

El Río Grande del Norte

A few years ago my family spent a day exploring the western flank of Ute Mountain along the Río Grande Gorge. I have traveled in remote and wild places around the world, and this is as wild as any. There is nothing out there but wind, wildlife and wide-open views.

Looking out across the sage plateau in any direction, there are no buildings, not a sign of civilization. The snowcapped Blanca Peak massif and the craggy Crestone Peaks farther north shine on the horizon, with the old shield volcanoes of Ute, San Antonio, Cerro de la Olla and others rising like 2,000-foot blisters out of the valley

FOR THE LAND



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floor. Old sheep and fisherman trails lead into the gorge to some of the most beautiful and lush places I have seen along our Río, a stretch that sees very few boaters.

And we were the only people in sight on a holiday weekend.

This is all part of what would be protected within the Río Grande del Norte National Conservation

Area (NCA)-236,000 acres, including two new wilderness areas, stretching from Ute Mountain to San Antonio Mountain; from the just outside my backdoor here on Hondo Mesa to the Colorado border. We don't have many tracts of open land like this left.

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works for years. The first bill to create the NCA was introduced by then-Sen. Jeff Bingaman in 2009, but it met with slow progress in a couple of sessions of Congress that were not particularly conservation oriented. Late last year there was a push to get President Obama to bypass Congress and declare the area a national monument. Now our congressional delegation has reintroduced the NCA bill.

The proposal has solid support across the cultural and political spectrum in Northern New Mexico and obviously is not going away. That broad support is due in part to

the fact that Bingaman's staff took the time to meet with all the land-based stakeholders-the land grants and ranchers and traditional residents who have been using this land for generations-and include their concerns and traditional land uses in drafting the bill.

It creates a precedent as the first piece of federal land protection legislation that explicitly includes land grant communities as part of the management consultation process. Of course, it also protects fundamental ecological and recreational values. The newly introduced bill includes all the same provisions.

We have come a long way in that land protection proposals are no longer the product of just usual suspects of national conservation groups, but include involvement and perspective from local communities on the ground. It's politically smart, but it's also the right thing to do.

It is refreshing to see brown-skinned people as the primary spokesmen and women for the Río Grande del Norte and the Columbine Hondo Wilderness. And it will be refreshing, and a gift to all of us, to have these places permanently protected.

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