

~ A CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF THE LAST GREAT PLACE ~



New Mexico Tourism Department

Valle Vidal, sometimes referred to as the Yellowstone of the Southwest, is the crown jewel of the Northern New Mexico conservation movement.

A CENTURY OF CONSERVATION

BY ERNIE ATENCIO

The history of conservation in Northern New Mexico has been a mixed bag – one culture’s conservation success might be another culture’s land loss. The

landscape, and even the ethics of conservation itself, have been contested territory.

Yet we look around today at a wild, open, enchanting landscape that is the result of centuries of traditional stewardship, as well as modern conservation approaches. All those cultures have left their mark.

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Taos Pueblo and other Tiwa ancestors were the first permanent residents of this area and set the template for conservation with a strong stewardship ethic. Indo-Hispano settlers, bringing a rich and varied cultural legacy from around the world, added another layer to conservation with their own land ethic, in this case codified in the Laws of the Indies and other land-use strictures.

In my conservation work over the years I have always tried to emulate the wisdom and examples of these land-based cultures.

New Mexico became a territory of the United States 64 years before it became a state and the winds of change were already blowing. In 1905 and 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed all

unpatented forest lands in Northern New Mexico as Forest Preserves, which later became Carson and Santa Fe National Forests. Other unpatented lands eventually became public domain under the Bureau of Land Management.

This is celebrated as a conservation success by many, but came at the expense of traditional communities that had previously controlled these lands through Spanish and Mexican land grants and aboriginal claims. In one dramatic turnaround, Taos Pueblo battled Washington for 64 years to have its sacred Blue Lake tract returned. When that finally took place in 1970 it was an unprecedented victory for Taos Pueblo, but many con-

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File Photo

Bureau of Land Management volunteers remove invasive salt cedar trees from the Río Grande Gorge in the early 1990s.

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servation groups at the time opposed it. Today, the Río Pueblo de Taos flowing out of the Blue Lake basin is one of the most pristine watersheds in the lower 48 states.

Another controversial conservation effort was the 73,000-acre Vallecitos Federal Sustained Yield Unit, set aside in the El Rito District of Carson National Forest in 1948 for the express purpose of providing a sustainable timber harvest and income for poor, forest-dependent communities. The Unit has had a checkered history, but is arguably a success – protecting the old growth and most sensitive areas, reducing the risk of catastrophic fire through prescribed thinning, and nominally supporting local communities.

Many of the conservation successes we are familiar with today came about as a result of new federal laws enacted in the 1960s and '70s to protect wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, clean water and clean air. And the Land of Enchantment provided many firsts.

In 1924 a visionary young forest ranger named Aldo Leopold, living in Tres Piedras and working for the Carson National Forest at the time, convinced the agency to set aside a wild area that would exclude roads and development.

Forty years before the Wilderness Act, the 558,000-acre Gila Wilderness Area in Southwest New Mexico became the first designated wilderness in the U.S. Leopold went on to teach his land ethic to generations of students and is considered by many to be the father of modern environmentalism. Some of us also believe that his wife, Estella Luna, and her Norteño family deserve some credit for their influence on his famous land ethic.

In all, 25 wilderness areas protecting 1.65 million acres have been established in New Mexico, including the nearby Wheeler Peak, Latir Peak, and Pecos areas.

With the 1968 Wild and Scenic River Act, the Río Grande Gorge from the Colorado border to the Taos-Río Arriba

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county line was one of eight original wild and scenic rivers in the country, with recreation areas along the way including Wild Rivers and Orilla Verde.

Some conservation success stories are about the bad guys that we defeat. In the late 1990s, some may remember the proposed Summo open pit copper mine in the area called Copper Hill near Picuris Pueblo. A powerful groundswell of public opposition from all quarters sent Summo packing in 1998. In 2000 the BLM permanently retired the mineral rights and protected Copper Hill as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern. That means that no mining company will ever be back.

Also in 2000 the federal government purchased the nearly 100,000-acre Baca

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File Photo

Hondo-Columbine, seen here from Taos Ski Valley, could be the latest in a long line of Taos-area conservation success stories.

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Ranch in the Jemez Mountains above Los Alamos, one of the most unique, lush and beautiful landscapes in the region, now the Valles Caldera National Preserve.

In 2006 we had another stunning success in another *valle* just to the north. With nearly unanimous support throughout the region, the Valle Vidal – the “Yellowstone of the Southwest” – was permanently protected from oil and gas drilling by an act of Con-

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In a brief three-year period between 2003 and 2005, the 2,500-acre Taos Valley Overlook and the 14,000-acre Ute Mountain tract were purchased and protected for the public with money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, thanks to the efforts of the Trust for Public Land and Taos Land Trust.

Private land conservation and land trusts have also had a huge impact in recent decades, with new federal rules in 1980 that gave landowners tax deductions for donated conservation easements. Today New Mexico has seven land trusts, including Taos Land Trust, that have protected a total of over 621,000 acres of private land.

This is a very brief sketch of a cen-

tury of conservation, built upon centuries of conservation before that, but there is much yet to do. The proposed 236,000-acre El Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area in northern Taos County will be a colossal success for long-term conservation, as will permanent wilderness designation for the 46,000-acre Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area where we all love to hike just up the ski valley road.

As a friend once said, “They’re not making any more land,” so we need to conserve it while we can.

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