



**My Turn**

## **Rio Grande del Norte's anniversary is a good reminder of what a gift it is**

**Garrett VeneKlasen**

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As the second anniversary of Rio Grande del Norte National Monument was nearing, we got more good news about conserving Western landscapes – Colorado's Brown Canyon was declared a national monument.

In both New Mexico and Colorado, sportsmen and women played a big role in winning monument designations for areas long prized by hunters and anglers. The March 25, 2013, declaration by President Barack Obama establishing the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument ensured that the land that has provided Northern New Mexicans food, livelihoods, recreation and solitude for countless generations will be open to them forever.

When the grassroots, diverse coalitions were working to win protections for Rio Grande del Norte, Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks and Browns Canyon, opponents claimed the goal was to lock up lands and ban most activities. The truth is hunters, anglers, hikers, grazing permittees, ATV-riders, mountain bikers, outfitters and many more wanted monuments established so a variety of activities would continue indefinitely. We want to conserve the backcountry, world-class fisheries and important big game winter range as well as ensure that day hikers and rafters continue to enjoy these great Western landscapes.

Rio Grande del Norte, which lies between the Sangre de Cristo and San Juan mountains, includes 242,500 acres of public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. While the monument is only two years old, the area's significance stretches back thousands of years. It's the essence of Northern New Mexico culturally and ecologically. Indigenous people lived and thrived there and still do, feeding themselves from hunting and fishing.

The land's bounty helps many families stock their freezers. The land supports the livelihoods of fishing and hunting guides and other business owners who benefit from tourism and outdoor recreation. On the monument's first anniversary, a business organization reported that the number of visitors had increased 40 percent and Taos saw a 21 percent jump in lodging-tax revenue.

The area's ecological and wildlife riches can't be overstated. It boasts 66 miles of what is unquestionably New Mexico's finest wild trout fishery.

It provides incredible habitat for waterfowl, elk, mule deer and pronghorns. The bighorn population is rapidly expanding and will soon reach a huntable population. The area has something for every sportsman and woman. And the bottom line is that access for hunters and anglers is, and will remain, the same as it has always been.

Keeping Rio Grande del Norte as it is now was the No. 1 reason for making it a national monument. After pushing for nearly a quarter of a century to conserve this unique area, New Mexicans feel confident that Rio Grande del Norte won't be carved up or closed off due to encroaching residential development or oil and gas drilling. It's important to remember that the public's will was achieved in the case of Grande del Norte, Organ Mountains- Desert Peaks and Browns Canyon through presidential proclamations.

Sportsmen and women faced the loss of these spectacular fishing and hunting areas as legislation in Congress stalled or came under attack. The Antiquities Act, which has been used by both Democratic and Republican presidents since 1906, is an important avenue for the public when elected officials fail to respond.

As we mark Rio Grande del Norte's second anniversary, we should be thankful for the natural treasures that have been conserved for future generations and defeat any attempts to make it more difficult to set aside these spots going forward.

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