

JANUARY, 2008



Blazing a Trail:

The Benefits of a Rio Grande
Trail in New Mexico



*Blazing a Trail:
The Benefits of a Rio Grande Trail in New
Mexico*

Environment New Mexico Research & Policy Center
January 2008

Randall C. Coleman

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Dave Simon and Jessica Terrell of New Mexico State Parks, Alan Hamilton of Rio Grande Return and John Rumpler of Environment America for their incisive review and editorial assistance on this report.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders or those who provided editorial review. Any factual errors are strictly the responsibility of the author.

Copyright 2008 © Environment New Mexico Research & Policy Center

In 2006, Environment New Mexico Research & Policy Center became the new home of New Mexico Public Interest Group (NMPIRG) Education Fund's environmental work, focusing exclusively on protecting New Mexico's air, water and open spaces. Drawing on more than 30 years experience, our professional staff combines independent research, practical ideas and effective educational campaigns to overcome the opposition of special interests and win real results for New Mexico's environment.

For additional copies of this report, please visit our website at www.EnvironmentNewMexico.org

For more information about Environment New Mexico or the Environment New Mexico Research & Policy Center, please contact our office at (505) 254-4819 or visit our website at www.EnvironmentNewMexico.org

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Background.....	3
A Vision for the Rio Grande	4
A Trail to the Solution	5
Trail Benefits.....	6
Economic Benefits.....	7
Recreational Benefits.....	8
Health and Fitness.....	9
Preservation	10
Conclusion.....	10

Introduction

New Mexico is a land of monumental beauty and contrast. From the majestic peaks in northern New Mexico to the white sand dunes of southern New Mexico, the state is full of natural splendor. These remarkable landscapes have made New Mexico a magnet for lovers of the outdoors who are attracted not only to the scenery but the myriad activities to enjoy--none more popular than trail recreation. It is estimated that over 40 percent of New Mexicans take to New Mexico's trails every year.¹ The popularity of trails is not surprising; untold miles of trails lead people to all corners of the state on foot, bike, rollerblades or horseback to experience the Land of Enchantment up close.

Owing to the popularity of trails, the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, State Parks Division has set in motion an ambitious plan to construct a multi-use trail alongside the length of the Rio Grande. The trail will be similar to and eventually connect with the existing river trails in Albuquerque and Las Cruces. Currently, a corridor study is being undertaken to identify and evaluate potential trail alignments and constraints. Upon completion of the study, trail construction will begin if the necessary funding is provided. At this time there is enough funding to complete the corridor study but little with which to begin construction.

Concrete steps need to be taken in order to ensure the Rio Grande Trail project receives adequate funding. The New Mexico Legislature should start making annual investments in the trail, starting with at least \$5 million in 2008. Over the next 5 to 10 years the Legislature should continue making these investments in a sustained manner so that the main infrastructure of the Rio Grande Trail can be completed. Further appropriations by the Legislature and regional government agencies will need to be made to help cover maintenance and administrative costs once the majority of trail construction is completed. Additionally, New Mexico should seek funding from federal agencies to help trail construction/maintenance in federal lands.

This report will look at the benefits the Rio Grande Trail will have on preservation of the Rio Grande, the state economy, recreation and public health in New Mexico.

Background

Ultimately, the Rio Grande Trail will extend from Sunland Park in southern New Mexico to the Colorado border in northern New Mexico, paralleling the Rio Grande's passage through the state. Upon completion, the trail would be one of the longest continuous trails in North America. Completion of the project will likely take many years so initial efforts are being concentrated on the southern half of the state where basic infrastructure already exists.

¹ The Outdoor Industry Foundation, "The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: a \$730 billion annual contribution to the U.S. Economy," 2006.

Governor Bill Richardson and the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, State Parks Division initially proposed the concept of a recreational river trail, and in 2006 the New Mexico Legislature appropriated \$4 million for State Parks to begin planning and development. The trail concept was revisited by the legislature in 2007, when the New Mexico House and Senate passed a joint memorial (HJM49/SJM44) to support the completion of the Rio Grande Trail.

The New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resource Department, State Parks Division, has already begun developing river trail in five state parks along the southern stretch of the Rio Grande, which will eventually connect with the greater Rio Grande Trail. The Mid-Region Council of Governments (MRCOG), a regional governmental planning agency, entered into a contractual agreement with State Parks in late 2005 to begin the planning and development of the trail from Bernalillo to Belen. MRCOG has identified three pilot projects along the Rio Grande corridor that are in various stages of development.

