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Social Justice Resource

Ecological Crisis: The Impact of a Border Wall on Creatures and their Homes

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EXPERIENCE

In recent months, public discourse in the U.S. was dominated by “The Border Wall.” Analysts have been debating the usefulness of a wall for securing our border, and its potential for success in constraining illegal migration. The economic, cultural, and political consequences of funding and constructing a wall have been discussed *ad nauseum*, and there is outrage on all sides concerning the moral necessity or harm of a wall. Largely absent from the discussion, however, has been consideration of the *environmental* impact of a border wall.



A family of javelinas encounters the wall on the U.S.-Mexico border near the San Pedro River in southeastern Arizona.

The heated debate is motivated by a significant uptick in the number of migrants crossing our

southern border at unregulated entry points – approximately 100,000 people crossed in April alone.¹ There has been, however, an important change in the demographics of these migrants, as most (70%) were families and children rather than single adult males.² The vast majority of these families turned themselves in to border patrol agents to request asylum immediately upon crossing, so – according to DHS – since this is a legal means of requesting asylum under U.S. and international law, the number of successful *illegal* entries is skewed to appear larger than it is.³

Undocumented immigration as a whole has been on a downward trend for decades, due to an overall decrease of incoming migrants, combined with an increase in outward migration flows (e.g. undocumented migrants returning to their home countries, or U.S. citizens emigrating with deported family members).⁴ Recent numbers of undocumented border crossings – including those of asylum-seekers – are not nearly the highest this nation has seen. Monthly crossings regularly exceeded 100,000, and often exceeded 200,000, at the turn of this millennium.⁵ Still, the recent influx of families poses a crisis, both for the migrants who are seeking refuge and for our nation, which must determine just ways of maintaining the rule of law while responding to their needs.

It is not only these needs that must be considered, however. The ecosystems near projected building

sites will be trampled, bisected, and made unsafe as wall construction occurs and a finished barrier changes the landscape. Further, like many of the people in the southern border region, animals there embody a binational lifestyle, and they, too, will feel the effects of a physical barrier.

ANALYSIS

The land along the southern border of the U.S. is “one of the biologically richest regions in the country.”⁶ It stretches nearly 2000 miles and includes “six separate eco-regions, ranging from desert scrub to forest woodlands to wetland marshes, both freshwater and salt.”⁷ Two major migratory bird flyways converge there,⁸ and the region is home to hundreds of plant and animal species – 62 of which are critically endangered.⁹ In addition, much of the land (18%) near the border is conservation land, and “this includes four clusters of protected lands that sandwich a total of 400 border kilometers to create contiguous binational habitat corridors through the Sonoran Desert, Sky Islands, Big Bend, and Lower Rio Grande.”¹⁰ These conservation projects are often binationally coordinated.¹¹

Animals often use both sides of the border to meet their daily needs. One herd of bison, for example, finds its water source in Mexico, but grass to eat in the U.S.¹² Sonoran pronghorn, Peninsular bighorn sheep, Mexican gray wolves, jaguars, and ocelots – to name a very few – are examples of the more than 100 species at increased risk of extirpation because of limited mobility caused by a border wall.¹³ Robert Peters – along with more than 3000 concerned scientists – warns, “A continuous border wall could disconnect more than 34% of US nonflying native terrestrial and freshwater animal species (n = 346) from the 50% or more of their range that lies south of the border,” limiting their ability to roam to find food, water, or mates.¹⁴ This limited mobility affects not only the animals, but also the plants that depend on those animals for pollination and seed dispersal.¹⁵

In addition, the proposed border wall would cut through seven wildlife conservation areas in Texas alone. Because of the REAL ID Act, passed by

Congress in 2005 as a response to the terrorist attacks of 2001, Homeland Security is authorized to waive any laws for the purpose of national security. This means that border wall construction is not required to adhere to any environmental standards, including the Endangered Species Act, National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act, or the Clean Water Act.¹⁶ As scientist Robert Peters and more than 3000 of his cohorts point out, “With these laws sidelined, wall construction proceeds without the necessary depth of environmental impact analysis, development of less-damaging alternative strategies, postconstruction environmental monitoring, mitigation, public input, and pursuit of legal remedies.”¹⁷



Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge
Left: March 2007, Right: September 2007, after replacement of vehicle barrier with impenetrable barrier

The destruction will be widespread: “Like any large-scale development, construction of the wall and associated infrastructure, such as roads, lights, and operating bases, eliminates or degrades natural vegetation, kills animals directly or through habitat loss, fragments habitats (thereby subdividing populations into smaller, more vulnerable units), reduces habitat connectivity, erodes soils, changes fire regimes, and alters hydrological processes (e.g., by causing floods).”¹⁸ Flooding disasters already have increased along already-completed portions of the wall, as barriers act “as dams during rainy season floods.”¹⁹ Towns have been ravaged, and animals have been trapped by the barriers and drowned.

