

The Cliff/Gila Valley

A Sense of Place: Fishing For Solutions

by Dutch Salmon

For an angler, that special place is not a town or city but is “out there” somewhere, along water that sustains fish. In my youth it was a big water called the St. Lawrence River, wide as a lake but still filled with current; there, year after year, I tangled with a leaper, the swift, tenacious smallmouth, or bronze, bass. According to the lore, it is “the gamest fish that swims.”

Some twenty years later I arrived in Grant County, New Mexico. Right away I looked to the local river, called the Gila, for some sport. I found the flow more stream than river, but it teemed with fish.

Twenty Miles... of Fish

Although I would in time hike and fish the entire length of the Gila in New Mexico, I focused then and now on a roughly twenty-mile reach that runs from the Turkey Creek confluence on down past



Editor's Note

This issue is sort of a departure for us. It is on a “sense of place” and it contains a variety of articles by people who live and/or work in the Cliff/Gila Valley, in southwestern New Mexico. We thought it would be interesting to see how one place can carry multiple values, all legitimate, and how those values might be complementary. The instructions to authors were to discuss their favorite place in the Valley, what they thought was the greatest threat to that place, and what hope this special place holds for the future. We hope you find this as fascinating as we did.

Mogollon Creek, through the Cliff/Gila Valley, and into the north end of the Burro Mountains to the so-called Middle Box. I would find this twenty miles a kind of summary of all that glorified and ailed the Gila drainage. It was small enough to reach by day-hike, or big enough for a real pack trip. Some of it was private, some Forest Service, some BLM. At the north end there were ponderosa pines; down in The Box it was a desert stream. There were parts of it that had housing, farms and ranches, and its banks filled with revelers on a summer day. Other sections, you could get lost in for days and never see a soul. Some of it was protected (some said over-protected); some of it was abused. And all along those twenty miles there were those fish.

Trout were popular. Channel and flathead catfish got big and

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River Valley

by Joe Hollister, rancher

River Valley. I love those words as they conjure up childhood images for me, images of a nurturing and sustaining place, a wild and invigorating place. A place to live! The Gila River Valley is such a place.

Alexandria (my wife and best friend!) and I purchased a home overlooking the river valley near the mouth of Lobo Creek on the Cliff side about three years ago. She is developing a private counseling

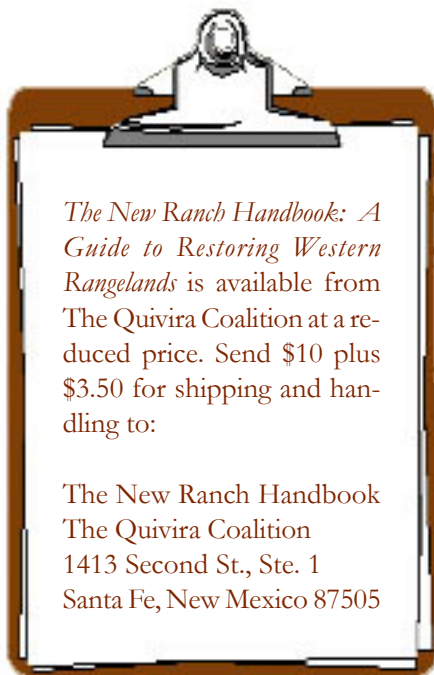
practice in Silver City, and painting in her studio, while I am working three leased farms scattered throughout the valley.

The EZ Does It, a partnership with Sue and Oscar Davis, consists of 21 irrigated acres where we are breeding fullblooded Tuli cattle—an African breed known for heat tolerance, fertility, high meat quality, and docile nature. The former Seeds of Change Farm is 20+ irrigated acres leased from The Nature Conservancy and is primarily in hay production. Chuck's farm is 35+ irrigated acres in annual crops, leased from an old-time valley resident.

I think that the biggest threat to this valley is polarization, and small mindedness. No matter how we slice it, we are all citizens of this rock hurtling through space, the furred, the finned, the feathered, and the naked—animal, vegetable, and mineral. We must build bridges; farms, ranches, livestock, wilderness, and wildlife are not incompatible. Open minds and open hearts will find solutions to the toughest of problems; we just need to think and act to the seventh generation and beyond.

I was having a conversation with a new acquaintance the other day, and we were trying to verbalize what is it about the people here that makes them so accepting of each other's differences, unlike some other places of our experience. Our query may be the answer. "Perhaps it's the land itself?"

I love this valley and in my mind's eye see a place that indeed has built bridges that span differences. I have deep gratitude and appreciation for this place and its people.



The New Ranch Handbook: A Guide to Restoring Western Rangelands is available from The Quivira Coalition at a reduced price. Send \$10 plus \$3.50 for shipping and handling to:

The New Ranch Handbook
The Quivira Coalition
1413 Second St., Ste. 1
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87505

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THE QUIVIRA COALITION

1413 Second St., Ste. 1
Santa Fe, New Mexico

USA 87505

(505) 820-2544

(505) 955-8922 (fax)

www.quiviracoalition.org

Executive Director

Courtney White

(505) 820-2544

executive@quiviracoalition.org

Communications Director

Barbara Johnson

(505) 466-4935

lunah3@aol.com

Administrative Coordinator

Tamara Sherburn

(505) 867-4685

projects@quiviracoalition.com

Founders:

Jim Winder

(505) 267-4227

jrwinder@heritage-ranch.com

Courtney White

Barbara Johnson

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It won't make headlines in your local newspaper, but The Quivira Coalition recently achieved an important milestone.

For the last year or so we've become increasingly involved in various kinds of restoration activities. We've been working collaboratively on Comanche Creek, in the Valle Vidal unit of the Carson National Forest, with the goal of restoring high-quality, cold-water habitat for the nearly endangered Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout, New Mexico's most famous native fish.

We've also picked up the pace of our work with Bill Zeedyk, whose low-cost, low-tech riparian restoration strategies that "let nature do the work" are beginning to take hold across the region. [See story and photos on pages 10-13.] We're even tackling ranch roads in an upcoming workshop, led by Bill. A major contributor of unwanted sediment to the state's waterways, roads rarely receive the sort of attention that constantly swirls around livestock grazing. This is unfortunate because there are a lot more bad roads out there than bad cows.

Of course, The Quivira Coalition has been in the restoration business from the start. Working with ranchers to change their management and grow more grass (when it rains) has huge benefits to ecosystem health. This is one reason why the EPA and the New Mexico Environment Department/Surface Water Quality Bureau awarded us two big grants under the Clean Water Act to help tackle the nonpoint source pollution problem in the state.

And the success of Bill Zeedyk's riparian structures depends on good grazing management. There's no point in slowing water down and growing more sedges and rushes if cattle are allowed to eat the vegetation to the ground.

So, we like to think we've

been in the healing business since Day One.

But, a few weeks ago, we took our restoration work to a new level. For more than a year now, we've been involved in a planning process for a range restoration project located west of Taos, New Mexico. It's sort of a "poop-and-stomp." The ranchers intend to use the animal impact of a herd of cattle to stomp some desolate country, dominated by large sage, back into grasslands.

It's a little more complicated than that, of course; and we'll take more time in a future newsletter to explain it.

But here's the milestone: With the financial assistance of two private grants, we were able to make a unique map of the project area. Employing the protocols in the publication *Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health, Version 3* (U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, National Science and Technology Center, Technical Reference 1734-6 [Denver]), we sent Kirk Gadzia, David Trew, and Gordon Tooley into the field in May to conduct a *qualitative* assessment of the 18,000-acre project site as part of the baseline monitoring.

Kirk and Co. located a reference area, on private land, and then compared the rest of the project area to this "ideal." They marked their observations down on a seventeen-point checklist and determined where a site fell on a scale from "None" to "Extreme" as a deviation away from the reference area. [Rangeland Health assesses: Soil Stability, Biotic Integrity, and Hydrologic Function.]

Later, our friend Gen Head translated this data into GIS and produced a colorful map of Rangeland Health for the 18,000 acres of commingled BLM, state, and private land.

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From the Founders

Jim Winder
Courtney White
Barbara Johnson

The proceedings of the Collaborative Stewardship Conference from last year in Taos are just about ready! If you would be interested in receiving a copy, please send \$5.00 for shipping and handling to:
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A Sense of Place—From a Field Biologist's Perspective

by Scott Stoleson

A Ph.D. in avian ecology, Scott works for the USDA's Rocky Mountain Research Station.



The Cliff/Gila Valley. To my mind the term is almost synonymous with the U Bar Ranch, and conjures images of black hawks soaring overhead, dense thickets alive with squealing willow flycatchers, herons wading through the shallows spearing crayfish, javelina snuffling obliviously through the underbrush, bobcats slinking out of sight, and oceans of twelve-foot tall sunflowers. And green fields full of fat, happy Angus cattle—an apparent paradox, and one of the many there.

