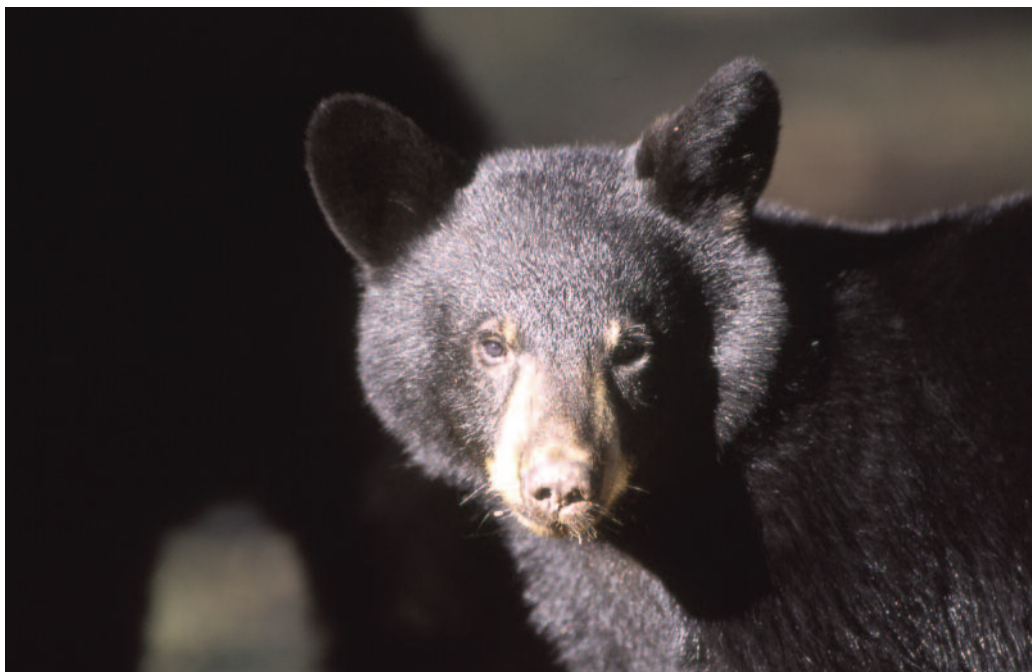


# The Despoblado

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Some would say it was an impossible dream, an unattainable vision. The concept of an international conservation corridor spanning the Mexico-U.S. border has been subject to nearly a century of the frequently tumultuous relationship between the two North American neighbors.

Beginning with the earliest Spanish explorations of the arid, rugged deserts of what are now northern Coahuila and Chihuahua and western Texas spanning the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, it has been known as the Despoblado, an “unpeopled land.”

The Despoblado became peopled, if sparsely, with Mexicans and American pioneers who forged common bonds, culture and economies.

As the nineteenth century passed, the two nations struggled to define a boundary between nations and cultures. However, with each passing decade and the dawn of the twentieth century, distant political, cultural and economic forces resulted in a boundary increasingly at odds with the common ecological, cultural and economic bonds developed on the local and regional scale.

Ironically, the seeds of discord during Mexico’s 1910-1920 Revolution created the seedlings of vision toward a unique zone of protected landscape that appears to be maturing and bearing fruit nearly a century later.

The revolution was Mexican, but the U.S. influenced and was influenced by the struggle. As a result, the first influx of numerous Americans from across the U.S. and from all walks of U.S. life came to the Despoblado, now known

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Photos courtesy of Agrupación Sierra Madre.



to those north of the border as the Big Bend of the Rio Grande. Thousands of cavalry and foot soldiers were stationed in camps spread north of the river. Fortunately, these soldiers encountered little military action. There was ample time for the literary among those temporarily in uniform to publish their writings and illustrations of the vast and ruggedly beautiful landscape. Among these reports were the first printed suggestions that the area deserved preservation for its natural and scenic values.

The revolution came to an end and the border and its inhabitants again found solitude and relative peace. However, the vision of a national park nestled in the Big Bend of the Rio incubated and grew with local and regional support. Legislation authorizing establishment of Big Bend National Park was signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936, protecting what is now 324,291 hectares for the purposes of preserving natural values and providing enjoyment of those values by the public.

However, since the earliest recognition that the diversity of the Chihuahuan desert, the aquatic and riparian lifeline of the Rio Grande, and the modest montane forest of the Chisos Mountains of Big Bend National Park represented exceptional natural and ecological values, observers could not help but note the presence of equal if not more extensive and remarkable values in the adjacent Mexican landscape south of the border.

