

# WILDERNESS DISPATCHES

## Updates on New Mexico Wild Projects Across the State

### THE FIGHT FOR THE CAJA DEL RIO CONTINUES

STAFF ARTICLE

For years, we have advocated for protecting the Caja del Rio, the magnificent 107,000-acre plateau just outside of Santa Fe. That urgent need for protection was never more evident than after the recent decision of the U.S. Forest Service to allow the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to construct a 14-mile utility corridor across these lands. Near the Rio Grande and Bandelier National Monument, the Caja is one of the most ecologically rich and culturally significant landscapes in the American Southwest. These historic lands are sacred to many Pueblos, an important wildlife corridor, traditionally used by local Hispano communities and a recreational resource for many. The utility corridor will be 100 feet wide with 17 new transmission towers and will include roads to build and service the project. This disastrous outcome could have been avoided had the Caja del Rio been permanently protected through a national monument designation.

The NNSA proposal to transect the Caja with high-power transmission lines has faced strong opposition from sovereign Tribes, the All Pueblo Council of Governors, local Hispano communities, the Santa Fe County Commission and thousands of New Mexicans.

New Mexico Wild filed a formal objection on behalf of the coalition and met with the Forest Service as the lead objector, citing violation of federal laws that require more substantive cultural and environmental assessments and demanding a full environmental impact statement, the completion of an ethnographic study, serious evaluation of alternatives and, ultimately, the denial of this project.

The Caja national monument campaign has enjoyed overwhelming community support for the past several years but was unable to gain traction with the U.S. Department of Interior until there was consensus among the Pueblos. After a draft decision was released by the Santa Fe National Forest authorizing the new transmission corridor, Tesuque Pueblo called on our congressional delegation to help permanently protect the Caja del Rio as a national monument. A unanimous resolution of support from the All Pueblo Council of Governors passed quickly thereafter, enabling the coalition to secure a letter from the Santa Fe County Commission, the coalition's own

Caja del Rio in springtime riot.  
Photo by Garrett VeneKlasen



letter (signed by 25 Indigenous, Hispano, government, business, grazing permittee, faith and conservation leaders) and a letter to the administration from New Mexico's entire congressional delegation asking for the creation of a national monument.

New Mexico Wild was central to these developments. Years of community-building, as well as critical work facilitating highly delicate conversations within and between stakeholder groups, resulted in a remarkable series of events, accomplishments and momentum. Disappointingly, despite our best efforts, and despite a supportive congressional delegation and a sympathetic administration, we were informed that there simply was not enough time to get this across the finish line before the change of administrations.

Still, we're proud of the coalition and this remarkable effort. Despite new challenges, we will continue working with communities and partners to fight for permanent protections until we are successful. ▲▲



From left: Esther García's granddaughter Megan Archuleta and daughter Lori Archuleta, New Mexico Wild Deputy Director Tisha Broska, award recipient Ernie Atencio and New Mexico Wild Executive Director Mark Allison.

### THE 2024 ESTHER GARCIA CONSERVATION CHAMPION AWARD

STAFF ARTICLE

New Mexico Wild Executive Director Mark Allison was honored to present the 2024 Esther García Conservation Champion Award to Ernie Atencio at the annual holiday party and member meeting in December.

Atencio's deep connection to Northern New Mexico conservation spans decades and includes helping to secure the designation of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and the protection of Chaco Canyon. After nine years of service on New Mexico Wild's board of directors, he stepped down in 2024. His approach to conservation emphasizes community engagement and cultural understanding, reflecting the values that García championed. "Ernie exemplifies the bridge-building and inclusive approach to conservation that Esther García stood for," Allison said. "His dedication to protecting New Mexico's lands while honoring local communities and traditions makes him an ideal recipient of this award."

García was a conservation trailblazer. The first female mayor of Questa, she was instrumental in designating the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and honoring the age-old Indo-Hispano traditions of acequias and land grants, integrating traditional values and uses into the plan. New Mexico Wild was proud to have her serve on our board of directors.

Sadly, we lost García in 2020. At the time of her passing, Allison was already contemplating an annual award in her name to honor a New Mexico conservation leader who carries on García's spirit of justice, diplomacy, wisdom and passion. ▲▲

**Last fall's issue of this newsletter featured a conversation between Mark Allison and Ernie Atencio. Read it here: [bit.ly/NMWAatencio](https://bit.ly/NMWAatencio)**



## EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION: THE OUTDOOR ACADEMY

BY BEN MORTENSEN

The Outdoor Academy, an innovative program by the Friends of the Rio Grande del Norte, is dedicated to empowering Taos youth through outdoor education, mentorship and hands-on experiences. Engaging diverse students from Taos High School and Taos Pueblo Day School, the academy immerses participants in outdoor recreation, environmental stewardship and career pathways. The program provides necessary gear at no cost to ensure that financial barriers don't prevent youth from exploring the outdoors.

