

Of Land and Culture: Environmental Justice and Public Lands Ranching in Northern New Mexico

by Ernest Atencio

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Environmental Justice and Public Lands
Ranching in Northern New Mexico**

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**A Report by
The Quivira Coalition and
the Northern New Mexico Group of the Sierra Club**

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"The rich diversity of the world's cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth." —

Aldo Leopold

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It has been a privilege for me to do this work, and I hope it contributes in some small way to justice, equity, and the vitality of land and communities in northern New Mexico.



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Editing and Layout

Barbara Johnson

Photos

Acknowledgments

Chimayo. *Courtesy of Courtney White.*

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Preface



*"You cannot
save the land
apart from the
people or the
people apart from
the land. To
save either, you
must save both."*

—Wendell Berry,
author and farmer

Not long ago, I attended a meeting of Sierra Club activists where a very earnest middle-aged man implored the assemblage to separate nature from culture and do only what is right for the environment. A biological crisis was on, he insisted, therefore Nature had to come first, no matter what the social, economic or political consequences.

And, of course, there could be no compromises.

It didn't matter to this man that he lived in a big, sprawling city and enjoyed the multiple benefits of a well-paying, high-tech job. It didn't matter to him that the audience that day included poor rural folk with a four-hundred-year tradition of sustainable use of natural resources. Nor did it matter that his "nature first" remedy, including a call to end all commercial logging on public lands, is a brand of absolutism that

is almost entirely political, therefore cultural.

No, all that mattered to him was that he be "bold and strong" for the environment. In fact, later in the meeting he publicly martyred himself, figuratively nailing himself to a cross of self-righteousness. "It's all for the trees and the animals," he said, as he hung his head.

"Right," I thought, "and tomorrow you'll drive your SUV to work."

It is exactly this sort of foolishness that has endangered the public lands-wing of the environmental movement. Although The Four Horsemen of Absolutism — Ignorance, Tyranny, Hypocrisy, and Misanthropy — have been creating chaos on the extreme for some time, they are now beginning to see the fruit of their labors, as evidenced by the institutional embrace of a call to End



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Commercial Logging by the national Sierra Club a few years ago.

Next up is grazing. The absolutists have launched a bold and strong effort to end public lands ranching in the West. They want to do what's right for the environment by indiscriminately eliminating the good rancher along with the bad, ignoring, in the process, every bit of evidence that contradicts their argument that ranching is an irredeemable activity. It is a campaign of breathtaking political imperative masquerading (intentionally or not) as a concern for the environment.

And a major casualty of this campaign will be the credibility of the movement as a whole. Which means the biological crisis will get worse.

We decided to fight back. The Quivira Coalition and the Santa Fe Group of the Sierra Club, with additional funding from the McCune and Santa Fe Community Foundations, decided to call the bluff of the absolutists on one of their main arguments — that the elimination of public lands grazing will not have an adverse impact economically and culturally on rural people, especially in northern New Mexico. We hired author and environmentalist Ernie Atencio, formerly of Amigos Bravos, to explore what we already suspected to be the truth — that the environmental justice consequences of ending public lands ranching would be huge in the region.

Poverty, economic justice, good stewardship, healthy ecosystems, strong communities, a land ethic, a sense of hope, we believe, are all mixed up together in a way that perfectly illustrates John Muir's famous observation

that everything in the universe is connected to everything else. Separating people from nature is not only wrong, it is impossible.

The answers to the various crises confronting us do not require more bold absolutism and divisiveness. Instead, we need to work cooperatively toward common goals, city and rural dweller, environmentalist and rancher, Anglo and Hispano, left and right. It is this effort, which I call "working in the radical center," that will require real strength and courage. But it will not be enough to simply hold the Four Horsemen at bay; we need to make progress on our own. We need to construct the radical center in such a way that problems actually get addressed "on the ground."

This report is just one of many building blocks being used. Read it, think about it, place it in the larger context of what's going on around you.

Then come lend us a hand.

**Courtney White,
Executive Director,
The Quivira Coalition**



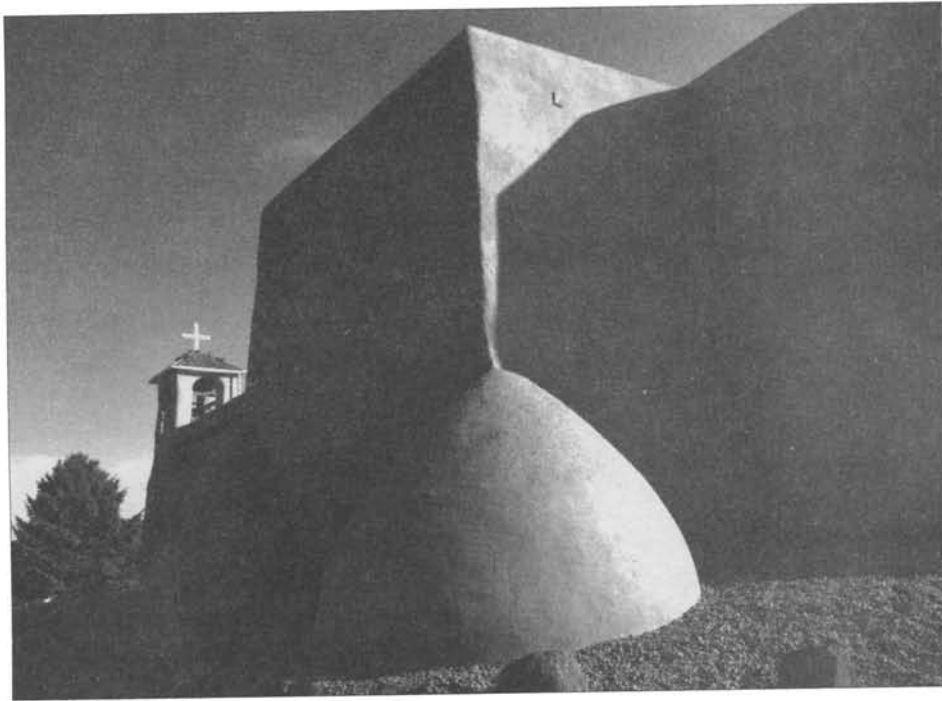
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Chapter One

Environmental Justice in Northern New Mexico



*"History will
judge greens by
whether they
stand with the
world's poor."*

—Tom
Athanasiou,
social ecologist¹

In the mountains and mesas of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, a land-based Indo-Hispano village culture persists against all odds. For over four centuries, these isolated ranching and farming communities have survived the rigors of frontier life in the farthest corner of the Spanish kingdom, generations of raiding by nomadic tribes, rebellions, wars and conquest, the vagaries of weather, dispossession of community lands, and desperate poverty. But they have done more than simply survive. A distinctive culture has developed in the region that remains a dynamic and defining presence today. And after centuries of continuity and adaptation, rural villagers have acquired a powerful sense

of belonging, a rooted knowledge and reverence for their homeland that has become rare in the modern world.

Though rich in culture and history, local Hispanos have not shared in national economic prosperity throughout most of the twentieth century. Even today, while the United States enjoys the strongest economic boom in its history, New Mexico remains the poorest state with the highest rate of "food insecurity" in the nation. And the largely rural north-central counties of Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos are among the poorest in the state.²

Impoverished rural families have come to depend on the meager economic buffer provided by grazing a few cattle or sheep on what are now



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U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands. Perhaps the most important dimension of the story, and one that makes the northern New Mexico situation unique, is the fact that many of these "public" lands were once community land grants that have been dismantled and lost over the last 150 years through the machinations of the U.S. legal system.

It is clear from the research, and ominously obvious to local ranchers, that ending public lands grazing here would have a devastating impact on an already strained local economy, on the social fabric of rural communities, and on the continuity of a centuries-old cultural tradition.

Toward a Broader Environmental Justice

During the last decade of the twentieth century, the environmental movement was forced to recognize the fact that people of color and the poor have been left out of the dialogue about environmental issues and often fall through the cracks of environmental regulations.³ While we were busy worrying about the pressing problems of dwindling wildlands, dammed, over-appropriated and polluted rivers, and biodiversity, poor people got poorer and continued to bear the brunt of toxic industry. Certain environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, responded commendably by broadening their approach to at least consider environmental justice issues. But some people and some issues continue to fall through the cracks.

Public health impacts from environmental conditions or hazardous waste, or discrimination in the imple-

mentation and enforcement of environmental policies are unquestionably critical problems, but environmental justice is about more than that. It is also about widening the discourse on environmental issues to include the perspectives, values, and concerns of the usually ignored populations of people of color and the poor. Ben Chavis, one of the original movers and shakers of the environmental justice movement, nine years ago said, "Environmental racism is [among other things] the history of excluding people of color from the leadership of the environmental movement."⁴

In 1992, then Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Fischer called for "a friendly takeover of the Sierra Club by people of color," and optimistically declared that "the struggle for environmental justice in this country and around the globe must be a primary goal of the Sierra Club during its second century."⁵

In New Mexico, at least, a *de facto* exclusion still holds true. Working for a Taos-based environmental organization, in a state where the Anglo population is still a little less than half, I often found myself the only ethnic representative among dozens of other environmentalists at various and sundry meetings. In my experience, a limited perspective and generally narrow range of discourse within the environmental movement is one obvious and unfortunate result.

Embracing the concerns of people of color and the poor would expand that perspective and that discourse to include the issues of social and economic hardships they face every day. But what do these issues have to do with the environment? An anthropologist at a

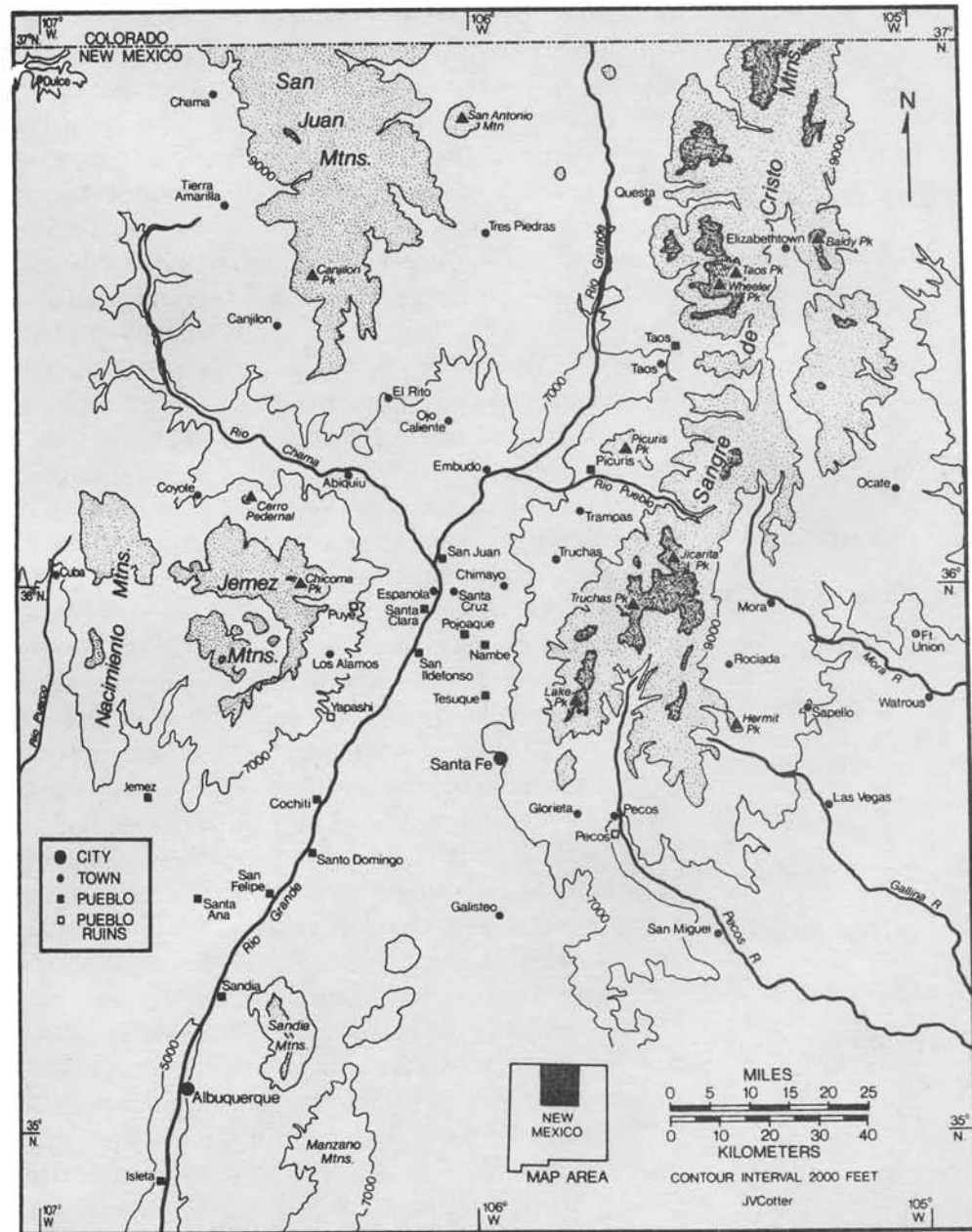


Environmental Justice in Northern New Mexico

recent conference I attended suggested that there will soon be no nature to protect unless we address social justice issues to share the world's resources more equitably.⁶ Protecting natural ecosystems will become a moot point, in other words, if the poor of the world continue to be left farther and farther behind, struggling for their slice of a shrinking pie of natural resources. As one person put it, "In the metaphor of a rapidly sinking ship, we are all in the same boat, and the people of color are closest to the hole."⁷

Environmental justice is not whole, then, unless it recognizes the inescapable global forces of political economy that perpetuate cycles of poverty and environmental abuses, and unless it addresses social and eco-

nomic justice as integral components. Law professor Eileen Gauna frames environmental justice as "a challenge that all should be concerned about



Map 1. Landforms and settlements of north central New Mexico.



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A zero-grazing policy would have an impact on a predominantly poor, Hispano population as negative as any discriminatory environmental policy that threatens the health and welfare of disenfranchised populations of people of color in any other context.

in a society that is committed to the ethical precept of basic fairness."⁸ Providing support and economic and social safety nets for those less privileged has long been part of our national culture. In this context, access to public lands for grazing is the safety net that keeps some families from destitute poverty or displacement to some poor inner-city *barrio*.

In New Mexico, one on-the-ground example of applying broader principles of environmental justice is the Federal Sustained Yield Unit Act. Enacted in 1944 as part of the New Deal effort to stem rampant poverty, this act was a pioneering effort in environmental justice many decades before the term even existed. It designated five forest units throughout the country and mandated for those units not only sustainable forest management, but management that provided income for poor, forest-dependent local communities. Perhaps because of the long and continuing tradition of natural resource dependence in northern New Mexico, only the Vallecitos, New Mexico Unit still exists of the five initially established. And despite the ongoing struggle to stay the course through legal fights and shifting federal regulations, Vallecitos still aspires to its original dual mission.⁹

Another concrete local example of a broader environmental justice is the return of 48,000 acres of Forest Service land to the Taos Pueblo Tribe in the 1970 Blue Lake Act. After generations of struggle by Taos Pueblo to regain this tract of land and the sacred Blue Lake that lies at its heart, Congress, with Richard Nixon's strong

support, finally recognized that it had been wrongfully taken by the government and restored it to the tribe for traditional and religious use.¹⁰

Environmental justice issues and remedies can take many forms. In the case of the Federal Sustained Yield Unit Act, the remedy was to address the economic needs of struggling, forest-dependent communities by insuring long-term access to forest resources (though clearly more needs to be done). With Blue Lake, it was recognizing that an historic injustice had been committed against the Taos Pueblo people and correcting that injustice by returning the land to its rightful owners.