I came to the Valley to study the paradox of endangered willow flycatchers seeming to thrive on a working cattle ranch. After years of training at fancy Ivy League schools and field studies at numerous remote sites in North, Central, and South America, I felt well qualified for studying an endangered species. At first I was even a little disappointed with the assignment—a cattle ranch in southern New Mexico hardly seemed in the same league, biology-wise, as the Galápagos Islands, the savannas of Venezuela, or even the mountains of Wyoming, all places I had spent a lot of time. Little did I know! Now, after five and one-half years studying the bird life there, it has become one of my very favorite places in the world.

“Whole Lot of Birds”

Part of the reason is the ranch's lush riparian forests and the critters that inhabit them. The green valley stands in stark contrast to the brown, arid uplands, providing a welcome reminder of home to this displaced easterner. Huge old cottonwood trees tower

to heights over 140 feet. My initial impression of a whole lot of birds was corroborated by the data we collected: **riparian habitat on the U Bar supports the highest densities of non-colonial birds on the continent.** [Emphasis added.] And it's not just birds. An incredible diversity of wildlife calls the U Bar home: insects, fish, reptiles, even a yearling bear that developed an unwelcome attraction for one of my technicians. Every field season has brought something new and different. In many ways, the U Bar is every field biologist's dream.

Of course, the U Bar is not a wilderness area, but a ranching business. Before I started, I thought the political constraints on the study would be daunting. The conventional wisdom that ranchers and endangered species don't mix suggested I'd be walking a tightrope, trying to conduct good science without offending my hosts. And how could an academic from the East tell a rancher how to manage his land?

I needn't have worried; the Ogilvies' support and welcome have been unqualified and unwavering. And the quality of their management quickly became self-evident. Most of the local people have also been very supportive: when we returned for a second field season, the folks at the Gila Valley Market asked, “How are the birds doing this year?”—and I thought they didn't even know why we were there. Even those explicitly disinterested in endangered species always treated us with amused but courteous tolerance.

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Over all, it's clear that the people of the Cliff/Gila Valley are very aware, and proud, of what they have. They are the rest of what makes the place so special.

Concerns

Of course, my enthusiasm for the U Bar is tempered by concern. Rumors about Phelps Dodge (the owners of the land) pulling out of New Mexico raise questions about the future of the U Bar, and whether the Ogilvies will be able to continue managing it as they have. During their ten-year tenure there, the flycatchers, and their riparian habitat, have proliferated. If the land gets sold, that will end. It's likely that at least some will be subdivided. And I am certain people would buy and build there—I know I would if I had the money! Then the very qualities that make the Valley uniquely attractive would be its undoing.

Frankly, I am also concerned because in many ways the U Bar is “politically incorrect.” To some folks, grazing in riparian areas, and in the presence of endangered species, is just wrong. Never mind that the birds (and federally listed fish, for that matter) are thriving. Or that extensive regeneration of habitat has occurred even in grazed pastures. Never mind that the U Bar would provide an excellent educational tool for demonstrating sound management (as The Quivira Coalition has done). Or that it is private property.

I've talked with many seemingly intelligent people involved with conservation in the region who reject out of hand the notion that a working cattle ranch

can coexist with, let alone promote, the recovery of endangered species. To them the U Bar is an embarrassment or an aberration, because it contradicts their simple dichotomous view of the world.

I believe such an attitude was responsible for a political decision that delayed and emasculated a bank stabilization project proposed by the U Bar. The project would have been a refinement of an earlier one at the northern end of the ranch, which this year was home to well over twenty pairs of flycatchers (making it one of the ten largest flycatcher populations, if considered separate from the rest of the ranch!). Imagine—had science rather than politics prevailed, there would probably be an additional twenty or more pairs of Southwestern willow flycatchers in existence today, and the species would be that much closer to recovery. I am concerned that more poor decisions, based purely on political beliefs rather than on what's best for the critters of concern, may further constrain how the U Bar is managed in the future.

What does the future hold for the U Bar Ranch, and the rest of the Cliff/Gila Valley? With support, education, and some common sense in the right places, the Ogilvies can continue to manage as they have been, perpetuating the paradox of the Southwest's finest riparian habitat existing on a cattle ranch, and the black hawks can continue to soar and the willow flycatchers to squeal along the Gila.

A Field Biologist's Perspective

(*con't from page 4*)

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Life in the Gila

by Mary Burton Riseley

Mary Burton Riseley is a Quaker, a fourth-generation New Mexican from a ranching family, a lifelong conservationist, former board member of the Upper Gila Watershed Alliance, now a gardener and mediator. She keeps an eye on water planning in southwestern New Mexico.

The Gila River Valley between the Bird Sanctuary and the Upper Box Canyon is a most difficult place to live and farm. In the twenty-five years I have been visiting here, and the four years of living here, residents have experienced three 100-year floods, as well as severe droughts with the river completely dry in stretches for weeks at a time in early summer. The temperature extremes range from zero degrees in winter to 110+ in the summer.

Plagues

In alternating years there are plagues of grasshoppers and blister beetles, with the latter capable of stripping the leaves from an entire large tomato and pepper garden in a few hours. We have roving javelina packs which often decimate an entire crop of squash by taking a few bites out of each one, then moving on to the next delectable morsel. In dry summers, we often have bears sojourning down from the mountains whose long black claws rake lower branches of apples and other fruit, in those few years with no late frosts when our trees actually bear.

We have serious infestations of non-native, noxious weeds such as yellow starthistle, which is toxic to horses, horehound, Johnson grass, Russian thistle, and tree of heaven.

Alongside the river on both banks are roads culminating in Forest Service campgrounds which overflow with beer bottles and other trash left by rowdy youths who zoom by downstream neighbors whooping it up every weekend in the spring, summer, and fall.

Water...and Phelps Dodge

You, dear reader, would surely not want to live here.

Or, at least, I sincerely hope you will not. The Gila Valley has so far been spared the kind of overappropriation of water and rampant subdivisions which give the beautiful Mimbres Valley to the East its crowded, trailer-junky look. We've been spared that fate for two main reasons. One is that, as part of the Colorado River system, the Gila is under a strict U.S. Supreme Court decree to deliver a fixed amount of water to the Arizona border every year. Water is so tightly regulated here that not even an outdoor spigot for a dog dish is allowed without ownership of a water right.

The other reason we still have pastoral, spacious fields and not much available land for growth is an interesting historical occurrence. I never thought I'd be grateful to a multi-national corporation, but in the late 1950s Phelps Dodge created a wholly owned subsidiary with which to buy up around 55% of the land and water in this valley. This has proved to be a blessing, so far. The water was used in the Tyrone mining operation to the south until a few years ago, when it was returned to Valley lands which have been leased to a local conscientious rancher named David Ogilvie, whose work supporting the recovery of the Southwestern willow flycatcher is well-known to New Mexico conservationists. Seems to me the farms Phelps Dodge bought would have been the same marginal operations who might otherwise have been tempted to subdivide.

My great fear is that Phelps Dodge may for some reason move to a Plan B I'm sure its Real Estate Development office in Phoenix has on file, the one called "Gila Valley

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Subdivisions.”

My then husband, now dear friend, and I bought eighteen acres here in 1981, and I moved here as a retired divorcee in 1998. I love my life here. Our land hosts the champion evergreen, Emory oak tree in the state. It is twenty feet in circumference at the base, with its massive trunk splitting into two a few feet off the ground. Its shade is truly a sacred space, and offers a cool refuge even on the hottest day. People living and visiting here often gather “under the big tree” for potluck suppers in the evening.

I love the gardening, even though I learn much every year from my more experienced friends—I am certainly not expert. I love the access to the river and to hikes in the mountains. I love the nearby natural hot springs. And I love my social life here.

Community

There is so much small-town civility in Gila and its nearby village of Cliff, too. Rancher, farmer, and mine-worker families hobnobbing and giving care to newcomer organic gardeners, wildcrafters, herbalists, a Rolfer, a surprising number of nurses and ex-nurses, a couple of psychotherapists who commute to town, even forest-living intentionally “homeless” radical simplicity hippies. These carless friends report they rarely have difficulty hitching rides on the highway. Elderly oldtimers are visited and taken to lunch by newcomers fascinated by their stories of life in earlier times in these parts. There is community here—the caring goes both ways.

I don’t mean there are no conflicts. The wolf re-introduction program has hackles up on both sides, and there are rabid anti-graz-

ing folks who heckle the Forest Service at any opportunity. But for the most part, people don’t hold each others’ opinions against them and friendliness is the norm.

