

Long road to recovery

Nambé Falls open to public while post-fire rehabilitation continues

Rebecca Moss, *The New Mexican*

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The mud stuck and turned black beneath head ranger Wayne Vigil's cowboy boots as he strode up the steep, quarter-mile trail to Nambé Falls. The narrow path was composed of the same clay-like sediment used to craft Native micaceous pottery and was strewn with jagged shale rock, some imprinted with faint fossils.

Just out of sight, the sound of rushing water blared like radio static.

It's in this uneven terrain, where the trees grow sideways out of the hillsides, that Vigil, now 45, and his siblings played as children. They scaled the same treacherous cliffs he now takes pains to keep new generations from exploring. It is also the place where Nambé Pueblo's religious leaders for centuries have held biannual spiritual ceremonies in earthen kivas constructed just out of view.

"It is still considered a sacred area," Vigil said. "We take pride in it."

When the waterfall finally appeared at the crest of the hilltop, were it not for the noise, the sheet of rushing water would have seemed like a mirage amid the otherwise dry landscape.

The Nambé Falls Recreation Area and Nambé Lake, still in a state of recovery from the effects of a fire in 2011, have opened for the summer season. Much of the area remains scarred by the Pacheco Canyon Fire, which torched 10,000 acres of the Santa Fe National Forest and much of the area surrounding Nambé Pueblo. Lake water was drained to put out the flames. When the monsoon rains fell after the wildfire, the area flooded, inundating Nambé Lake with ash, soil and other debris from the burn.

"We haven't fully rehabilitated," said Nambé Pueblo Gov. Phillip Perez. "Right now, we are in a much better position than in 2013, but we still see the impact."

"We are going to bring back the respect to that area that it deserves," added Perez, a third-term governor who worked as an engineer at Los Alamos National Laboratory before joining the tribal government in 2006. "... We are moving into a new area of management and operation for the area and the parks."

Newly generated brochures advertise opportunities to picnic, hike, fish and camp in the Nambé recreation areas, just 20 miles north of Santa Fe. Last year, the recreation areas closed for the season in September, but officials hope to keep the sites open longer this year, possibly through October.

Despite an overnight snow, families with young children and college students on spring break were already exploring the park by noon the opening day. The only evidence of the cold weather was the stillwet earth and 33-degree water pummeling down the falls from a snaking river lined with 100-year-old, leafless cottonwoods.

Trails had been cleaned and vegetation shorn to protect the area from wildfires.

The day had started off slow, Vigil said, but he had already received calls from people planning to head up or wanting to reserve campsites.

Farther upstream, a handful of fishermen had cast their lines into Nambé Lake – created by a 1970s-era dam – and were hoping to catch a few of the 2,400 rainbow trout stocked two weeks earlier. The lake opened last year for fishing – the first time since the fire. But a wide ring of sand still circles the low lake.

“This is the perfect way to end our spring break,” said Pimentel Lorraine Bangug, who had moved with her husband and two sons to Gallup from the Philippines three years ago. They are Catholic and visit El Santuario de Chimayò at least once a year on a pilgrimage. Each time, she said, “We always get that curiosity” about what exists a few miles down the road in Nambé Pueblo.

It took roughly \$7 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other public funding to restore the area and dredge sediment from Nambé Lake. The weight of the trucks pulling debris further tore apart old tribal roads and led the pueblo to shutter the area for another year for repairs.

Part of the ongoing rehabilitation includes efforts to restore campsites, partly built from adobe bricks that, over time, have been inscribed with hundreds of names. Large chain-link mesh cages have been stretched through the canyon to prevent floodwaters from causing damage in the future, and stormwater monitors are being installed to notify the community in advance of an event.

The fire also led Nambé Pueblo leaders to reimagine the pueblo’s role in the community.

Under Perez, pueblo officials are working to create a new “synergy” between the lake and falls, the newly opened Nambé Falls Casino and a cultural center under development to encourage more tourism and allow visitors to experience the pueblo’s heritage.

“It also gives us a good tool in preserving our culture,” Perez said of the effort.

“As Native people, the mountains, the hills, the water, the lake, the trees are all sacred locations,” he said.

For Vigil, the park is best in the summer, when, from the top of the waterfall outlook, “You can hear all the laughter and carrying on down below. And you can see all the way down the valley” to the mesas of White Rock and Los Alamos. “It’s one of the reasons I like being up here.”

For 20 years, Vigil, a retired Marine, ran the slot machines at a Pojoaque casino. When a park ranger job came up at the falls, he said, he jumped on it.

“Like my wife said ... do something you are going to be happy doing. Running around in the hills and being up there at the lake – what can make you happier than that?”

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From left, Kansas State University students Logan Hughes, Chandler Wildenan and Tommy Fink hike to Nambé Falls. They were visiting the area on spring break.

Luis Sánchez Saturno/ The New Mexican



Tommy Fink, a Kansas State University student on spring break, turns around Friday after reaching the end of the trail to Nambé Falls.

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