

## My Turn

# Thanks to those protecting the Rio Grande

**Raena Garcia**

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I arrived in Taos last year after graduating from the University of New Mexico and have been working as an Americorps VISTA volunteer for a local nonprofit, Rivers & Birds.

Through working with Rivers & Birds, I have really begun to understand the allure that the Taos area has on its residents. The experience of working so closely with the land has taught me a lot about the intricate relationship people have with the surrounding natural environment and wildlife.

This year is the 50th Anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. In 1968, 55 miles of the Rio Grande became one of the first rivers to be protected under the act. Within the last 25 years, extraordinary sections of the Rio Grande and the Red River were added, and now the protected river areas total 74 miles. These values add to the richness of Taos County, and we are so fortunate to have so much open and adventurous land and water available to us.

In celebration of Earth Day, I wanted to take the time to thank the community on behalf of myself and Rivers & Birds. So many citizens here have worked to honor, care and support our Wild and Scenic Rivers and the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. Although I am not able to thank everybody, I want the environmental efforts of our past and present generations to be recognized.

Wildlife in this area has not always been as abundant as it is today. A century ago, no river otters or bighorn sheep existed here due to over hunting and human encroachment. Through the leadership of Taos Pueblo, Amigos Bravos and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, river otters are now swimming happily in our Rio Grande. Taos Pueblo and state Game and Fish also collaborated to reintroduce bighorn sheep to Taos County. Anyone who has hiked near the gorge can confirm they are thriving. Maintaining the health of our wildlife is essential to Taos' future ecological health.

By educating the community, we can continue to enjoy these areas without too much human alteration. Rivers & Birds continues to teach the next generation of Earth stewards to be mindful and respectful of nature.

Through 20 years of experience, Rivers & Birds has engaged elementary school students in planting more than 650 native trees along the Rio Grande as part of an ongoing Rio Grande native riparian restoration effort. Rivers & Birds has also taken more than 5,000 students through a nine-day nature immersion program that teaches the value of water conservation. Inspiring these students to care about the environment is crucial if we want to change our society's attitude towards conservation and to prevent long-lasting, harmful effects.

Last, I want to acknowledge the other entities of Taos County that have dedicated time and effort in conservation work. Amigos Bravos has done years of legal work advocating for the protection of the Rio Grande from pollution and misuse. The Taos Land Trust promotes sustainable and traditional use of the land. The Bureau of Land Management Taos field office has protected and managed the Wild and Scenic Rivers so that we can experience the rivers as nature intended.

In this world, it's rare to have access to such pristine natural landscapes. By working with a community organization like Rivers & Birds, I have the opportunity to experience people's devoted philanthropy toward the Earth.

Let us celebrate Earth Day not only this one day of the year but also throughout our daily lives. Be mindful of your excess usage of Earth's resources. Be grateful for this landscape and the wildlife.

Esther Garcia, president of the San Antonio del Rio Colorado Land Grant said, "Water is life, everybody knows that. It is important for our community and for our survival."

*Raena Garcia is a resident of Arroyo Hondo.*

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