

The Hidden Wildness of Mexico

BY JAIME ROJO

As a child I was filled with images and ideas of the biodiversity and culture of Mexico. Jaguars, bighorn sheep, blue whales, or harpy eagles harmoniously blended with the ethnic groups of Lacandons, Huichols, or Seris in a collage whose main theme was diversity. As I studied this country more, I dreamed the sounds of its primeval forests, the endless stars of its desert nights, and the burning heat of the mountain escarpments. At that time, I didn't have a name to describe that force, or presence, which kept me aware and dreaming through many nights. Today, I do, but it was a couple of decades before I understood what this was all about.

I grew up in Spain, and during my childhood's endless summers, the torrid olive groves or the ancient *dehesas*—cattle-managed Spanish oak woodlands—in which I would wander for hours in search of insects or birds seemed to me the ultimate wilderness, the last frontier. I was raised in Madrid, the capital city of Spain, but was lucky enough to have parents who were passionate for nature and allowed me



Figure 1—Morning mist in a pine forest at the Neovolcanic Axis, Morelos. Photo © by Jaime Rojo.



Figure 2—White-eared hummingbird (*Hylocharis leucotis*), Neovolcanic Axis, Mexico. Photo © by Jaime Rojo.

to experience the rural world and the wildest side of my country. Those wonderful years shaped my life, and I will never forget them.

Relative Landscape Scale

Years later I had the opportunity to come to Mexico and fulfill my childhood dreams. I have now lived in Mexico for five years, and I am still humbled by the untamed nature that is hidden in every corner of this incredible country. The best part is that, after having traveled through much of its lush forests and scarped sierras, I feel I have only seen “the tip of this iceberg.” Certainly, the size of the country has much to do with that impression. Call it a matter of perspective, but when you have grown up in a region in which 1,000 hectares (2,500 acres) is a huge hunting *finca* (ranch)—or where Doñana National Park, the crown jewel of protected areas in Spain, has 53,000 hectares (131,000 acres) and is one of the biggest wintering sites for birds in Europe—it is overwhelming both to learn that Mexico's Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve is more than 2.5 million hectares (6.3 million acres),

about 5% of Spain's total land area, and to spend your first Christmas in this new country with a group of ranchers in northern Mexico whose properties together account for 0.5 million hectares (1.2 million acres).

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that many Mexican conservation colleagues don't think that wilderness still exists in Mexico. It is true that the country has had many millennia of human occupation. Some of the most outstanding civilizations of Mesoamerica have flourished here, and its modern, still-increasing population is more than 110 million inhabitants. Let's do basic math: almost one-third of the total population is crowded into just three cities—Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey—that together account for less than 0.6% of the national territory. That leaves more than 99% of the country to the other 75 million people—almost all of whom reside in numerous smaller cities. But, forget about these calculations, because my most important point is the concept of relativity.

The more I learn about the concept of wilderness the better I understand its flexibility and adaptability. In Mexico, I have met people for whom camping on one of the surrounding little volcanoes, with the glow of the immense Mexico City underneath, is the wildest experience they dream about. I have met others for whom Mexico is not enough and constantly dream of the open spaces of Africa or Alaska. And you would be surprised to find out how often people yearn for the "real nature" that we have in Spain.... I've actually been told that!

Wilderness Policy in Mexico

All these perspectives are valid. But sometimes there is a need to be strict when considering wilderness, especially now when Mexico is doing an

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important job as it develops its national wilderness policy. Under the leadership of Ernesto Enkerlin, head of the National Commission for Protected Areas (CONANP), Mexico has embarked on a pioneering crusade to establish and consolidate a legal framework to protect its many and diverse wilderness areas.

But the challenges to doing this can sometimes seem overwhelming. First, the wilderness concept does not actually exist in the Spanish-speaking world—numerous possible translations are used, and their meaning or acceptance varies according to the audience. Second, not everyone in the conservation world is happy with the new look of the protected area policy in Mexico. There

remains in some sectors an attitude of "why burden ourselves with another imported *gringo* concept such as this?" And finally, and probably most important, Mexico's land tenure is complicated, with more than 90% of its land under private or communal property regime. This creates tough



Figure 3—Volcano rabbit (*Romerolagus diazi*), La Cima, Distrito Federal. Photo © by Jaime Rojo.



Figure 4—Coatimundi (*Nassua narica*), El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve, Chiapas State, Mexico. Photo © by Jaime Rojo.



Figure 5—Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), Santuario de la Mariposa Monarca “Piedra Herrada,” Mexico State. Mexico. Photo © by Jaime Rojo.



Figure 6—Local *ejidatario* trained as guide and reserve warden, Monarch Butterfly Sanctuary, Michoacan State. Photo © by Jaime Rojo.



Figure 7—Emma Díaz Gutierrez, Oaxacan biologist, originally from the indigenous communities of Sierra Norte, and supervisor of the sustainable shade coffee plantations, San Juan Yagila, Oaxaca. Photo © by Jaime Rojo.

conditions for wilderness advocates, including CONANP, when policy decisions are required.

Nevertheless, after the government of Mexico announced at the 8th World Wilderness Congress (Alaska 2005) its commitment to develop its wilderness policy, a series of events favored a new wilderness paradigm in

Mexico. For example, for decades Mexico has had a powerful but obsolete agrarian reform program that considered nonfarmed or nonranch lands as “idle lands” and, therefore, subject to distribution for the use of the people. In the past few years, colleagues have worked to modify the Mexican Constitution so that “conservation” is considered a legal use of the land. If this is finally

approved, it will open up many more opportunities for protected areas and conservation land use in Mexico. Also, for those who don’t know, WILD9, the 9th World Wilderness Congress, will take place from November 6–13, 2009, in the city of Mérida, Yucatan—*el corazón del mundo Maya*—and it is already gaining momentum that will certainly enhance the political and social conditions to make things easier for wilderness advocates in Mexico.

Coming is the day when the majestic mountains and canyons of the western Sierra Madre will no longer be seen just as the home for the narco; the high-biodiversity Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts will no longer referred to as “hostile and barren lands”; and the scarce, critically important mangroves of the Gulf of California will be easily off-limits to resort or shrimp farm development. The day is coming when Mexicans will proudly speak of their *tierras silvestres*—using the term promoted by WILD9 to refer to the wilderness of Mexico and Latin America—as a valued part of their rich national heritage, an irreplaceable gift to their children, and an asset admired by the entire world.

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El Noveno Congreso Mundial de Tierras Silvestres, as it is called, will be the first completely bilingual WWC, and it’s about time. For wilderness to win, and continue with its role in mitigating climate change, providing irreplaceable ecosystem services, and providing its singular sense of wild spirit in our world, it needs to be in many different languages. After all, diversity is a key element of wilderness.

The *IJW* greets and welcomes delegates to WILD9, where this issue will be available free to all participants. To mark the occasion we have a Soul of the Wilderness on Mexico’s remarkable wilderness characteristics, and a pioneering feature article on the important role of wilderness in mitigating climate change (a central theme of WILD9). In addition, other articles from North America and Asia combine with articles on science and stewardship to round out a diverse issue.

After all we’ve mentioned here about wilderness words, here’s something else that’s interesting. The word *wilderness* is not happening in Latin America, true. But when Spanish speakers talk about the WILD9, they always refer to it as WILD Nueve! It does the job....

References

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