

Binational Cooperation in the Big Bend Region

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THE EARLY ADVOCATES FOR PRESERVING A LARGE CONSERVATION AREA in the Big Bend region were big thinkers. Even before Big Bend National Park itself was founded in 1944, they envisioned not an isolated national park unit in remote west Texas, but a true international conservation area, where the Rio Grande could be viewed as more of a river, and less of a boundary. As early as 1935, National Park Service, congressional, and civic leaders forwarded a recommendation to President Franklin D. Roosevelt to explore the possibility. By 1936, a formal International Park Commission was formed, holding meetings in El Paso and Alpine, Texas. This commission toured not only the proposed national park, but also the Rio Grande (called Río Bravo in Mexico), the towns of Boquillas, Coahuila, and San Carlos, Chihuahua, and the Sierra del Carmen, areas which eventually were included in the Maderas del Carmen and Cañón Santa Elena protected areas (Welsh 2002).

Unfortunately, although there was a flurry of scientific and photographic reconnaissance in the area, the international idea never fully took root. The tragic automobile crash death of International Park Commission member and Big Bend advocate George Wright while returning from the 1936 commission tour, and later the advent of World War II, prevented the international park from progressing beyond the idea stage. However, the establishment of Big Bend National Park in 1944 brought with it a second round of interest in an international park, with President Roosevelt writing to Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho with such a proposal.

In 1947, a new binational commission was created. It was active for a number of years, with civic and government representatives visiting the governors of Coahuila and Chihuahua. The Mexican delegation even had a name for the planned conservation unit south of the Rio Grande: “Parque Nacional de la Gran Comba.” However, by 1953 NPS Regional Director M.R. Tillotson would confide to Big Bend’s superintendent, Lon Garrison, that “my efforts and those of the United States Section of this Commission have not been very fruitful” (Garrison 1954).

There seems to have been little high-level interest in the international park idea in the 1960s and ’70s, but beginning in 1981, and continuing to this day, superintendents of Big Bend National Park have worked to strengthen ties and work cooperatively towards cross-

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border environmental cooperation. In addition, several local and regional initiatives, such as the La Paz Agreement (1983), and civic groups, including Rotary International, were helping to strengthen border conservation ties. A major breakthrough occurred in 1994, when the Maderas del Carmen and Cañón Santa Elena protected areas were established, ultimately to be administered by Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP), under the Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT).

Since 1990, Big Bend National Park's fire management program has benefited from the assistance of "Los Diablos" wildland fire crew, consisting of Mexican nationals who live in the tiny villages immediately across the Rio Grande from the park. The remoteness of the park from other firefighting resources in the United States created the need to find local resources. With assistance from the Department of Homeland Security and the US Border Patrol, program participants are eligible for entry into the United States on an annual basis to assist any emergency firefighting effort in the company of Big Bend National Park staff.

In 1997, The Department of Interior and SEMARNAP (now SEMARNAT) issued a letter of intent to work together towards conservation goals in the national parks and protected areas along the US–Mexico border, resulting ultimately in a Memorandum of Understanding, and the initiation of several new conservation programs, in 2000.

Throughout the 20th century, river crossings (not bridges) between Mexico and Texas were open at four locations in, and adjacent to, Big Bend National Park, allowing international access to scientists, staff, and tourists into the frontier areas of northern Coahuila and Chihuahua, Mexico, and allowing Mexicans from these small towns to travel to and from the US border area for shopping and access to services that were scarce in rural Mexico. From the late 1980s through 1995, the park hosted an annual Mexican park managers' course, with several alumni becoming prominent protected area managers and environmental leaders in Mexico. Probably the most long-term NPS/Mexican village initiative was the International Good Neighbor Day Fiestas, which first occurred under Superintendent Ross Maxwell under another name, then were resumed in 1981, under Superintendent Gil Lusk, and continued until the final one in 2001. At times, there were even regular exchanges of amateur baseball games featuring NPS and CONANP staff and local citizens from both sides of the river. One legendary game played out in Jaboncillos, Coahuila, with the Yanks losing in spectacular fashion to a very skilled Mexican team. The game was followed by a picnic and goat roast under the big trees of town.

In May 2002, seven months after the 9/11 attacks, these crossings were closed, radically changing the human landscape in this remote area of the border, crippling the fragile economies of the small Mexican border towns, eliminating significant cultural and recreational opportunities to Big Bend visitors, and severely hampering efforts at binational management of resources.

Despite this setback, in June of 2003 the National Park Service hosted a river trip in Boquillas Canyon. Participants included agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from both countries. This trip showcased efforts by CONANP to control saltcedar, an exotic invasive tree, and facilitated discussions on project expansion to both sides of the river. Soon afterward, cooperative projects between CONANP, NPS, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Rio Grande Institute (RGI) began implementing saltcedar eradication proj-

ects within Boquillas Canyon. Each fall, saltcedar control crews from the village of Boquillas were joined by Big Bend National Park and NGO partners as they traveled by canoe through the canyon working on both sides of the river. Recently, the scope of exotic plant work on the Rio Grande was expanded, with projects designed to assess the relationship between diminishing flows and increasing riparian vegetation, and to address increasing occurrences of athel (an exotic tree related to saltcedar) and giant cane, a large invasive exotic grass that is taking over the riparian habitat.

