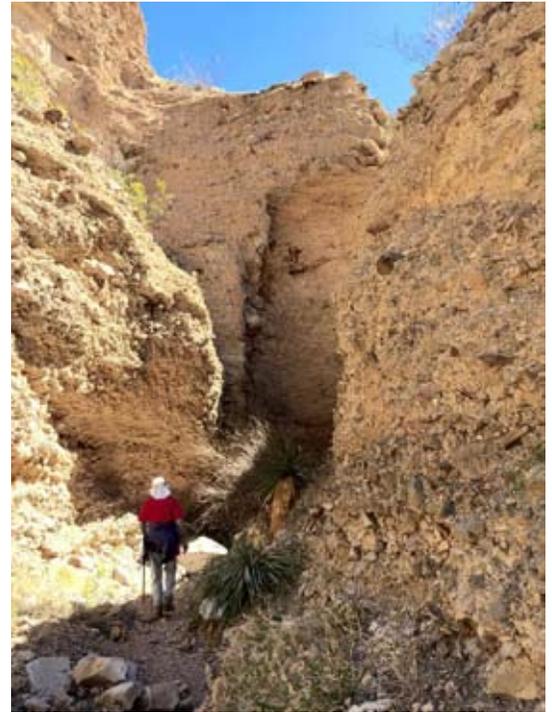
Don't miss out

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.

Did you know...?

New Mexico ranks fourth among the states in the number of plants and animals found within its borders. SWEC has worked for more than 20 years to protect this extraordinary natural heritage.

Spring 2015 Back by Noon Outings



SWEC's Spring 2015 Back by Noon series of guided natural history introduced many people to the region's natural history. Thanks to all of our guides for giving up their Saturday mornings to share their knowledge. Stay tuned for the Fall Series beginning in August.



(Clockwise from top left) Ecology of the Franklin Mountains, with Dr. Paul Hyder; Slot Canyon Adventure, with David Soules; The Amazing Maze Trail in the Franklin Mountains, with Adrianna Weickhardt; Migratory Birds of the Mesilla Valley, with Ken Stinnett; Trek to the Top of the Franklins.





Cacti of the Chihuahuan Desert, with Lisa Mandelkern (top left); Flora of the Organ Mountains, with Pat Alexander (top right); Discover Kilbourne Hole, with Paulo Galvan (bottom).



Around the World with SWEC Members

SWEC members are incredibly well-traveled. We know this because we hear from so many of you about your epic hiking trips, national park visits, wildlife safaris, pilgrimages, and other nature-focused travels.

This fall we want to give you a chance to share those wonderful photos and stories, not just with us, but with each other.

On Tuesday, September 8th, our monthly program will be "Around the World with SWEC Members." We'll give each person a maximum of five minutes to share up to ten photos of their travels outside southern New Mexico and west Texas. The format should make for a lively evening of armchair adventuring.

You must be a member of the Southwest Environmental Center to show your slides. For more info contact Tricia at 575-522-5552 or Tricia@wildmesquite.org.

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Use Our Postcard to Send the Governor a Message

Yes, it's grisly, but by design. SWEC's new postcard calls attention to the fact that the Land of Enchantment is also the home of more than 30 wildlife killing contests annually, where coyotes and other animals are slaughtered for fun and prizes.

It is intended to be sent to Governor Susana Martinez and state legislators, to remind them that this issue is not going away and they need to act to stop these barbaric events.

Designed by Charles Fox of Santa Fe, the postcards are available for free at the SWEC office. If you write the message, we'll pay the postage! We can also mail copies to you if you're not in the area.



Janine Divyak is handed the keys to her new Prius by SWEC's Kevin Bixby (l) and George Vescovo, of Vescovo Toyota.

Mesilla woman wins 2015 Prius raffle

Janine Divyak of Mesilla (NM) was the lucky winner in SWEC's annual Toyota Prius raffle. She is a planner with Doña Ana County, making her the second county employee to win the raffle. She purchased a single ticket.

The annual raffle is SWEC's biggest fundraiser. We sold all 500 tickets, raising nearly \$30,000 that will go towards our conservation programs.

Thanks to everyone who bought a ticket, especially those who are repeat buyers. We really appreciate your support, and wish that you could all win a car.

Thanks to Vescovo Toyota of Las Cruces for making this fundraiser possible.

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