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Ernie Atencio, executive director of the Taos Land Trust, was recently presented with the national Voices for The Land award from the Wilderness Society.

A VOICE OF THE LAND

Director of the Taos Land Trust wins national award
for keeping connection to nature alive

By HELEN GAUSSOIN
For the Journal

The national Voices for the Land award that was recently presented to the executive director of the Taos Land Trust was as significant for the change in thinking it represented as it was an honor for the winner, the recipient says.

"I was really happy and excited and felt genuinely honored to be in the company of the others named Voices of the Land. But it was significant as well because the Wilderness Society was recognizing the connection between culture and land," Ernie Atencio said. "That's always been important in New Mexico. Much of our work has been about the linkage between healthy communities and healthy ecosystems. But many mainstream

environmental groups don't see it that way."

Atencio, one of three winners of the Wilderness Society's new award for "individuals who courageously speak out for the protection of wild and special lands," said the relationship of northern New Mexicans to the land can be described with the Spanish word *querencia*.

Depending on the Spanish-English dictionary, the word translates to homing instinct or homesickness. But Atencio expanded on the meaning.

"It describes a lot about how the people feel about the land here and a powerful sense of place that comes with the obligation for good stewardship," he said.

He said that connection to the land is reflected in the dozens of *dichas* — folk sayings — that talk

about respect for the land.

"The Spanish who came here 400 years ago have become pretty native to this land. When you have people living in a place, working the land for hundreds of years, a co-involved relationship develops. You can't really separate the people from the land or the land from the people," he said.

The culture of northern New Mexico reflects a blending of American Indian and Spanish customs, melded over hundreds of years of living together, Atencio said.

"There's been an intermingling of these cultures and beliefs and blood, as well, over 400 years," he said. "Certainly, there were conflicts when the Spanish came in. It was a conquest, like when the U.S. came in. But the people who stayed behind were not

conquistadors. They were just dirt farmers trying to make a living."

A need for connection

But more recent generations of northern New Mexicans risk losing their connection to the land and culture, Atencio said.

"My family goes back here 300 years, but my father left Dixon when I was a little boy because there weren't any opportunities. A lot of people leave for college or a good job, then they lose the connection to the land," he said.

He added that even those who don't leave can lose their connections.

"I was in the first generation that didn't learn Spanish," he said. "Even my cousins who grew up in Dixon didn't learn Spanish. That

Director Earns National Voices for The Land Award

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was the generation that put aluminum siding on their adobes and planted grass."

The importance of that connection of land and culture means the Taos Land Trust works not just on the conservation easements common to land trusts but also on reconnecting youth to the land and on making the traditional agricultural use of the land profitable, Atencio said.

"There are 1,600 land trusts throughout the country, and they have a reputation for working with wealthy land owners to get them tax breaks, but there are a lot of local groups like ours that are trying to be relevant and address local community issues, preserve traditional uses of land," he said. "We are trying to respond. We are trying to help foster what I believe are healthy and whole communities."

Making land useful

Atencio said the trust is working on a collaborative effort with the Taos Valley Acequia Association and the Taos Valley Economic Development Corporation called *De la Tierra a la Cosecha* — From Earth to Harvest — to help preserve undeveloped land.

"There are thousands of acequias (in northern New Mexico), and those lands are most at risk of being developed," he said. "Generally, the owners are

land rich but cash poor, families who don't have many opportunities except to sell the land."

As part of the effort, the Taos Valley Economic Development Corporation helps build opportunities for farm-based and ranch-based businesses. For example, growers can use a commercial kitchen to process food for sale to grocery stores and other outlets.

"There are a lot of places where the farmer is growing alfalfa but he could be growing food," Atencio said. "Organic produce and grass-fed beef and lamb are lucrative businesses. We want to motivate them to stay on the land by making it productive. Development of that land means we lose the potential to grow our own food. Making the land productive means more social and economic equity for people who don't have many opportunities. It means preserving the land and cultural diversity that makes Taos and northern New Mexico a very special place."

