

# El Carmen

## *The First Wilderness Designation in Latin America*

BY PATRICIO ROBLES GIL

*Wilderness conservation is a series of stories, as much about personal vision and commitment as it is about science, law, and policy. To the stories of Ian Player in South Africa; Bob Marshall, Sigurd Olson, Aldo Leopold, and Howard Zahniser in the United States; and other pioneers, we can now add that of Patricio Robles Gil in Mexico. At the 8th World Wilderness Congress in Alaska, October 2005, the multinational cement company CEMEX announced the designation of a 75,000-hectare (185,250-acres) wilderness on their corporate landholdings in northern Mexico, and the government of Mexico announced new wilderness legislation to address wilderness protection on these private lands and several other land ownership regimes. In this article, Patricio tells his personal story of this conservation accomplishment, and the people who worked with him to make it happen.*

—Vance Martin International IJW Editor

The process of experiencing wilderness, and then advocating for its protection and sustainability, can create a collage of distinct, often varying episodes that forms a fascinating and unforgettable personal picture of one's own life. Each element of the collage—from the wilderness, a meeting, or a conversation—is often so different that they rest in my mind as unique encounters with nature and people, the sum total of which produces within me a sense of dynamic peace.

I'll try to explain—in English!—this process, which for me has been a challenge, a passion, and a commitment. It has

been an evolution of thought, concept and action, changing and growing with each person I've tried to convince about the value of wild open spaces.

For 16 years I've been involved in the conservation of nature through Agrupacion Sierra Madre, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) that I founded in Mexico. This country gave me the opportunity to understand the challenges of conservation. I truly believe that if we want

to establish a conservation movement and create an environmental culture, our society must understand the importance of wilderness, and the threats that imperil wilderness. Thus, a large portion of my time has been focused on these two primary issues.

In some cases I have been involved in the field with ranchers, *campesinos*, ethnic groups, scientists, and researchers. These experiences taught me a great deal, primarily that communication is essential in order to “sell nature to society.” This realization caused me to coin the term “conservation marketing,” and for it to be the central organizing principle of my work.

As conservationists we also need to create successful, practical, and replicable conservation models. I consider myself a promoter of these models and techniques, with a focus on species management, biodiversity conservation, and the protection of wild, open space without an industrial human footprint. This last concept is where my heart lies, so when the president of The WILD Foundation, Vance Martin, suggested that Mexico could embrace wilderness, I saw the opportunity to build on this concept a more intimate relationship between the modern Mexican people and its natural wild places, or *tierras silvestres*.

### **Conservation Movement in Mexico**

This process of helping Mexico to protect large areas of wild land has become one of the most interesting debates



Article author Patricio Robles Gil.

in which I have been involved. To help you understand this, I'll briefly summarize the conservation movement in Mexico.

First of all, Mexico's southern part is in the Neotropics region, and tropical rain forest habitats are dominant. The northern area is Nearctic, with primarily arid habitats, except the pine-oak forest of the high mountains. The interaction of these different ecosystems results in enormous biodiversity, placing Mexico among the top-five megadiversity countries worldwide. This natural wealth produced some of the most remarkable cultures on the planet—Mayas, Aztecs, and Olmecs—that used these resources to create great empires. Therefore, all over Mexico, wetlands and forests were heavily used, and the impact of the human footprint spread almost everywhere. Only the deep canyons and remote deserts of the northernmost system remained reasonably unaltered.

Second, Mexico's system of land tenure is a significant factor for the status of our protected natural areas. There is a saying that Mexican land has been given "several times" to its people. After the agrarian reform, a high percentage of the land was held under communal private property, or *ejidos*. This means that there is virtually no public land, so the government cannot unilaterally set any aside protected areas. Integrated, complex efforts are required. This makes conservation of wilderness and biodiversity a singular and interesting challenge, because the general public has almost no access to wild open spaces. In all the other countries that have wilderness legislation, the experience of wild nature by the public has been instrumental in creating the movement and subsequent legislation. Mexico essentially lacks a popular cul-



**Sierra del Carmen, Coahuila, Mexico, the location of the first designated wilderness in Latin America. Photo by Patricio Robles Gil, courtesy of Agrupacion Sierra Madre.**

ture, or relationship, with nature, and our language has not even a word that conveys the meaning of wilderness.

