

A CONVERSATION WITH NEW MEXICO WILD BOARD MEMBER **ERNIE ATENCIO**



Above: Ernie presents New Mexico Wild's inaugural Esther Garcia Conservation Champion Award to fellow Norteño John Olivas in 2023.

Left: Ernie Atencio in 1988 at Mesa Verde National Park, where he was then working as a ranger.

Editor's Note: After nine years of service on New Mexico Wild's board of directors, Ernie stepped down this summer. He is the Southwest Regional Director for the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA), covering 64 park units in the Four Corners states. This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Mark Allison: Hi Ernie, thanks for making time and great to see you. How did you get into conservation? You've been doing this work for a long time in various ways. What drew you to it originally?

Ernie Atencio: I'm not sure if you've heard this story, but it all goes back to what we participants called a "Hoods in the Woods" Outward Bound trip when I was 18 years old, right out of high school. I got the one scholarship at my inner-city high school for a 23-day Wilderness course in the Sangre de Cristos in Colorado, near the sand dunes. It just blew my mind and opened up a whole new world I didn't even know much about. I had some yearnings about being out there but didn't have a clue how to do it. It started there. I fell in love with wild places and saw the incredible power of places like that. Little by little, I ended up working for Outward Bound for a while, leading trips, then as a park ranger for many years. My roots are here in Northern New Mexico, for many centuries. I had an epiphany during graduate school—while doing fieldwork on the other side of the planet—about coming back to Northern New Mexico. The irrigation system where I was working on the Tibetan Plateau is a perfect parallel to the acequia system here in Northern New Mexico and it transported me back to Dixon as a young kid. I later learned that it may have originated there and made its way across to Northern Africa, Spain and then here, just a few miles north of where I live. Within about a year after grad school, I had a job offer to work for Amigos Bravos, which brought

me back to Northern New Mexico. I worked for Amigos Bravos for a few years, did some contract work and publications for the Quivira Coalition and was on the board of Quivira for many years. I was also involved with the Northern New Mexico chapter of the Sierra Club and was the executive director of the Taos Land Trust for many years. There has been so much I've had the opportunity to do with NPCA across the Southwest, especially the Chaco withdrawal. It's only for 20 years from now, but I think we'll get that legislation passed for permanent protection, or if we haven't broken our petroleum addiction by then, it's just going to be too late.

MA: You served on the board of New Mexico Wild for nine years. Being on a board of directors is a volunteer position, in addition to everything else you have going on. Can you say a bit about why you devoted the time and energy to be on the board of New Mexico Wild? What has it meant to you personally?

EA: As I've told you before, I'm particular about the organizations I support. I really appreciated the approach New Mexico Wild has been taking, especially under your leadership, Mark—being more open to listening to community voices and different ideas about what conservation means in Northern New Mexico. I was really proud to participate and be part of that. I didn't realize how much the organization has grown in those nine years. It's great to see, and it's just from doing good work. I think New Mexico Wild has really become a leader and a shining example of how to do this work in New Mexico. I'm proud to have been part of that.

MA: What would you say to people thinking about serving on a board of directors, either New Mexico Wild's board or any conservation board?

What guidance might you have for future board members about their role and responsibility?

EA: That's a good question. This staff is on a good path—you're doing great work, and the organization's growth shows that. I think board service is an opportunity to work quietly behind the scenes to slowly push for this kind of cultural change, to provide oversight and general guidance, but don't get in the way of the executive director and the staff if they are on a good path. The board needs to be a step removed from the day-to-day and let you and the staff take care of that. Most board members are good about that, but I know that the tendency to micromanage can complicate things.

MA: That's a great distinction and an important point. Well, thank you so much. I appreciate your time this morning and thoughtfulness, as always. But also, I appreciate your years of service—not just with New Mexico Wild, but for lands, waters and wildlife in New Mexico. Beyond just being present on the board, I've always appreciated being able to call on you for guidance and advice and the way you model how to do this work. I've always looked up to that.

EA: That's great to hear. Honestly, it's been a totally unexpected blast. I never imagined myself in this work—I didn't even understand it. When I was in my late teens, early 20s, I'd heard about the Sierra Club and other organizations, but I didn't even know how to join an organization like that. I was a slow starter. But it's been a great adventure.



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