The issue of public lands ranching in northern New Mexico stirs up the very same thorny questions as these two examples, but also offers the same opportunities to set things right. A zero-grazing policy would have an impact on a predominantly poor, Hispano population as negative as any discriminatory environmental policy that threatens the health and welfare of disenfranchised populations of people of color in any other context. And it would create chaos, as one rancher puts it, with the social and cultural fiber that holds together centuries-old Hispano communities. Following a guiding principle of environmental justice, we should choose instead to remedy historical injustices and foster greater social equity by providing access to public land resources for some of the poorest members of our society.

Bridging persistent gaps between environmental, social, and economic concerns and working toward a holistic approach to environmental



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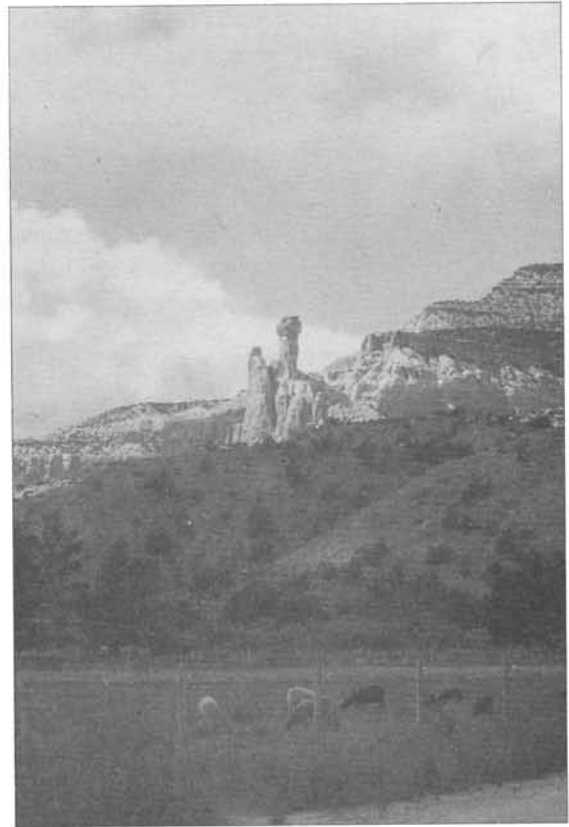
justice is a major challenge currently facing the environmental movement. Those of us who care about environmental issues, but also about social and economic justice, straddle and obscure comfortable categories and test the limits of the more strident and dogmatic on both sides of the proverbial fence. Colleagues in this area, for instance, have been accused by other environmentalists of "talking to the enemy," for attempting collaborative approaches with local land-based interests. I was once accused by another environmental activist of caring too much about community issues at the expense of the ecosystem, even while being threatened by a member of one of those communities for being an environmentalist. For lack of a handy category, this perplexing hybrid activism is even occasionally, and inaccurately, lumped together with the anti-environmental "wise use" movement.

Despite the rhetoric, it's my experience that many environmentalists and land-based interests in northern New Mexico share fundamental environmental values — and the same is very likely true in other places — but history and confrontational approaches have made it difficult to reconcile those values.

In recent years, for instance, two very volatile issues — a legal fight between the Sierra Club and the model sustainable economic development enterprise called Ganados del Valle and a Mexican spotted owl lawsuit and injunction against all logging and fuelwood gathering on New Mexico national forests — succeeded only in agitating a sense of conflict and widening the

rift between environmentalists and local communities. And in the end, after all the acrimony, lawyers, and expense, neither action profited anybody. Among the other consequences discussed throughout this report, pushing a zero-grazing agenda would provoke a similar needless and counterproductive conflict, and would set back a lot of the progressive work many people are involved in to build consensus and broaden constituencies around common ground issues.

There are several initiatives currently underway in northern New Mexico in which environmentalists and land-based interests are working collaboratively, if cautiously, to bridge some of the gaps, recognizing both a healthy environment and healthy rural communities as dual priorities. This is not some lame watered-down compromise, but an approach that acknowledges and respects a natural environment that we all value, the communities in which we all live, and the unique cultural and political history of this region. And it is an



Ghost Ranch.
(Photo courtesy of Elsbeth Atencio.)



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approach with a fundamental sense of justice and inclusiveness at its heart.

Rancher and professional range manager Virgil Trujillo expresses well the desire to end the perpetual environmental tug-of-war and move on to broader horizons. "The environmental movement has been excellent in the sense that it makes us aware of

our environment. But we've got to stop the nonsense of wasting all those resources, attacking each other, yelling at each other. Turn the situation around and let's start yelling *for* each other, for each other's health, so to speak."¹¹



Aparcio Gurulé.
(Photo courtesy of Ernie Atencio.)

In Their Own Words

Along with other research I conducted for this project, I also interviewed six northern New Mexico ranchers, including Virgil Trujillo quoted above, who rely on federal public lands grazing for some portion of their livelihood. There is plenty of literature about the long history and the social, cultural, and economic importance of ranching in this area, plenty of data and statistics on economic conditions and public lands grazing, but it's important to hear directly from the people who still do it and who would be most directly affected by shutting down public lands ranching. Their voices are found throughout the text:

Ricardo Fresquez, 43, is a rancher, farmer, and sawyer who lives

on his ancestral family property near Mora. He grazes 19 cattle four months a year on a nearby Santa Fe National Forest allotment, which was once part of the Mora Land Grant belonging in part to his ancestors.¹²

Aparcio Gurulé, 83, is a life-long rancher who has a relatively large operation that modestly supports several generations of his family. He and his sons graze 376 cattle four months a year on the Santa Fe National Forest (he holds the largest single permit on the forest at 326, beating out the Conservation Fund's Grassbank permit by one head) and on BLM lands near his home in Cuba in the winter.¹³

George Maestas, 68, is retired from a career in mining and state government to his home in Rodarte, and is currently secretary/treasurer of the community-based Santa Barbara Grazing Association. He supplements his limited income by ranching, including grazing eight cattle for four months a year on the Santa Barbara Allotment of the Carson National Forest.¹⁴

Andie Sanchez, 43, lives in Llano, has worked a variety of construction and odd jobs, is currently president of the Santa Barbara Grazing Association, and grazes 14 cattle four months a year on the Santa Barbara Allotment to make ends meet.¹⁵

The Santa Barbara Grazing Association that George and Andie both belong to is involved in a voluntary project that has temporarily relocated the association's 203 cattle to the Conservation Fund's Grass Bank on the Santa Fe National Forest. Meanwhile, the Santa Barbara Allotment is allowed to rest and undergo prescribed burning, thinning,



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reseeding, and riparian restoration measures. The project is considered far and wide to be a model of consensus that is yielding concrete environmental results, while improving range conditions for local ranchers.

Joe Torres, 73, lives in Black Lake, near Angel Fire ski resort. He has had a varied career in government, economic development, teaching, contracting, and ranching, and currently runs a very successful enterprise of 864 cattle (one of the largest individual cattle operations in the area) that graze four-and-a-half months a year on the Valle Vidal Allotment of the Carson National Forest.¹⁶

Joe has revived herding on the Valle Vidal in a demonstration project expected to reduce overall allotment impacts. He is also involved in a cooperative venture to restore a native trout fishery on Comanche Creek, which flows through the allotment.

Virgil Trujillo, 39, is Superintendent of Rangelands at Ghost Ranch and a recognized innovator in holistic range management, who also runs his own herd of 139 cattle for six months a year on the Santa Fe National Forest near his home in Abiquiú.¹⁷ Highly respected for his balanced perspective on environmental issues and innovations in rangeland stewardship, Virgil is a founding board member of The Quivira Coalition.

These individuals are more or less representative of Hispano northern New Mexico ranchers. Though they have critical things to say about some environmental organizations and policies, based on local history and

experience, they are not people with a narrow anti-environmental, pro-industry



Andie Sanchez.
(Photo courtesy of Elsbeth Atencio.)

agenda. The world is not that black and white here. They are just reasonable men who care about the land, their communities, and their culture, who are simply trying to make a living like everyone else.

All these ranchers have had their share of conflicts with the Forest Service and have strong opinions about managing public lands. But by and large they do not feel the vehement hostility toward the federal government or public lands agencies that is common in many rural communities in the West. Most of them, like Virgil Trujillo, take a charitable tone. "I hesitate to be too critical of our public land managers, because they have no more resources to work with," he says. "It's pretty sad. . . . there are good people in there. But they're really short-handed."

About this Report

This report is not intended as an apology or excuse for those who abuse



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[I]t's important to recognize the fact that ranchers clearly have a vested interest in conservation and sustainability, and many take their stewardship very seriously.

public lands or pad their profits at the public's expense. There is no arguing the fact that irresponsible livestock grazing can have a negative impact, especially in this arid region, on important ecological processes, on erosion, on natural vegetational succession, on watershed health and productivity. There is no arguing the fact that some ranchers have not demonstrated much success with sustainable management in the past. Serious problems exist and we have to deal with them. On the other hand, it's important to recognize the fact that ranchers clearly have a vested interest in conservation and sustainability, and many take their stewardship very seriously. There is strong and growing evidence that conscientious grazing practices and new approaches to holistic range management, in the right places, at the right times, can be genuinely sustainable and even enhance natural habitat and biodiversity.¹⁸

But that is not the intent of this report. I will sidestep those issues, not because they are irrelevant or unimportant, but because they are already being very successfully addressed through several other avenues. The Conservation Fund's Valle Grande Grass Bank, a cooperative watershed restoration project on the Santa Barbara Allotment, innovative range management practices at Ghost Ranch, remarkably successful restoration at Sid Goodloe's Carrizo Valley Ranch, reviving herding on the Valle Vidal and elsewhere, the very fruitful collaborative efforts of The Quivira Coalition, are a few examples of progressive grazing and range management initiatives in this region that are making a differ-

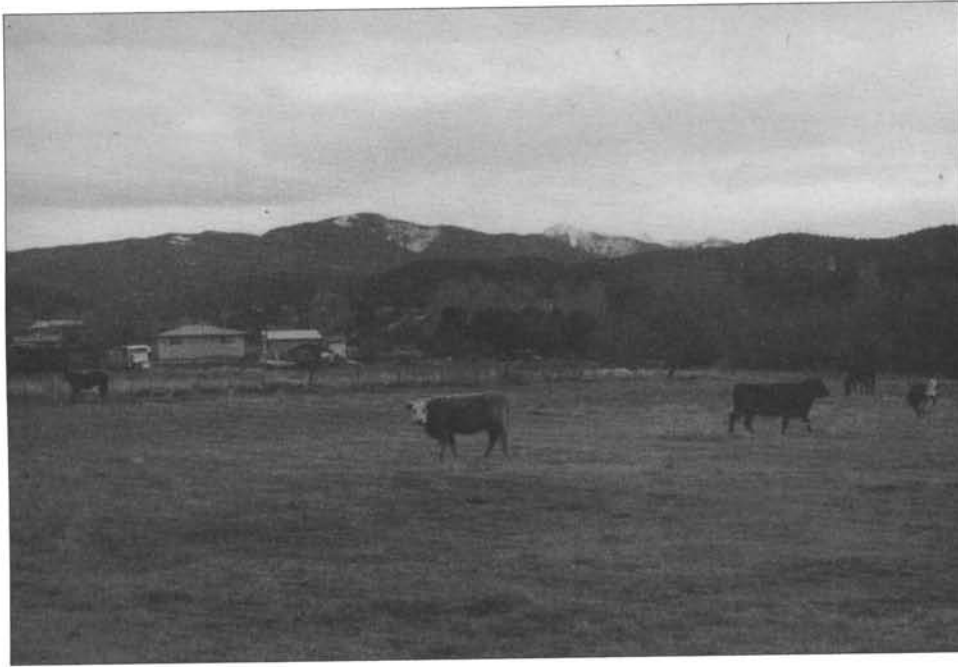
ence.¹⁹

This report is specific to unique circumstances and history in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, but the general information and arguments are just as relevant to any other context where traditional-use access to ancestral lands is at issue. In particular, the same tough questions certainly surface anywhere that Native Americans graze livestock on federal lands, or other areas of the Southwest where Hispano populations have similarly lost community lands. Ending or curtailing public lands grazing might in fact make good sense in some places where the system and the land are blatantly abused for private or corporate profiteering, but not in situations like that described in this report.



Chapter Two

Poverty and Subsistence Ranching



*“We are
doing our
best to make
a living here.
We aren’t
getting rich,
[just] trying
to survive.”*

**—Andie
Sanchez,**
local rancher

Andie Sanchez is typical of the northern New Mexico rancher. He has a permit for 14 cattle, four months a year, on the Carson National Forest. Of the 203 cattle that graze on his grazing association’s allotment, no more than 30 are owned by any one person. A handful of ranchers have large and economically viable operations and make all or most of a living from ranching, but the majority, like Andie, are struggling local villagers who supplement limited incomes by grazing a few head on public lands.

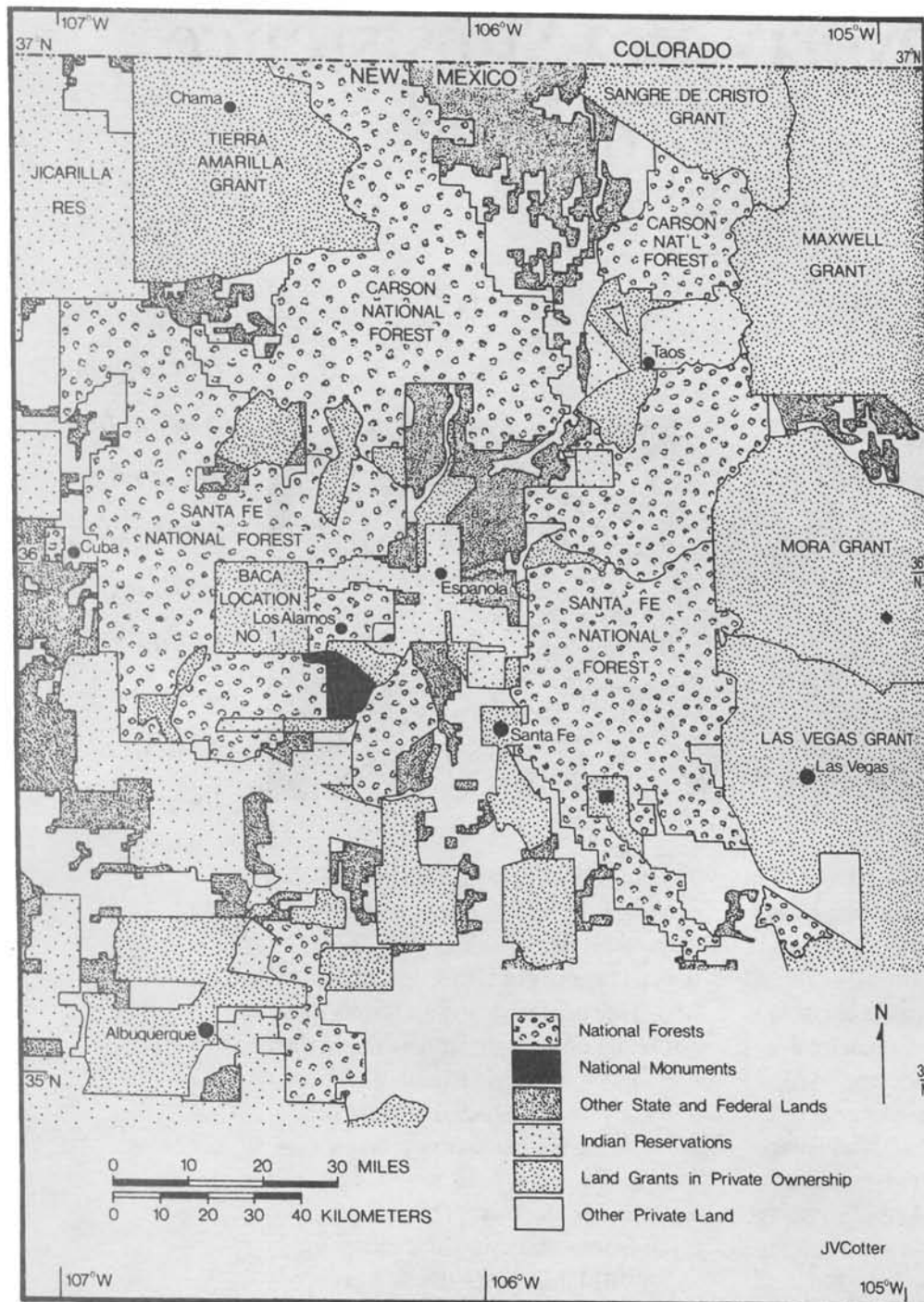
By U.S. government definition, 500 cattle is a “large” operation. Accounting for northern New Mexico’s legacy of subsistence ranching, Virgil

Trujillo considers 80 a large herd. To be economically self-sufficient these days, he says you’d need at least 300. Yet, the vast majority of Hispanic ranchers who graze on the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests have far fewer even than the “large” subsistence herd of 80.

