

The border debate and the environment

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From the Los Fresnos cienega in Sonora , the [Huachuca Mountains](#) trace a jagged outline across the horizon, showing a side unfamiliar to anyone who sees them only from Arizona . The border cuts through somewhere between the grasslands and the foothills, but for the deer and the javelina and the endangered jaguar, the fence is mostly a nuisance, one they can get around when they need to.

The plight of habitat and wildlife and the condition of a fragile desert ecosystem are tough sells when the subject is the security of our nation and the economic effects of undocumented immigration. Environmentalists, worried that their cause will get lost amid the higher profile issues, have decided to join the debate.

At stake are the vast stretches of desert that straddle the two countries, a landscape hostile to people trying to sneak through but home to an amazing array of wildlife and habitat, none of which stops at political boundaries. Desert habitat covers wide swaths of ground. Big cats wander hundreds of miles to find food and water. Herds of deer chew quickly through sparse forage. Biologists say those paths are interrupted, wildlife suffer.

The Tucson-based [Center for Biological Diversity](#) says one proposal for a giant triple wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, combined with increased military and security traffic, would create a “colossal environmental disaster.”

“More walls will harm wildlife and natural landscapes along our fragile southern border,” said Daniel Patterson, a desert ecologist for the center. “The only living things the walls won’t stop are people. Walls will cut off essential wildlife movement corridors and are not an ethical solution.”

The center and other conservation groups propose wildlife-friendly vehicle barriers at certain strategic and at-risk areas on the border, such as the [Cabeza Prieta](#) National Wildlife Refuge, the [Buenos Aires](#) National Wildlife Refuge, the [Coronado](#) National Forest and even the Barry Goldwater [military range](#), which protect thousands of acres from incursion. Such a barrier at [Organ Pipe Cactus](#) National Monument has helped top smugglers’ vehicles, but it hasn’t stopped border control traffic, Patterson said.

The environmental advocacy group [Defenders of Wildlife](#) says that border patrol activities are destroying sensitive vegetation and wildlife habitat near those refuges and parks. Among the wildlife affected: the Sonoran [pronghorn](#), the [jaguar](#), the desert bighorn sheep, the [Gila monster](#) and the desert tortoise.

Damage is caused by the migrant traffic as well: Abandoned vehicles, trash and human waste affect water and soil quality and cleaning up those messes add traffic on fragile ground. The group proposes increasing the use of high-tech surveillance equipment to reduce actual patrol traffic, using less-harmful building techniques that allow for wildlife movement and enforcing once again environmental laws that can protect the borderlands.

The Bush administration exempts many border projects from those laws, a move that has allowed border enforcement agencies freer movement in the remote areas that border-crossers seek.

“National security always comes first,” said Jamie Rappaport Clark, executive vice-president of Defenders of Wildlife. “But ... there are simple steps that can be taken that will allow us to secure our borders even as we protect local communities and the environment.”

A hearing this morning in a Phoenix courtroom won’t address border protection, but it could add nuance to the debate over managing wildlife populations across political boundaries.

U.S. District Judge Susan Bolton will hear arguments about whether the federal government should remove the cactus ferruginous [pygmy owl](#) from the endangered species list. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [de-listed](#) the tiny bird earlier this year after a federal court ruled that the Arizona population of the owl was not distinct enough from the Mexican population to warrant protection.

Conservation groups say there are about a dozen or so pygmy owls left in Arizona, but the courts ruled there are more in Mexico and that the two populations are not legally distinct. In other words, the court assumed the U.S. birds and Mexican bird comprise one big family despite the borders.

The Center for Biological Diversity wants Bolton to re-instate the endangered species protection until a lawsuit over the de-listing is heard. The plaintiffs in the suit are the National Association of Home Builders and two Arizona home builders

' groups.