

My Turn

A not-so-good very bad deal

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Collaborative, landscape level, and science-based are the latest watch words in national planning guidelines for our public lands.

Not so at Taos BLM. All three of these important components are missing from the field office's first decision about Rio Grande del Norte National Monument lands — a decision, it is important to note, that precedes the Monument Plan itself.

The Decision Record on Special Recreation Permits for Non-motorized Competitive Events in Rio Grande del Norte National Monument allows commercial mountain biking races at anytime during the year — including during bird nesting season — on Overlook Trails and Wild Rivers.

Just four Albuquerque recreationists filed for or inquired about racing opportunities on the Monument. These four proved mightier than a slew of local activists, birdwatchers, New Mexico Audubon, Sangre de Cristo Audubon, an ornithologist, and even a biologist in the non-game department of New Mexico Game and Fish. To be fair to these four, however, local politics may have played a bigger role. The Decision Record is currently under appeal.

Pit camping and live bands (amplified music at Wild Rivers) are now allowed in areas previously off-limits. There will be parking or a shuttle service along CR 110. There will be vendors and porta-potties. Silly mitigation efforts are offered: race organizers are charged with re-seeding trampled ground and conducting nesting bird surveys.

Really. I'm not making this up.

Sure, the field office has its apologists and apologies. And although the field office narrative has morphed markedly since the first environmental assessment was offered last summer, the justification runs along these lines — we can't stop working just because we're monument planning.

Yeah, but if you just purchased a bit of property, wouldn't you design the area first before deciding what to do with it? Taos BLM acquired acreage at the end of CR 110, right at the boundary of the Monument. It was billed by managers as a gateway to the Monument. So why didn't they use their non-monument planning time to design the area? Why wasn't the public invited to weigh-in directly about this acreage? At least one acting field office manager in the past year would have taken this approach. Lack of leadership may be the biggest culprit in this debacle.

The area cries out for good design. A historic illegal dumping ground, hang-out for bored teenagers, and site of illicit deal-making, this new acreage could be re-purposed into a Monument stepping-off point we can all be proud of. Vandals have since made off with fencing and signage that has had to be continually replaced.

To be fair, Taos BLM is trying. But arguably, valuable staff time was re-routed to mountain biking racing instead of to designing this location, one which many locals consider a jewel at our doorstep.

We need a gem-quality design, not a cut-and-paste job.

Which is what we may be getting. An illegal, nearly 15-foot-wide access for mountain bikers has already been pasted onto the site. Meandering pathways, promised by enthusiastic managers, have fattened into six-foot-wide trails covered with trucked-in road-fill. Wheel-chair-access is still a future dream.

But the real hit will not be on us humans. It will be born, as usual, by wildlife, particularly by nesting birds who utilize the Overlook acreage for something arguably more important than mountain biking races. Do birds, already beset with a myriad of environmental and climate challenges, need another hurdle? Birds may be surviving with present levels of hiking, biking, and dog-walking. But what if we add in long periods of disturbing, racing traffic?

We don't need accelerated development anywhere in the Monument.

What can we do about it? I am hopeful that as the Monument Plan moves forward, our Taos community will push for ecosystem-wide planning instead of this piece-meal approach; for collaborative partnerships with authentic bird and wildlife protection organizations, such as Audubon; and for science-based planning, where wildlife data aren't continually trumped by unreliable numbers of recreational use.

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