“The livestock that grazes on public lands is often an important source of supplemental income for families,” says George Maestas. “This is also often an important part of families’ food supply. Although not sufficient to cover major expenses, the ability to sell a few steers is often the only insurance which many families have to cover unexpected expenses.”



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Map 2. Land Ownership in Northern New Mexico

Economic Struggles

While the abject poverty and

economic crisis that spawned the New Deal era of the 1930s may be ancient history to most Americans, northern New Mexico still carries that legacy.

North-central New Mexico emerged in the 1930s as a distinctly poor region, and has remained an area of severe and chronic poverty to this day. As recently as 1970, nearly half the region's families remained below the poverty level. Nationwide only 11 percent of Americans fell into that category.²⁰ That same year, more than 60 percent of local homes still lacked modern plumbing facilities. And unemployment has averaged around 20 percent in the area since the sixties.²¹

In what is today the poorest state in the U.S., the counties of Mora,



Poverty and Subsistence Ranching

Rio Arriba, and Taos — predominantly rural, agricultural, and Hispano — are among the poorest counties. And hunger stays close on the heels of poverty. Over 15 percent of New Mexico households suffer from what is known as “food insecurity,” meaning “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods...” New Mexico ranks highest in the nation in that category and third in plain old hunger.²²

In 1995, the three north-central counties of Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos had a combined poverty rate of 27 percent. Compare that to a statewide rate of 20.2 percent, which is bad enough, and a national rate of 13.8 percent. These are dismal figures, but poverty is even more prevalent among Hispanics.

More recent statistics broken down by Hispanic origin are not available, but in 1989, while the three counties had a combined poverty rate of 30.4 percent and the state 20.6 percent, 33.3 percent of Hispanics in the three counties and 27.3 percent in New Mexico were living in poverty. An additional and even more shocking statistic is that, in 1989, 13.9 percent of Hispanics in those three counties were living at *below half* the poverty level.

Other economic indicators like per capita income and unemployment tell the same story. Per capita income in 1997 for Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos Counties was \$14,279, compared to \$20,288 for New Mexico and \$25,924 nationwide. Again back to 1989, with per capita income for the three counties at a grim \$9,085, the state at \$13,221, and the U.S.

at \$17,731, per capita income for Hispanics in those counties was only \$6,720.

Unemployment in 1997 for Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos Counties was 14.9 percent, over three times the national rate of 4.9 percent, while the state was at 6.2 percent.

Unemployment statistics for 1989 perhaps most clearly illuminate the ethnic divide in socioeconomic conditions. That year, 15.5 percent of Hispanics in the three counties were unemployed, nearly triple the rate of about 5.2 percent for their white non-Hispanic neighbors living in the same three counties. The rest of New Mexico in 1989 had 6.7 percent unemployment and the U.S. 5.3 percent.²³

Slim educational opportunities keep pace with the region’s struggling economy. Joe Torres is proud of the fact that he’s been successful enough to send all four of his children to private schools and on to college. Considering the chances for local Hispanics to get an education, it is certainly an accomplishment to be proud of. In the three northern counties of Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos in 1990, only 57.8 percent of Hispanics over age 25 graduated high school, and only 7.6 percent made it through college. Overall in the three counties, 65.8 percent graduated high school and 14.3 percent college. Statewide, those figures were 75.1 percent and 20.4 percent, respectively, and closer to the national averages of 82 percent and 23.8 percent.²⁴

Any way you spin the statistics, New Mexico is a very poor state, the three northern counties of Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos are even poorer, and

Any way you spin the statistics, New Mexico is a very poor state, the three northern counties of Mora, Rio Arriba, and Taos are even poorer, and the local Hispano population is among the poorest of the poor...



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the local Hispano population is among the poorest of the poor (see Table 1). And most local ranchers are just scraping by, supplementing meager incomes from other jobs with the little economic buffer provided by grazing a few cattle on public land.

In this economy, with ranchers running mostly small operations, profit margins from ranching are slim to none. In 1982, small-scale ranchers averaged only \$6.12 per animal in net return, while large-scale, commercial ranches made \$47.68. Local Hispano

it, but just as importantly, they are free of growth hormones, irradiation, and chemicals, as well as free of Alfalfa's, Wild Oats, and other high-priced sources for organic meat. "It does help with our food," says George Maestas, commenting that "... meat is the most expensive item in the grocery store."

All the ranchers I spoke with typically butcher a few cattle each year for the family to eat. For both financial and health reasons, they prefer meat they have raised themselves to what they can buy at the store. If not

Table 1
Socioeconomic Conditions in North-Central New Mexico, 1997

Area	Poverty Rate (b)	Per Capita Income	Unemployment Rate	High School Graduates (c)	College Graduates (c)
Mora, Rio Arriba, & Taos Counties (a)	27%	\$14,279	14.9%	NA	NA
New Mexico	20.2	20,288	6.2	78%	23.6%
United States	13.8	25,924	4.9	82.1	23.9

Sources: BEA 2000; Census 2000; NMDL 2000.

a = Combined averages for the three counties.

b = 1995 data (most recent available for counties).

c = For individuals 25 or older.

NA = Not available.

ranchers often view their livestock as "banks-on-the-hoof," rather than for-profit enterprises, that can be tapped in hard times, used as a backup for emergencies, used to cover unpredictable periods of unemployment, or to pay college tuition for their kids. Basic subsistence by way of meat and milk are an important part of that bank account for most families.²⁵

Ranchers are "free of the Safeway,"²⁶ as Bill deBuys describes

purely or certified organic, their cattle is naturally fed and fattened, without growth hormones. Joe Torres explains, "we don't use all the gimmicks that they use on the feedlot. I think we're hurting ourselves by implanting, we're hurting ourselves by using a lot of chemicals in the food." And Ricardo Fresquez worries about irradiation and the recycled slaughter house scraps that are sometimes fed to feedlot cattle. "You never know until 20 years from now what



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effect it will give us," he says.

Despite an obvious dependence on public lands for grazing, local ranchers resent the popular "welfare rancher" argument that their livelihood is heavily subsidized by taxpayers. Above and beyond grazing fees, permittees explain that they are responsible for range improvements like reseeding, trail maintenance, developing water holes for cattle (which also benefits wildlife), and building and maintaining fences. Citing a sense of stewardship and local pride, most of them say they also pick up garbage and clean up other people's messes.

They are all acutely aware of the fact that wilderness protection, all types of recreation, and other activities on public lands are similarly "subsidized." In particular, three of the ranchers I spoke with complained with distaste about the environmental damage done by off-road vehicles. "A lot of people think that cows are causing all the erosion," says Andie Sanchez. "We have seen in our forest that a lot of four-wheelers, four-wheel drives or Jeeps, ATV vehicles, they destroy a lot of land, they really kill a lot of grass." Ricardo Fresquez echoes that complaint. "People are getting into the Forest Service and, like the meadows, they're camping, they're running their ATVs, and they're destroying a lot of public land."

Joe Torres responds angrily to the welfare rancher argument. "I don't buy that," he says. "I want to talk to the environmentalists, to anybody, who tells me 'subsidy.' Who's subsidizing who? We have the cheapest food in the world. We have the best food in the

world, and we have a few — a very small percentage of the population are farmers and ranchers, and they feed not only the United States, they feed the world. Who is subsidizing who? Don't give me that bull. . . . Oh, those guys. Where did they go to school? They went to public school that was subsidized, they travel on a highway that's subsidized. They don't look at the subsidy. They are a product of a socialistic society. That's why they can afford to stand on a Goddamn soapbox and bark all day. Because they are a product of a socialistic society, whether they want to admit it or not."

Subsidy or not, a strong case can be made for inexpensive, if not free, grazing permits for lower-income northern New Mexico ranchers, consistent with our national ideal of providing an economic safety net for those less privileged. Even in a recent high-profile feature in the *San Jose Mercury News* called "Cash Cows: The Giveaway of the West," an editorial suggested, "So if there are subsidies, they should be targeted to the needy."²⁷

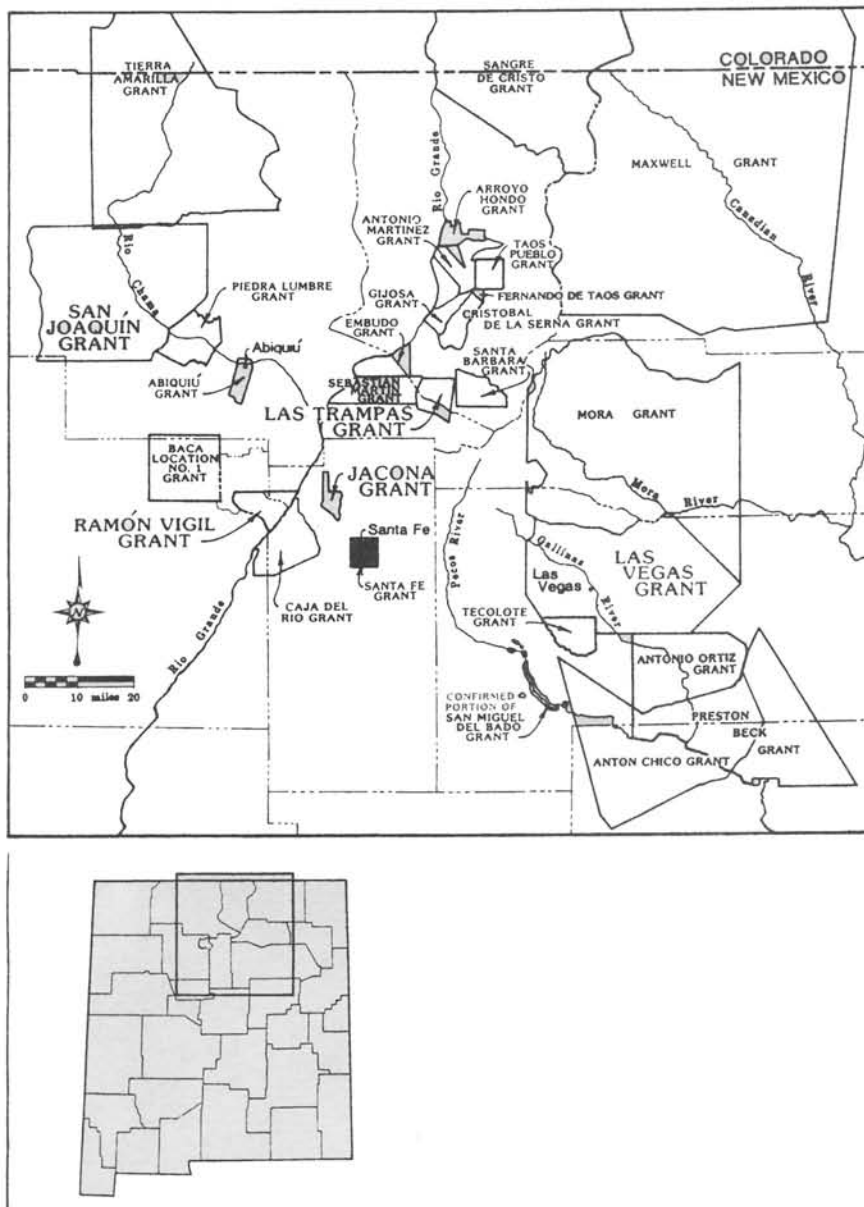
A Legacy of Injustice

There is plenty of debate about the reasons for chronic local poverty, but some causes are clear. Northern New Mexico has been an economic backwater since the early Spanish days, isolated on a far frontier from economic centers in what is now Mexico. Though localized subsistence economies once endured, if not occasionally flourished, the region has never been rich in natural resources. Carrying capacities are comparatively low, and today the state's farmland is valued the lowest in the entire country.²⁸ But for centuries, rural communities

They are all acutely aware of the fact that wilderness protection, all types of recreation, and other activities on public lands are similarly "subsidized."



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Map 3. Land Grants in North Central New Mexico.

controlled a large enough land base through the communal lands, or *ejidos*, granted by the Spanish or Mexican government, that they could meet all their basic needs. These lands provided ample grazing, access to timber, firewood, game, and control of watersheds on which their sophisticated irrigation

works relied.²⁹ Into the early part of the twentieth century, during the waning years of free access to *ejido* resources, many villages remained largely self-sufficient.

"Cooperation prevailed," writes Charles Briggs. "A large group of people would harvest one person's fields, then those of the neighbor, and so on. The people also operated in accordance with the principle of charity in their daily lives, helping out those who were in need. . . . The people were strong, because they ate the good food of the land. . . . Their herds and the wild game of the uplands provided meat. The sheep brought a double harvest — first wool then the lambs."³⁰ Though never prosperous, villagers remember those days of modest self-sufficiency with pride.³¹

Northern New Mexico has remained apart from the economic mainstream since becoming a territory of the United States. Writers, researchers, and local villagers make a convincing argument that an essentially colonialist relationship with the U.S. continues still today to be part of a political-economic dynamic that perpetuates economic dependence and local poverty.³² Certainly the loss of communal land grants was a catalyst,



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if not the major reason, for chronic poverty and displacement in the region.³³ While some writers dispute whether keeping hold of the *ejidos* would have really provided social and economic stability,³⁴ it's hard to argue against the idea that it would have provided a greater measure of stability and higher standard of living than most land-based villagers enjoy today.

Ricardo Fresquez grazes his 19 cattle for four months each year on a Santa Fe National Forest allotment that used to be part of the Mora Land Grant, which belonged in part to his ancestors. He says, "That's why Hispanics are so far down in the hole, because the majority don't have nothing. And if we, if these kids, if these people had their land, we'd have a lot of cattle. . . . And we'd be more educated on top of it."

George Maestas feels that "Traditional uses are. . . being challenged and threatened by environmental groups without any acknowledgment that these communal grant lands were often taken from the communities they were intended to benefit by surreptitious, unscrupulous and even fraudulent means."

Sociologist Clark Knowlton explained the land grant story in a nutshell. "The establishment of national forests in New Mexico also resulted in the abrogation of Spanish-American property rights. Much of the land now included in the National Forest System in northern New Mexico was once part of the many Spanish and Mexican land grants in the region. The inhabitants of the numerous Spanish-American mountain villages located their settlements in valleys and along streams

wherever valley floors were large enough for village sites and irrigated farm plots. The forested mountains, usually part of the village communal lands or *ejidos*, were used for grazing, hunting, fishing, and obtaining firewood. . . . When the Forest Service acquired these lands, these use rights were not acknowledged. The loss of grazing lands and the resources of the mountain forests brought poverty to a large number of Spanish-American village people."³⁵

Against a broad historic backdrop in northern New Mexico, the war with the United States a century and a half ago and the subsequent loss of land grants is recent memory. Many of my neighbors in the area, both activists and old-timers in the villages, can quote chapter and verse from the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which included an empty promise to honor all pre-existing land grants. The more resolute insist they live in "occupied Mexico."

