

My Turn

Spending National Trails Day on land that should be protected

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I celebrated National Trails Day, June 2, by visiting one of my favorite places in Northern New Mexico: Rio Grande del Norte. The area is steeped in cultural and natural history, and this area provided a fitting place for a day to celebrate New Mexico's great outdoors.

Ute Mountain — perhaps one of the most well-known places — is an essential part of the traditional values of the New Mexican people. The mountain and the Rio Grande del Norte area, which it rises over, serve as an escape from everyday life in the modern world.

Several persons accompanied me on this hike up the mountain. Among them was a local woman who hiked to the top of Ute Mountain years ago, and returned to “honor the mountain” by visiting again. To her it was a spiritual journey and her love for the mountain was the motivation to make the difficult climb. Her passion for the beauty and wildness of the area was apparent, and to her it is clear we are connected with these wild places on a deep level, and honoring and respecting them is important for our own well being as well.

The Rio Grande del Norte area is the protectant of New Mexico's water. Deep within in the land lies the beginning, or headwaters, of many rivers that sustain the downstream communities. The R'o Grande River is responsible for a lot of the water in New Mexico, and the abundance of water could not be possible without protection.

The R'o Grande del Norte takes us back to when the Earth was pristine and its peoples lived in harmony with the land. El Rio Grande del Norte is a time capsule of our nation's rich history.

It is home to many vestiges of American Indian history, including ancient legends, petroglyphs and ruins.

If its rich cultural past is not enough to lure you in, it is also teeming with wildlife. It is a habitat for antelope, big horn sheep, elk, sand hill cranes, golden eagles, deer, peregrine falcons, and other native animals. It is also a meeting place for thousands of birds making their way across the country by way of the Rio Grande Flyway; a flyway where one can find three different species of hummingbird (if you can spot them fast enough!).

Needless to say, the possibilities for bird watching, photography and hunting are limitless.

Rio Grande del Norte is a rift valley alive with plains of wildflowers, abundant wildlife and wild adventures. It is a wonderful place for those not only seeking solace, but fun, recreation and education. There are any number of great outdoor activities to choose from, ranging from swimming, hiking, rafting, horseback riding, bird watching, fishing, and big game hunting — just to name a few.

Simply put, it is a nature lover's paradise; a place to remember where we came from, who we are, and what great debt we owe to our planet.

Fortuitously, there is a bill in Congress that could protect Rio Grande del Norte for future generations. The Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area Establishment Act (S 667 and HR 1241) — introduced in the Senate by Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and co-sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM), and in the House by Rep. Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) with Rep. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) as a co-sponsor — would safeguard more than 21,000 acres of wilderness within a larger national conservation area of 235,980 acres.

Passing this bill is crucial for conservation efforts in New Mexico and the surrounding states that also benefit from this untouched expanse. It would keep these lands wild and open to the public for their outdoor choice of recreation.

It is truly precious, but if we fail to protect it, it could be forever ruined. Yet, there are several bills in Congress that could giveaway or destroy this incredible area. Somehow, Rio Grande del Norte must be permanently protected.

As I stood on Ute Mountain, I could not think there was a better way to spend National Trails Day than in Rio Grande del Norte. I hope that when I return next year, it will be permanently protected.

Terry Chastain is a semi-retired accountant living in Taos County who enjoys spending time in nature and is passionate about preserving our wild places.