

Saving the Pecos River: A Community of Conservation

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. --Margaret Mead, American anthropologist (1907-1978)

Protection of an iconic landscape starts in the heart.

Every Santa Fe Conservation Trust project is unique. We shape each cooperative partnership to the particular needs of the land, the conservation wishes of its landowner(s), and the values that the Trust wishes to protect in that particular locale. Yet every project starts in the same way. It first forms in the heart of one or two people who carry an unshakable belief that a particular place they love is too beautiful, too irreplaceable, and too important to lose.

This is a story about a thoughtful, committed group of citizens who love and are protecting one of northern New Mexico's most beautiful landscapes—the upper Pecos River.

North of Ilfeld, New Mexico, a wild stretch of the Pecos River twists through Cerrito Amarillo Canyon, forming small rapids and catching in deep, still pools as it negotiates the rugged terrain. Here 200-foot sandstone and limestone cliffs stand guard, historically preserving the canyon's untamed character from development, forestry, grazing, and off-road vehicles. High above the gorge, wildflowers, cactus, piñon, juniper, ponderosa, scrub oak and mountain mahogany grow in thick profusion in rock terraces above the gorge. Along the river's edge, gambel oak, willow and box elder maple cluster and verdant carpets of native grasses, wildflowers and shrubs stabilize the banks. The canyon is home to abundant and diverse wildlife including bear, elk, deer, and beaver.

In 2002, a local ranching family decided to sell a 32-acre tract in the heart of the canyon, and people who knew and loved this beautiful area immediately realized it had to be preserved. Local resident Christopher Thomson suggested to his neighbor Dyanna Taylor that the community pool funds to purchase and protect the land. Together they drafted a proposal and emailed it to Kevin Cassidy, another conservation-

minded Ifeld resident, who immediately committed \$10,000 in a two-word “I’m in” response.

The three began brainstorming, reaching out with email appeals, and walking the land with friends and neighbors. The vision proved infectious, and neighbor after neighbor joined the group with pledges of gifts. Participants even began to look at their own properties with an eye to their conservation potential. Energy was high, but at 85% of goal, funds were tapped out and ideas were running low.

As luck or fate would have it, that summer Dyanna happened to attend a Santa Fe Conservation Trust event on the property of one of its landowner partners just a few miles upstream along the Pecos. There she learned of a new state law—the New Mexico Land Conservation Incentives Act—that rewards landowners with tax benefits for voluntary conservation efforts.

There, too, was Santa Fe attorney and outdoor enthusiast Richard Hughes. Meeting Dyanna and learning of the dilemma, it dawned on Richard that the new tax incentives could help the neighbors partially finance their conservation efforts.

Suddenly it was obvious: people could do well by doing good.

Richard and his wife Clare Rhoades immediately joined the project and procured the balance of the funds. In addition, Richard donated legal help, putting together a conservation easement with the Santa Fe Conservation Trust, whose costs were partially covered by a grant from SFCT.

In the end, through the combined efforts of 26 neighbors, friends, and partners, the property was saved.

The experience proved so satisfying that they decided to form a 501(c)3, call themselves Pecos River Open Spaces (PROS), and do it again.

And again.

Today PROS members continue to purchase properties as they come on the market and protect them with conservation easements in direct partnership with the Santa Fe Conservation Trust. In 2006, PROS members purchased a 17-acre stretch of riverfront protecting lush riverside vegetation, trout and beaver habitat, and community access to a naturally-occurring swimming hole, a long-time favorite of local

Pecos River Properties protected by the Santa Fe Conservation Trust

Four Ifeld area properties held by PROS:

Cerrito Amarillo tract: 32 acres

Swimming Hole tract: 17 acres

Coonly tract: 60 acres

Pecos 16 tract: 16 acres

Three other parcels upstream, each held by private landowners, protect an additional 964 acres.

Total protected so far: 1,093 acres on eight properties—and counting!

residents. In 2009, neighbor Genevieve Coonly, admiring the group's efforts, donated an undeveloped 60-acre property to the cause. Later that year, group members raised enough to purchase yet another 16 acres of riverside property vulnerable to subdivision.

Each effort adds another pearl to the string of protected lands embracing the upper Pecos River, and deepens the commitment of participants and community members to preserving the canyon.

This is exactly why the Santa Fe Conservation Trust exists—to support such efforts. Our charge is to be here long after these dedicated, generous people are gone, a permanent partner for current and future generations who know that a place worth living in is a place anchored by a network of natural lands and waters. We're proud to be here for our landowner partners along the Pecos River, and in communities throughout northern New Mexico.

The dream to save this stretch of the Pecos River started in the hearts of those who loved it and cared enough to invest in its protection. The rest just flows naturally.

As will this beautiful, forever-wild piece of New Mexico.