Through a process of outrageous legal manipulations, various chicanery, and blatant deceit — a history that has been impressively well-documented by a small army of historians, justice advocates, lawyers, and social scientists — over 80 percent of community *ejidos* were eventually lost to local villagers.³⁶ In 1906, two years after the Court of Private Land Grant Claims closed, those unconfirmed grant lands became part of the public domain and were proclaimed by Theodore Roosevelt to be national forest. In Rio Arriba and Taos Counties, this consolidated nearly half the land mass, including every mountain watershed surrounding the villages, under federal control.³⁷ All told, the federal government today controls over half the

In 1906, . . . unconfirmed grant lands became part of the public domain and were proclaimed by Theodore Roosevelt to be national forest. In Rio Arriba and Taos Counties, this consolidated nearly half the land mass, including every mountain watershed surrounding the villages, under federal control.



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land in those two counties. Only 13.7 percent of Mora County became federal land, but that small portion includes the most desirable mountain lands in the county.³⁸

Despite presumed federal control, legal and rightful ownership of the public domain under the Forest Service and BLM in northern New Mexico remains an open question.³⁹ Over the last several years, New Mexico's Congressional delegation has floated a series of bills to address that question.



Log cabin at Ghost Ranch.
(Photo courtesy of Elsbeth Atencio.)

The most recent effort has been sent to the Government Accounting Office, 152 years after the fact, to review the United States' implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Writing about environmental justice, Jeanne Gauna, Co-Director of the Southwest Organizing Project, says that of the many historic injustices against local Hispanos, the loss of traditional lands is perhaps the most harmful.⁴⁰

The small plots of farmland that local families were left with after their land grants vanished were subdivided

through inheritance into progressively narrower strips called *varas*, or long-lots. Individual land holdings, which were often the only significant assets local families owned, eventually became too small to support a family with even the most ambitious subsistence agriculture.⁴¹

Local Hispanos clearly ended up with the short end of the stick. With a marginal land base once the land grants disappeared, no capital or access to capital to make investments or improvements, suddenly required to pay taxes for the first time, and generally ill-prepared to dive into a foreign economy and legal system, villagers were simply overrun by the U.S. conquest. Confusing the transition even further, the local concept of land as community property was fundamentally at odds with the U.S. concept of individually owned private property, and equally mystifying was the more abstract concept of public domain — land set aside for the public at large, even for people who would never set foot on it. With a limited understanding of these exotic new concepts of land tenure, local people did not understand it, or did not believe it, when their *ejidos* began to slip away.⁴² This combination of factors set into motion the cycles of poverty, unemployment, and under-education still at work today, a process that Peter van Dresser called the "Rural Syndrome."⁴³

In the 1940 *Forgotten People: A Study of New Mexicans*, George Sanchez describes the dynamics of local poverty at that time in Taos County, dynamics which have not changed much over the ensuing 60 years. "The



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land of Taos is poor. Under the best of circumstances, the natural resources of the area will provide only a meager living to tillers of the soil. In the past, the *Taoseño*

supplemented the production of his subsistence farm by grazing small herds of sheep, cattle, or goats on the open range. That range is no longer open to him on terms he can meet. Commercial livestock operators have acquired his land grants and compete with him for grazing leases and permits on public lands. Exorbitant fees, taxes, and forced sales

have crowded him out of his former grazing domain. His farm cannot support his family. Overuse of surrounding range and forest lands have depreciated further its limited worth. Subdivision, through inheritance, has reduced its size. There is little private work to be had, so he is forced into relief wage work, into seasonal labor, into destitution.⁴⁴

Exhibiting the humility common in local Hispano culture, Andie Sanchez is among the most soft-spoken, thoughtful, and considerate people I have ever met. Yet he has firm opinions, if no malice, regarding the land grant history. His perspective reflects a broader community senti-

ment. "I think us natives, we've got the privilege to graze it, to walk our own back yard. Because it was our ancestors', and it was handed down to us as a land



Ranch in Rodarte.
(Photo courtesy of Elsbeth Atencio.)

grant, by Guadalupe Hidalgo, to use as a family support."

Even Aparcio Gurulé, a very conservative gentleman who doesn't think highly of militant leaders in the land grant movement, and makes no claim to any land grant himself, says simply, "They were robbed of their land, they should get it back."

The process of dispossessing locals of their land grants was such a heartless, bureaucratic exercise carried out by lawyers and speculators in faraway places, that in some cases villagers did not know for many years that the land was no longer theirs. In the meantime, whether legally *ejido* or national forest, villagers for generations continued to



Table 2
Cattle Grazing Permit Sizes on the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests

No. of Cattle	1954 (%)	1964 (%)	1982 (%)	2000 (%) ^a	2000 (%) ^b
1-9	60%	48%	25%	13%	NA
10-19	22	24	30	29	NA
20-49	14	20	29	34	NA
50-99	4	7	10	16	NA
100+	< 1	1	6	8	7%
Average animals per grazing permit	13	17	32	41	63

Sources: Carlson 1990, Appendix J; Carson and Santa Fe National Forest records, 2000.

a = Santa Fe National Forest only.

b = Carson National Forest only; includes both cattle and sheep permits.

NA = Not available.

Note: Figures are rounded to the nearest whole percent.

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treat the landscape around their villages as a *de facto* local-use commons. Even after their loss became clear, and disempowered locals had little choice but to choke it down, they have continued to exercise traditional land-use rights on surrounding forest lands.⁴⁵

Small-Scale Ranching

"I depend on the cattle. . . to get out of the hole," says Ricardo Fresquez of the 19 head he grazes on National Forest land.

"The majority of the small settlers in the area all just had a few head, four or five head, ten head, fifteen maximum," explains Virgil Trujillo.

No one in northern New Mexico is getting rich from grazing cattle or sheep on public lands. In fact, since most Hispano ranchers raise too few animals to make a profit, they basically subsidize their own operations with the money and time they invest. Most local ranchers

cial, cultural, and spiritual— that are at least as important to their rural existence as profit.

Looking at a cluster of 11 adjoining allotments shared by a hundred permittees on the Santa Fe National Forest in Rio Arriba County, geographer Paul Starrs observes, "Nowhere else in the United States would one hundred permittees share a quarter million acres. A single Elko County, Nevada, ranch has 825,000 acres of land — and sixteen Elko ranches are bigger than 100,000 acres. The contrast could hardly be greater."⁴⁶

Small, non-commercial family herds for local use have been the tradition here for centuries. In the early days of local subsistence economies, occasionally one family or individual might own up to two or three hundred sheep or goats. But far more common in the villages was an average of less



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than ten head of cattle and/or sheep per family.⁴⁷

The many small-scale Hispano ranchers in the region today continue that legacy. From 1915 through 1954, between 60 and 70 percent of all grazing permittees on the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests — about 90 percent of them Hispano still today — had herds of less than 10 cattle, with an average permit size of about 11. As recently as 1964, the average was up to 17, but nearly half the permittees retained those tiny herds of less than 10. In 1982, the average permit was at 32 and the number of permittees on the two forests with less than 10 cattle had dropped to 25 percent. All told that year, 84 percent of the permittees still had relatively small herds of less than 50 head, and only 6 percent had anywhere near a commercial-size operation of 100 or more.⁴⁸

Current figures for the Santa Fe National Forest show 13 percent of cattle grazing permittees with less than 10 head, 76 percent at less than 50, and 8 percent at the commercial level of 100 or more, with an average permit for 41 head.⁴⁹

Current information for the Carson National Forest was not available in as useful a form. Based on the information that was obtained, the figures are generally comparable to those from the Santa Fe. Information was not broken down by what type of animal individual permittees grazed, but even at that, only 7 percent of the individual permits (not including cooperative grazing associations) on the Carson are for 100 or more cattle or sheep. The average permit is for 63 animals, but

that includes one particularly sheep-heavy district. Keep in mind that sheep ranches by nature and economics involve more animals. When reckoning AUMs (Animal Unit per Month), federal agencies calculate that five sheep need the same amount of forage or acreage as one cow and her calf. Subtracting the sheep-heavy Tres Piedras District, the average permit on the Carson falls to 37 animals (see Table 2).⁵⁰

Since most northern New Mexico Hispano villages lie in the mountains, and therefore near forest lands, grazing on BLM lands is generally beyond the scope of this report. BLM permits are typically for much larger commercial herds of both cattle and sheep, with an average in Taos County of about 140 cattle, and the largest and most productive allotments are held by out-of-state operators.⁵¹

As with all other wealth in our country, a handful of rich individuals controls most of the cattle industry. The top 10 percent of BLM grazing permit



Aparcio Gurulé and one of his grandsons.
(Photo courtesy of Ernie Atencio.)



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holders nationwide, for instance, controls 65 percent of all livestock on BLM lands. And none of that top 10 percent is in northern New Mexico. Throughout the West, 20,000 of approximately 26,300 ranches — 76 percent — are considered “small.” To the extent that public lands ranching is subsidized, large corporations and millionaires, not small-scale local ranchers, benefit most. And the large operators do more damage to the land.⁵²

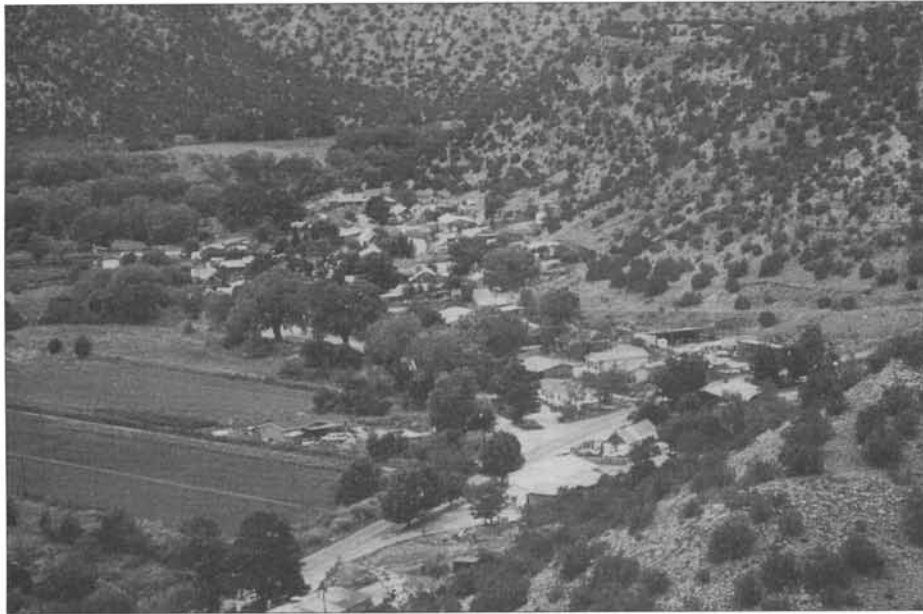
Back to the northern New Mexico scale, Virgil Trujillo says that today his grandmother and an uncle make their living exclusively from what is locally considered a large ranching operation of 257 cattle. But this would fall somewhere between small and unfeasible by national standards.

Even with 376 head — still a relatively small herd — Aparcio Gurulé’s operation supports several generations of his family and the occasional hired hand. “With us it’s a full-time job,” he says. “We make a living out of it.” He and his wife and periodic children and grandchildren live in a double-wide mobile home behind a family-owned general store in Cuba.



Chapter Three

Consequences of Ending Public Lands Ranching



"[It would]

create an economic chaos for northern New Mexico; it would create a social chaos for northern New Mexico, if the government lands . . . were withdrawn. . . . It would become a ghetto."—**Joe Torres**, local rancher and economist

"That's kaput," says Aparcio Gurulé about the impact to his family ranching operation of ending public lands grazing. Between 80 and 85 percent of his operation relies on federal lands, and pulling that reliance out from under him would result in four individual families — him and his children and grandchildren — plus occasional hired hands, suddenly without income.

Joe Torres says he could continue to live comfortably if the federal government pulled all grazing permits. "I could sell my water right and sit on my fanny the rest of my life. I wouldn't have to work again. I could sell this ranch and I wouldn't have to work again. . . . and it would become part of

the urban sprawl of Angel Fire [resort]." But about small-scale subsistence ranchers, he says, "They would survive, but they would not be able to send their kids to school. This is what pays the tuition at UNM, this is what pays the tuition at New Mexico State. This is why they can afford to have the modern facilities in their homes. They'd survive, but what would happen to their kids and the next generation and the next generation?"

Joe Torres continues, "People don't realize this, unless you listen to areas like Appalachia, where we have a complete breakdown of the economic structure, when mines closed down and all that. . . . I don't know if it's still there, but 28, 30 years ago, it was just — I mean



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it was bad. The whole system, the whole social system, the whole economic system, had broken down, the government had broken down. The whole system was broke. . . . you could see the chaotic conditions that existed because the basic industry had broken down. They say,



George Maestas.
(Photo courtesy of Elsbeth Atencio.)

‘well, it really wasn’t that important.’ But all these guys had a job, they were employed by the coal company. I don’t agree with what they were doing, strip mining the way they were doing. But they had a payroll, they had a check coming in. And all of a sudden they don’t have that check, their kids aren’t going to school, they are undereducated, they’re sick, doctors have moved out. Just a very, very chaotic situation.”

A 1994 study found that if public lands were closed to grazing, 44 percent of those surveyed in New Mexico would be forced out of ranching while 56 percent would continue to operate, but on a smaller scale.⁵³ In a strapped economic context, realistic alternatives are few and far between.

Ricardo Fresquez says he makes about half of his meager annual income to support his family of six from graz-

ing. “It would be impossible,” he says, without access to public lands.

For Virgil Trujillo, his Forest Service permit comprises 50 percent of his operation. “So it would be completely devastating to me,” he says, to lose his grazing rights. After at least five generations in the Chama Valley, he adds, “That would be a terrible uprooting situation, but, you know, if our culture and our communities were eroding to the point that there’s no life in it left for me and my family, there’d be no reason for me to stick around. It’s sad.”

Virgil says that his grandmother’s Forest Service permit provides about 40 percent of annual grazing needs, but that it is a critical 40 percent during the summer when nutrition content in grasses is most abundant in the high country. Without access to public land, he says, “I can definitely tell you that they would not be able to make their living off the cattle alone. . . [but] at the price and at the demand that our valley land is for development, I can bet that they’d still continue to make a decent living developing.”

George Maestas explains well the interconnected chain of events that would be set in motion with the loss of public lands grazing. “The ability to supplement one’s own land base with grazing on public lands ensures the minimal economic viability of small ranches, thus helping families to maintain ownership and beneficial use of relatively small plots of land and associated water rights. If this land cannot be maintained as at least minimally viable, longtime residents may end up being displaced by wealthy newcomers with



Consequences of Ending Public Lands Ranching

visions of subdivisions, golf courses or resort hotels. None of which is likely to have a more desirable environmental outcome. . . . Important cultural features such as *acequias* [traditional, gravity-driven irrigation systems] and communities made up of extended families might all fade away; to be found thereafter only in the history books."

Dark visions of resort development or subdivisions are not far-fetched in this area fast being discovered, and gentrified, by well-heeled immigrants from the cities. But this is more than a "cows versus condos" argument. And it is more than an argument of cows versus the loss of mere lifestyle or profession choice. It is an argument of cows versus the loss of a unique culture and communities that have endured in this region for 400 years. It is an argument of environmental justice.

Beyond the Bottom Line

"Here, the cattle industry and the agricultural industry might not be that important from a real economic standpoint, it might not even be a viable unit as far as an economic thing," says rancher-economist Joe Torres. "But, it is the — let's see, how I want to put it — it is the fiber that keeps the whole thing together. It is what keeps us together as a people, as a society, as a government, as a social-economic group."

Cattle ranching in northern New Mexico may in fact not be economically viable in a purist economic analysis. Taos County, for example, with a mostly rural land area of over 1.4 million acres, in the 1980s ranked dead last in the state for cash receipts from livestock, which accounted for less than

two percent of local cash receipts.⁵⁴ For local ranchers, who also work full-time jobs, operating losses often provide income tax write-offs against their other income. If they manage their finances properly, small-scale, low-income ranchers can lighten their considerable financial load by reducing their taxes.⁵⁵

But the danger of straight and narrow economic thinking is that it fails to take into account the less quantifiable, though no less important, issues of social well-being and cultural vitality.