He said maintaining that connection to the land means giving creating opportunities for the next generation.

"Even though I grew up in Denver, I still feel very connected to northern New Mexico," Atencio said. "Somehow, we stay connected to the home village. Every vacation I can remember growing up we came back to Dixon or went to Albuquerque (to visit other relatives). So we can help people create businesses on their farms or

ranches where their college-educated kids can come back home and use their skills and education, their computer skills and marketing skills and other skills other than agriculture. You can be gone a few years, but if a generation leaves, you lose your connection to the land."

Informing the youth

The land trust doesn't have a youth program but works a youth component into other programs. An intern working on the New Mexico Acequia Association program called *Sembrando Semillas* — Planting Seeds — will spend the summer surveying acequia associations to find out what they want and need to stay vital. When the summer is over, she'll go to school at Colorado College but she wants to come back when she's done with college, Atencio said.

"We want to try to reconnect kids to those agricultural roots if they have half an interest in it," he said. "It's about learning from our elders, gaining knowledge that is quickly disappearing. There is a resurgence in interest in agriculture, in food security, in organic produce. It's becoming a little more hip with kids."

And that "validates" the culture, Atencio said.

"There has been unspoken shame about being a poor minority person, (but now) people are feeling much more proud of their culture. More and more people are

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ERNIE ATENCIO

recognizing what a unique place northern New Mexico is," he said.

Helping keep the land in the family's hands is another service the trust can provide.

"The family may not have done any estate planning and might be responsible for estate taxes," Atencio said. "That's something that we can help address. We can help them with planning and in some cases can help eliminate the estate taxes. Conservation easements can be a tax shelter for the wealthy, but in cases like these, they don't need tax deduction, but they do need that help with estate taxes. They just want to make sure they can hold onto the land as the older generations pass on."

He said the trust considers the preservation of undeveloped land to be "extremely important" but thoughtful development can work.

"If everybody puts a house on five acres, then where do we get our food?" he said. "People need places to live, but we can make development much more sustainable. We can use more clustered housing, like in pueblos."

Finding a good fit

Atencio wasn't sure the Taos Land Trust was going to be a

good fit when he took the job because his background is in environmental justice. But the group's involvement in traditional land use is a passion.

"I grew up in Denver, a juvenile delinquent," he said. "My dad went there for work and ended up raising his kids in a rough, inner-city neighborhood. It was not as violent as it is now, but it was still pretty crazy."

He said he dropped out of high school and got involved in "criminal activities" and then found himself in an Outward Bound program, a program he called "Hoods in the Woods."

"Thirty-one years ago, right about now, I was off on this wilderness, and it just blew my mind wide open," he said. "Denver was a dead end, but Outward Bound opened up the opportunities."

He completed college, then worked for Outward Bound, as a wilderness guide and environmentalist and for the Forest Service, and eventually earned a master's degree in applied anthropology.

Atencio was working in La Dakh, India, on the Tibetan Plateau when he realized he wanted to come back to New Mexico.

"I was in this amazing, wild Tibetan Buddhist country, and I realized the irrigation

system was a perfect parallel for the acequia system," he said.

He discovered the acequia irrigation system for dry land farming has its roots in the Indus Valley not far from the Tibetan Plateau. It traveled across Persia into Spain and was imported to New Mexico, where it merged with the irrigation system already in place in the pueblos, he said.

"I had a kind of epiphany: Why am I working on the other side of the planet? That's when I realized I wanted to come back to northern New Mexico," Atencio said.

That was about 10 years ago, he said.

Before taking the job with the Taos Land Trust, Atencio served as coordinator for the Valles Caldera Coalition, which created the management plan for the Valles Caldera National Preserve. He has written about Navajo forestry, sustainable development, mining issues, cowboy culture and rural Hispano land-use traditions, the Wilderness Society says in a press release.

"Ernie's energy, dedication and understanding of the role of people in fragile landscapes enable him to tackle the challenges posed by land conservation campaigns in that region," Neri Holguin, New Mexico director of the Wilderness Society, says in the press release.

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