The kids go to the same school, from Kindergarten to 12th grade, about 20-25 kids in each level. A few years ago, the high school drama club put on a play the kids had chosen, called “WALLS.” It featured two groups of actors approaching the center of the stage, one in white tops and black bottoms and the other group in reversed costume. In sequence each group claims the place as their own, then they notice each other and glaring, construct a wall between them. Then they begin to imagine all kinds of dreadful things about the other group, because, as a chorus figure points out, they can’t see and don’t know each other. In the end, the wall is slowly taken down, and small acts of cooperation begun.

Having just arrived here from work on a master’s degree in dispute resolution focusing on rancher/environmentalist conflicts, I immediately thought: these kids get it! Communicate, know each other, and conflicts caused by ignorance and its attendant fear may resolve in a cooperative way.

My hope is that some of these young people who want to can stay here, can find work here, and can continue to live with their lifelong friends whose parents are so very different. If too many new-newcomers move here, the chances of the next generation having a place here will surely lessen.

I know, I know. I sound like a curmudgeon, but so be it. Go find and make your own community, somewhere else. Let the Gila be.

Life in the Gila

(con’t from page 6)

“My great fear is that Phelps Dodge may for some reason move to a Plan B I’m sure its Real Estate Development office in Phoenix has on file, the one called ‘Gila Valley Subdivisions.’”



September 2002



Will This Valley Survive All of the Attention?

by *Ralph Pope*

Ralph is a long-time range conservationist with the Gila National Forest.

My first in-depth look at the Cliff/Gila Valley came in 1990, shortly after I moved to Silver City. Being that I was the new Range, Wildlife, and Watershed Staff on the Silver City Ranger District, it did not take much time for me to be pulled into the controversy over resource conditions and land uses that was already near the boiling point in the Cliff/Gila Valley.

Having worked in Arizona on the Coconino National Forest in the Verde Valley, controversy over riparian management on a major Southwestern river system was not new to me. What immediately struck me about the Cliff/Gila Valley and the Gila River was how similar this valley and river system is to Verde Valley and the Verde River. The vegetative, avian, mammal, and fish communities are made up of the same suites of species. The topography and the climate are very similar, but the most notable similarity is the controversies that seem to have people pitted against each other.

Controversy over Agriculture

The controversy over agricultural uses and the loud cries of impending doom of threatened and endangered species in the Cliff/Gila Valley are a replay of public comments I had heard in the Verde Valley years ago. The claim that the riparian plant communities were so heavily impacted that recovery may not be possible seemed to be touted as fact in both places. When discussing the current management, it became clear that some people believed that the hydrologic function of both rivers was so messed up that there was no chance to ever have a functioning river again. Some people felt a total withdrawal of human activities from the floodplain was the only solution.

The one major difference back then, which is still true today, is

the Cliff/Gila Valley has not yet been cut up into parcels and made into one huge subdivision as has occurred in the Verde Valley. Land use in the Cliff/Gila Valley remains predominantly farming and livestock grazing. Most of the land is still owned by people or businesses whose main interest is agriculture and not liquidating their holdings to a real estate broker.

Fort West Ditch

As I became more deeply involved in the management of the National Forest lands both above and below the Cliff/Gila Valley, a small parcel of National Forest land that is located in the upper end of the valley caught my attention. This 160-acre abandoned Forest Service administrative site has a special meaning to me. One corner of this parcel (approximately twenty acres) is located within the active floodplain of the Gila River in the Cliff/Gila Valley and supports a well-established stand of riparian vegetation. One of the major irrigation ditches (Fort West Ditch) that serves many of the farms below, runs through this parcel. The head gate that regulates the flow for this ditch is located on this small parcel of National Forest land.

Over the years, multiple diversion ditches have been dug to bring water from the river to this head gate. In the past, each time the river flooded and created a new base flow channel, a new diversion ditch was built to connect the river to the ditch at the head gate. The multiple abandoned channels, the active inlet and outlet ditches and the over flow return ditch that radiate out from the head gate have provided the necessary ingredients for the establishment of one of the few unique areas of riparian/wetland habitat found in the valley. The

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riparian/wetland area created around the head gate is rich in both plant and wildlife species. Beavers are busy cutting trees and building dams in and around the head gate. Southwestern willow flycatchers and a host of other bird species nest in the dense canopy of trees found surrounding the backwater ponds. This area is vibrant, teeming with life, and dynamic. The area surrounding the head gate is an example of what riparian experts would consider a very healthy and productive ecosystem that represents what they strive for when planning riparian enhancement projects and assessing riparian health.

By-Product of Human Activity

This area, I am sure, would be considered special to others that deal with riparian management, but the significance of the area to me is more than the richness in species, and the healthy and productive ecosystem. This area is special to me, not because man's activities have been curtailed to create it, but because man's activities have continued for years and the richness and healthy condition is a by-product of human activity. The existence of this area is testimony to the fact that healthy ecosystems can exist in harmony with agricultural practices and healthy ecosystems can be either created or substantially enhanced by proper agricultural management.

The battles over land use and resource management still rage in the Cliff/Gila Valley. The opinion that the use of the land and resources in this valley need to be radically changed is still held by many. "Return the Cliff/Gila Valley to the conditions that existed prior to the arrival of European man" is a statement often made by people from one side of the controversy. "Build levees and dikes to contain the river and protect our land" is a solution often offered by

people on the other side of the controversy.

Direction for the Future

There is no doubt that past flooding has scoured stream banks, uprooted and removed patches of riparian vegetation, changed the location of the active stream channel, and deposited layers of silt across the field located on the floodplain. The awesome power of the Gila River, as it cuts its way through this valley, has and will continue to be one of the most important factors to deal with when deciding the future use and management of this valley. As I look at the area surrounding the Fort West Ditch head gate and other areas in the Cliff/Gila Valley that are similar, I can't but wonder if the past use and management of this valley isn't a reasonable direction to pursue for the future. A radical change to no agricultural use or a change to highly developed irrigation systems with maximum flood control may lead to undesired results that no one will be happy with.

I feel very fortunate to be working in an area where farming and ranching still make up a substantial portion of the economy. Even though I have not been back to the special places like the Fort West Ditch head gate area that I knew in the Verde Valley, I am sure they all have disappeared. I know that my special area in the Cliff/Gila Valley would not exist for long if this valley were to be turned into a sea of condos and houses, golf courses and supermarkets, as is occurring elsewhere across the Southwest.



Will This Valley Survive All of the Attention?

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'This area is special to me, not because man's activities have been curtailed to create it, but because man's activities have continued for years and the richness and healthy condition is a by-product of human activity.'



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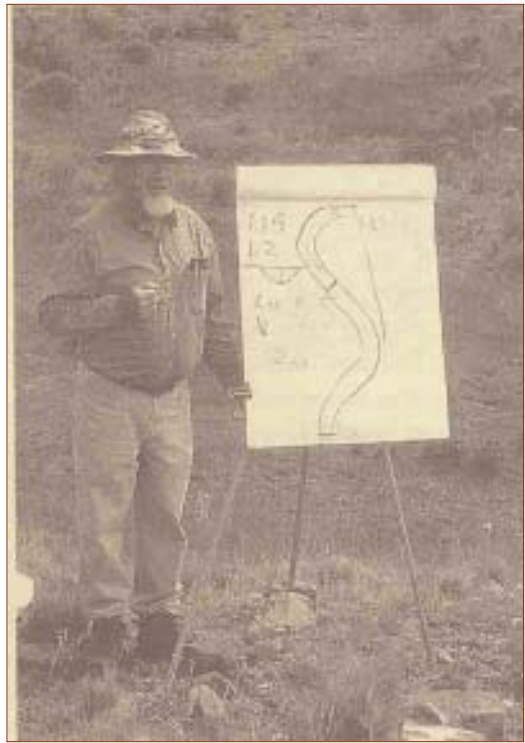
Letting Nature Do the Work— On the Land with Bill Zeedyk

In July and August, The Quivira Coalition hosted three riparian restoration workshops with Bill Zeedyk in three very different locations in central and northern New Mexico. Bill has pioneered a variety of restoration strategies that “use nature to heal nature,” including one-rock dams, juniper log “baffles” and “riffles,” and rock “vaines” that deflect floods from eroding streambanks. Bill’s structures can be built in any environment, and on any point along a water course. “Water is water,” says Bill, “it doesn’t matter if you’re talking about an ephemeral arroyo or an incised river, the principles of recovery are the same.”

Bill’s goals for riparian recovery include: lengthening streams by “induced meandering” in order to slow water down in flood events; encouraging the natural process of “armoring” the sides of streams with vegetation (instead of the usual concrete and wire); and constructing one-rock dams in order to capture sediment, which also helps to slow water down.

Bill’s ideas and methods fit the goals of The Quivira Coalition nicely—to work collaboratively together to heal landscapes. Good grazing management is a prerequisite for Bill’s work to succeed, which is also another nice fit.