In a study of community grazing practices in New Mexico, researchers Eastman and Gray determined that straight statistical analysis was not appropriate nor culturally compatible with local, small-scale grazing practices.⁵⁶ A conventional economic view also usually fails to take into account other tangible but indirect consequences of straight economic decisions. End public lands ranching in northern New Mexico because it is no longer "economically viable," for instance, and many a displaced family, with few other skills or assets to fall back on, could end up scraping by on a minimum wage in some poor, inner-city neighborhood. From my own family experience, growing up in inner-city Denver, I know that to be the fate of many a displaced local Hispano.

There are other seldom noticed



Joe Torres.
(Photo courtesy of Ernie Atencio.)



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social benefits that result from local ranching. Virgil Trujillo says that it not only helps feed families, but it helps keep kids out of trouble. "How do we measure all the social impacts when you can teach your kids to actually do some physical work, to be able to go out there and be productive citizens? That's a piece that happens out in ranch life as well."

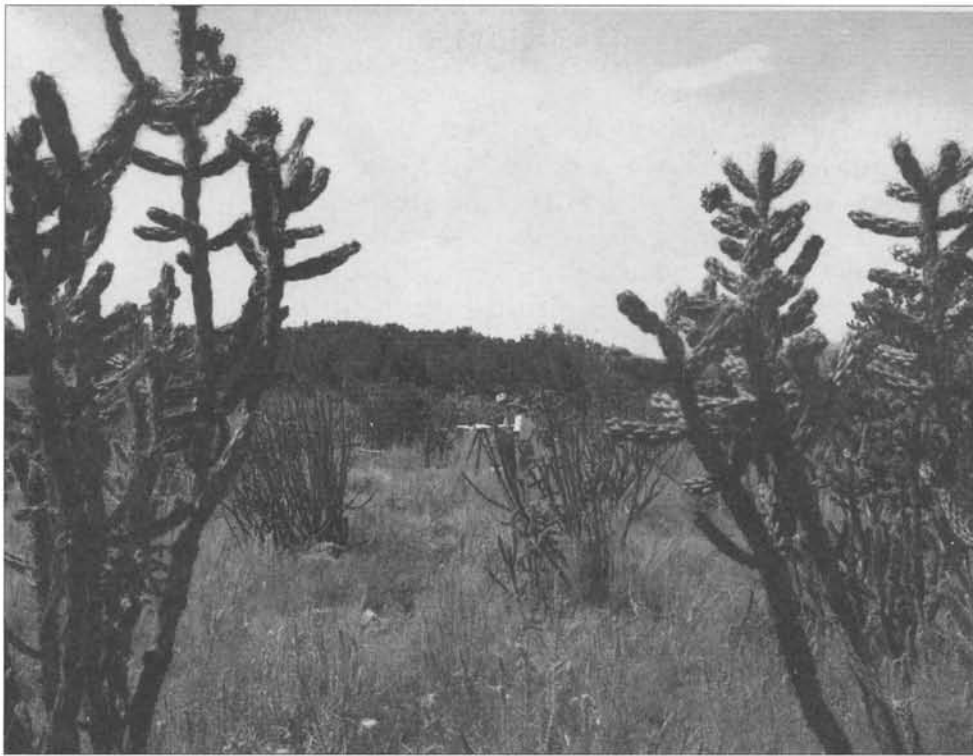
Local small-scale ranching may not seem a worthy pursuit in our modern, technology-based, runaway economy, but exchanging a rural economic struggle for an urban one, or pushing

able benefits like a sense of security, professional satisfaction, and family and cultural tradition may even outweigh the economic benefits. In a 1980 survey that had New Mexico ranchers rank their professional ranching goals, small-scale ranchers, like those in the north, ranked "quality of life" first and "make a profit" last, while commercial producers ranked making a profit number one.⁵⁷

"It gives us life," explains Virgil Trujillo. "It gives you peace of mind and peace of heart. You know, we're losing touch — we're just a couple generations removed from the land — who else is really going to take care of it? I see that responsibility, or am able to look far enough ahead, to know that we need folks out on the ground who can be good stewards."

Northern New Mexico ranchers have an intimate working knowledge of local natural history and ecological processes from on-the-ground personal experience and from oral history passed on from

parents and grandparents.⁵⁸ Virgil Trujillo relates his experience working outdoors. "I have my kids, who are in what I consider a beautiful setting, a ranch setting. It's just as clean a setting as you can be in. The wide open space,



Northern New Mexico Landscape.
(Photo courtesy of Courtney White.)

rural villagers closer to poverty and welfare, makes no sense economically or socially.

Local ranchers clearly articulate a long list of other important intangibles to community and family. Unquantifi-



Consequences of Ending Public Lands Ranching

the relationship with the environment, the relationship with the animals. And the wildlife as well. Remember that when we're out there and we're seeing all the wildlife in its natural state. To us, it's critical that it survive. I mean, if we do a good job at just managing our operations, everyone else benefits. There is a trickle effect. When we're thinning the forest, when we're doing sensible grazing, sensible logging. Remember we're opening up the forest floor to all the other critters that we share it with. Then there's a lot more room for everything, for all our little friends and neighbors that we share this environment with."

Ranching and Continuity

In a seldom cited passage from *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold, one of the fathers of the modern environmental movement, commented that, "The rich diversity of the world's cultures reflects a corresponding diversity in the wilds that gave them birth." And he lamented "the exhaustion of wilderness" and the "world-wide hybridization of cultures" as the two most significant developments of the modern age.⁵⁹ Taking that consciousness a step further, ethnobiologist Gary Nabhan more recently wrote, "It is ironic how many conservationists have presumed that biodiversity can survive where indigenous cultures have been displaced or at least disrupted from practicing their traditional land-management strategies. Ironic because most biodiversity remaining on earth today occurs in areas where cultural diversity also persists."⁶⁰

Land-based Indo-Hispano

village culture in northern New Mexico represents a unique reservoir of human experience, the centuries-long blending of cultures, spiritual traditions, and adaptations from the Middle-East, Spain, Mexico, and Native North America. Activists and scholars have recognized this unique fusion as *La Raza Cosmica* (the Cosmic Race), a living and breathing diversity firmly anchored in the soil of this region.⁶¹ Losing that rich tradition and rooted cultural knowledge would be a tremendous loss to cultural diversity in the world, comparable perhaps to the loss of biodiversity from indiscriminately clearcutting a swath of rainforest. And a big part of local cultural continuity is connected to the age-old activity of livestock grazing. "It's been a tradition since our grandfathers, our great-grandfathers," says Ricardo Fresquez.

Agricultural and social science researchers Clyde Eastman, Carol Raish, and Alice McSweeney explain the strong sense of local tradition and interconnectedness. "In northern New Mexico there is a distinct impression of continuity: a linking of the family with the land, the individual with community, the past with the future. These ranchers have a respect for land, family, and community that has strengthened over time with familiarity."⁶²

Andie Sanchez expresses almost the same idea in his own words. "One of the things is, that I think it's a family value, keeps the family together. Once you lose the family value, you lose the culture value, you lose the friendship, you lose the love of the family, because it keeps the family together," he says. "Usually, the family helps with the cattle. The association works together to work

"It gives us life," explains Virgil Trujillo. "It gives you peace of mind and peace of heart."



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the cattle while they are up in the forest.”

The roots of local cooperative grazing associations, like Andie’s, reach back to the old days of communal grazing on land grant *ejidos*. They keep alive the traditions of social cooperation and reinforce community bonds that are critical to rural village life.⁶³ Virgil Trujillo says that, despite any friction or feuds in the community, “we still have a strong community structure. When it’s roundup day, we all show up to go to the work. When we’re going to build an improvement, we show up.”

As well as its obvious benefits to community cohesion, local ranching also reaffirms ties to ancestral lands and other aspects of cultural heritage.⁶⁴ And ranching appears to be a tradition not just of the past but of the future.

Most of the ranchers I spoke with expressed a desire to see their children and grandchildren get involved in the family ranching operation. In some cases, they already are. Virgil Trujillo’s 16-year-old nephew, Giovanni Luchetti, already has two cows of his own and looks forward to following in his father’s ranching footsteps.⁶⁵

Aparcio Gurulé explains the strength of local ranching tradition, saying simply, as if the answer is as plain as day, “It’s in their blood.”

Without access to public lands, it’s clear that an age-old tradition, and an essential local economic pursuit, would probably be over. Losing legal title to community land grants is one thing, but losing all access to centuries-old traditional grazing lands would be the final blow. Not only would the rich fabric of social, cultural, and economic continuity begin to fray, but local ranchers who are

barely staying afloat as it is in a floundering local economy would find themselves in worse condition, struggling to provide even the basic comforts, food, and education for their families. It would be yet another in the long legacy of injustices to impoverished Hispano villagers.

Chapter Four

Culture, Ecology, Belonging



“Their families have lived here for centuries; their roots are in the land; their hearts and souls are there. The tie is really mystical.” –
Father Benedict Cuesta⁶⁶

Describing the powerful sense of belonging to the land that local people feel, father Cuesta, a Catholic priest from Arroyo Hondo (the village where I live today), said this less than 30 years ago. He was not the first or the last to recognize a unique cultural heritage and a strong connection to local land and history in northern New Mexico.

Writer, historian, and conservationist Bill deBuys, says that the “villages of northern New Mexico, belonged to a very small world. It was a world whose insularity, as well as its deep historical roots, accounted for the remarkable durability of Hispano culture.”⁶⁷

Anthropologist John Van Ness describes local history as “a chronicle of a rugged people who employed a community-based agro-pastoral system of subsistence to wrest a livelihood from a meager frontier environment. That they were able to accomplish this feat speaks both for fidelity to their cultural heritage and for adaptive ingenuity.”⁶⁸

Geographer Richard Nostrand says “The geographical outcome of four centuries of Hispano activity . . . is the stuff of Homeland. . . . And the legacy of all this is a truly remarkable geographic entity, a distinctive part of America, the Homeland of the only surviving Spanish colonial subculture.”⁶⁹

And historian Marc Simmons



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*"The more
you work the
land, the more
you get to love
it, because your
heart is in your
land."*

bemoans the fact that "New Mexico's distinctive Hispanic heritage has not received the recognition and respect that it deserves as one of America's oldest and most creative wells of human experience."⁷⁰

Many others have focused more specifically on the long and successful history of well-adapted, sustainable resource use, or cultural ecology.

Peter van Dresser, a pioneer in bioregionalism, said, "These settlements . . . were for centuries sustained by a simple but effective subsistence and pastoral agriculture, had evolved an architecture and a handicraft technology well-adapted to the land, and were enriched by folkways and ecclesiastical institutions of considerable stability and dignity."⁷¹

Long-time Taos resident and novelist John Nichols describes local culture as having "a strong sense of community, and of community maintained by the sustainable exploitation of resources. . . . It has rather meant livelihoods gained from mesa and meadow, irrigation farming in Taos County, firewood gathering, small ranching operations dependent upon grazing leases in the forest, and a generally low-key economic hustle . . . connected to the land-based self-sufficiency that has endured in this area for centuries."⁷²

Sociologist Devon Peña says, "Justice, common sense, and scientific prudence dictate that we protect these communities, for they are cradles of ecological democracy and sustainable livelihood."⁷³

And so on.

The long history, creative adaptability, vitality, and singular

uniqueness of northern New Mexico Hispano culture has been extolled and valued for generations as the subject of countless scholarly studies and novels. It is an old, deeply rooted, land-based culture, adapted to the local landscape through long experience, that thrives in all its nuanced customs, values, and beliefs, even into this new millennium. And there is no doubt that livestock ranching is and has been a critical part of the persistence of this distinctive culture.

Querencia

"The more you work the land, the more you get to love it, because your heart is in your land." This *dicho* (saying) from his grandfather is how rancher Andie Sanchez feels about his homeland. And it expresses eloquently the idea of *querencia*.

Querencia means "affection," "longing," or "favorite spot." In common usage around here it refers to a sense of responsibility toward a familiar place — a strong connection and ethic toward the land — and is an apt metaphor for rural Hispano cultural ecology. "They are at home in a place where they live and work and raise their families. This place provides them with the resources needed for survival, and, in turn, they feel a responsibility to care for that place. This is their *querencia*. It goes beyond the boundaries of legal ownership, beyond the promise of monetary return."⁷⁴

This land ethic is the product of old Spanish legal and moral strictures about land use, long history and adaptation to a land of relative scarcity, and centuries of intermingling of



Culture, Ecology, Belonging

Hispano and Native American blood, culture, and ideology.⁷⁵ This history explains the term “Indo-Hispano,” which more completely characterizes the culture. As local sociologist Tomás Atencio puts it, “Their shared experiences under the same sun, on the same land that is nourished by the same water have brought aspects of the two cultural views together, leaving a unique legacy to New Mexico, as well as to the rest of the country.”⁷⁶

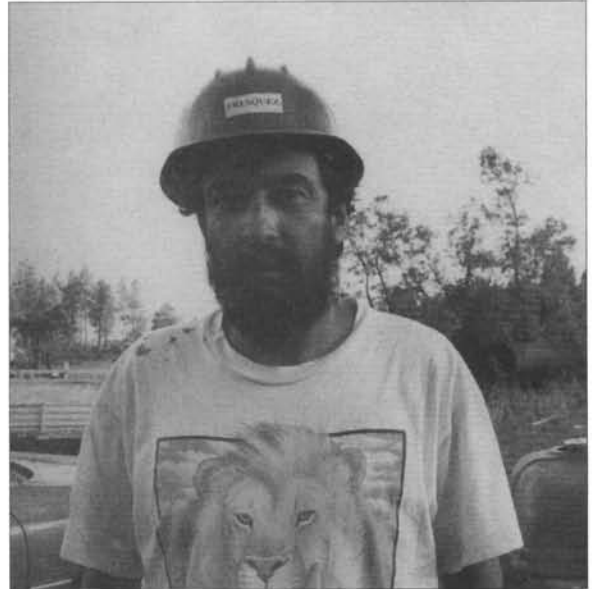
This cultural legacy is common knowledge among many local people. Ricardo Fresquez says, “Their blood runs in our veins because we have mixed because of all the years we have been with them here. . . . A lot of us have a lot of Native American in us and we don’t know it. But we have the same ways, same food, a lot of us think the same. We don’t think of selling our land.”

Responsibility and respect toward the environment is expressed in numerous and well-documented traditional land-use practices, cultural values and customs, *dichos*, and oral history comprising parables of the ethics and morality of caring for the land.⁷⁷ This land ethic is part and consequence of what anthropologists Paul Kutsche and John Van Ness, along with many others, have described as a constellation of distinctive “village culture values.”⁷⁸ *Vergüenza*, in particular, is a value that characterizes a great deal of Hispano culture and cultural ecology. Literally translated, the word means little more than “shame,” “disgrace,” or “shyness.” As an organizing principle for a culture, it concerns humility, modesty, regard for the opinion of oth-

ers, and an aversion to take or possess more than one needs.

We have to be careful of romanticizing land-based Hispano culture as a paragon of environmental harmony and sustainable resource stewardship, because there is certainly historic evidence of some overgrazing, excessive wood cutting, and other hard use around traditional villages (though debate continues about the real extent and causes of those impacts).⁷⁹ No culture on the planet can claim a history of perfect, benevolent stewardship. Nonetheless, an ethos of restraint is and has been the general guiding principle of resource use, or cultural ecology, in northern New Mexico for centuries.

In one relevant (though admittedly rare) example, a local grazing association in 1983 defied Forest Service wishes by *understocking* their allotment on the Santa Fe National Forest by about 50 percent, because the permittees did not agree that the area could provide enough grazing for the 440 head advocated by the agency. The permittees took this stand even at the risk of having their permit cut by the Forest Service



Ricardo Fresquez.
(Photo courtesy of Ernie Atencio.)



