

# The El Carmen-Big Bend Conservation Corridor A U.S.-Mexico Ecological Project

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The El Carmen-Big Bend region, a cross-border mega-corridor between the Mexican states of Coahuila and Chihuahua, and Texas in United States, is one of the largest, wildest and most biologically diverse areas in North America. Accordingly, this region is undoubtedly a global conservation priority and an international endeavor aimed at demonstrating what the human race can accomplish when working together.

This region's geographical location and wide-ranging topography give rise to its biological diversity. Located in the northeastern part of Mexico's Western Sierra Madre, a mountain range that extends north to the south Texas plains, this region is home to numerous species of neo-tropical flora and fauna which flourish at these latitudes. Furthermore, very few places in North America encompass rich desert environments and high sierra temperate forests, all within a few miles of each other. These "sky islands" are distinguished by diverse types of vegetation including desert shrubs, chaparrals, grasslands, pine-oak forests and fir forests. Water is plentiful in the area and, because of an elaborate canyon sys-

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Photos by Patricio Robles Gil.

tem, floodwaters are able to reach the desert floor, and ultimately the Rio Grande.

This region also has significant healthy populations of flora and fauna, many endemic or very rare. More than 80 species of mammals, including puma, desert bighorn sheep, black bear and cliff chipmunk; over 450 species of birds, including wild turkey and golden eagles; nearly 70 species of reptiles, such as the Texas horned lizard and the Mexican racer snake; and numerous amphibians, including many species of frogs and toads, have been recorded to date in this region. Additionally, more than 1,200 species of plants have been documented, including oaks located in pine-oak woodlands, firs in high forests and yuccas in desert grasslands.

Accordingly, this region's importance has been highlighted by key international environmental organizations, since this trans-border conservation corridor includes part of the Great Chihuahuan Desert Eco-region, one of the 20 most important eco-regions in the world as described by the World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet campaign. Furthermore, this territory's pine-oak forests have recently been listed by Conservation International as a global hotspot due to its extraordinary levels of endemism and serious levels of habitat loss. Likewise, because of their remoteness, some corners of this landscape appear on the Wildlife Conservation So-



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ciety's "The Last of the Wild" map, which includes the lands that currently represent the largest, least influenced wildlife areas in the world. Lastly, substantial portions of the region were listed as priority terrestrial regions by the National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (Conabio) since they represent rich ecosystems with a significant functional ecological integrity and a real opportunity for conservation.

It is then no surprise that the preservation of this vast tract of land requires effective conservation efforts since the dream of protecting this international conservation network has, for many years, been a vision of only a few. Nevertheless, recent conservation efforts have grown, evolved and adapted to the region's difficulties, and are now yielding tangible results. The upshot of this is that today we are witnessing the rebirth of the original dream of protecting this binational corridor.

It all started 70 years ago, when the U.S. Congress passed legislation to acquire land to develop a national park in the region. Since then, different models have been implemented to protect half a million hectares of land in four different areas of Texas: the Big Bend National Park (1944), the Black Gap Wildlife Management Area (1948), the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River (1978) and the Big Bend Ranch State Park (1988).

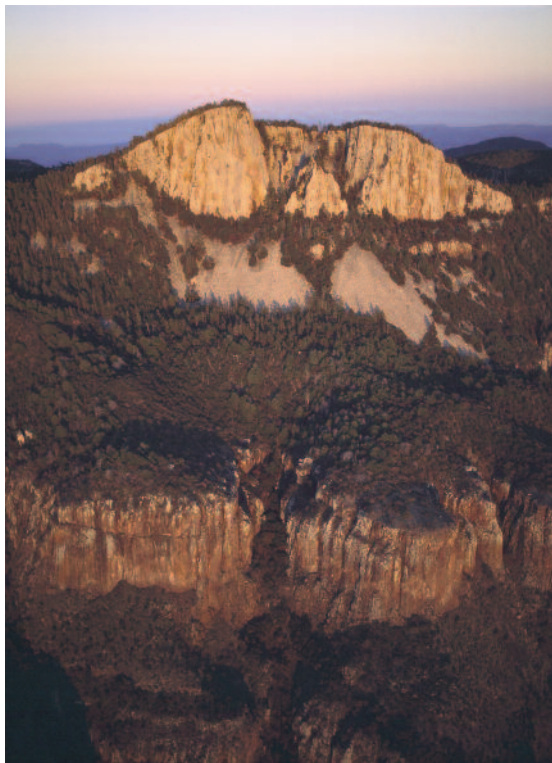
In Mexico, the response was much slower. After Big Bend became a National Park, President Franklin D. Roosevelt

