

## WILDERNESS DISPATCHES, CONTINUED

### CELEBRATING THE HISPANO CHAMPIONS OF RIO GRANDE DEL NORTE NATIONAL MONUMENT

BY DEVON NAPLES

New Mexico Wild joined with our partners and the community of Northern New Mexico in Taos in May to celebrate the 10th anniversary of one of our state's hardest-won conservation victories: Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. The celebration brought together community members, local leaders and current and former New Mexico Wild staff and board members to honor not just the monument itself, but also the people who dedicated their invaluable time and talent to the campaign to protect this uniquely beautiful and significant place. Esther Garcia and John Olivas were two of the campaign's most crucial organizers. The monument designation likely would never have happened without them, but their broad legacies reach beyond the Rio Grande del Norte.

Garcia was a trailblazer in more than one way. The first female mayor of Questa, she was a strong-minded and outspoken woman. She was instrumental in designating the monument and doing it the right way by honoring the age-old Indo-Hispano traditions of *acequias* and land grants and integrating traditional values and uses into the plan. New Mexico Wild was proud to have Esther serve on our board of directors.

Sadly, we lost Esther in 2020. At the time of her passing, New Mexico Wild Executive Director Mark Allison was already contemplating an award in her name to annually honor a New Mexico conservation leader who carries on Garcia's spirit of justice, diplomacy, wisdom

New Mexico Wild board member Ernie Atencio (left) presents John Olivas with the Esther Garcia Conservation Champion Award. The photo is a shot of the Rio Grande River where it flows through RGDN, by Wayne Suggs. Staff photo



**"John's approach to conservation work, particularly in Northern New Mexico, is the embodiment of effective grassroots organizing."**

— Ernie Atencio



**"Hispanics have always been conservationists. We care about protecting the land and the water, that's how we survive. But no one has ever paid attention. Things are changing."**

— Esther Garcia

and passion. At the anniversary celebration in May, New Mexico Wild was consummately represented by board member Ernie Atencio, who presented the inaugural Esther Garcia Conservation Champion Award to a true conservation hero, John Olivas.

Here is an excerpt from Ernie's speech:

"John is a skilled community organizer, land grant heir, sportsman, biologist and advocate for wild places and the communities that steward them. John's approach to conservation work, particularly in Northern New Mexico, is the embodiment of effective grassroots organizing.

As John described to me when I interviewed him in 2013, the campaign that led to the protection of this monument began with a conversation at Esther's kitchen table that lasted for 11 hours. John said, "If the movement didn't happen within the Hispanic leadership, it wasn't going to happen" in Northern New Mexico. "Esther and I spoke the same language" of community and tradition. And it was that partnership that eventually led to Esther coming around to support the monument, but on her own cultural and environmental terms.

This path led John to collaborate with grazing permittees, Taos Pueblo leadership, land grant heirs, *acequia parciantes* and *mayordomos*, local businesses, sportsmen, ranchers, and local governments. That diverse coalition built a campaign that led to President Obama designating more than 240,000 acres of land as the new Rio Grande del Norte National Monument on March 25, 2013.

John is a gentle and humble man, a great listener with a brilliant mind for strategy, and a true visionary. During the decade that John worked with New Mexico Wild, his courageous approach to the work left a mark on the organization that we are proud to honor tonight with this award." ▲▲

Read Ernie's entire speech here:



Bighorn sheep frequently can be seen in Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. Photo by Garrett VeneKlasen