In light of these adverse impacts of a border wall on vulnerable creatures – irrespective of the impact on vulnerable human beings – Peters and his 3000 fellow scientists appeal to the U.S. government “to recognize and give high priority to conserving the ecological, economic, political, and cultural value of

the US–Mexico borderlands. National security can and must be pursued with an approach that preserves our natural heritage.”²⁰ Important options to pursue include reforming the system so that there is an efficient process through which migrants are able to apply for entry and have the opportunity to enter legally, either permanently or temporarily; contributing to development projects in Latin America; and improving technologically-advanced equipment options. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) argues that “Combining high-tech equipment such as underground pressure sensors, radar, drones and seismic detectors can create a virtual wall far more proficient than any physical barrier,”²¹ and Collin O’Mara, NWF President and CEO, notes, “We have more-effective and less-harmful solutions today than what the Chinese came up with thousands of years ago,” emphasizing the need for legislation to “ensure the most practical and effective technologies are deployed on the border, a win for wildlife and the nation.”²²

I should note, here, that the border wall also will have devastating effects on the indigenous peoples living in the region, who share an intimate connection with the land. The Tohono O’odham Nation, for example, was forcibly bisected by the international boundary in the 1800s, when Mexico and the U.S. agreed on the line without consulting them. The proposed wall will cut through their lands again. Verlon Jose, vice chairman of the Tohono O’odham Nation, explains, “It would be as if I walked into your home and felt like your home was not safe, but I want to build a wall right smack in the middle of your home and let me divide your family.”²³ April Ignacio, who lives on the U.S. side, adds, “You’ve taken the land. You’ve taken the majority of the water and our resources and the minerals. What more ... do Indian tribes have to compromise?”²⁴ They emphasize that “we do not own the land, but we care for the land. Every stick and stone is sacred. Every creature is sacred. Every creature has a significant part in our way of life.”²⁵ Clearly, a wall would disrupt this way of life, impeding the free migration of sacred wildlife, as well as the activities of the Tohono O’odham Nation, many of which require traversing the border regularly to visit family and to participate in sacred rituals.²⁶

Additionally, the Tohono O’odham Nation relies on “rushing waters to cross the border through washes that water their land during summer months,”²⁷ and a wall would stop this major source of water. Some members of the tribe already have to travel four miles into Mexico to fill up barrels of water for domestic and agricultural use.²⁸



Photo: Tim Vanderpool/Yes Magazine.

REFLECTION

As we deliberate about which actions should be taken to address the current migration crisis at the U.S. southern border, environmental considerations must be factored in. We should be concerned not only with the vast numbers of people – families and children, especially – who are seeking refuge in our country, but also with the variety of plant and animal species who will be affected by any action we take, as well as the indigenous communities connected to the border lands. In fact, Pope Francis argues, indigenous peoples “should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values.”²⁹ Border security, then, should be achieved in the least invasive way possible, through consultation with indigenous communities at the border. When this fails to happen, Pope Francis warns, “where certain species are destroyed or seriously harmed, the values involved are incalculable. We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of

humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration.”³⁰



Photo: Dianna M. Náñez/The Republic

While a border wall *might* limit unauthorized entries into the U.S., it will not address the actual crisis of so many people in need, and it will endanger myriad plants and animals and their ecosystems. Pope Benedict XVI insists that “on this earth there is room for everyone: here the entire human family must find the resources to live with dignity, through the help of nature itself—God’s gift to [God’s] children—and through hard work and creativity. At the same time we must recognize our grave duty to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it.”³¹ On my understanding of Catholic social thought (CST), we must regard as unjust an environmentally damaging structure built to limit the ability of people in need to request asylum – especially when it is not linked simultaneously to measures designed to increase the efficiency and availability of official avenues for such requests and to protect the species it places at risk. The words of Pope Francis are compelling: “It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”³²

It is important to emphasize, here, that securing the border *must be done for the sake of the common*

good of all. According to CST, a nation’s authority derives from its role in facilitating the common good,³³ which is based on “the dignity, unity and equality of all people” and is defined as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”³⁴ Although a nation’s government is responsible for promoting the flourishing of its own citizens, this cannot be done to the unjust exclusion of others or without concern for the effects on the wider world – “Authority must recognize, respect and promote essential human and moral values.”³⁵ Thus, nations have the right to secure their borders, provided that such security in fact benefits the global community and does not deprive anyone of their human rights, including the right to seek asylum and the right to enjoy God’s creation.

