

The Great Wall of Arizona - Cactus Wren•dition (Spring 2021)

A variety of objections have been raised against the thirty-foot tall steel border wall, ranging from the aesthetic ("it's an eyesore"), cultural ("it separates traditional transborder communities"), economic (it's costing billions of dollars, as much as \$41 million per mile in parts of Arizona, that could be better used elsewhere), procedural ("it's being built with no-bid contracts"), appropriational ("it's illegally taking funds from the military budget"), humanitarian ("it interferes with the rights of people seeking refuge from political terrorism and climate disaster"), effective ("it is easily breached with ladders and battery-run saws"), proprietary ("it's taking private properties by eminent domain"), religious ("it's destroying sacred Native American sites, including graveyards and age-old traditional places of worship"), etc.

But for many of us, the main objection is ecological: the wall divides wildlife communities, destroys natural habitat, endangers irreplaceable sources of water, disrupts waterways, blocks migration routes and mating circuits, puts up 24-hour lighting that upsets nesting and other processes, and in general puts wildlife, including many threatened and endangered species, at greater risk in arid lands where survival is already difficult. It's being built with absolutely none of the normal safeguards of environmental, freedom of information and administrative procedures laws, all of which have been waived by executive fiat.

Many of these problems are most obvious in Arizona, where construction has been largely on public lands where construction can proceed unimpeded by legal procedures required on private lands. Federally-designated Arizona lands where the wall is going up include the Coronado National Forest, the San Bernardino, Cabeza Prieta and Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuges, the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, and the Coronado and Organ Pipe National Memorials. In each of these, construction has been proceeding even faster than usual in the past few weeks in order to comply with Mr. Trump's directive to finish as much as possible before the end of his term.

One of the greatest objections is that planned wildlife openings in the wall are too few and too small, only about fifty openings across the whole state, the size of an 8½ x 11 sheet of copy paper. About the size for a large house cat, but totally inadequate for adult javelina, deer, mountain lions or jaguars, and spaced so far apart that for many animal communities they may as well not exist.

On the San Bernardino, in the extreme southeast corner of the state, the wall has already gone up across major washes impairing waters of endangered fish and amphibians the refuge was established to protect. In adjacent Guadalupe Canyon and the remote Peloncillo Mountains, the contractor is destroying habitat by dynamiting rugged backcountry to make a thirty-to-fifty foot corridor for the wall which will prevent cross-border passage of jaguars, ocelots and other wildlife.

Local ranchers and other residents of the area have noted that the wall is entirely unnecessary here because Border Patrol electronic surveillance and personnel in the past few years have effectively stopped illegal traffic in the area.

At the San Pedro, often noted as the last free-flowing river in the Southwest, the wall and accompanying bridge are going up across at the southern tip of the National Conservation Area. The SPRNCA, which was brought under federal protection by President Reagan with broad bipartisan support from Congress in 1988, has long been recognized as one of the most biologically diverse places in the world, providing habitat for more than 80 species of mammals, two native and several introduced species of fish, more than 40 species of amphibians and reptiles, and over 350 species of birds.

Conservationists have been unanimous in declaring the wall across the San Pedro as a disaster-in-the-making since the proposed gates in the riverbed section are far too small to allow passage of tree trunks and other debris normally carried by the swollen river in flood season. Critics point out that if the electronic and personnel to be provided by the Border Patrol is adequate to curtail illegal traffic when the gates are left open as planned during rainy periods, the same security could be provided year-round without the economic and ecological costs of the wall.

In Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, contractors began blasting Tohono O'odham sacred sites near Quitobaquito Springs in August 2019. Since then, they have used so much groundwater to mix concrete for the wall that the spring's flow has hit record lows, reducing to mudflats much of the unique desert pond, essential to the endangered Quitobaquito pupfish and Sonoyta mud turtle and other wildlife, as well as being for centuries sacred to Native Americans in the area.

Construction of the wall and consequent destruction on Tohono lands, which in violation of several federal laws and agreements was done without required consultation with and despite a number of published objections by the Tohono O'odham Nation, has led in recent months to unprecedented demonstrations and peaceful protests by tribal members of the tribe, and to hearings in the US House of Representatives.

Of the situation at Quitobaquito, noted southwest ecologist Gary Nabhan says, "As many as 40 species [of birds] have been absent in the last year there as the additive effects of border wall construction, pumping, and dynamiting exacerbated other long-term stressors, like climate change, and pushed the ecosystem to the breaking point." Hydrologists seriously question the possibility of the spring's flow ever being restored.

Conservationists and human rights advocates are calling for all construction on the wall to be halted, openings of appropriate size and location for wildlife to be made immediately, and for the rest of the wall to be brought down in due course.