

My Turn

Raise a glass to wilderness in Rio Grande del Norte

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Nearly 20 years ago I made a decision that changed my life — I moved to Taos. I came here because of our incredible public lands, and they have proven to be the economic backbone of our community and my livelihood. Taos Mesa Brewing (TMB) is part of a big network of businesses that all depend on our great outdoors. People come from near and far to play in and explore our big backyard.

They come to hike, bike, raft, camp, ride horseback and more. And when they visit, they spend their money in our hotels, bed and breakfasts, outfitter shops, restaurants — and bars like TMB. Together with our friends and neighbors who choose to live here for the same reasons I do, we all sustain our economy year round.

But Northern New Mexico would not be the place it is today if not for our foresight to safeguard our public lands for future generations to enjoy.

One of my favorite places (and I say one of because there are so many) is the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument — designated so by President Obama in 2013. One of the best things about the national monument is its wildlife. It serves as a corridor for animals like Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer, pronghorns, black bears, coyotes, red foxes, cougars, and bobcats. It is also one of the world's great avian migratory routes, providing an important stopover for eagles, hawks, Canada geese, herons, sandhill cranes, hummingbirds, American avocets and falcons. Many of these animals call two areas within the national monument home: Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio.

These special places were first proposed as wilderness areas before Obama designated the Rio Grande del Norte. However, only Congress can designate wilderness — so today they remain in limbo.

Cerro del Yuta, or Ute Mountain, is the highest point on Bureau of Land Management land in New Mexico, reaching roughly 10,000 feet.

As a former volcano, one only needs to close their eyes to imagine lava flowing from atop its peak.

And today this tall giant serves a viewpoint to see miles and miles of New Mexico's natural splendor. Rio San Antonio is dominated by rolling grasslands, providing incredible opportunities for viewing wildlife. Together, Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio make up roughly 21,500 acres of the 242,000-acre national monument.

People choose to explore Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio because each of these places offers a unique and special experience. People come to hike, ride horseback and camp. It is

in these places that people can truly disconnect from the hustle and bustle of daily life — and reconnect with friends and family, or just be alone.

My business depends on the permanent protection of these places. Rio Grande del Norte would not be the same without Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio. In 2014, just one year after designation, there was a 40 percent increase in visitors to the national monument, and the town of Taos enjoyed a 21 percent increase in lodgers' tax revenue. Additionally, there was an 8.3 percent increase in gross receipts revenue from the accommodations and food service sector. Nearly two years after designation, *The Taos News* said Rio Grande del Norte National Monument was the reason the local economy improved at a "rate that no one anticipated..." The publication added that tourism "is one of the main economic drivers of economic growth."

Designating these places as wilderness would preserve the most pristine lands within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. That's why Senators Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall introduced the Cerros del Norte Conservation Act, and why the U.S. Senate passed it. Both the national monument designation and the wilderness legislation are supported by ranchers, sportsmen, local elected officials, Hispano organizations, Native American tribes, veterans and business owners like me. In fact, people have been working to safeguard these places for years.

It is time to protect the most special places within the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument.

I want to thank our senators for working to safeguard Cerro del Yuta and Rio San Antonio for future generations to enjoy.

I hope they are protected this year.

Irion is events booking manager and a managing partner at Taos Mesa Brewing.



Irion (center) and crew before a New Mexico Wilderness Alliance flight to observe the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument from the air.