Anasazi Trails, Inc. has been contracted by State Parks to perform a corridor study for the proposed trail. Alternatives for trail routes, trail design and permitted uses will be outcomes of this planning process. The exact details of trail construction and placement will be determined by community and land manager preferences and local conditions. The trail will have a multi-use designation to allow for a variety of non-motorized recreational activities. Anasazi Trails' scope of work includes conducting several public workshops to gather community input on trail planning, as well as developing, distributing and analyzing the results of a Rio Grande Trail survey. Frequent collaboration will be maintained between Anasazi Trails and local and state government, and this will be partially accomplished through their attendance at several regional stakeholder meetings. They will perform a per-mile cost analysis comparing surface materials, route location and other factors to achieve the most cost-effective design. Late summer 2008 is the estimated date of completion of the corridor study.

A Vision for the Rio Grande

The history of New Mexico is integrally linked to the Rio Grande. The river runs through the heart of the state, cutting gorges in the north and supporting fertile valleys in the south. The Rio Grande valley has long been home to native cultures that have relied on the river for survival. In modern times the river has supported a burgeoning urban population and irrigated New Mexico's fields.

Unfortunately, human interaction has also damaged the river. As the population in New Mexico and the Southwest has expanded, the demands on the Rio Grande have grown in kind. Currently, more water has been allocated from the river than the river can provide; at the river's terminus in the Gulf of Mexico the flow of water is, at its best, a mere trickle. During many months, the stretch of the Rio Grande south of Elephant Butte Dam is totally dry.

In 2003 the Alliance for Rio Grande Heritage undertook a study to better understand the attitudes and perceptions of the river among New Mexicans. They found that the river engendered a sense of embarrassment among New Mexicans because of its low flows. Ironically, many viewed the river as small despite the fact it is the 5th largest river in the U.S.² It is of little wonder the Rio Grande attracts few restoration projects—people view the river as a lost cause, one lost to development and incapable of rehabilitation. It is time for this to change.

The Rio Grande is an iconic river of the American Southwest, steeped in New Mexican culture and natural heritage—a river as much tied to our survival in this arid land as it is to the New Mexican identity. If we are to preserve the Rio Grande and by extension a vital part of the New Mexican way of life, the perception of the Rio Grande will have to change. The river can no longer be viewed as a mere utility but instead as a natural and cultural treasure.

We can have the best of both worlds: a river that provides us with important services and one that is admired for its beauty and aesthetic appeal. In order to do so, more resources need to be put into the Rio Grande and the first step is to build a relationship with the river in which people recognize the value of the Rio Grande.

A Trail to the Solution

The Rio Grande Trail will run along the river affording people the opportunity to explore the river and the surrounding land. Trail consultants are assessing a one mile corridor on either side of the river for trail placement—allowing for detours and reroutes around private property or sensitive areas recognized for their ecological value. In these areas, spur trails will give visitors the chance to see the river up close, to watch wildlife along its banks and to step out on the river’s sandbars. The trail will provide avenues for historical and environmental education opportunities—increasing awareness of the problems facing the Rio Grande and cultivating stewardship.

There are a number of trails across the nation created with similar preservation goals in mind. The 19th century C&O Canal & Towpath in Maryland, originally used to tow stores of munitions from Harpers Ferry to Washington DC, had fallen into obsolescence by the middle of the 20th century and was seen by some as an ideal place for a highway. The idea succumbed to the more popular idea of a recreational trail and the canal has since been converted into a 185-mile long park that was designated a National Historical Park in the 1970s.³ In Virginia, as part of the state’s Civil War site preservation initiative, the

² Harpoon Consulting, “Rio Grande: The Alliance for the Rio Grande Heritage Exploration of Identity and Issues Amongst New Mexicans,” August 2003.