wrote a letter to Mexico's president, General Manuel Ávila Camacho, stating that in order for Big Bend to be complete, it needed a similar counterpart on the other side of the river and that the creation of an International Peace Park should be pursued. Unfortunately, the project did not flourish, probably due to the country's struggling economy at the time.

It was not until 1994 that two Flora and Fauna Protection Areas were declared in Mexico, Cañón de Santa Elena in Chihuahua and Maderas del Carmen in Coahuila, both of which lie along the banks of the Rio Grande. In a more recent turn of events, the government is planning to establish a new reserve later this year, to be called Ocampo, located between these two protected areas.

Not only government bodies from both countries have been involved in the conservation of this area. Without a doubt, there have been no better conservationists than individuals with a deep understanding and appreciation of their

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own land. Inside the Serranías del Burro in Mexico, in the eastern corner of this great trans-border mega-corridor, a group of ranchers has protected the land for approximately 40 years. These ranchers have lived their entire lives in harmony with the environment and are genuinely committed to wildlife protection and the conservation of the region.

Similarly, another group is actively involved in the region, a rare but great example of the private sector's involvement in conservation, and a new model of commitment born six years ago to guarantee the long-term protection of the region. Cemex, an international cement corporation, acquired more than 70,000 hectares of land inside the Flora and Fauna Protection Area Maderas del Carmen and has entered into conservation agreements with neighboring private landowners. Great strides forward have been made since Cemex became involved in the region, including the removal of domestic livestock, the elimination of miles of barbed wire fence and rewilding of the area through the reintroduction of flagship species like the desert bighorn sheep, which had been extinct in the area for more than 60 years.

The "El Carmen-Big Bend Conservation Corridor Initiative" was born of the collective efforts of various stakeholders and a unique partnership between the Sierra Madre Group, a Mexican non-governmental organization (NGO), and Cemex. Today, El Carmen's advisory board is made up of leading NGOs, respected conservationists and local ranchers, and focuses on guaranteeing the permanence of the ecological corridor in order to ensure its vital role of interconnecting different protected areas and mountain ranges.

As a result, this vast trans-border landscape now encompasses approximately 1.5 million hectares including a variety of protection mechanisms which require innovative policies and working relationships among federal and state government agencies in both countries, enabling them to work toward a

common goal hand in hand with NGOs, private ranchers, *ejido* collective farms and the private sector. Accordingly, this variety of conservation models represents one of the binational corridor's most important strengths.

Although many important efforts are being made to promote this mega-corridor's conservation, many challenges still exist. The largest of these today is land fragmentation, which directly affects fauna and flora diversity and divides wildlife populations. Furthermore, the continued division of land can represent a real threat if new landowners do not share the same conservationist vision. Other hazards include the continued expansion of exotic fauna populations, some of which have completely replaced native species, and accordingly pose a major biological threat to native biodiversity.

Finally, a significant challenge that must be addressed is the large difference between both countries' protected area models. In this sense, the scarcity of public land within Mex-

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ico has resulted in protected areas being created on private *ejido* collective farms or communal lands, where land use has legally been oriented toward conservation and human sustainability, rather than opting for the expropriation of land. Due to this situation, the government has had to “convince” landowners inside protected areas to protect and preserve their natural resources. In comparison, in the United States, successful natural conservation areas have been developed from the existence of vast federally-owned tracts of land available for conversion into parks and protected areas, in addition to being able to acquire private land for public uses such as parks and reserves.

The growing demand that modern society is placing on natural resources represents a great threat and creates a big responsibility for mankind. The establishment of this mega-corridor represents an opportunity for strengthening the relationships between both countries, forging alliances among different stakeholders and creating an international model which will act as a source of inspiration for other similar regions around the world. More importantly, this example of joined forces will be able to address one of the greatest challenges mankind faces today, the conservation of wilderness. ■■