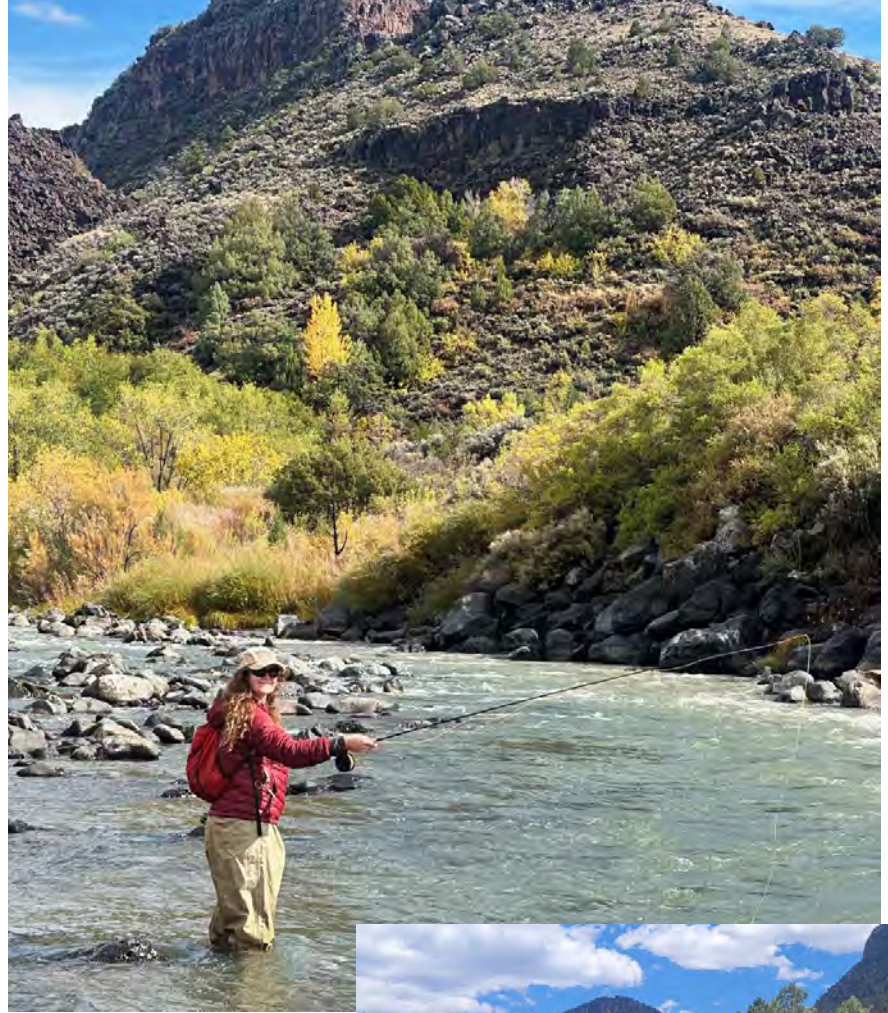
Through programs like fishing events, guide schools and certifications necessary for outdoor professions, students learn essential skills while developing a deep respect for public lands. These young people not only build expertise in outdoor recreation, but they also connect with the lands that surround them in a way that fosters lifelong stewardship.

In light of recent attempts to seize public lands across the U.S., the Outdoor Academy's mission has become even more vital. Public lands are integral to the program, providing an invaluable backdrop for hands-on learning and career development. Without access to these lands, the academy's efforts to train the next generation of outdoor professionals would be severely hindered.

Paid internships with local outfitters give students real-world experience, preparing them for careers in both guiding and conservation. These opportunities depend on the continued availability of public lands for exploration, environmental education and sustainable recreation. If these lands were taken away, not only would the students lose access to the very resources



The Friends Group hosts a community float to celebrate youth white water rafting guide school graduation. Staff photo



Above: Outdoor Academy student Uma Geisler fly fishing amongst the fall colors.

Right: Outdoor Academy gets local kids outside for a community fishing day. Staff photos



es they are learning to protect, but they would also lose the chance to build careers that help them work in the places they have grown up exploring.

The Outdoor Academy is more than just a program—it's a lifeline for students, a bridge to careers and a reminder of the importance of preserving public lands for future generations. It's critical that we protect these lands, ensuring that young people can continue to experience and learn from them. ▲▲



In January, New Mexico Wild Conservation Director Bjorn Fredrickson (front) and Executive Director Mark Allison (4th from left in back) hosted graduate students from the Harvard Schools of Public Health, Education, Government, and Business at the Albuquerque office to discuss the importance and impact of New Mexico Wild's protection campaigns and how various wilderness protection efforts have short-term and long-term impacts not only on the local economy but also on human health and social wellness. Staff photo