³ Rails to Trails Conservancy, “Historic Preservation and Community Identity,” http://www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/resource_docs/tgc_historic.pdf, 30 November 2007.

state funded the construction of numerous hike-and-bike paths, complete with historical interpretive signs, through historical town centers and battlefield parks.⁴

To date, more than 10,000 miles of historic railway corridors have been converted to trail through the rails-to-trails project, a nationwide effort to convert old railroad lines into recreational trails.⁵ The 225-mile Katy Trail State Park in Missouri was one of the first rails-to-trails projects in the U.S. and passes along the Missouri River through the corridor of the old Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad. Many former railroad bridges along the Katy Trail have been converted into pedestrian bridges, and some sections of the trail are part of the Lewis and Clark National Historical Trail.⁶ Closer to home, the New Mexico Rails-to-Trails Association converted the historical Alamogordo and Sacramento Railway into a multi-use trail complete with original trestles in the Sacramento Mountains.⁷ The nation is replete with other examples of trails being used to preserve landmarks.

We all want healthy rivers but we first need to create an atmosphere in which people are invested in the river's health in order to create a solution. The Rio Grande Trail will achieve such an atmosphere by reconnecting residents with the river. The Alliance concluded in their report that while many resented the Rio Grande for its "second-class" status, there is undeniable "pride and emotion around the river that is potent, but it lies beneath the surface."⁸ We need to harness this emotion and remake the Rio Grande into a point of pride for all New Mexicans.

Trail Benefits

The benefits of trails are well documented. One need look no further than the premier long-distance trail, the Appalachian Trail (AT), located in the Eastern United States, for benefits trails can bring to local communities. The trail itself has become a mecca for hikers and outdoor enthusiasts from around the world who come to the trail and nearby towns each year. An estimated 3 to 4 million people hike a portion of the 2,174-mile trail every year.⁹ These individuals stay in local hotels, shop local outfitters and eat in local restaurants, injecting millions of dollars into the economy.

The Appalachian Trail has helped raise the awareness of locally endangered species and responsible land development through communities of trail hikers and activists. In total, there are 40 organized AT clubs which are each responsible for a different section of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Missouri Department of Natural Resources, <http://www.mostateparks.com/katytrail/generalinfo.htm#history>, 6 December 2007.

⁷ New Mexico Rails to Trails Association, <http://www.nmrailstotrails.org/index.htm>, 28 November 2007.

⁸ Harpoon Consulting, "Rio Grande: The Alliance for the Rio Grande Heritage Exploration of Identity and Issues Amongst New Mexicans," August 2003.

⁹ Appalachian Trail Conservancy, "2,000-Milers: Facts and Statistics," http://www.appalachiantrail.org/site/c.jkLXJ8MQkH/b.851143/k.C36D/2000Milers_Facts_and_Statistics.htm, 26 November 2007.

AT. The clubs, staffed by dedicated volunteers who are AT hikers themselves, maintain trail sections, take water-quality samplings of nearby streams, and monitor rare species.¹⁰ The Maine Appalachian Trail Club, typical of many of the clubs, offers its own education workshop on maintaining the purity of the wilderness while hiking the trail.

Founded in 1927, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club sums up well the spirit of AT stewardship in its mission statement: “As we hike and work, alone or together, we are the stewards of the land, ever mindful of the need to conserve the natural landscape with respect for historical and cultural features as well as the natural ecosystem.”¹¹ The Appalachian Trail is undoubtedly the paragon of community trail interaction, but it serves as an example of how trails across the country can benefit local communities.

There are certain benefits that all trails offer. They inject money into local economies by attracting more people into the communities near the trails and increasing the desirability of the area. They provide numerous outdoor recreational opportunities while improving the overall health of local citizens. Trails also help foster preservation by bringing more people into contact with nature and fostering an ethic of stewardship.

Economic Benefits

In New Mexico, trail-related recreation is enormously popular. Over half a million people annually from across New Mexico take in the stunning landscapes and scenery of the Land of Enchantment first hand—by hiking and biking on the thousands of miles of trail that already exist in the state.¹² This popularity translates into considerable economic gain for the state’s economy. The Outdoor Industry Foundation estimates that outdoor recreation contributes \$3.8 billion annually to New Mexico’s economy.¹³

In the retail sector alone, trails and the outdoor recreation industry generate substantial revenue for the state. According to a 2006 report by the Outdoor Industry Foundation, those participating in trail-related activities spend on average more than \$200 annually on trail gear.¹⁴ When you consider that 41 percent of New Mexicans participate in some form of trail activity, it is no surprise that outdoor recreation retail sales account for 4.6 percent of gross state product.¹⁵

¹⁰ The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, “Trail Clubs,” http://www.appalachiantrail.org/site/c.jkLXJ8MQKtH/b.786807/k.3154/Trail_Clubs.htm, 6 December 2007.

