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How to make your own Yellowstone, Mexican style

By Hal Herring

COAHUILA, Mexico - At Boquillas Crossing on the southern edge of Big Bend National Park, the Rio Grande is slow and muddy, waist-deep and 50 yards across. You can hail a boatman from the group of men who loiter around the gravel bars on the Mexican side, playing cards on the tailgate of a pickup, their saddle horses tethered in the mesquites. One of them will drop his cards and give you a ride across the river for a small fee.

South of the Rio Grande, the great limestone scarp of the Sierra El Carmen rises, dramatic and white, a walled fortress of forests and grasslands towering 8,000 feet above the pale stone and muted greens of the Chihuahua Desert. The roads that follow the mountain wall south into the Mexican state of Coahuila are few and bad. The villages are widely scattered, surviving on cattle and goat-herding or the ancient trade of extracting wax from the candelilla plants that grow wild in the desert.

When Lorenzo Zambrano thinks of the Sierra El Carmen, he dreams of a Mexican Yellowstone, where mountain lions stalk javelina among tall cottonwoods and Mexican cherry trees, and where bighorn sheep square off among the sotol and agaves. For Zambrano, who sits at the helm of the Mexican corporate colossus CEMEX, the third largest cement producer in the world, it's not a far-fetched dream. With business booming in 33 countries and annual

sales last year of nearly \$7 billion, CEMEX can afford to buy huge chunks of the Sierra El Carmen. And that's what the company has been doing, snapping up 187,000 acres in the last two years. It's a capitalist's endeavor reminiscent of Ted Turner's vast land acquisitions in the Western U.S. Zambrano wants to show the world how private enterprise can achieve what government cannot, and how a developing nation like Mexico, beset with political and social turmoil, can succeed in preserving wild lands and wildlife where more prosperous nations have failed.

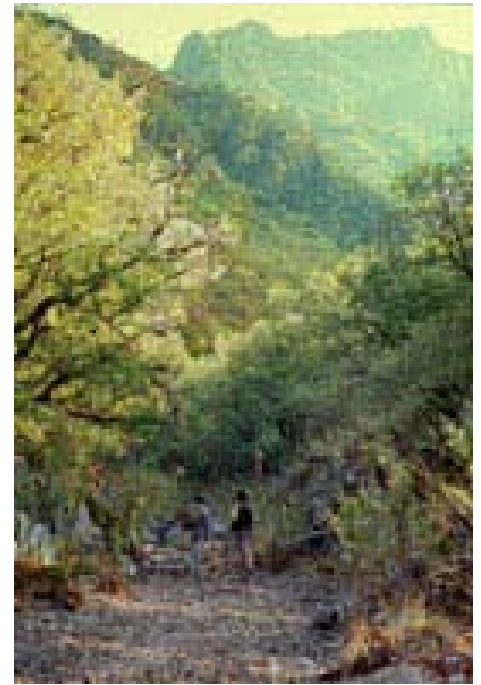
Already, CEMEX has earned laurels for its low-impact resource extraction and reclamation, and for its support of several conservation projects throughout Latin America. Still, there is suspicion in many quarters that the El Carmen project is only an enormous corporate retreat, reintroducing extirpated species only to stock the mountains with big-game animals for hunting.

But so far, CEMEX's most formidable challenge has not been environmental scrutiny, but trying to adapt the rapid pace of a corporate-backed project to the maddeningly slow progress of conservation.

For the people who know the El Carmen country and want to see it preserved for wildlife, the CEMEX purchases are welcome news. "The corporate sector is out there on the landscape, playing for good or ill," says Jeff Weigel, The Nature Conservancy's representative for northeast Mexico. "The CEMEX project really represents the birth of the land-trust movement in Mexico, a new strategy entirely. It's bigger-picture conservation and it gives us the opportunity to stop thinking that the world ends right there at the U.S. border."

The Long Road

The El Carmen and its sister range to the east, the Serranias del Burro, hold lions and black bears, deer and turkey,



A corporate behemoth races to restore a Coahuilan gem

bobcat and jaguarundi, possibly jaguar and ocelot. It's believed that there are more than 400 species of birds that live or winter here, along with rare reptiles, insects and amphibians.

Across the river in Texas lies not only the 770,000 acre Big Bend, but also the Black Gap Wildlife Management Area, an isolated 100,000-acre expanse of desert. Neither have the kind of biodiversity found in the El Carmen or the Burros, but their proximity to each other may prove a vital element to creating a vast, prolific ecosystem.

But for now, that is just a dream. The El Carmen has been continually mined, hunted, and grazed for centuries.

Twelve years ago, when Zambrano was looking for a conservation investment, he called Patricio Robles Gil, the charismatic leader of the Mexico City-based conservation group Agrupacion Sierra Madre. "He asked me if I could direct him to a cutting-edge project, with international impacts, something that Mexico could be proud of," says Gil, who is also a well-known wildlife photographer.

Gil immediately directed Zambrano to El Carmen. "Lorenzo said then that he was going to move his company to the forefront of conservation."

Zambrano asked Gil to take charge of the project, and kick-start it quickly. But in the first few years they encountered terrible setbacks. Political upheaval, first the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas, then the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Colosio in 1994, placed the project on hold.