In the winter of 2008, WWF organized and hosted the Rio Grande workshop, a binational meeting to discuss and identify restoration priorities and targets for the Rio Grande. In this meeting, participants developed a single vision statement for the river to be considered as a guide by each country when planning conservation projects. In addition, two teams were established to identify and investigate conservation challenges and possible solutions. The science and policy teams established at this meeting have been active in planning and implementing conservation and research work on the Rio Grande, including a binational tour of southern branch of the Rio Grande, the Río Conchos in Chihuahua. This trip was quickly followed up by a team of scientists visiting a grassland restoration program in Coahuila.

In the past ten years, several other binational resource management projects were begun, and many are still underway, including rare plant surveys and habitat analysis, a survey of groundwater and area springs, a study of diminishing river flows and declining aquatic habitat, amphibian and bat surveys, a study of genetic relationships among US and Mexico black bear populations, and peregrine falcon studies.

The pace of the current binational efforts picked up in 2009, when Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar (US) and Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada (Mexico) announced a commitment to strengthen conservation cooperation in the Big Bend Area. This was followed in May 2010 by a statement from presidents Felipe Calderon and Barack Obama to “work through appropriate national processes to recognize and designate Big Bend–Río Bravo as a natural area of binational interest.”

The National Park Service recognizes that managing parklands along the international border presents unique challenges that include effects of drug smuggling and illegal immigration. However, the Big Bend region has historically experienced less cross-border traffic than any other southern border area. The close economic ties that arose from open border crossings yielded a free flow of information between the park and its international neighbors, which helped suppress illegal cross-border traffic. We believe an area of international cooperation, where the communities of both nations are engaged in mutually beneficial projects involving resource management, wildland fire protection, and ecotourism, can significantly reduce the negative impacts of illegal cross-border traffic.

Considering the obstacles, future prospects for increased binational conservation and tourism cooperation are good, although a true international park is unlikely in the near future. In 2011, Mexican and US agencies and scientists drafted a successful proposal to the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC). The CEC supports development of collaborative transboundary landscape conservation projects in North America. The CEC Big Bend–Río Bravo project includes management of invasive exotic species, ecosystem sci-

ence and monitoring, ecological restoration, sustainable economic development, and building capacity for local communities to implement conservation. Additionally, plans are underway to re-open the river crossing at Boquillas, Mexico, with ground-breaking on a contact station on the Texas side occurring in October 2011. Both US and Mexican officials are cautiously optimistic that this crossing will be opened in 2012. Concurrent with the ground-breaking, secretaries Elvira and Salazar issued a joint statement on cooperative action for conservation in the Big Bend–Río Bravo region, memorializing the area as a conservation area of binational interest.

While such a statement, and the re-opening of a historic crossing at Boquillas, are important steps forward, they fall well short of the vision of a binational park as initially conceived nearly 80 years ago. Currently, US and Mexican agencies are working towards addressing some of the unique obstacles in the path of binational conservation, such as the need for bilingual staff on both sides of the river; difficulties in the acquisition of permits, travel credentials, and environmental compliance procedures that need to be duplicated to meet regulations of two separate federal bureaucracies for every proposed action; and the knotty question of how to legally move money and materials across an international border to meet shared conservation goals. A major hurdle in the management of the Rio Grande–Río Bravo is the fact that flows through the Big Bend reach are almost entirely supplied by releases from Luis León Dam on the Río Conchos in Mexico, with little hydrologic connection to the Rio Grande that is born in the southern Rocky Mountains of the United States. Water delivery is determined by treaty, and is governed by a maze of law, regulation, and policy, making the simple question of “how much water should be in the Rio” an international quagmire.

Perhaps the most glaring example of the unique challenges of binational conservation is what it takes to simply have a face-to-face meeting with our colleagues in Mexico. The only currently legal method for scientists and resource managers to meet outside of the river corridor, involves an epic journey of 13 hours or more through the nearest legal crossing at Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila–Del Rio, Texas, to cover a distance that is in places less than 100 feet, across a river that is often no more than knee-deep. The declaration of a conservation area of binational interest, and the re-opening of the Boquillas crossing to foot and boat traffic, would help to streamline bureaucratic processes such as moving funds and materials across an international border, issuing environmental permits, and completing compliance documentation. Additionally, the declaration would facilitate long-term planning, data sharing, training, and binational implementation of conservation projects. But there are no guarantees that any of this will happen. We could, after all this work, end up with another pleasant-sounding declaration without programmatic or legal authority. At least, if it does nothing else, recognition of the Big Bend–Río Bravo conservation area will get people on both sides talking to each other again. As long-time Big Bend river ranger Marcos Paredes used to say, “You can’t manage one side of a river.”

References

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