¹¹ The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, “Mission Statement,” http://potomacappalachian.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=41&Itemid=55, 6 December 2007.

¹² The Outdoor Industry Foundation, “The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: a \$730 billion annual contribution to the U.S. Economy,” 2006.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Outdoor Industry Association, *State of the Industry Report*, 2006, <http://www.outdoorindustry.org/images/researchfiles/SOI.pdf?29>, 26 November 2007.

¹⁵ The Outdoor Industry Foundation, “The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: a \$730 billion annual contribution to the U.S. Economy,” 2006.

Trails promote economic activity at the local level through business development and tourism. A nearby trail can increase small business sales and influence where new businesses choose to locate. A year after the opening of the 35-mile Missouri River State Trail, a flat river trail similar to the Rio Grande Trail and the precursor to the Katy Trail State Park, 61 businesses located along the trail reported the trail was having a positive impact on their business.¹⁶ Of those businesses, 11 reported that the trail was a strong influence on their decision of where to locate and 17 reported that they had increased their investment since the opening of the trail.¹⁷ Another flat, multi-use trail in Maryland, the Baltimore and Annapolis Trail, attracted six new trail-related stores and two other stores relocated near the trail to attract more business.¹⁸

There is a strong correlation between higher property values and proximity to parks and open space. The real estate market has consistently demonstrated that property located close to parks and open space areas is more highly valued than a property that does not offer this amenity.¹⁹ According to the U.S. National Park Service, there is a 5 to 32 percent increase in the value of property adjacent to trails and greenways.²⁰ A study looking at the effect of green spaces in Boulder, Colorado showed that in one neighborhood a greenbelt added \$5.4 million to the total property values of the neighborhood.²¹ This increase added \$500,000 in additional property taxes—generating enough revenue to cover the purchase price of the greenbelt in three years.²²

Recreational Benefits

The 2004 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan identified trails as the top recreation priority for the public in New Mexico. The popularity of trails is in many ways due to the assortment of activities that can be enjoyed and the wide range of interests that can be accommodated on trails. Take, for example, the Albuquerque Paseo del Bosque trail which attracts such diverse tastes as horseback riding and skate boarding. Trails are anything but a niche market, and the Rio Grande Trail, passing through some of the most populated areas in the state, will host all types of activities.

A cyclist will be able to ride from Las Cruces to Albuquerque without hugging the shoulder of Interstate 25. A jogger will be able to forgo exhaust fumes and barking dogs on residential streets for a tree-lined path. Horseback riders can mingle with families

¹⁶ American Hiking Society, “The Economic Benefits of Trails,” http://www.americanhiking.org/news/pdfs/econ_ben.pdf, 19 November 2007.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John L. Crompton, *The Impact of Parks and Open Space on Property Values and the Property Tax Base*, <http://www.rpts.tamu.edu/Faculty/PropertyValue.pdf>, 30 November 2007.

²⁰ Gary Sjoquist, “The Economic and Social Benefits of Trails,” <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/economics/MNecon.html>, 6 December 2007.

²¹ Paul M. Sherer. “The Benefits of Parks: Why America Needs More City Parks and Open Space,” *The Trust for Public Land*, 2006.

²² Ibid.

picnicking on the banks of the river, and wildlife and bird lovers will have easy access to prime viewing locations. There will be a few hundred miles of trail available to those who want an intense workout and to those who enjoy Sunday afternoon strolls.

As the trail is developed, amenities can be added to enhance user experience. Interpretive signs along the trail can educate visitors about native flora and fauna or historic events that occurred in the region. Parking lots interspersed along the trail will allow for easy trail access and locations for kayak and canoe launches.

Nationwide, trail recreation has become increasingly popular and many trails have become destinations in and of themselves.²³ The Continental Divide Trail already brings people from across the nation through New Mexico in their bid to hike the Rocky Mountains from Mexico to Canada. The Rio Grande Trail has the opportunity to tap into this fervor and become one of America's truly iconic trails.