On Blue Horse Ranch, located near the village of La Cienega south of Santa Fe, we used material from a large, recent, check dam, to create over fifty one-rock dams in a spiderweb of small eroded arroyos. “Rivers don’t like to be lakes,” said Bill, by way of criticizing the check dam idea, “and even if blocked well, in time, they will be rivers again.”



Bill Zeedyk discussing meander length calculations during a Riparian Restoration Workshop on Comanche Creek, August 4-5.

On Las Huertas Creek, located north of Placitas near Albuquerque, the problem is a deeply incised stream channel that was created by poor land management in the past, and supported today by heavy runoff from nearby subdivisions. A recent major flash flood had damaged various structures built by Bill and his volunteers—but most of the structures held together and did their job!

On Comanche Creek, located high in the Valle Vidal unit of the Carson National Forest, east of Questa, we installed a variety of natural structures in ephemeral streams that are contributing sediment to the main creek. We also helped to install fencing to protect willow clones from elk and livestock grazing—all with the goal of enhancing habitat for the nearly endangered Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout.

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Letting Nature Do the Work

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Comanche Creek August 4-5, 2002

[Top left] Bill Zeedyk and Van Clothier use a model creek to demonstrate the principle of induced meandering.

[Above left] A "one-rock" dam on a side channel of Comanche Creek, installed by participants during the August 4-5 workshop.

[Top right] Workshop participants Trudi Martinez and Mark Torres discuss the construction of a "divit flow left" structure.

[Above right] Kirk Gadzia marks the beginning of a head cut off Little Costilla Creek. (All photos on pages 10-11 are courtesy of Tamara Sherburn.)

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Letting Nature Do the Work

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[Right] Volunteer crews constructing one-rock dams in an arroyo using material from a large, nearby check dam.



[Above]

The finished product. That's a "baffle" on the left, and a "riffle" on the right.

[Right] UV resistant sandbags work great too.



[Top] The one-rock dams are carefully spaced in the arroyo in accordance with mathematical calculations.

[Above] Bill has pioneered a whole new approach to stopping headcuts by employing pinon logs.

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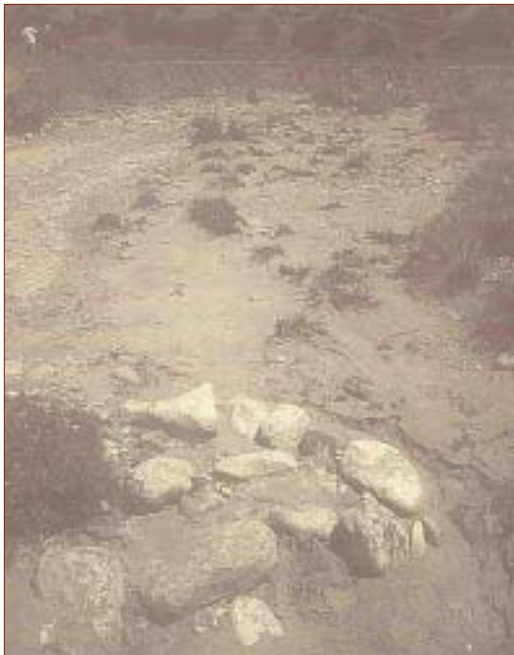
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La Cienega
July 13-14, 2002

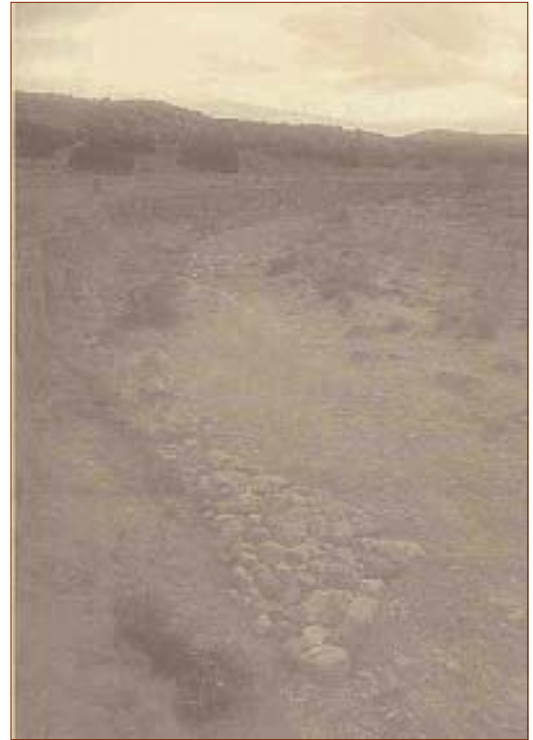
(con't on page 13)

Letting Nature Do the Work

(con't from page 12)



Las Huertas Creek August 9- 10, 2002



Maintaining Progress on Las Huertas Creek

[Top Left] The Problem—a century of poor land management, including recent heavy flash floods caused by new housing developments upstream, has caused Las Huertas Creek to become degraded.

[Middle Left] Previously constructed in-stream structures took a beating in a recent mega-flood event, but survived! See how this structure captured sediment on the upstream side.

[Bottom Left] The finished product—a one-rock "riffle"—constructed at the mid-point between two meanders.

[Above Right] A reconstructed one-rock "vaine"—designed to deflect water away from an eroding bank.
(Photos on pages 12-13 are courtesy of Courtney White.)



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September 2002

The Far Horizon

by Courtney White

*Who will change old
lamps for new?
—The Arabian Nights*

July 1, 2002
*To Carl Pope, Executive Director
The Sierra Club*

Dear Carl,

On June 11th¹ I resigned from the Executive Committee of the Santa Fe/Northern New Mexico Group of the Sierra Club. I did so principally in order to create more elbow room in my life for my family. However, I have also moved on to a new type of environmental activism, one that does not fit well with the Club's current policies and approaches. "In fact," I said in my resignation letter, "I have deep concerns about the future effectiveness of the Sierra Club on issues related to the public lands in the West."

I want to explain this last thought, gleaned from nearly eight years of intensive environmental activism at the grassroots level, in hopes of nudging the Sierra Club, an organization I still greatly admire, in a new direction.

The American West has witnessed tremendous changes in the last fifteen years. These changes include the rise of models of sustainable use of public and private lands; the widening threat of recreation to biodiversity; the emergence of a "land health" paradigm from the scientific community; the shift of conservation strategies from "protection" to "restoration"; and the expanding role of collaboration to resolve resource conflicts.

However, these changes, which are here to stay, are not yet reflected in the work of most mainstream environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club. As a result, environmentalists have begun to marginalize themselves in the debate over the future of our

public lands.

If the Sierra Club desires to remain a player at the grassroots level—by that I mean the level of grass and roots—significant changes will be necessary. I will use the issue of public lands ranching as an example.

Work

It is critically important for the environmental community to understand that a model of sustainable use of public rangelands by livestock has emerged over the last fifteen years. Its form takes a number of shapes—herding, planned or rapid-rotational grazing, grassbanks, dormant season grazing, etc.—but its underlying principle is the same: that controlling the timing, intensity and frequency of livestock impact on the land can yield positive ecological and economic benefit to resource managers.²

The science supporting this principle is strong and diverse; as is the small, but growing, number of ranchers who put the principle to work with demonstrable results. There is also a growing body of evidence which says well-managed ranches harbor as much biodiversity, or more, than "protected" landscapes, such as wilderness areas. [*Editor's note:* See our January 2002 newsletter for details.]

This is not to excuse overgrazing, which remains a persistent problem in the West. But the existence of ecologically sensitive ranch methods means the goal of activists needs to shift from extermination to reformation.

However, this requires a big first step—an admission by envi-

(con't on page 15)



ronmentalists that “work” is no longer a dirty word.

The history of the environmental movement is chiefly the story of the struggle against bad management. Clear cuts, strip mines, overgrazed rangelands, toxic dumps, poisoned rivers, and, now, rampant oil and gas drilling—the catalog of abuse is all too familiar. As a result, a prejudice against commercial use of public land developed among activists, and rightly so. Ed Abbey was on target in his outrage when he called the West “cowburnt.”

But it is not the 1980s anymore. The emergence of the progressive ranching model across a wide variety of Western landscapes, including those that receive less than twelve inches of precipitation a year, means the goal of public lands environmentalism can no longer simply be to “protect” the land from human activity. Instead, its goal should be same as the progressive ranchers’—to figure out how to live sustainably in our native landscapes.

Play

In the fall of 1999, twenty-two environmental groups (not including the Sierra Club) took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* entitled “End Welfare Ranching.” It called public lands ranching “ecologically and economically unsustainable” and proclaimed livestock production to be “the single largest source of water pollution, soil erosion, and species endangerment in the western U.S.”