Also, scientists recognized that in addition to the myriad exemplary biotic zones, vegetation associations, geological and paleontological features, isolated springs and rare plants found in the landscapes, long-term perpetuation of a variety of low-density but wide-ranging species such as black bear, desert bighorn sheep and mountain lion would require preservation of habitats on a larger scale than the national park could provide.

The U.S. method of park and reserve establishment continued. The establishment of Black Gap Wildlife Management Area (in 1948, now 48,178 hectares) to the east, and later Big Bend Ranch State Park (in 1988, 121,052 hectares) created a U.S. federal and state relationship in regional public land conservation.

The U.S. federal model of natural area protection in the region reached its limits with the initiative to establish the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River in 1978 (111 kilometers within Big Bend National Park, 190 kilometers downstream of the park). The proposal to create this additional zone of federally administered property in the area was met with significant opposition by affected landowners and community leaders.

The political climate had changed since local and state enthusiasm had produced the establishment of Big Bend National Park. A rising private-property rights organization, distrust of the federal government and a perception of excessive government influence in private landowner affairs





found voice and support. The river designation occurred, but in a form much abbreviated from the initial proposal. Among the criticisms voiced by the proposal's opponents was that since the river is an international boundary, any U.S. designation could only protect one-half of the river zone.

Still, was the vision expressed most prominently in 1944 when Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ávila Camacho agreed to the principle of an international park an impossible dream? Or was it a concept of the northern neighbor, as so often has been the case, that failed to respect, failed to translate into the cultural and political realities of Mexico?

The U.S. concept of a national or state park, with outright government ownership of land, expensive and long-term investments in construction and upkeep of public roads, administrative facilities, big staffs and more emphasis on structured and managed large-scale public recreation than on ecosystem preservation or restoration is a result of the uniquely U.S. combination of economic, social and governmental realities and public expectations. It is unreasonable to expect the U.S. blueprint to fit or be the desirable strategy for landscape-scale natural area protection and management in most other—even neighboring—countries and their societies that have significantly different economic and cultural heritages and realities.

Thus, for the past decade, it has been Mexico, rather than the United States, that has taken the

lead in forming and bringing to fruition the vision and the hope of an international zone of natural-area protection to the Despoblado. From the realities and necessities of the Mexican condition a creative new approach that may offer the world a new model for cooperative conservation is blossoming.

The initiative, known as the El Carmen-Big Bend Conservation Corridor, from the perspec-



tive of this observer from north of the border, has developed through several distinct steps:

1. *Federal designation of protected areas*

Recognizing the value of the area's natural heritage and potential for Mexican and international conservation, the Mexican federal government designates Areas for the Protection of Flora and Fauna. These are the Santa Elena and Maderas de El Carmen Protected Areas. If successful, proposals to designate the Ocampo Protected Area and to recognize the distinctly linear river ecosystem with National Monument designation would unify the area.

2. *Private and non-governmental focus and investment*

Following the formal recognition of the natural area(s) and monument, attention of Mexican and international conservation organizations, private conservation investors and corporate conservation initiatives is focused within the protected area boundaries. These entities provide for a variety of protective measures through land purchase, management agreements and other instruments.

3. *Landowner conservation initiatives*

Within the protected areas and in the greater region of ecological interdependence, traditional ranchers and allied conservation organizations develop conservation best-practices certification standards and provide incentive and



encouragement for landowners to voluntarily meet certification standards for livestock production. A creative and pioneering strategy to create a designated wilderness area through a similar voluntary landowner certification process in the northern Sierra del Carmen is of particular note because it complements adjacent wilderness management areas of Big Bend National Park.

4. *Creating cooperative partnerships*

The last step would be to develop a framework for the diverse group of private, non-governmental, corporate, state and federal conservation stakeholders both north and south of the border to cooperate toward development and implementation of a common vision for landscape-scale international conservation. At the same time, we need to foster respect for the diversity of conservation approaches, legal mandates and socioeconomic realities of partnering entities.

To a 40-year resident of the U.S./ Mexico border zone with 25 years in conservation as a career U.S. National Park Service biologist, it has been discouraging to experience the increasingly restricted and discordant formal relationship being imposed upon our border.

A zone of cooperation in preserving a portion of our shared natural heritage represents a window of hope. A hope that the dream is possible. A hope that the nearly century-old vision is attainable. **MM**