Health and Fitness

Trails get people off the couch and into the outdoors providing healthy and sustainable recreational outlets. In the age of high-calorie foods and car-centric communities, exercise is increasingly important to maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Trails provide a number of different outlets for increasing one's fitness from low-impact forms of exercise like walking to more strenuous forms like mountain biking. It is no surprise that a study published by the Center for Disease Control found that creating or enhancing places for physical activity such as trails led to a 25.6 percent increase in the percentage of people exercising on three or more days per week.²⁴ Indeed, while there are other factors to consider, there is little doubt that creating more parks and open spaces will help improve public health.²⁵

Providing more places for exercise and physical activity, such as trails, is crucially important as the nation's obesity rates continue to rise. Obesity affects the health and well-being of millions of people and costs billions of dollars in healthcare expenditures. New Mexico, while slightly under the national trend, has not been immune to the obesity epidemic. In 2003, more than 55% of New Mexicans were overweight or obese.²⁶ Weight problems can lead to serious health consequences such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease,

²³ American Hiking Society, "The Economic Benefits of Trails," http://www.americanhiking.org/news/pdfs/econ_ben.pdf, 19 November 2007.

²⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Increasing Physical Activity: A Report on Recommendations of the Task Force on Community Preventive Services." *MMWR*, Vol. 50, No. RR-18, October 2001.

²⁵ Outdoor Industry Association, *State of the Industry Report*, 2006, <http://www.outdoorindustry.org/images/researchfiles/SOI.pdf?29>, 26 November 2007.

²⁶ The New Mexico Department of Health, "The New Mexico Plan to Promote Healthier Weight: Obesity and Overweight in New Mexico," http://www.health.state.nm.us/pdf/3_nm_ob_ow.pdf, 26 November 2007.

asthma, arthritis and some cancers. Treating these health problems can be incredibly expensive. It is estimated that New Mexico spends \$324 million annually on direct adult medical costs that can be attributed to obesity.²⁷ By curbing the obesity rate, New Mexico stands to save millions in healthcare costs.

These unhealthy trends can be combated with proper diet and exercise. As part of the *New Mexico Plan to Promote Healthier Weight* the New Mexico Department of Health advocates for regular physical activity and healthy eating practices to decrease the risk for chronic diseases associated with weight problems. By creating more outlets for physical activity, we can combat this public health crisis. The Rio Grande Trail will provide hundreds of miles of new trail on which people can walk, run or bike. With over 50 percent of New Mexicans living within 20 miles of the Rio Grande there is the opportunity to improve the health of the majority New Mexican citizens.

Preservation

In their 2003 report, the Alliance for Rio Grande Heritage noted that “for many the river is simply uninviting – it is not terribly beautiful or picturesque, it is too dangerous or too shallow for swimming, and it is simply impossible to get to.” The overwhelming majority of people surveyed by the Alliance did not consider the Rio Grande to be a destination—either for recreation or otherwise. In fact, the only subset of people who thought differently, were from Taos and the Albuquerque region.²⁸ Not surprisingly, in these regions, there is greater interaction with the Rio Grande. Near Taos, the Rio Grande Gorge is frequented by whitewater rafters, rock climbers and sightseers; in Albuquerque, hundreds of people per day take to the Paseo del Bosque Trail for a reprieve from urban living. These river sections are cared for because people have a reason to care for them.

The Rio Grande Trail has the same ability to cultivate stewardship and make the Rio Grande a destination. It will get people into nature and enjoying their surroundings. The Rio Grande will be recognized for the role it has played in shaping New Mexican life and greater effort will be made to protect this iconic river.

Conclusion

New Mexico has the opportunity to build a visionary trail that would be one of the longest multi-use trails in the nation. Hundreds of miles of new trail for visitors to enjoy and explore would benefit Rio Grande preservation, the state economy, recreation and public health in New Mexico. The trail is widely popular across the state but funding to build the trail is drying up.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Harpoon Consulting, “Rio Grande: The Alliance for the Rio Grande Heritage Exploration of Identity and Issues Amongst New Mexicans,” August 2003.

If funding for the project is not provided soon, there will be no means by which to begin construction once the corridor study is completed in late 2008. The Legislature should begin making annual appropriations for the trail in order to complete the major infrastructure construction. The state of New Mexico has the chance to benefit all New Mexicans by building the Rio Grande Trail. This is a chance that should not be passed by.