

De la Tierra

Rio Grande: The Great River

By Steve Tapia

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On March 25, 2013, President Barack Obama signed a presidential proclamation designating the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

The monument includes more than 240,000 acres of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and non-BLM lands within the monument's boundary that are not affected by the proclamation.

The Rio Grande del Norte was designated a national monument to protect four key "objects of value": geology, cultural and historic resources, ecological diversity and (my personal favorite) wildlife, states John Bailey, monument manager with the Bureau of Land Management-Taos Field Office.

The Establishment Record for the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument states, "In far northern New Mexico, the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River flows through a deep gorge at the edge of the stark and sweeping expanse of the Taos Plateau. Volcanic cones, including the Cerro de la Olla, Cerro San Antonio, and Cerro del Yuta, jut up from this surrounding plateau. Canyons, volcanic cones, wild rivers, and native grasslands harbor vital wildlife habitat, unique geologic resources, and imprints of human passage through the landscape over the past 10,000 years. This extraordinary landscape of extreme beauty and daunting harshness is known as the Rio Grande del Norte, and its extraordinary array of scientific and historic resources offer opportunities to develop our understanding of the forces that shaped northern New Mexico, including the diverse ecological systems and human cultures that remain present today."

Spanish conquistadores discovered the mouth of the Rio Grande in 1519. During the next 100 years, they founded some of the earliest North American settlements along its banks, according to High Mesa Productions out of El Prado. These explorers named the river "El Rio Grande," or "the great river." However, it has been called by many other names. The Pueblo people called it P'osoge, the "big river." Shipwrecked British sailors crossed it in 1568 and called it "the river of May," and various Spaniards and Mexicans named it "El Rio de Nuestra Se-ora" (River of Our Lady), El Rio Guadalquivir, El Rio Bravo, El Rio del Norte and El Rio Turbio (turbulent river). On a map dated 1700, it appears as El Rio del Norte y de Nuevo México.

This river of many names, or at least the section that runs through Northern New Mexico, is not a typical river that has carved out its own valley. Rather, the valley appeared first and the river followed, according to Linda Thompson, online instructor for U.C. Berkeley Extension and co-owner of High Mesa Productions.

This “rift valley” is a separation in the earth’s crust caused by faulting and other earth movements when the North American and Pacific plates scraped against each other some 29 million years ago. The Rio Grande Rift is not just the canyon, or gorge, that holds the river, but an area of more than 160,000 square miles reaching from Central Colorado almost to Big Bend National Park in Texas.

Taos Plateau is part of this “rift system” and lies in the San Luis Basin, which is nearly 100 miles long and about 47 miles wide. Some scientists believe that, several million years from now, the Rio Grande Rift may become an ocean. If that should happen, Taos County residents will have both mountain and ocean views! Perhaps that’s where the song “Oceanfront Property” sung by George Strait comes from! Ha!

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Rio Grande Gorge



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