## **El Carmen**

I could only conceive of protecting Mexican wilderness by first identifying a place that everyone would consider wilderness: El Carmen—a sky island—is in northern Coahuila on the border with Texas's Big Bend National Park. For special reasons, this place is the cradle of my involvement

with wild nature and my commitment to its conservation. The mountain range has been declared a Flora and Fauna Protected Area (FFPA), one of the least strict categories of the Mexican protected areas system. Its management plan allows people and cattle to live inside the protected area, and Mexican legislation allows environmentally aggressive activities such as mining inside the perimeter.

El Carmen is a keystone in a huge complex of transboundary protected



**El Jardin escarpment of Sierra del Carmen, a “sky island” in the Chihuahuan desert. Photo by Patricio Robles Gil, courtesy of Agrupacion Sierra Madre.**

areas that comprise one of the biggest high-biodiversity megacorridors in North America. In the last year Agrupacion Sierra Madre has focused its efforts on the promotion of El Carmen-Big Bend Conservation Corridor Initiative, a conservation initiative that holds one of the most diverse arrays of conservation models in the world, ranging from government protected areas to a private protected area managed by a corporation. If we only focus on the government’s protected areas we can see that four different models coexist in this area. Maderas del Carmen (520,000 acres; 210,526 ha) and Cañón de Santa Elena (693,000 acres; 280,566 ha) are both FFPAs managed by the Mexican central government’s National Commission for Protected Areas (CONANP). Ocampo is a new FFPA of 680,000 acres (275,300 ha) that will be declared between them. On the U.S. side, Big Bend National Park (800,000 acres; 323,886 ha) has on its eastern flank the Black Gap Wildlife Management Area (119,000 acres; 48,178 ha) and on the west, Big Bend Ranch State Park (300,000 acres; 121,457 ha), both managed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Together, all these reserves protect a surface of more than 3 million acres (1.2 million ha).

In addition to these governmental models of land protection, a group of ranchers in the heart of Serranías del Burro in Mexico committed several years ago to the private conservation of its ranches. They formed CONECO (for its acronym in Spanish)—a non-profit organization—which helped them to address severe environmental threats to their lands. These 17 ranches encompass almost 500,000 acres (202,429 ha) and comprise a conservation success story in and of itself. For example, thanks to the effort of these ranchers the black bear in Mexico has

maintained a healthy population and even expanded to its former territories across the border into Big Bend National Park, from which it had been previously exterminated.

Finally, one of the most important stakeholders of the region is CEMEX, the third largest cement producer in the world. This corporation presented a great opportunity to Agrupacion Sierra Madre when they asked us to help them strengthen their commitment to the natural world. In 1995 we presented to them the importance of El Carmen. Today the company owns



**The Rio Grande (US)/El Bravo (MX) River cutting through a canyon on the Texas/Mexico border. Photo by Patricio Robles Gil, courtesy of Agrupacion Sierra Madre.**



Rock formations in Big Bend National Park, Texas. Photo by Patricio Robles Gil, courtesy of Agrupacion Sierra Madre.

almost 195,000 acres (78,947 ha) inside and outside the FFPA (Maderas del Carmen), and through conservation partnerships manages another 62,500 acres (25,303 ha). Its conservation activities include the rewilding of this sky island through intensive habitat restoration programs, the removal of all fences and cattle, and the reestablishment of big mammals such as the desert bighorn sheep—a flagship species that represents the true historic wilderness. The northern end of this mountain range, bordered by the Rio Grande River and Big Bend National Park, is remote and without human disturbance. Big Bend has struggled to be declared a wilderness area since 1978, when the park staff (concerned by the increasing number of visitors) proposed 79% of the park's surface as a wilderness area. Some local residents opposed the initiative, fearing it would limit tourism opportunities. A strong debate ensued, but the U.S. Congress didn't pass the proposal. However, since then, park administrators have been managing most of Big Bend's area as a de facto

wilderness. Years later, the biggest attraction for tourists in Big Bend is its wilderness qualities.