In support of its call for the abolition of ranchers, the advertisement cited an article published in the peer-reviewed journal *Bio-science*, which claimed that livestock grazing had contributed to the decline of 22% of endangered

animal species and 33% of endangered plants in the U.S. This article reported the conclusions of a study conducted by a group of scientists who had analyzed the effects of various extractive industries on the viability of endangered plants and animals and ranked them according to their severity.

Contrary to the claims of the ad’s authors, the greatest threat to endangered plants and animals, according to the researchers, was NOT ranching. At the top of the list was water diversion, principally dams. Ranching checked in at number three, ahead of logging and mining.

In second place was recreation.

Although the chief recreational threat to wildlife was identified as off-road vehicles, the underlying message of the study was clear: recreation is officially an “extractive” industry on public lands and should be treated as such.

Naturally, there has been no full-page ad in the *New York Times* calling for an end to public lands recreation. The reasons are obvious, including a huge case of denial. However, the 800-pound gorilla called “recreation” can no longer be ignored, and if the environmental community does not begin to put play on public land under the same microscope that it does work, then its credibility will continue to erode.

Work and play need to be treated equally and fairly. To do this, environmentalists should heed Aldo Leopold’s advice—that any activity which degrades the quality and quantity of an area’s ecological integrity should be curtailed, changed, or stopped; while any activity which

(con’t on page 16)

The Far Horizon

(con’t from page 14)

“... environmentalists should heed Aldo Leopold’s advice—that any activity which degrades the quality and quantity of an area’s ecological integrity should be curtailed, changed, or stopped; while any activity which enhances, restores, or expands ecological values should be supported. It should not matter if that activity is recreation or ranching.”

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September 2002

The Far Horizon

(con't from page 15)

enhances, restores, or expands ecological values should be supported. It should not matter if that activity is recreation or ranching.

Land

There is a chunk of BLM land west of Taos, New Mexico, that will never be a wilderness area, national park, or wildlife refuge. It is modest land, mostly flat, covered with sage, and very dry. In its modesty, however, it is typical of millions of acres of public land across the West. It is typical in another way too—it exists in a degraded ecological condition, the result of historic abuse and recent neglect.

As humble as this land is, it is not unloved. The wildlife like it, certainly, but so do the owners of the private land intermingled with the BLM land, some of whom have built homes there. The two new ranchers to the area also have great affection for this unassuming land, and want to see it healed.

These ranchers intend to use cattle as agents of ecological restoration. Through the effect of carefully controlled herding, the ranchers intend to browse and trample the sage and bare soil, much of which is capped solid, so that native grasses can get reestablished again. The ranchers are calling this act of restoration a “poop-and-stomp.”

Using cattle to restore rangelands is not as crazy as it sounds. In fact, Aldo Leopold once remarked that wildlife could be restored using the same tools that had destroyed it: “cow, fire, gun, axe, and plow.” The difference, of course, is the management of the tool, as well as the goals of the tool user.

The goal of the Taos project

is ecological and economic restoration; and two of the tools are qualitative and quantitative assessment and monitoring. The science community has developed new protocols over the last decade to measure range health, focusing on the functionality of ecosystems. These protocols do not measure “wildness” or “pristineness.”

Instead, they ask a fundamental question: is the land healthy at the level of soil, grass, and water? If the answer is “no,” then we need to look into our toolbox for a new, or old, tool to repair the damage.

This project is emblematic of a new conservation approach in the West. In fact, I am convinced that land health and restoration, not wildness and protection, will become the principle paradigms of a new environmental movement in the not-so-distant future.

Sense of Place

I was encouraged to learn that Wendell Berry spoke recently to the Sierra Club’s Board of Directors. His invocation that “You cannot save the land apart from the people—to save either, you must save both” has been the guiding principle of my environmental activism.

I believe the ecological crisis confronting us is, at root, a cultural crisis. Poor human behavior caused much of the environmental damage that surrounds us today, and only good human behavior will restore the land to health. Isolating people from nature, a current trend of thought among some activists within the Club, will only further alienate us from our roots, and compound the environmental challenges confronting us.

(con't on page 17)



The Sierra Club's sense of place needs to expand beyond wilderness and national parks. It needs

Courtney White

[Editor's Note: Mr. Pope had not responded to this letter by press time.]

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² See Nathan Sayre, *The New Ranch Handbook: A Guide to Restoring Western Rangelands*. Santa Fe; The Quivira Coalition, 2001.



The Cliff/Gila Valley.

Fishing for Solutions

(con't from page 1)

"Wham! I tied into my first leaper, bronze and green and swift and tenacious and made all the better by the fact I'd found him in Aldo Leopold's Wilderness."

roamed the deeper pools. Carp and suckers were everywhere. Spike dace and loach minnows were not. These native fish were scarce, indeed "threatened"; within a few years of my arrival they would cause a terrific fuss when the issue of a Federal water project on the river came to a head. And to my considerable surprise, I found the bronze bass of my youth. They would provide me with a world of sport, and in time something of a lesson.

Ol' Billy and the Bronze Bass

Nature never put a small-mouth bass within 500 miles of the Gila River. And the Game & Fish Departments of New Mexico and Arizona will tell you they believe in native species and would never stock an alien fish. For a while I thought it was a character I'll call Billy who did it. Ol' Billy and I used to hang out at the same honky tonk in Silver City. He knew I liked to fish and after a few brews he would tell me once again that he was the outlaw that released those bass into the Gila. He must have loved the story, as often as he repeated it, but he seemed oddly uninterested in these bass as gamefish. It seemed he did it (or said he did it) more to prick the agencies and those damned "enviros" than to improve the angling in the Gila. Of course capturing bass and keeping them alive over a long distance transport for a surreptitious release isn't easy. Still, it was a great story and I even believed it until a couple of years ago when I got a copy of an agency fish survey of the Gila, circa 1953. Turns out the bronze bass was already well established in the Gila River some fifty years ago, when Ol' Billy was still in grammar school.

Whoever did it, the bass didn't need any help once they got

there. And I couldn't wait to try them out. In 1982 I parked my pickup one Sunday at the Mogollon Creek confluence and started my first hike up the river. I found that most of the other river users that day didn't bother to walk. They used 4-wheel drives and ATVs and had turned a wild river into a road. Most every likely looking pool that day had a machine parked nearby, if it wasn't roaring and on the move. I looked without love at one particularly noisy gathering and they stared back, defiant. Needless to say, the fish were spooked. And there were cows everywhere along the river; that's where livestock will go in an arid land if they're not controlled. The riparian zone showed the effects. Still, it was an awesome stretch of canyon and I hiked to some high points and sought out some quiet spots while I determined to wait out the hordes.

Toward evening some big-horn sheep came down from the hills for a drink. I woke from a nap and watched them quench, slowly realizing that they wouldn't be there if things hadn't quieted down. Monday was a workday and, sure enough, the hordes were leaving the wilds. It didn't take me long to find a hellgrammite under a rock, impale him, and cast him upstream to the head of a pool. Wham! I tied into my first leaper, bronze and green and swift and tenacious and made all the better by the fact I'd found him in Aldo Leopold's Wilderness.

Changes Not All Bad

A fisheries biologist told me once that if he had his way all the bass, catfish, and other non-native fish of the Gila would be poisoned

(con't on page 19)



out, leaving only the indigenous species in the Wilderness, just as God made it. If I had my way, all the ATVs would get sugar in their gas tanks, leaving the wilds to hikers and horsemen, just as I figure nature intended. Neither of us is going to get all he wants. Even Leopold's Wilderness is not just as God made it, but rather as God made it and we've changed it. And I've come to learn the changes aren't all bad.

In the twenty years since my first fishing trip the ATVs have largely been removed from the Gila's riparian areas, at least those on public lands, but they still rip and snort in the uplands. So I guess we each got something of what we want. The cows are better managed today, in some places so artfully that they have aided and abetted the revival of an endangered bird, the willow flycatcher. From Turkey

Creek on down through the Valley and the Middle Box the banks are firmer and greener than what I saw in '82. I caught my first bass at the proposed Hooker dam site, a few miles above the Mogollon Creek confluence. That site, and the later Conner site downstream, are now history; the dams that never were. Much remains to be done to restore the watershed, but anytime you can stop a dam on a wild river, you've got progress.

The bass are still there of course, as lively and tenacious as ever, only now I often try them with flies. And the spike dace and loach minnow are there too. Just this summer I turned up a bunch of loach minnows while netting some bait in a riffle down near The Box. Like the bass and catfish I caught that day, I returned them to the river.