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— and therefore reduced in market value — because of underuse.⁸⁰

Homeland and Alienation

When asked how long his family had been ranching around the Cuba area, Aparcio Gurulé responded, “Since the beginning of recorded time.” Joe Torres responded, “My grandfather,

my people. . . . were freighters on the Camino Real, but they came there in 1700.” It’s common for northern New Mexico villagers to be able to describe their family history 10 to 12 generations back.⁸¹

From that long history of relying on the land, local

Hispanos have a bond with their landscape and communities as intimate and undeniable as that of any native people anywhere on the planet. As one rancher expresses it, his children’s interest in the land is “an interest through blood.”⁸² Richard Nostrand describes the intimate knowledge of the local landscape, and the fierce love, pride, and loyalty to home, as part of the Hispano sense of place, or “homeland.”

Nostrand also relates the following anecdote about a man named Tony Lucero. “What happened was that in 1951, soon after the Forest Service denied [Tony’s father] Juan Lucero a permit to graze his cattle on the one-time common lands of Placitas — where Tony’s grandfather had raised sheep and his great grandfather had raised goats — the family moved to California.”

Tony remembered how his father often looked to the sky and said, “*Grulla, grulla. A tu tierra, grulla. Porque esta no es tuya.*” (Goose, goose. Return to your home. Because this is not your land.) A generation later, Tony Lucero and his family moved back to the home village in northern New Mexico.⁸³

Despite the strong bonds, or maybe because of them, many local Hispanos are beginning to feel a disheartening alienation in their own homeland. A common lament is that newcomers from the outside world who are seeping in and rapidly gentrifying the region lack knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity to local history and culture. This makes maintaining traditional lifeways and livelihoods all the more challenging.

An example of maintaining that strong connection to the homeland, my father, Ernesto Atencio, has lived in Denver for the last 38 years but shares local concerns about the recent influx. “The outsider is not familiar with the culture here and they are not familiar with what people did to provide for their families only 50 years ago,” he says. “So that is tough, when people migrate to a beautiful location like here. . . . But they don’t know what these peoples endured in years past, and what they labored in, and what the four seasons meant to them. These are things that the new arrivals will never know because they don’t rely on the land. These people cannot appreciate the way people do who have had their hands in the soil for 50 years or more.”⁸⁴

Ricardo Fresquez echoes that sentiment. “People with money that



Virgil Trujillo.
(Photo courtesy of
Courtney White.)



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come from the outside that are trying to change this beautiful place, because they feel it should be the way they feel it is, in their own eyes. But they don't know how many people have lived like this, or what are our ways of living."

Virgil Trujillo explains the economic realities of the influx. "The dominant culture right now has a huge impact on our little communities. There is no doubt. The money is running right over us. I mean, what chance do I have. What chance does Grandma have when she owns ten acres, squat in the middle of two people that are willing to pay multi-million dollars for their land on either end? Her taxes go through the roof. . . she's basically squeezed out. What chance do we really have to survive in that environment? I mean *survive*. . . I don't mean, be happy with your crumb and don't ask for anything more."

It is clear that economic survival and cultural survival must go hand in hand. And a strong argument can be made that survival of local communities, well-adapted land use practices, and the traditional land ethic of northern New Mexico Indo-Hispano culture can actually enhance, rather than threaten, potentials for ecological health and restoration.



A Santo at La Gruta protecting the valley below, part of the Hispano tradition long held and still honored. (Photo courtesy of Crystal.)



Chapter Five

Grazing Practice and Policy



"One of the saddest thing is that there is a wealth of actual experience in our small communities," says Virgil Trujillo. "And it's not worth two cents when you go sit in an allotment meeting with the Forest Service, because you don't have a degree, because you don't have a formal education.

"This whole question of multi-use in our National Forests is something that is just on the forefront of my mind constantly," continues Virgil, "... because it all has limits. How much wood can you take? How much grazing can you take? How much recreation can you place on it? All those are limits, and we all have to be aware of what the limits are so we don't push them. And

so we're able to manage for maximum, or optimum, efficiency."

Local ranchers consider themselves to be among the most responsible and knowledgeable stewards of local ancestral lands. Obviously, they have a very direct stake in keeping forests and rangeland healthy and productive. When discussing problems of overgrazing, everyone I spoke with thought that was about the stupidest and most short-sighted thing any serious rancher could do. Certainly, ranchers here and elsewhere have made that short-sighted miscalculation in the past, but, as George Maestas says, "as with every other human endeavor throughout history, mistakes have been made. Nevertheless, we've learned

"There are no easy choices, but the dilemmas are clear. If northern New Mexico is to remain an area where traditional Hispanic society is to survive in at least some ways, its use of a 'federal' commons will have to continue."

—Geographer **Paul Starrs**⁸⁵



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from those mistakes and improved our management practices.”

Local Knowledge

In a common lament, George says that there is a “presumption that traditional users have ruined or will ruin these public lands. In general, our riparian areas and forests are relatively healthy.”



Thick forests in Northern New Mexico. (Photo courtesy of Courtney White.)

Despite local understanding of local ecosystems, policy and management decisions that affect ecological health are out of the hands of local ranchers, he says. “To the extent that our forests’ health has deteriorated, it can largely be attributed to management policies that have been mandated and imposed on us. Policies like indiscriminate fire suppression, and prohibitions on timber and firewood removal have left our forests overgrown with little forage for our cattle or wildlife and susceptible to catastrophic fire.”

Discussing policy issues that address biodiversity, Virgil Trujillo exhibits the same grounded knowledge of local ecology. “Well, I think the en-

dangered species protection is critical, but while we get narrow-minded and focused down on an individual species, again — and keep forgetting about how the whole picture ticks together — that then causes a big concern for me. If we’re losing our watersheds also to this tree encroachment, and so on and so forth. If it’s affecting the way our rivers run and so on and so forth, it concerns me when we focus and narrow-mind ourselves down to one little issue and spend millions of dollars on it, instead of standing back and looking at the big picture. . . . It’s a complicated issue. I share my environment with all the creatures. All have equal right.”

Both George and Virgil express a knowledge of ecology and a sensitivity to local ecological issues that is shared by all the ranchers I spoke with, a knowledge borne of generations of first-hand experience. Writer and historian Bill deBuys points out that public lands ranchers are a well-informed and increasingly vocal constituency for large-scale landscape rehabilitation, particularly for those “homelier” wildlands ignored by most environmentalists because they do not support recreation or lack wilderness designation. Ranchers are among the few people these days arguing for prescribed burning and thinning as a matter of ecosystem health and productivity, not just to avoid catastrophic fire and property damage. Removing ranchers from public lands, especially in northern New Mexico, says deBuys, would be a waste of the largest interest group that is best equipped to take on the burden of a progressive management to restore wildlands.⁸⁶



Grazing Practice and Policy

Another common lament, and something that mystifies local villagers, is the way the national environmental agenda often lumps together local, small-scale, potentially sustainable resource use with multinational, profit-driven, industrial-scale exploitation. Local ranches are small, often hand-to-mouth operations, that simply help poor families survive. As Aparcio Gurulé says, "Don't compare them with Ted Turner and those big kids, you know?"

Most use of National Forest resources in this area is at a level of simple local subsistence. "The thing is, the whole community is in need of the wood products from the forest. A lot of people have to bring *vigas* (ceiling beams) for their homes, or fuelwood for survival, cooking a meal, or warming up," explains Andie Sanchez.

Setting Things Right

Despite constant conflicts and disagreements with public lands managers, most ranchers have learned to tolerate what they see as unavoidable bureaucratic shortcomings. As Virgil Trujillo says, "I hesitate to be too critical of our public land managers because they have no more resources to work with. It's pretty sad." However, he also points out that "they hold the decision-making authority. And we basically have to make our living at their whim." Like Virgil, everyone else I spoke with has ideas about how public lands agencies could improve local management.

Considering dismal local economic conditions, and the fact that many public lands in the neighborhood used to be community *ejidos*,

local ranchers believe that public lands managers should be more responsive and more accountable to local needs. At least in 1972, the Forest Service agreed.

That was the year regional forest supervisor William Hurst drafted the Northern New Mexico Policy directive, which said that "the Forest Service as an organization can contribute most effectively to many of the economic and social needs of the people of Northern New Mexico." And it stipulated that "the uniqueness and value of the Spanish American and Indian cultures in the Southwest must be recognized and efforts of the Forest Service must be directed toward their preservation."⁸⁷

Violent and high-profile protests regarding the loss of land grants, compounded by forest policies that cut grazing and discontinued free-use permits, had motivated a 1968 Forest Service report by Jean Hassell called "The People of Northern New Mexico and the National Forests." The Hassell report, which is what spurred the regional forester's policy directive four years later, outlined 99 policy recommendations to better serve local communities. Within those recommendations, Hassell said "the value of these subsistence permits [for small herds] must be recognized. If nothing more, they provide meat which frees money for the purchase of other necessities of life."⁸⁸

While that was nearly 30 years ago, local conditions and needs have not significantly changed. And certainly, "Spanish American and Indian cultures in the Southwest" continue to be unique and worthy of preservation efforts. Despite some local complaints to the contrary, the Forest Service has by and

"It's a complicated issue. I share my environment with all the creatures. All have equal right."



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large followed through on giving priority to small-scale “subsistence permits” for local Hispanos, at the expense of larger commercial permits for non-locals.⁸⁹ Another policy that responds to local cultural realities is working with a number of cooperative grazing associations on group allotments, even though one Forest Service official described it as a “nightmare” to administer.⁹⁰ Grazing associations, as mentioned earlier, reflect



Rio Grande.
(Photo courtesy of Ernie Atencio.)

and reinforce a long tradition of communal grazing since the days of community-owned *ejidos*.

Despite these efforts, some local ranchers believe the Forest Service could and should do more for local communities. Ricardo Fresquez says that the Forest Service ought to honor more of the letter and spirit of its 1972 Northern New Mexico Policy. Talking about commercial use of the forests, he says, “The only people that have been to the Forest Service is big commercial logging industries that have come in. . . . Nothing is done local, nothing is done to help the local economy. It’s really a shame how the Forest service behaves with the local

people.”

To better ground Forest Service personnel in the gritty realities of trying to make a living around here, Virgil Trujillo suggests, only half joking, that “the first thing they ought to do, when we get a range [conservationist], is give him twenty-five head of cattle, a power saw, and a pickup, and tell him that’s fifty percent of his wages. Okay? . . . A range conservationist — he’s the guy that can stand up there and say, ‘I’m going to cut your permit in half, and I’m really sorry, and I know how you feel,’ without it having absolutely no impact on his income. He can go to bed the same way as he got up this morning, and it’s not going to affect him or his family.”

The unavoidable and very pertinent history of land grants and long traditional use is an issue most Hispano ranchers feel strongly about. Regarding the semantics of grazing “privilege” versus grazing “right,” Virgil Trujillo says, “For us it’s basically a right. Our forefathers settled this land. These public lands were settled with, you know, blood and sweat. There are members in our family who gave their lives to be settled in this area. Most of these, of course, are — all the area that I am involved with — were land grants. And we know the whole issue behind land grants. So for us, it’s a right and we don’t take it lightly.”

Short of having those lands returned, which most locals agree is near impossible, ranchers feel that traditional-use rights for local Hispano communities should, at the very least, be legally recognized and permitted under public lands policies. George



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Maestas says, "Now that the communities no longer own the lands, at least the traditional uses by those communities should be preserved and continued. [Because] the history of acquisition is indeed very distinct from acquisition of public lands in other parts of the country."

Precedents for this approach exist. In the 1975 Grand Canyon Enlargement Act, Congress recognized Havasupai traditional-use rights by returning 185,000 acres of Park Service and Forest Service land to the tribe, as well as granting exclusive use of an additional 95,300 acres of land within the park.⁹¹ Another example mentioned earlier is the 1970 Blue Lake Act, which returned 48,000 acres of Forest Service land to the Taos Pueblo Tribe for traditional and religious use.⁹²

These were both controversial issues within the national environmental community at the time, but few can argue that these actions helped set right historic injustices and that they embodied principles of environmental justice. Ensuring traditional-use access to ancestral lands for struggling northern New Mexico Hispano ranchers would be equally just and the right thing to do.



Chapter Six

Toward a Sustainable Future



When asked what he thought would happen in northern New Mexico if public lands were closed to grazing, Virgil Trujillo responded, “The end of a traditional way of living, the end of a culture, the end of eras.” But he optimistically went on with a hope about the future. “All those things . . . concern me. I don’t want to see the ends. I want to see a continuation and a beginning to support what we already have. . . . I think, and I really believe, that if the agricultural community is allowed to communicate and to be tested, we’ll find out that there is more good than bad out there. And that that’s where the real answers lie.”

While this report paints a

dismal picture of the northern New Mexico economy and the state of environmental politics, we can’t ignore all the very positive work underway in the region. The agricultural community here is collectively undertaking some of the most progressive sustainable economic development projects anywhere in the West.

Too many of my environmental colleagues blindly vilify all things agricultural as the scourge of the environment. But if we don’t support local, sustainable agriculture of all sorts, if we’re not committed to the idea of using part of our own backyard to produce as much of our food and other needs as possible, where do they come from?

“I think, and I really believe, that if the agricultural community is allowed to communicate and to be tested, we’ll find out that there is more good than bad out there. And that that’s where the real answers lie.”

— Virgil Trujillo,
local rancher and
professional range
manager



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Northern New Mexico's legacy of localized natural resource dependence and a traditional ethic of restraint provide an ideal framework for sustainable, bioregional development in the modern context.

Whose watershed somewhere else are we polluting and dewatering through industrial agriculture and factory farms? What kind of corporate globalism and resource-squandering infrastructure are we supporting when we buy foods of dubious quality transported halfway across the planet? The local agricultural community has already confronted these questions and is coming up with some concrete answers.

Northern New Mexico's legacy of localized natural resource dependence and a traditional ethic of restraint provide an ideal framework for sustainable, bioregional development in the modern context. In his 1972 book, *A Landscape for Humans*, Peter van Dresser saw the traditional Hispano community in this region as a coherent model of local land use, well-suited technology and construction techniques, and economic organization that was uniquely poised to evolve into what he called the sustainable "bioeconomic" community of the future.⁹³ These very qualities are part of what drew counter-culture refugees to rural northern New Mexico in the sixties and seventies — a back-to-the-earth hippie influx seeking its own eco-utopia. Many of those folks have stayed on, integrating themselves into the local community and economy, and have become part of the movement toward local sustainable development.

Building on traditional economic and social structures and on the cultural wisdom and ethics that have guided resource use for centuries, local land-based communities are blending new ideas with the old to stimulate a wide range of economic potentials. This is not a wholesale plunge into anything that

makes a buck, but a mindful approach to economic development that seeks harmony with the realities of local landscape and the rhythms of local culture.

Turning to the Past

There is not much true social or economic innovation in the world. Most of what we call "progressive" or "sustainable" these days is built upon old ideas adapted for modern contexts. As Virgil Trujillo says, "The answers are already there. There's nothing to be re-discovered, we've just got to put a lot more of that into practice. We go back, take from the past so that we can really, you know, continue to create the future." Northern New Mexico offers plenty of old ideas, a long and rooted history, on which to build, and most of the successful development work going on today follows that model.

The non-profit Community Development Corporation Canados del Valle (Livestock of the Valley), based in the agricultural heart of Rio Arriba County, is a pioneer in locally appropriate sustainable development. Canados has had its share of challenges, including some from the environmental community, but has been overall exceptionally successful.

