

The Manzano Mountains: An Example of Community-based Forest Stewardship

Located just southeast of Albuquerque, NM in Torrance County, the Manzano Mountains, in contrast to the surrounding grassland, contain a mixed conifer forest of ponderosa pine and piñon-juniper woodland, with patches of oak, and aspen. Throughout its history, this area has been used by humans—from the Tiwa-speaking, Pueblo Indians, who settled there before 1300, to the land grant communities established by the Spanish government in the 1600's and later, by Mexicans, who resettled there in the 1800's. As part of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which followed the Mexican-American War, the region then became part of the United States. Under this treaty, the land grant communities of the Manzano Mountains were subsumed into the U.S., where by some retained a traditional, communal system of land tenure by establishing community lands for grazing, hunting, and resource extraction. Heirs of the original settlers still live in communities at the base of the mountains and many continue to be reliant on the land and forests for their livelihoods.

Though not recognized by the United States government as property of the land grants, much of the mountains became part of the Cibola National Forest's Mountainair Ranger District. As National Forest land, these mountains are managed by the Forest Service and subject to the processes and policies of federal land management. This management has frequently caused dismay among members of the land grant communities, as they have watched the destructive logging by industry on their traditional forestlands, which have also been neglected for fire management, and made off-limits to them for

the traditional practice of gathering fuelwood.

In the Manzano Land Grant, one of the communities bordering the National Forest, you can see the effects that a legacy of mismanagement has had on a rural community. Most striking is the lack of water for irrigation in the valley. In this region, the mountains and their snow pack are critical to maintaining a continuous supply of water in downstream springs. The dense vegetation of second-growth forest, where fires have been suppressed, keeps snow from reaching the ground and recharging aquifers. Down in the valley, the Manzano Land Grant's intricate, spring-fed system of irrigation ditches, which once provided for rich and diverse agriculture in the valley, sits dry and unused.

Economic opportunities have also dried up in this small, family-oriented community. Unemployment is common and the younger generations are leaving the area to find work. Many residents depend on the neighboring National Forest as a source of fuel wood for cooking and heating, and for wood, which they use in fences and construction. Some residents make money off the National Forest by poaching old-growth alligator juniper, a high quality firewood, and large moss-covered rocks, which are popular in the foundations for Santa Fe-style homes. A combination of economic need and the high price for these products offsets the risk of getting caught and paying a fine.

The risk to local communities of catastrophic wildfire posed by the overstocked stands of trees in the National Forest have led to some creative collaborative solutions to the envi-

ronmental and economic challenges of the region. In 1998, the Mountainair Ranger District, in partnership with six land grant communities, initiated a forest health stewardship project. The Las Humanas Cooperative, made up of people from each of the six communities, hired a local crew and trained them to harvest small diameter trees, reducing forest density and the risk of catastrophic fire. Members of all of the land grants were allowed to take small diameter material to use as fuelwood and building material, providing benefit to them while disposing of the small logs.

Learning from the lessons of that project, Las Humanas has continued, winning contracts for thinning projects on the National Forest and providing work for two trained crews. Las Humanas has also purchased a log peeler and loader which they use to make *vigas* and *latillas*, traditional structural materials for homes. They are even exploring the feasibility of using the leftover peelings in a process for making a recycled plastic-infused composite board called Altree developed by the local P&M Sign Company in Mountainair.

There have of course been setbacks to this collaborative stewardship approach. The Mountainair Ranger District's proposed 10,000 acre Thunderbird Ecosystem Management Project, involving fuels reduction and watershed restoration, was halted for unresolved environmental concerns and the communities have urged the Ranger District to focus on smaller, less controversial, defensive space projects close to communities. Conflict of this sort emphasizes the importance of building consensus over fuels reduction activity in Na-

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tional Forests. It is hoped that careful monitoring will help inform this debate and some of the younger generation of the land grant communities are already learning the skills to do this monitoring through a Youth Conservation Corps program administered by the Forest Trust in collaboration with the Mountainair Ranger District and the Las Humanas Cooperative. The youth interns are trained to measure vegetation growth and ecological conditions in the sites of past stewardship projects. Las Humanas president, George Ramirez is also developing methods for a socioeconomic monitoring component that uses indicators of community wellbeing to evaluate the impacts of the stewardship projects.

Ramirez, who runs Las Humanas and tirelessly fulfills a host of other civic and community duties, sees that restoring the forests and the opportunities for his community will require using a variety of creative strategies. Even elementary school children are being introduced to stewardship of the Manzano Mountains through a yearly program to Adopt-an-Alligator Tree. Each year the children select the largest alligator juniper that they can find and commemorate it with a sign bearing their names. These 400-year-old trees, which were around at the start of the original land grant communities, stand as a reminder of the lengthy relationship between landscape and community in these mountains. As modern policies and management continue to shape the ecology of these forests, the communities dependent on them will also respond, continually finding new strategies for survival.

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