Fishing for Solutions

(con't from page 18)

*Author, hunter, fisherman, and long-time wilderness advocate, Dutch owns and manages **High Lonesome Books**, located in Silver City.*

A Letter Regarding the First Burch Award

July 15, 2002

Dear Courtney,

I wanted to again express my thanks for the **Clarence Burch Memorial Award** presented to my colleagues and me for our work on the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher on the U Bar Ranch.

This generous award has enabled us to put together a crew of three field biologists focused solely on the flycatchers; in previous years we were constrained to use a single crew that spent only part of their time on the flycatcher. As a result, we have been able to expand the extent and intensity of our data-gathering.

One of the more intriguing results we've discovered so far this year is the rapid colonization of the U Bar's Bennett restoration project. As you recall, this area was the site of severe bank erosion in 1994. The U Bar used a combination of earth moving and pole-planting of native trees to create an artificial oxbow. The main goal of the project was to stabilize the banks and prevent further erosion, but it was accomplished in a such a way as to create riparian habitat

as well. Flycatchers first colonized the project in 1998, and by last year we had found 6 pairs. This year, we have documented somewhere between 24 and 30 pairs of breeding flycatchers in the project (they are too densely packed to allow for an accurate count!). I believe this represents a very clear and unobvious example of management by a private landowner that addresses both the manager's needs as well as wildlife concerns. It also demonstrates the value of collaborative work between land owners, agencies, and the scientific community.

Your generous award has enabled us to continue our studies of this restoration project and other aspects of an endangered species thriving on a private cattle ranch. It also serves to publicize the fact that resource use and conservation need not be conflicting activities, but rather, that both can benefit from intelligent management.

Thank you again,

Scott H. Stoleson, Ph.D.
Research Wildlife Biologist

"This generous award has enabled us to put together a crew of three field biologists focused solely on the flycatchers; in previous years we were constrained to use a single crew that spent only part of their time on the flycatcher."



September 2002

The Gila River and Life in the Southwest

by Jack Carter

A retired professor, Jack is the President of the Native Plant Society of New Mexico.

As a child, I was attracted to the pastures that surrounded our home. My mother commonly described this behavior, and my interest in the plants and animals I observed there, to her friends and neighbors as “Laying in the ditch.” As I grew older, this habit of “laying in the ditch” became more serious because I was finding some very interesting organisms and combinations of living things in and around the ditches, ponds, and streams that I encountered. This obsession became so engrossing that by the time I was in my early twenties I had completed a master’s degree in limnology and invertebrate zoology. Then over time, and after I had completed an advanced degree in systematic botany, it became obvious to me that it is this fresh water that sustains both the aquatic and terrestrial flora and fauna, including humankind.

Importance of Fresh Water

The study of water as the medium responsible for the evolution and survival of practically all forms of life on Planet Earth has been understood for several centuries. However, the relationship of living organisms to aquatic communities limited to fresh water has only in the past half century taken on new meanings for greater numbers of people. Once we recognized that more than 95 percent of the earth’s water is contained in the oceans, and three to four percent of the earth’s water is tied up in ice, a new dimension for fresh water started to unfold. As the human population has continued to increase at an exponential rate, and

as lakes, rivers, and the earth’s aquifers continue to recede, the scientific community and educated laymen have recognized how important the remaining one or two percent of the earth’s water supply is, and why this fresh water must be protected.

Be it the Amazon, Ganges, Mississippi, Rio Grande, Colorado, or Gila Rivers, we are learning to recognize their role in sustaining life on earth. The history of Homo sapiens has been one of gathering along the rivers of the world in order to survive. Again, as a child it was the Kaw (Kansas) River that was of real importance, where agriculture and the growing cities could not exist without that river. In those days, going to the neighbor’s pond for a swim on a hot summer day was an act of survival. Carrying buckets of water for the garden and to water the chickens was simply another way of maintaining life. Then in the Dust Bowl years of the early ’30s, when the well dried up and we had to carry water some distance, water became critical. The history of human life on earth has been one of locating and staying close to water.

Three Rivers

Through an extremely exciting combination of climate, chemistry, physics, and biology that starts well within their headwaters located in the Gila National Forest, three rivers are the major sources for the water and minerals that are basic for the survival of practically all life in southwestern

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New Mexico. If the phrase “multiple use” ever made sense, it is in maintaining our rivers as ecosystems that protect the biological diversity in this place we call home. The Gila, as well as the San Francisco and Mimbres Rivers and the life forms they support, must be protected.

We recognize the role of the birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles, crustaceans, and finally the protists that all must be protected and fill their niches if these rivers are to survive. At the lowest rung on this ladder are the millions of phytoplanktonic forms that contain that precious green plant pigment chlorophyll that finally control the destiny of us all. At the top of the food chain, we must also recognize that humankind, along with all other terrestrial mammals, could not exist here if it were not for all the other organisms that make their home in the riparian areas near these rivers of life. As a result of this fresh water supply several thousand species of green plants, including the lichens, mosses, ferns, gymnosperms, and flowering plants, form the ecosystems that make it possible for all life to persist in this precariously dry region.

What Aquatic Ecosystems Bring to Our Lives

Each of us recognizes these aquatic ecosystems from a different perspective. Through a wide range of backgrounds and differing life histories we come to appreciate what this water brings to our lives. We do know that people will travel thousands of miles to see specific birds that reside in this

unique area. For many of the natives who grew up in this region, fishing and hunting have long been associated with these rivers. Rafting and floating these rivers is a pastime for large numbers of people. And finally those ranching families that have made their homes along these rivers for many years see this water supply as basic to their livelihood.

As both the human population in New Mexico and our daily consumption of water increases, our newspapers and television are sending the message that water is in short supply from Santa Fe to El Paso and throughout the highly populated central core cities that draw their water from the Rio Grande. Elected officials and the news media have only recently started to recognize that the same problem exists throughout New Mexico and the Southwest. For those of us living in the Southwest, our riparian environments are a treasure-trove that must be protected. Once we learn to respect and care for the place where we live, we will then better appreciate the fact that Planet Earth is our only home, and that biodiversity is the foundation of our survival.

The Gila River and Life in the Southwest

(con't from page 20)

“ . . . we must also recognize that humankind, along with all other terrestrial mammals, could not exist here if it were not for all the other organisms that make their home in the riparian areas near these rivers of life.”



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September 2002

The Cliff/ Gila Valley

by David Ogilvie



Tammy and David Ogilvie.
(Photo courtesy of Courtney White.)

*In addition to managing the U Bar,
David owns and operates his own
ranch, located west of Silver City.*

The first time I saw the Cliff/Gila Valley was in the spring of 1985. My wife Tammy and I were over from Arizona looking around the southern part of New Mexico for a place to move our young family and start a cattle ranch.

Arizona had been our home as well as our ancestors' for three generations, but, during the previous couple of decades, it had changed. Thousands of people from all over had moved there for its beautiful scenery, climate, wide open spaces, or for many other reasons I'm not sure of! The rural nature of the state had disappeared and we were looking for a place to escape the people.

Lack of Development

The first thing that struck me about the Cliff/Gila Valley was not its beauty (of course it is beautiful), since there were river valleys back in Arizona that had been similar, but its lack of development. Here was a river valley in a rural setting that had not been taken over by Californians. Contrary to the situation in Arizona where developments had consumed most of the landscapes along the major waterways, the Cliff/Gila Valley landscape was virtually intact. The activities of ranching and farming were still active and were an important part of the economy, not banished from the river, not replaced by expensive

homes with fancy foreign cars. I was impressed with Cliff/Gila Valley and felt my wife and I would "make a home" in the area.

Since moving here, I've discovered that the Cliff/Gila Valley is also unique in other ways. The diversity of wildlife in the area is amazing. The valley is the home of the largest population of Southwestern willow flycatchers found anywhere in the Southwest. The population has been documented by the longest, most comprehensive research done on flycatchers anywhere. It is home to several species of threatened fish, also documented by research, such as the spike dace and loach minnow, as well as other threatened species such as desert suckers, Sonoran suckers and the Gila chub. It is home to one of the largest populations of common blackhawks found anywhere. Many other sensitive bird species are found here in abundance such as the yellow-billed cuckoo, Bell's vireo, Lucy's warbler, Albert's towhee, and the Gila woodpecker. It has also been shown by research to have the greatest density of non-colonial nesting birds found anywhere in North America, with densities of some 1,300 birds per 100 acres.

Coexistence

I am most impressed by the unique situation of the coexistence of humans and their activities with these animal species. Research conducted in the area has shown that agriculture, as practiced in the Cliff/Gila Valley, has actually allowed these species of concern to

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coexist with human activities. The case could be made that some of these threatened species have even benefited by the protection in the valley of the habitat that certain species such as the Southwestern willow flycatchers depend upon.