Further, when considering nature, Pope Francis reminds us, “We take these systems into account ... because they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system.”³⁶ Saint Augustine emphasized this point 1600 year ago, writing, “It is not with respect to our convenience or discomfort but with respect to their own nature that the creatures are glorifying to their Artificer.”³⁷ In other words, the value of nature is intrinsic, not conferred by human beings. We ourselves are part of the natural world, and our existence is tied up to the health of the planet and all living beings. We cannot flourish without adopting values consistent with this recognition. In the words of Pope Francis, we cannot “substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves.”³⁸ Human beings have developed the power to dominate nature through artificial measures, and therefore we have a grave responsibility to protect and cultivate our world in humility: “We are called to be instruments of God ... so that our planet might be what [God] desired when [God] created it and correspond with [God’s] plan for peace, beauty and fullness.”³⁹

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– *Laudato Si*, 53

ACTION

Please join the School Sisters of Notre Dame by participating in some of the following actions, as we “educate, advocate, and act, in collaboration with others, for the dignity of life and the care of all creation.”⁴⁰

1. The AMSSND Immigration Committee invites you to participate in this prayer service, to pray for all who will be most affected by a border wall – especially endangered plants and animals, vulnerable border communities, and migrants seeking refuge.
2. Add your name as a “general supporter” to “[Scientists’ Call to Action – The U.S.-Mexico Border Wall Threatens Biodiversity and Binational Conservation](#).”
3. Watch the Tohono O’odham video, “[There’s No O’odham Word for Wall](#),” and the recent JPIC [video reflecting on endangered species](#).
4. Reflect on this photo gallery that captures the [border wall’s effect on limiting the mobility of plants and animals](#).
5. To learn more about indigenous perspectives on border security, visit the [Tribal Border Alliance](#), which “was created to protect native-nation sovereignty as well as important tribal culture and traditions, all in the context of the ongoing debate over immigration and border security.”
6. Visit the [Smithsonian Education](#) site to learn more about the history of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.
7. Continue to speak out against the border wall, and demand that border security measures align with recommendations from Tribal governments and take into account potential environmental harms.

¹ [U.S. Customs and Border Protection – Southwest Border Migration FY 2019](#)

² Ibid.

³ [Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2017 Report](#)

⁴ [Pew Research Center](#)

⁵ [U.S. Border Patrol](#)

⁶ Laura Tangley, National Wildlife Federation, “[Up Against a Wall](#)”

⁷ Laura Parker, National Geographic, “[Six Ways the Border Wall Could Disrupt the Environment](#)”

⁸ Laura Tangley, National Wildlife Federation, “[Up Against a Wall](#)”

⁹ “[Nature Divided, Scientists United: US–Mexico Border Wall Threatens Biodiversity and Binational Conservation](#)”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Laura Tangley, National Wildlife Federation, “[Up Against a Wall](#)”

¹³ Laura Parker, National Geographic, “[Six Ways the Border Wall Could Disrupt the Environment](#)”

¹⁴ “[Nature Divided, Scientists United: US–Mexico Border Wall Threatens Biodiversity and Binational Conservation](#)”

¹⁵ Laura Tangley, National Wildlife Federation, “[Up Against a Wall](#)”

¹⁶ Laura Parker, National Geographic, “[Six Ways the Border Wall Could Disrupt the Environment](#)”

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- ¹⁷ [“Nature Divided, Scientists United: US–Mexico Border Wall Threatens Biodiversity and Binational Conservation”](#)
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Laura Parker, National Geographic, [“Six Ways the Border Wall Could Disrupt the Environment”](#)
- ²⁰ [“Nature Divided, Scientists United: US–Mexico Border Wall Threatens Biodiversity and Binational Conservation”](#)
- ²¹ Laura Tangle, National Wildlife Federation, [“Up Against a Wall”](#)
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ NPR, Morning Edition, [“Native American Leader: ‘A Wall is Not the Answer’”](#)
- ²⁴ PBS News Hour, [“At U.S.-Mexico border, a tribal nation fights wall that would divide them”](#)
- ²⁵ [“There’s No O’odham Word for Wall”](#)
- ²⁶ PBS News Hour, [“At U.S.-Mexico border, a tribal nation fights wall that would divide them”](#)
- ²⁷ Stephanie Innes, Arizona Daily Star, [“Tohono O’odham leaders: Trump’s wall won’t rise on tribal borderland”](#)
- ²⁸ [“There’s No O’odham Word for Wall”](#)
- ²⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 146.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 36.
- ³¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate)*, 50.
- ³² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 139.
- ³³ Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, II.8.III.a-b.
- ³⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, I.4.II.a.164.
- ³⁵ Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, II.8.III.b.397.
- ³⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 140.
- ³⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, XII.4.
- ³⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 34.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 53.
- ⁴⁰ [School Sisters of Notre Dame, 24th Directional Statement](#)