Local citizens formed Canados del Valle in 1983 in response to the state's economic development plan for the region, which was pushing a tourism-based economy complete with a downhill ski resort. Canados founders recognized that this sort of development would undermine rather than enhance economic self-reliance and sustainability — it would increase land values and taxes, divert scarce irrigation



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water from agriculture to recreation, and create primarily low-wage seasonal jobs for locals. Ganados successfully opposed the resort and conceived an alternative approach to rural development that not only fosters sustainable local economies, but also benefits local culture and protects the environment.⁹⁴

Two Ganados-initiated enterprises — Tierra Wools and Pastores Collections — provide lucrative markets for local wool in the form of stylish, hand-woven textiles. A tire recycling project makes use of one of the most pervasive by-products of our national automobile culture. Pastores General Store carries goods from 150 local artisans and cottage industries. A commercial kitchen and a natural beef processing plant are in development. Today, in one of the poorest counties in the nation, Ganados enterprises and spin-offs employ about 40 people, market goods for another 150, and generate close to half a million dollars in annual local revenues.⁹⁵

This integrated approach to rural economic development is not new to the region, but it's growing steadily. Siete del Norte Community Development Corporation (one of the oldest in the nation), Taos County Economic Development Corporation, and La Jicarita Enterprise Community are among those working on development projects with a mind to sustaining the unique life and culture of rural communities.

Agricultural Projects. Other agricultural projects are flourishing as well. The Sangre de Cristo Growers Cooperative, based in Costilla, is a good example of the innovation and potential of organic farming. Reviving an

historic agriculture of a century ago, the co-op engages six local farmers in producing organic wheat. This hinterland community offers few opportunities, but the fledgling co-op already produces up to 300,000 pounds of wheat and nearly \$90,000 in revenue per year, and so far has found lucrative markets with several bakeries and restaurants in Taos and Santa Fe. Looking to the future, the co-op is building a mill to process grain locally and cut out middleman costs, experimenting with organic oats and barley, and running a summer youth-farmer program.⁹⁶ As a friend once said about reviving traditional farming at a Hopi village, "It's not just about growing food, it's also about growing kids."⁹⁷

Following the Sangre de Cristo Growers' lead, other organic wheat cooperatives are sprouting in the area. Farmer's markets and organic produce are also experiencing a renaissance throughout New Mexico. Santa Fe hosts one of the premier farmer's markets in the country, and another 26 such markets are thriving in other parts of the state. One indicator of the economic potential is the fact that the market for organically grown food in New Mexico has increased by 20 percent per year since 1990.

Acequias. Working toward similar goals, acequia associations in the state have become more politically active and influential in their advocacy of traditional communities and locally based economies. Acequias — gravity-driven irrigation systems imported to the region by the earliest Spanish settlers — have sustained local communities and agriculture for centuries and were the earliest form of cooperative community



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Acequia.
(Photo courtesy of Ernie Atencio.)

government in rural Hispano villages.

Today, acequias endure as part of the glue that holds together rural communities, but they also nourish the burgeoning organic produce industry.⁹⁸ But their survival, like so much in traditional Hispano communities, depends on maintaining local control of critical local resources, in this case community water rights.

Forestry.

Sustainable forestry programs have found surprising success in the wake of lawsuits, injunctions, and acrimonious

disputes over logging. Since larger multi-national timber companies bailed out after cutting the best and biggest timber, small-scale local enterprises have filled the niche. Like most other local natural resource use, small-scale operations harken back to the days of community *ejido* use.

The Santa Fe-based Forest Trust has initiated or partnered on at least six community forestry projects with Hispano and Indian communities. These projects employ local villagers in sustainable timber harvesting — in some cases part of restoration and fire hazard reduction contracts with the Forest Service — while developing new markets for small-diameter trees. Current projects include stewardship contracting and milling at Las Humanas Cooperative, a mill, post-peeler and solar-drying kiln at

Jemez Pueblo, round-wood construction at La Madera Forest Products in Vallecitos, cutting firewood, *vigas*, and *latillas* (for Pueblo-style ceilings) at La Montaña de Truchas Woodlot, a post-peeling project in Peñasco, and restoration work at Picuris Pueblo. In all, these projects employ about 50 people, as well as providing work for an additional 100 or so contractors.

Forest Trust's Community Forestry Coordinator, Ryan Temple, says that community forestry offers the best hope for sustainable timbering, because it involves local people with a local stake in the long-term health of the resource, rather than the corporate model of grabbing for short-term profits, cutting, and moving on. He also points out that the community gets more out of this approach than just income. In places like the village of Truchas, where La Montaña is currently the largest single employer, it raises the overall quality of life and sense of hope, and provides incentives for people to stay in the community rather than seek work elsewhere.⁹⁹

Ranching. Ranching in northern New Mexico is undergoing a similar revitalization through recent innovations in holistic range management. Like other agricultural development in the area, improvements in range management are often more a revival of traditional practices, but coupled with a new scientific approach. Among the benefits of ecologically sensitive management, ranchers have sometimes been able to increase herd sizes, and therefore income, while improving ecological conditions.

Virgil Trujillo manages a graz-



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ing program for the 21,000-acre Ghost Ranch near Abiquiú. He expresses the basic philosophy that guides his work — a philosophy based on 400 years of local ranching — in a characteristically simple way. “Keep the land healthy, and it will keep you healthy.” In this case, keeping the land healthy entails a rigorous grazing rotation schedule and a lot of work moving cattle from one pasture to the next. Since switching to holistic methods in 1986, the ranch has been able to triple its carrying capacity and still remain within ecologically sustainable limits. Even at that, grass cover across the ranch is healthier than ever.¹⁰⁰

Herding is a part of ecologically sustainable management that is one of those age-old practices making a comeback. Herding livestock has been a widespread and successful adaptation around the world for up to 10,000 years, at least as old a pursuit as farming. But recent practice and public lands policy have tended to plop livestock untended into a fenced allotment, where, without the ability or incentive to roam, animals are likely to overgraze and overtrample one small area or destroy a stretch of sensitive riparian habitat. Herding keeps livestock on the move as a unit, filling an ecological niche large roaming herds of ungulates have always filled (though admittedly not always these ungulates). It spreads both the impacts and the benefits more evenly over a large area, keeps cattle out of sensitive areas, can strategically exclude or include different stretches of land as conditions dictate, and allows longer periods of rest for large areas.

Joe Torres says he got the idea

of reviving herding on the Valle Vidal Allotment of the Carson National Forest from talking to his grandfather, who spent a lifetime herding sheep. By all accounts, conditions on the Valle Vidal are vastly improved since Joe hired a rider to keep the cattle moving. “They can’t stay in the creek bottoms,” for instance, “because the rider won’t let them.” Joe says the extra \$20 per head he pays each year for the rider is well worth it, not only because the lighter touch on the land means better forage and fatter cattle, but because it promotes a healthier ecosystem. The Valle Vidal herding operation is proving to be a successful experiment that other local ranchers are beginning to emulate for all the same reasons. On the Valle Vidal, at least, herding has produced such a dramatic improvement in range conditions that the Forest Service District Ranger has been able to shift resources to other parts of the district.¹⁰¹

The Valle Grande Grass Bank, located on Rowe Mesa on the Santa Fe National Forest, offers yet another avenue for improving both ecological and economic conditions for ranchers. The grass bank is under a special grazing permit to the Conservation Fund that allows National Forest permittees from other areas to temporarily relocate their livestock to Rowe Mesa while home allotments get a chance to rest and undergo restoration work. A well-documented trend of tree and shrub encroachment into mountain grasslands during the last century has cut available grazing lands by half. This loss has squeezed livestock into a shrinking territory where the forage is limited and grazing impacts are magnified. Removing animals from their home allotment gives the Forest

“Keep the land healthy, and it will keep you healthy.”



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Service and permittees an opportunity to re-grass some of those overgrown areas through thinning, prescribed burning, and reseedling. An additional year or more of rest allows the desired



Rowe Mesa, before the Valle Grande Grass Bank.
(Photo courtesy of Courtney White.)

new growth to take a firm hold, and the livestock are returned to a revitalized and more productive allotment.

Grassbanks like Valle Grande help ranchers restore the ecological vigor and carrying capacity of their grazing allotments — which every rancher I spoke with would like to see — without forcing them to suspend ranching operations and cut into their slim revenues. In partnership with the New Mexico Environment Department, The Quivira Coalition, the Río Pueblo/Río Embudo Watershed Protection Coalition, and the U.S. Forest Service, the Santa Barbara Grazing Association is among those who have taken advantage of this opportunity to address what its members recognize as serious problems on their allotment. Though some of the Santa Barbara ranchers harbor vague suspicions about

this new-fangled idea, they are willing to go along with it if it will improve conditions in their home watershed, even though having to truck their cattle the extra distance increases costs.

Bill deBuys, one of the Valle Grande Grass Bank founders, says that perhaps its greatest value is as a powerful lesson in the potential of collaborative problem-solving. Ranchers, conservationists, and agencies have thrown in together for the collective good of the land and the people who rely on it. And it works.¹⁰²

Collaborative Stewardship

Concepts like collaboration and consensus have become the bogeymen of the national environmental movement, signaling co-opting and compromise. But it's clear to people on the ground that this approach benefits both the land and land-based communities, without compromising any of our strongly held values — it's not an either/or proposition. Initiatives like the Valle Grande Grass Bank are not examples of environmentalists folding to industry interests, but are the product of dedicated, proactive work by people who care about the health of the land and communities. It is certainly a challenging approach, because it requires the slow and patient work of building relationships, bridging ideological gaps, and exploring our common ground. And it's an approach whose time has come.

In the Camino Real District of the Carson National Forest, straddling the Taos-Rio Arriba County line and encompassing the Santa Barbara Allotment, Picuris Pueblo, and some



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of the oldest Hispano villages in the region, this approach has become part of official policy and won the district a prestigious award in 1998. District employees developed their Collaborative Stewardship Program, partly in recognition of unique local history and economic circumstances, and partly because they were tired of the perpetual adversarial relationship with local forest users, in many cases their own friends and neighbors. Current District Ranger Cecilia Seesholtz says her predecessor saw they were spending too much energy in conflict and not getting much done on the ground.

The district has not changed forest management goals, only how to accomplish those goals. In partnership with local communities, rather than the typical top-down imposition of policy, forest management projects are designed to enhance the ecosystem and biodiversity while providing resources and income for community members. Cooperative agreements with the Forest Trust, La Montaña de Truchas Woodlot, Picuris Pueblo, the Santa Barbara Grazing Association, and the Valle Grande Grass Bank have produced successful thinning and restoration projects, while benefiting local ranchers and villagers who rely on fuelwood and other forest resources.

In recognition of its innovative

Prescribed thinning and burning on the Santa Barbara Allotment.

[Top] Burning.

(Photo courtesy of Steve Miranda.)

[Middle] After the burn.

(Photo courtesy of Steve Miranda.)

[Bottom] Regrowth.

(Photo courtesy of La Jicarita.)





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*"We needed
to scrap the old
approaches and
get creative."*

approach and cutting through bureaucratic red tape to get the work done, the district earned one of ten Innovations in Government Awards granted nationwide in 1998, including a \$100,000 grant. A greater recognition will be when other districts and national forests see the long-term value of this approach and adopt it for their own work. The district is sponsoring a conference on Collaborative Stewardship to spread the news and help increase its use.

After nearly 30 years, District Ranger Seesholtz says that the Collaborative Stewardship Program is finally implementing the recommendations of the 1968 Hassell Report and the 1972 Northern New Mexico Policy directive. "It was a good idea, but there was no direction about how to get there," she says. "We needed to scrap the old approaches and get creative."¹⁰³

"It Gives Us Life"

All the ranchers I interviewed for this report, activists working on behalf of acequias, those involved in small-scale forestry, people pursuing economic development projects, and many environmentalists I have worked with, all share a fundamental respect for the land and the unique communities and culture of northern New Mexico. I don't know anyone working on these issues on either side of the fence who doesn't care about the environment, and it exhibits an enormous prejudice to assume that those who make a living by grazing livestock or cutting timber on public lands in northern New Mexico care less about those lands than environmentalists and recreationists. I believe we all want the same things — healthy ecosystems and

healthy communities — but we sometimes have different ideas about "how to get there." Collaborative Stewardship and the other initiatives described above offer some direction. They also show the potentials that exist for shaping a future that nurtures the land while providing sustainable rural livelihoods for the people who've lived here for centuries.

That small-scale ranching and other northern New Mexico land-use traditions endure into this new millennium, even after the loss of traditional lands and resources, might seem an anachronism, but it underscores the phenomenal persistence and adaptiveness of local Hispano culture. As Bill deBuys puts it, "There are a great many ways to parse the reasons for this persistence but in the end nearly all of them come down to love of culture, love of place, and love of land. And this, in turn, is not three things, but one. It is the single most valuable artifact of the nation's most singular region."¹⁰⁴

As I hope this report has made abundantly clear, ranching and other natural resource uses, whether on public lands or private, are critical to sustaining that singular cultural tradition. Who would vote to shut down public lands grazing and close access to traditional-use lands on which the continuity of this centuries-old tradition hinges?

If we care about genuine environmental justice and about setting right historic injustices, then supporting local Hispano self-determination through appropriate and sustainable economic development is a move in the right direction. Finding a way to ensure



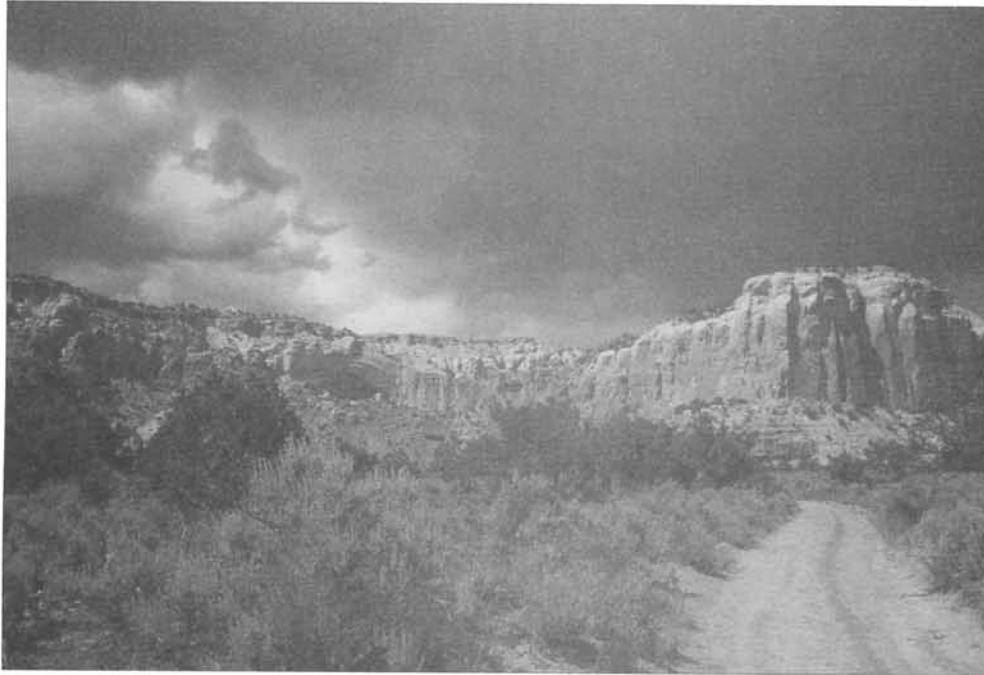
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traditional-use access to ancestral lands and resources, though sure to stir more controversy among the old guard of the environmental movement, moves us farther in the right direction.

“It gives us life,” explains Virgil Trujillo. “We’re well aware of that. And, especially in an agricultural-based community, we know the land is what gives us life.”



Footnotes



*“When we try to
pick out anything
by itself, we find
it hitched to
everything else
in the universe.”*

— John Muir

¹ Athanasiou 1998, p. 304. The more complete quote in context reads: “Given the key role they are fated to play in the politics of an ever-shrinking world, it is past time for environmentalists to face their own history, in which they have too often stood not for justice and freedom, or even for realism, but merely for the comforts and aesthetics of affluent nature lovers. They have no choice. History will judge greens by whether they stand with the world’s poor.”

² Census 2000; Nord, et al. 1999.

³ The now legendary letter from economic and social justice activists to the “Group of Ten” national environmental organizations in 1990 is what brought national attention to the environmental justice movement. See

Sierra Club 1993; SWOP 1990.