History

The reason the valley exists as it is today is due to its history. Settlement started in the valley in the late 1800s with farming and livestock grazing being practiced from the beginning. The LC Cattle Company first employed the use of water diversions in the Gila River and, with earthen irrigation ditches, farmed the broad river floodplain. By the early 1900s, the valley was fully settled. The farming and grazing activities were the essential economic basis for most homesteading families and ensured their survival. During the early years, farming in the valley was far more extensive than today with many diversions at different locations along the rivers.

This situation continued as the status quo in the valley until the late 1950s. It was at this time that Pacific Western Livestock Company came in and started to acquire farm properties in the area. Pacific Western, a subsidiary of Phelps Dodge Mining Corporation, was seeking to acquire water rights to use in the start up of the Tyrone Mine near Silver City. Even after Pacific Western acquired a significant portion of the Cliff/Gila Valley, livestock grazing and farming continued as the normal practice. The water that could be used for development purposes was being used in the mining pro-

cess.

Some of the properties along the river were not acquired by Phelps Dodge but have also remained undeveloped due to strong cultural influences. While so many other river systems in the Southwest were being changed by development encroachment, the Cliff/Gila Valley was actually being protected by an interesting mix of factors.

Deserves Protection

When I was asked to write a short essay about the Cliff/Gila Valley I felt it would not prove to be too difficult a task. In reality, it has been! The valley means different things to many different people. There are some that would like it to be like it once was: a valley farmed or ranched with little additional development. Others would like it without human activity involved at all. Even others are standing in the wings, waiting for the time valley properties will change hands and allow for development. The one thing I know for sure is that many people with a vested interest and deep love for the land have helped shape and protect the valley and its resources for over 100 years. We at the U Bar do feel that the valley deserves protection because of its special nature and part of that special nature of the valley involves people.



The Cliff/Gila Valley

(con't from page 22)



Scott Stoleson (see story page 4), David Ogilvie, and others on U Bar Ranch's Southwestern Willow Flycatcher habitat. (Photo courtesy of Courtney White.)



From the Founders

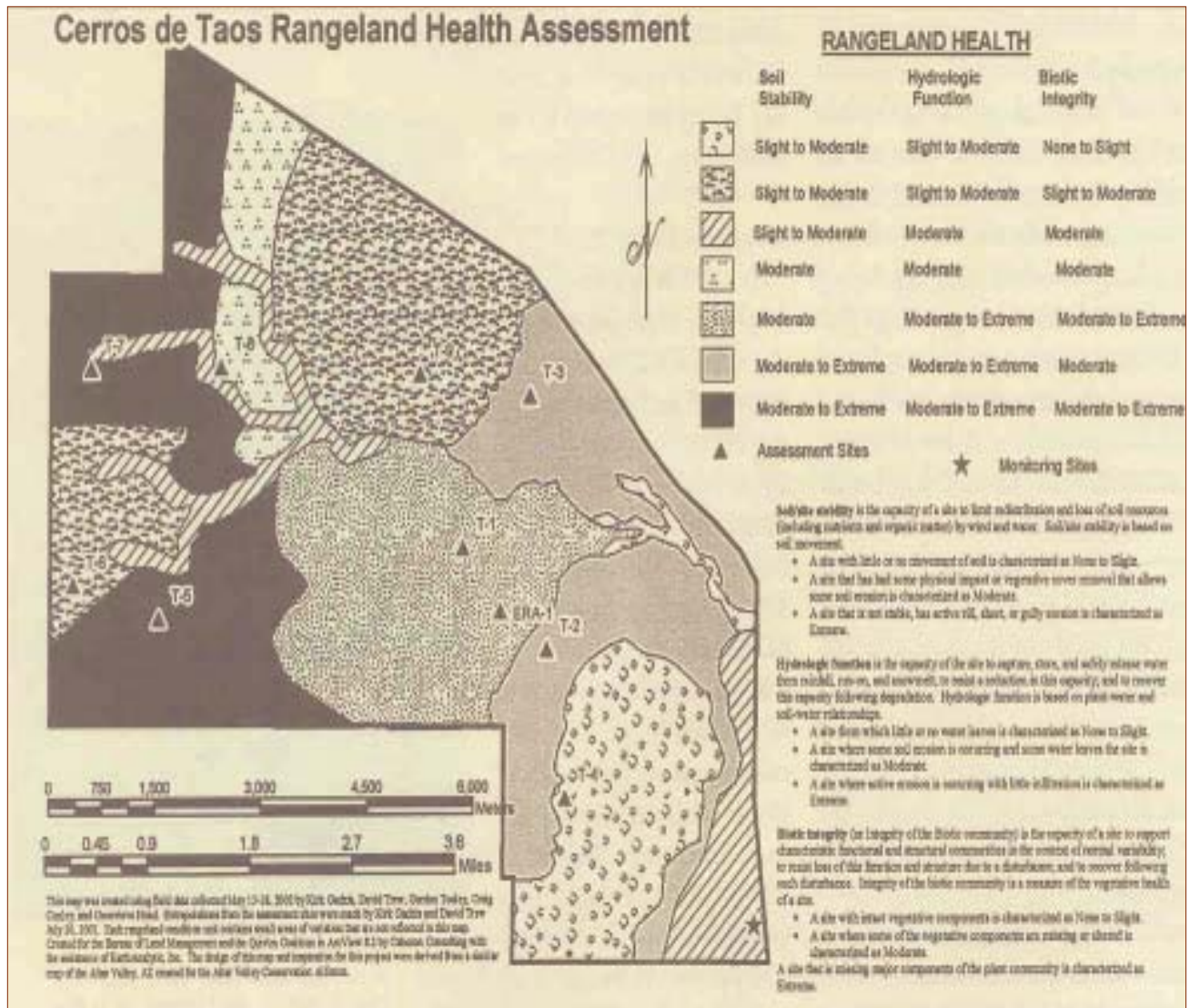
(con't from page 3)

As far as we know, **this may be the first Rangeland Health map produced in the state of New Mexico.**

The assessment, and the map, measure **land health**, not forage production, representing a sig-

the project progresses.

In other words, we're walking our talk. We're assisting land managers by bringing resources to the table; we're employing the Rangeland Health paradigm; we're restoring land




nificant departure from past land assessment paradigms. What's more, the map should help private and public land managers prioritize their restoration work.

By the fall, we will have returned to the project area and placed six long-term **quantitative** monitoring transects on sites chosen to represent the information gathered in the qualitative assessment. This way, we'll be able to detect change over time as

collaboratively as a partner; and we're monitoring the results.

And we're having fun too.

None of this will catch the eye of a reporter. But that's all right. The goal here is to craft a slow, deliberate process by which people and land are healed. It's not flashy. It took a long time for the land to get in this condition, and it will take a long time for it to be restored to health—one acre and one person at a time. 



How can I tell you about this river?

A Snapshot: Summer 2002

I am standing ankle deep in the warm shallow flow of the Gila River, a little above the dry confluence of Garcia Canyon. It is summer evening. The monsoon has not yet settled in, and the river is very low. Farther upstream, where the river flows out of the Mogollon Range and into this valley, the rhyolite cliffs of Watson Mountain are more red in the long light of the sun setting behind me. My view of those red cliffs is framed by tall cottonwoods clustered along the river's higher shores. The high green leaves barely move in the soft air, and below, on the near floodplain, Coyote willows, saplings, and clover complete the green complement in quiet shades. The air smells slightly sweet. Someday this will be the new forest, the next generation, nurtured by seasonal floods. Violet-green swallows skim the river now, drinking in swift darting flights, rising again and falling with a grace my camera cannot record. I hear the blackbirds settling into the cattails of the slough.

Another Snapshot: Winter 1978

My friend hands me a 3 x 5 Kodacolor, a little dog-eared now, the old kind of photograph with narrow white borders and the date printed at the bottom. His son, who was still a little boy in this picture, stands at the place we call the overlook, and behind the boy and below him the Gila River is flooding. In this picture, the sky is still overcast but the clouds are wispy the way they get when a long rain is nearly over. The cottonwoods are grey too without their leaves, looking in the distance a little like the clouds, the trees emerging from water that seems to cover everything else. You can't see the big trees falling, but they are. At night especially, said my

friend, above the sound of water flowing through the dark, you could hear the terrible sigh of each undercut tree collapsing in the hungry water.

Imagine a river where the volume of flowing water can vary an order of 2,000: From 16 cubic feet per second (cfs), recorded this summer (2002) before the monsoon, to 32,000 cfs in the winter of 1978, when warm rain fell on the Mogollon snow pack. This year we are in a severe drought of uncertain duration, and the USGS gauge at Gila marked the lowest flow in its 74-year record. The biggest flow, more than 35,000 cfs, occurred in the winter of 1984, an El Nino year in the Pacific decadal oscillation.