Then in 1994, the Mexican government declared most of the El Carmen Mountains a "protected area." But the designation meant very little, since the entire area was essentially private property, held in big ranches, mining claims and ejidos - the collective farms and ranches that date back to the Mexican Revolution. When Mexican government officials disclosed the new land-use rules for the protected area, the landowners and ejidatarios were furious, and they barred government officials from entering the area.

This situation is not unique in Mexico; it has more than 140 designated national parks and protected areas across the country, but only a few are protected from development. As Gil puts it, "There is money enough allocated, some years, to manage maybe 16 of the parks. The others are really just on paper. In the El Carmen, things might have actually gotten worse after it was made a protected area - there was a lot of logging, overgrazing, all of that."

But the same roller-coaster economics that imperil the other national parks has, in part, laid the groundwork for El Carmen's protection. During the 1990s, Mexican dryland cattle producers suffered the same losses as their U.S. counterparts. The world-famous mines of the area were mostly played out. Years of drought had forced the toughest of the ejidatarios to consider working in the cities or north of the border.

When Gil made inquiries, he found many landowners ready to cash out and move on. By 2000, CEMEX made an initial purchase of 136,000 acres within the El Carmen protected area.

"Everybody asks me why we would do something like this," says Armando Garcia, the executive vice president of development for CEMEX, and the man in charge of acquiring new lands for the project. "There's the obvious reason - to re-establish wildlife corridors to protected lands in the U.S. There's also the fact that those mountains provide a very important environmental service to both of our countries, and if it is lost there will be serious costs to bear. We understand that service both as conservationists and as businessmen, and we can figure out how best to protect it." Meanwhile, nature takes its time

CEMEX officials and the board of directors for the El Carmen project have feverishly debated the details. The board is a diverse group that includes Kathryn Fuller of the World Wildlife Fund, biologist Russell Mittermeier, Mexican rancher conservationists David Garza and Guillermo Osuna and a handful of corporate overseers. Their ideas vary widely, from reintroduction of extirpated species into a pristine landscape, to a restored tract of land on the model of a U.S. national park, like Yellowstone.

"If mankind hadn't hit it so hard, there'd be no reason to manage this place," says Bonnie McKinney, who, along with her husband, Billy Pat, has been hired to manage the project. "But we've watched the steady decline of wildlife in places like Big Bend, where the mandate is clearly hands-off. We can't afford that here."

Bonnie McKinney thinks the only way to fix El Carmen is exhaustive restoration, from re-establishing native grasses to reintroducing native wildlife. "There are places here that will not recover in the lifetime of anyone living today," she adds, "but we can make a start."

As a private enterprise, funded entirely from CEMEX's profits, El Carmen project managers have an autonomy that would make U.S. Forest and Park Service officials envious. But there's a trade-off: Private stewardship is no guarantee that the project will exist in perpetuity, with the agreed goals of biodiversity and wildland preservation shaped during its creation.

Even Gil is somewhat concerned that by directing CEMEX's interest to the El Carmen, he was personally unleashing uncontrollable forces of change upon one of the most important and isolated landscapes of Mexico. "I constantly asked myself if I was doing the right thing, arguing for this," he says. "I worried about it ten years ago. I worry about it now."

For Gil, the expertise of the board of directors is something of a comfort, especially when Bonnie McKinney came in as a manager. But there are still some serious hurdles. The CEMEX protected area is supposed to include low-altitude grassland habitat, which would extend all the way to the border of the U.S. And there are at least two ejido properties that sit between the current acquisitions and the Rio Grande, at the border of Big Bend. Another bridges a wide valley, and an important wildlife corridor, to the private conservation ranches in the Serranias del Burro.

On the side of the El Carmen that faces one large ejido, livestock - cattle, goats and horses - enters the property on a regular basis, as do subsistence hunters. Another ejido also represent a roadblock for migrating wildlife. In the mid-1990s, a large number of black bears left the Serranias del Burro for the Chisos Mountains deep in Big Bend National Park, where they had not been seen since the 1950s. Two years of drought sent most of them back to Mexico, by way of one large ejido that they had avoided on the trip north. All the bears that had been fitted with radio collars by biologists in Big Bend were shot.

McKinney says that CEMEX is prepared to pay market value for the ejido properties, which would mean moving families who have owned land in the area for centuries. Some observers of the project object to the idea of displacing human beings for wildlife conservation. But McKinney finds nothing offensive about it.

“I had a guy from Big Bend National Park looking at maps of the El Carmen with me,” explains McKinney, “and he said, ‘You cannot displace those people from those lands for this.’ My jaw must have dropped down to my belt buckle. The U.S. government condemned my grandfather’s ranch - just flat took it - to make Big Bend. And this guy has the nerve to tell me that CEMEX can’t offer market price for land to accomplish something like this?”

Even if the El Carmen project comes to fruition, the forces of change will still be unleashed on the desert silence of northern Coahuila. If the project becomes a park, there will be visitors, and there is talk of the necessity of paving the highway from Boquillas to allow them access from Big Bend. Trails known only to candelilla wax gatherers, poachers and contrabandistas will be trod by wilderness and wildlife enthusiasts from around the world. The area could lose some of the romantic and actual isolation that it now owns in a very profound sense.