⁴ Gauna 2000, p. 4.

⁵ Sierra Club 1993, p. 51.

⁶ Pramod Parajuli, speaking on “Endangered Peoples” at the 1999 meeting of The Society for Applied Anthropology, “Constructing Common Ground: Human and Environmental Imperatives.”

⁷ Decohn Ferris, September 1991, quoted in J. Gauna 2000, p. 6.

⁸ E. Gauna 2000.

⁹ David Benavides, personal communication, October 18, 2000.

¹⁰ Gordon-McCutchan 1995.

¹¹ From an interview with Virgil Trujillo on August 8, 2000 (see “In Their Own Words” section of this report).

¹² Ricardo Fresquez interviewed at his small sawmill on his property near



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Mora on August 16, 2000.

¹³ Aparcio Gurulé interviewed at his home in Cuba on August 9, 2000.

¹⁴ George Maestas interviewed at his home in Rodarte on August 10, 2000. Additional quotes from a subsequent letter dated August 26, 2000.

¹⁵ Andie Sanchez interviewed with George Maestas in Rodarte on August 10, 2000.

¹⁶ Joe Torres interviewed at his home in Black Lake on August 14, 2000.

¹⁷ Virgil Trujillo informally interviewed during a run to the Taos Recycling Center on July 5, 2000, then again in his office at Ghost Ranch on August 8, 2000.

¹⁸ See Dagget and Dusard 1998; Quivira Coalition n.d.

¹⁹ Contact Courtney White, Executive Director of The Quivira Coalition, (505) 820-2544, for more information.

²⁰ deBuys 1985, p.211.

²¹ Carlson 1990, pp. 100, 108; Stevens 1994, Table X, p. 47, Table XII, p.53.

²² Nord, et al. 1999, p. 2, Table 1, Figure 3, Figure 5.

²³ BEA 2000, Regional Accounts Data, Local Area Personal Income; Census 1993, Table 28, Table 29, Table 30; Census 2000, 1990 U.S. Census Data, New Mexico; Census 2000, Poverty 1995, Table A; Census 2000, Poverty for New Mexico 1995, Table A95-35; Census 2000, USA Counties 1998; NMDL 2000, Economic Research and Analysis, Table A; Stevens 1994, Table XII, p. 53.

²⁴ Census 1993, Table 28; Census 2000, USA Counties 1998.

²⁵ Eastman and Gray 1987; Eastman, et al. 2000.

²⁶ deBuys 1985, p. 270

²⁷ Rogers 1999, editorial.

²⁸ Carlson 1990, p. 123

²⁹ Briggs 1987; deBuys 1985; Knowlton 1970; c.1985; Kutsche and Van Ness 1981; Van Ness 1987.

³⁰ Briggs 1987, pp. 229-230.

³¹ deBuys 1985, pp. 196-198.

³² Athanasiou 1998; Nichols 1996; Peña and Martinez 1998; van Dresser 1972. See deBuys 1985, pp. 274-275 for his argument that a socio-political perspective alone does not explain it all, and that these issues should be analyzed also through an ecological lens.

³³ Knowlton 1970; c. 1978; c. 1985; Nostrand 1992; Pulido 1998; van Dresser 1972; Van Ness 1987.

³⁴ Carlson 1990; deBuys 1985.

³⁵ Knowlton 1970, pp. 1070-1071.

³⁶ Briggs 1987; deBuys 1985; Carlson 1990; Eastman, et al. 2000; Ebright 1987; 1994; Knowlton 1970; c. 1978; c. 1985; Kutsche and Van Ness 1981; Nostrand 1992; Rodriguez 1987; Tyler 1989; Van Ness 1987; and many more.

³⁷ Rodriguez 1987, p. 340.

³⁸ Eastman, et al. 2000, Table 2, p. 533.

³⁹ Eastman, et al. 2000; Ebright 1987; Starrs 1998; Westphall 1983.

⁴⁰ J. Gauna 2000, p. 5.

⁴¹ Carlson 1990; Nostrand 1992.

⁴² deBuys 1985; Kutsche and Van Ness 1981; Starrs 1998; Tyler 1989.

⁴³ van Dresser 1972.

⁴⁴ Sanchez 1940, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁵ deBuys 1985; Ebright 1987;



Footnotes

1994; Kutsche and Van Ness 1981; Van Ness 1987; Westphall 1983.

⁴⁶ Starrs 1998, p. 106.

⁴⁷ Eastman, et al. 2000, pp. 534-535.

⁴⁸ Starrs 1998; Carlson, 1990, Appendix I, Appendix J; Stevens 1994, Table XXXC, p. 96.

⁴⁹ Raw numbers for cattle permits, with cattle per permittee, from Sylvia Valdez of the Santa Fe National Forest, August 2, 2000.

⁵⁰ Raw numbers for cattle and sheep permits, not correlated with individual permittees, from Cindy Medina of the Carson National Forest, July 25, 2000; Rogers 1999.

⁵¹ BLM 1999a, pp. 3-8, 3-9; Stevens 1994, pp. 98-99.

⁵² Rogers 1999.

⁵³ Fowler, J. M., et al., 1994, *Economic Characteristics of the Western Livestock Industry*, cited in Eastman, et al. 2000, p. 542.

⁵⁴ Stevens 1994, pp. 93-95.

⁵⁵ Eastman, et al. 2000, p. 543.

⁵⁶ Eastman and Gray 1987, p. 121.

⁵⁷ Eastman and Gray 1987.

⁵⁸ Eastman, et al. 2000.

⁵⁹ Leopold 1976, p. 188.

⁶⁰ Nabhan 1997, p. 37.

⁶¹ Arellano 1997.

⁶² Eastman, et al. 2000, p. 545.

⁶³ Eastman and Gray 1987.

⁶⁴ Raish 1996.

⁶⁵ Giovanni Luchetti participated in the first informal interview with Virgil Trujillo on July 5, 2000 (see note 19 above).

⁶⁶ Quoted in Carlson 1990, p. 109.

⁶⁷ deBuys 1985, p. 121.

⁶⁸ Van Ness 1987, p. 141.

⁶⁹ Nostrand 1992, p. 232.

⁷⁰ Simmons 1988, p. 188.

⁷¹ van Dresser 1972, p. 15.

⁷² Nichols 1996, p. 1.

⁷³ Peña 1998b, p. 275.

⁷⁴ McSweeney 1995, pp. 112-113; see also Arellano 1997.

⁷⁵ Arellano 1997.

⁷⁶ Atencio 1987, p. 1.

⁷⁷ Arellano 1997, Atencio 1987, Nostrand 1992; Peña 1998a; Peña and Martinez 1998; van Dresser 1972; Van Ness 1987.

⁷⁸ Kutsche and VanNess 1981, ch. 7.

⁷⁹ See Carlson 1990, p. 103; deBuys 1985, ch. 14; Starrs 1998, fig. 5.5, p. 91 for evidence of impacts. Discussing erosion and deeply incised rivers in northern New Mexico, Starrs also says, "Whether this is the by-product of overgrazing, climatic change, or a combination of these and other factors is one of the great debates of geomorphology, hydrology, and environmental history" (p. 91). Peña and Martinez 1998, stridently oppose the view that village Hispanos overused the land before the more recent influences of a capitalistic economy, increased markets, and modern transportation.

⁸⁰ Eastman and Gray 1987, pp. 112-113.

⁸¹ Eastman, et al. 2000, p. 545.

⁸² Quoted in McSweeney 1995, p. 100.

⁸³ Nostrand 1992, p. 223, p. 213.

⁸⁴ From an interview with Ernesto Atencio, conducted by Lorenzo Sotelo as part of an Amigos Bravos Oral History Project, July 2, 1997.

⁸⁵ Starrs 1998, p. 108.



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⁸⁶ Bill deBuys, personal communication, October 4, 2000.

⁸⁷ Hurst 1972, pp. 1 & 3.

⁸⁸ deBuys 1985; Hassell 1968, p. 21. For a more complete history of local protests see Knowlton c. 1978; Nabakov 1969.

⁸⁹ Grazing permittee information from Santa Fe National Forest, August 2, 2000, and Carson National Forest, July 25, 2000; also Carlson 1990, Appendix I; deBuys 1985; Stevens 1994, Table XXXC, p. 96.

⁹⁰ Eastman and Gray 1987; Starrs 1998, p. 105.

⁹¹ Hirst 1976.

⁹² Gordon-McCutchan 1995.

⁹³ van Dresser 1972.

⁹⁴ Pulido 1998; Sargent, et al. 1991.

⁹⁵ Arlene Valdez, Ganados del Valle Executive Director, personal communication, November 8, 2000.

⁹⁶ Lonnie Roybal, Sangre de Cristo Growers Cooperative President, personal communication, November 9, 2000.

⁹⁷ Miguel Vasquez, Professor of Anthropology, Northern Arizona University, personal communication.

⁹⁸ García 1999.

⁹⁹ Ryan Temple, Forest Trust, personal communication, October 25, 2000.

¹⁰⁰ Quivira Coalition 1998.

¹⁰¹ Bradford and Allen 1999; Gadzia 1999; Quivira Coalition 1999, pp. 10-11; White 1999.

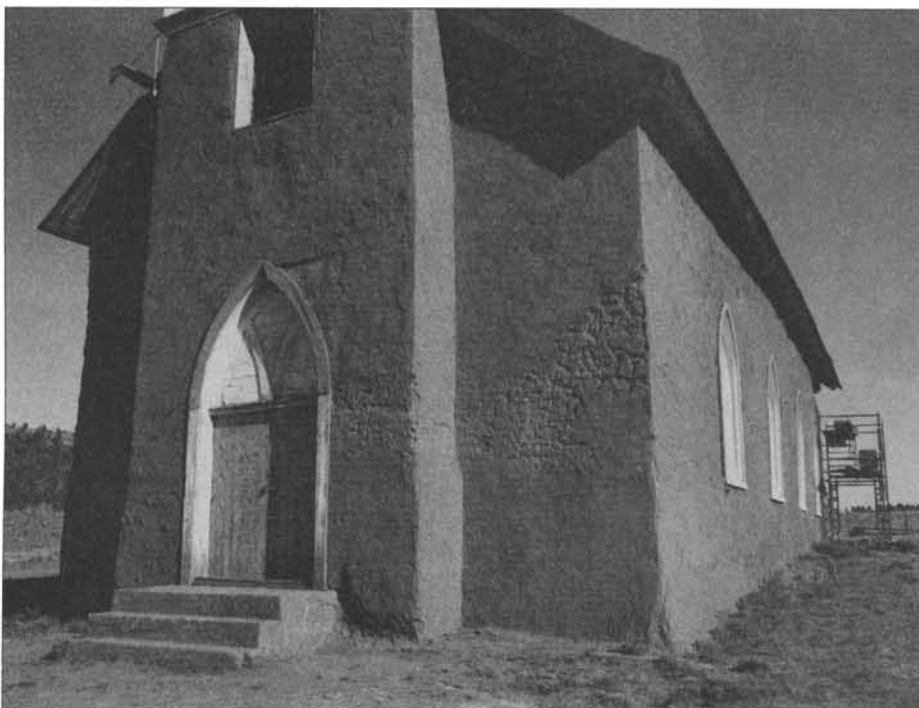
¹⁰² deBuys 1998.

¹⁰³ Cecilia Seesholtz, Camino Real District Ranger, personal communication, October 25, 2000.

¹⁰⁴ Bill deBuys, personal commu-



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"If we are to correct our abuses of each other and of other races and of our land, and if our effort to correct these abuses is to be more than a political fad that will in the long run be only another form of abuse, then we are going to have to go far beyond public protest and political action. We are going to have to rebuild the substance and integrity of private life in this country."—

Wendell Berry



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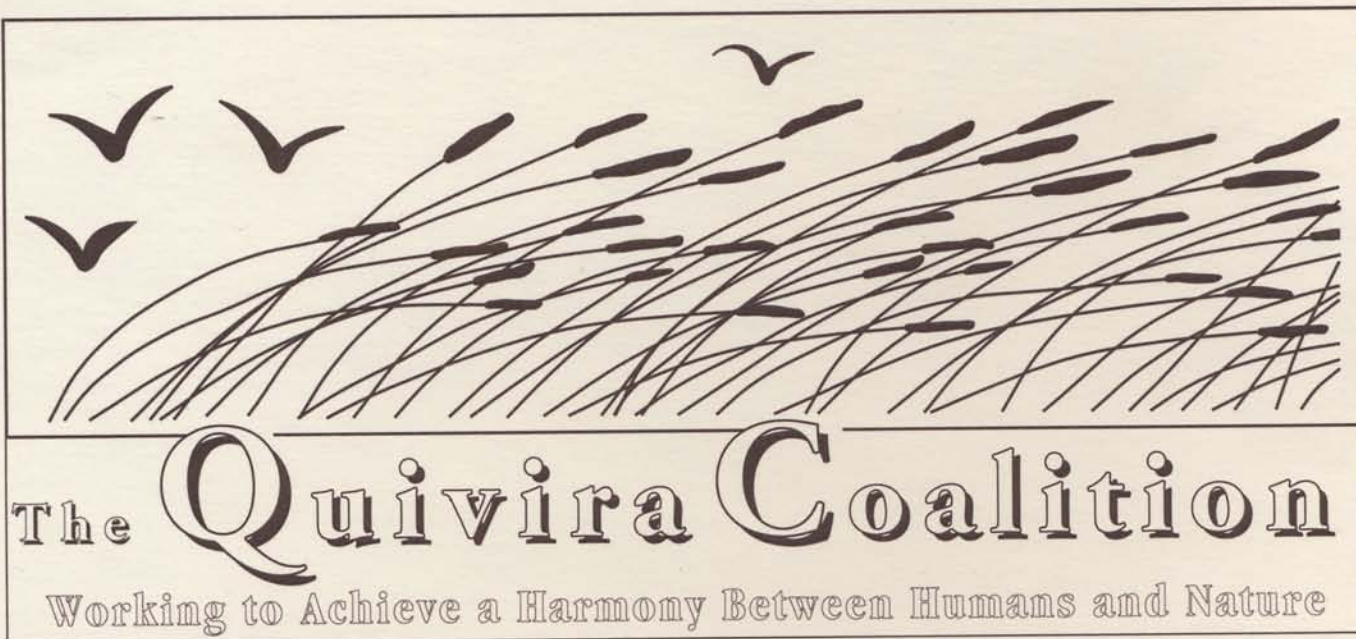
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About the Author

Ernest Atencio has worked in his native northern New Mexico and throughout the West for many years exploring and promoting the essential linkages between conservation, culture, and community. Currently Executive Director of the Taos Land Trust, he has also worked as an environmental activist, environmental educator, wilderness instructor, national park ranger, and laborer. With an M.A. in applied anthropology, he has conducted ethnographic field research and published works on sustainable development on the Tibetan Plateau, Havasupai oral history, Navajo forestry, cowboy culture, and Hispano land stewardship traditions in rural northern New Mexico. Among his many publications, he is the author of *La Vida Floresta: Ecology, Justice, and Community-Based Forestry in Northern New Mexico* and several features for *High Country News*.



The Quivira Coalition is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization incorporated in New Mexico on June 11, 1997 by two conservationists and a rancher. Our purpose is to teach ranchers, environmentalists, public land managers, and other members of the public that ecologically healthy rangeland and economically robust ranches can be compatible. Our mission is to foster ecological, economic, and social health on western landscapes through education, innovation, collaboration, and progressive public and private land stewardship.

We pursue our educational mission through a regular newsletter, workshops, conferences, lectures, site tours, a Web page, seminars, outdoor classrooms, publications, videos, collaborative management demonstration projects, monitoring, and scientific research.

This is the first in a series of publications dealing with issues surrounding the New Ranch.SM

During the Spanish Colonial era, mapmakers used the word *Quivira* to designate unknown territory beyond the frontier; it was also a term for an elusive golden dream.