The river answers to a rhythm of droughts and floods that we are only beginning to discern.

My wife and I own a little farm along the Gila River, but we don't live there yet. Eighteen years ago, when we lived along another river in Grant County, the 1984 flood swept through our neighbor's orchard where we had parked our car, and the water carried our only transportation into the channel, where floating cottonwoods battered it into junk. Later, we sold a picture of our ruined car to *New Mexico* magazine. The house we hope to build in Gila will not be in the 100-year floodplain.

Snapshot: Fall 2001

I like the fields around here. From the 211 Bridge over the river to our place is about four miles, and the road passes across and then north along one side of the wide irrigated pastures that are the Gila's floodplain. There are just a few houses. I often think how pretty these fields are in the fall, after the sandhill cranes have arrived and are feeding on the shoots of winter wheat, with cattle drifted

(con't on page 26)

Gila River Grant County, New Mexico

Hydrologic Unit Code 1504001

Latitude 33°03'40", Longitude 108°32'13" NAD27

Drainage area 1,864.00 square miles

Gage datum 4,654.80 feet above sea level NGVD29

by Peter Russell

A resident of Silver City, Peter is a professional conservationist and a former city council member.



September 2002

Gila River

(con't from page 25)

"The cottonwood-willow forest is the rarest forest type in the American Southwest, and in the Gila Valley stands its best example."

out across the fields and the river's long narrow forest defining the far side. This valley is a good place for birds. Over any given year, more than 300 different species breed here or winter here or rest here during their migrations. Beyond the cottonwoods are more pastures that my camera cannot see. Another road runs beside the green floodplain there, and beyond these roads that border all the fields, the ground rises perhaps a hundred feet and rolls back through the desert several miles to mountains.

If you look at the Raven map of New Mexico, the big one that shows topography in color, the Gila Valley almost looks round. Millions of years ago, this valley was a lake, until the river cut a canyon through the Burro Mountains.

Oasis

The valley is an oasis.

Mostly the farms here are these lovely pastures, although I am told that, until World War II, a lot of the produce sold in Silver City was raised in the Gila Valley. Probably not too much fruit though. At night, cold air follows the river out of the Mogollons, which rise to nearly 11,000 feet above sea level, and late freezes are common in the Spring. After the war, I guess it was cheaper and easier and more reliable to ship our produce in. Today there are three supermarkets in nearby Silver City that sell fruit and vegetables all year around—from Washington, from Mexico, from anywhere but here.

How did the valley look 140 years ago, before a plow first turned the rich soil of the floodplain? Well, there are disputes, and we cite conflicting descriptions left by trappers and try to read between the oblique lines of those records left for a different purpose. More trees? No trees? Marshes? All of the above, but in a mosaic of patches? My neighbor who

owns a small ranch just up the river has lived here more than 80 years, and he remembers his father talking about marshes and the seepy ground that used to bog down cars in the valley. He has a funny story about a preacher, a model T, and the boggy roads that I don't remember very well. There really aren't many marshes left, but I would like to start one.

I admire my neighbor. He remembers a lot of things, including how the river has changed even in our own lifetimes.

"A Wonderful Place"

So this is what I want to say about the Gila River and this valley: It is a wonderful place. I like the high, wet mountains that cradle this river and deliver it flowing into our desert valley. I love the river's refreshing touch in the low water time of early summer. I am grateful for this river. It builds the soil some of us still farm, it gives the water that flows through the ground to all of our wells, and it creates that uncommonly beautiful flood forest. The cottonwood-willow forest is the rarest forest type in the American Southwest, and in the Gila Valley stands its best example. The flood forest here supports the densest population of non-colonial breeding birds in the United States. Unlike most rivers in the Southwestern deserts, this one still has all of its native fish.

While floods like the one in 1978 tear out parts of the forest and fields, there is a kind of syncopated rhythm at play, and the river starts new patches of forest and lays down new soil at the same time or in the next flood, building in this way a diversity of form, often working in the apparent disorder and washed-up debris of the old forest—if we let it. The old fallen trees half-buried in the

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The Gila River is not very well known outside the Southwestern United States. It runs for many hundreds of miles and is one of the major rivers in the western States. On its trip from the Gila Mountains in New Mexico to the Colorado River near Yuma, Arizona, it flows through a couple of valleys known as the Gila Valley—one in Arizona and one in

Gila River

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river also have purpose, creating pools for fish and turtles, and flycatchers perch on the dead branches, and so do herons and black hawks and kingfishers.

The river is wider than the literal edge of the water, and its attributes—the forest, the floodplains, the flows, the wildlife—are part of a dynamic system that is ever changing. But we didn't always think of the river in this way. In the 1950s, during the last big drought, it seemed like a good idea for the Army Corps of Engineers to cut down trees to save water—phreatophyte control, we said. The Corps cut a straight channel for the river so that floods would drain quickly and built levees to keep the river straight, and we were all complicit, dozing new earth into the old river meanders that were left behind the levees to make bigger fields.

Should we try to defend the 1950s channel at all costs? Is the new growth in the river merely food for livestock? How much is a Vermilion flycatcher worth? Is water flowing in the river wasted?

Should we build a dam?

As we sit down together to answer these questions and to think about economics and our livelihoods, I hope that we will also think to accommodate in this valley the pulse and natural rhythms of the Gila River because it is now nearly unique, and we are all of us living in its current.

New Mexico. The Gila Valley in New Mexico is the one important to me.

This Gila Valley begins as the Gila River flows out of the mountains. There are two small communities that grace this valley: Gila, on the east side of the river; and Cliff, on the west side of the river.

At the southern end of the town of Gila a creek flows past and empties into the Gila River. This creek, called Bear Creek, is very special to us. You see, it flows right through the middle of our ranch. Our working cattle ranch began operating as a guest ranch several years ago, and Bear Creek has become the lifeblood of so much of what we do at Double E Ranch, for several reasons. The water, habitat, forage, and sheer natural beauty provide sanctuary for the animals, birds, and people who find their way to this special place.

Water provides the obvious for all the birds and animals, but it also provides the soothing ripple that calms the inner man.

Safe habitat is provided for Rocky Mountain Big Horn Sheep, deer, bear, javelina, mountain lion, one permanent resident blue heron, and for 250 species of birds passing through during the year.

Sheer natural beauty is always difficult to place a value on. Most guests living outside the Southwest can never get enough of this incredible place.

Our greatest threat is development. Everyone wants to move here. New York City—or the Gila Valley. . . tough choice!

Through guest ranching, we make a point to educate our visitors about the benefits of cattle ranching and conservation. This is a very special place. By maintaining it as a ranch, guests will always be able to enjoy those unique qualities. By being our guests, they make it possible for us to keep it that way.



Bear Creek

by Alan Eggleston

Alan owns the Double E Ranch in Gila, New Mexico

"Our greatest threat is development. Everyone wants to move here. New York City—or the Gila Valley. . . tough choice!"

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September 2002

UPCOMING EVENTS

Second Annual Conference

January 16-18, 2003 Hilton Hotel, Albuquerque

Ranching at the Crossroads: Forging a West That Works

There will be four half-day sessions on the following topics:

Where Will the Deer and the Antelope Play?

Restoring the Gift of Good Land

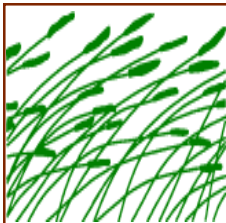
Creating a Society to Match the Scenery

For the Health of the Land and the People

Featuring the following speakers—and more:

- **Daniel Kemmis**, *Director, Center for the Rocky Mountain West, University of Montana*
- **Gary Paul Nabhan**, *author and ethnobotanist, Northern Arizona University*
- **Bill McDonald**, *rancher and Director of the Malpai Borderlands Group*
- **Rick Knight**, *Professor of Wildlife Biology, Colorado State University*
- **Sid Goodloe**, *Carrizo Valley Ranch*
- **Guy MacPherson**, *Professor of Range, University of Arizona*
- **Lani Lamming**, *goat rancher*
- **Bill Zeedyk**, *New Mexico Riparian Council*
- **Craig Allen**, *fire ecologist, USGS*
- **Jeff Jones**, *American Farmland Trust*
- **Kris Havstad**, *USDA Jornada Experimental Range*
- **Alvin Warren**, *Santa Clara Pueblo*
- **Duke Phillips**, *Chico Basin Ranch*
- **Tony and Gerrie Tipton**, *Tipton Ranch.*

Also, there will be a **booksigning** featuring Daniel Kemmis, Rick Knight, Nathan Sayre, and Gary Paul Nabhan and, on Saturday night, the **Second Annual Clarence Burch Award Banquet!** Registration materials are being prepared now and will be mailed to you shortly.



The
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