With this northern neighbor and the conditions of isolation and lack of human presence, the northern portion of Sierra del Carmen seemed the perfect place to be designated as wilderness. Hence, we worked with CEMEX's field team and presented the proposal to the CEO for approval. His vision and commitment were tested in this endeavor. But, finally, after consultations with staff and neighbors, the owners made a long-term commitment to wilderness, and approved the launch of the initiative at The WILD Foundation's 8th World Wilderness Congress in Alaska (see *IJW*, December 2005), becoming the first wilderness designation in Latin America. In light of the political situation between Mexico and the United States, this wilderness designation represents an opportunity to strengthen relationships, and, for Big Bend National Park, it supports their dream of declaring a big portion of the park as a wilderness. If so, it would be a

transboundary wilderness area of enormous significance for North America.

We had the commitment of land—we now needed the government. We knew there was the opportunity for the Mexican government to embrace the wilderness concept because of the true passion of Ernesto Enkerlin, president of the CONANP, with whom I had a long dialogue about wilderness. He asked me to collaborate with Juan Bezaury, a CONANP advisor and director of environmental policy of The Nature Conservancy-Mexico. Juan explained that if we wanted the initiative to move forward, it should be through an existing scheme of private and social land system certification through which CONANP recognizes landowners' voluntary efforts to protect their lands. His idea was to raise the level of protection for wilderness by creating an official certification or designation.

Under Mexican law, private owners accept certain limits of control over their land that can be imposed by the government or other actors (e.g., road building, mining, fishing in lakes and rivers, water extraction, etc.). Under existing certification, CONANP protects the landowner against government imposition, except min-



Desert bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*), reintroduced to El Carmen area as part of the re-wilding process. Photo by Patricio Robles Gil, courtesy of Agrupacion Sierra Madre.

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ing and water extraction. The next step Juan envisioned was to have a new certification, one that would be much stronger and would be given by a coalition of NGOs, both national and international, such as Unidos para la Conservación, Pronatura, Conservation International, and The Nature Conservancy, among others, and scientific institutions such as the National Institute of Ecology of Mexico (INE) and the Mexican Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (CONABIO). These would provide both a scientific and ethical component to the wilderness argument that would fight even mining and water extraction.

Therefore, private owners would have three possibilities: (1) the certification of Wilderness Zones by the CONANP, which would give legal protection from certain government agencies and common use by people;

(2) the Wilderness Land certification by the NGO coalition for those who don't want any government intervention, but who want to fight to maintain the highest ecological integrity; and (3) both certifications, Wilderness Zone and Wilderness Land, such as in the case of CEMEX's great commitment for the El Carmen

One of the interesting parts of this process is the different perceptions shared by the actors involved in the discussions. First, many of them consider the core areas as de facto wilderness without a special name to highlight them. Others think that this scenario could be easily implemented in the north of Mexico where there is desert, and not so easily in the tropical forest communal lands of the southeast, and this became a strong argument of opposition. The fear was also expressed that this new certification would not include important areas of high biodiversity because they were too small, or because they contained existing human disturbance. As a result of the discussions, an additional approach was proposed to address cultural, tribal, and sacred areas. Sharing these different concerns enriched the debate and enlarged the concept, out of which emerged four different certifications within the framework of the CONANP:

1. Natural sacred places: areas with importance for the conservation of biodiversity, which tribal groups

have used as a spiritual, magic ritual place.

2. Places with cultural biodiversity landscape: where habitats, biotic communities, and species of flora and fauna have been managed by communities under traditional practices with the understanding of a component of conservation of the native species and exotics that have historical land uses for the sustenance/nourishment of those societies.
3. Places dedicated to long-term scientific research.
4. Areas of almost-intact habitats and biotic communities, where the human footprint or industrial civilization is not present, where human activities are developed without leaving evidence of their presence and that are large enough to enable the reconciliation of humans as a species, with nature.

The steps taken in the promotion of this wilderness initiative in Mexico are parts of a collage. Each piece doesn't make great sense by itself, but when seen together they are much bigger than the sum of the single parts. Many things remain to be done, but we are on the right track. I'm optimistic for the future, one in which Mexicans will enjoy, respect, and feel the awe of their wilderness areas. **IJW**

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Black bear (*Ursus americana*) are abundant in the El Carmen area. Photo by Patricio Robles Gil, courtesy of Agrupacion Sierra Madre.