



Written By:

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People over Profit:

Fighting For Castner Range's National Monument Designation

Overview:

As the news of the Castner Range National Monument designation is processed by our communities and those of us that have passionately fought for its protection, we are hopeful of what the future holds for our history and the legacy of the land. Located in the Chihuahuan desert along the Rio Grande, Castner Range sits in the southeastern peak of the Franklin Mountains, an area that stretches from El Paso to New Mexico. As the sacred site and ancestral homeland of the Comanche and Apache people, Castner Range holds a sacred value to the indigenous communities in the area. Determined to protect the land, community organizers and leaders in Texas had been fiercely advocating for President Biden to employ the power of the Antiquities Act to address El Paso's nature gap; a systemic barrier that separates marginalized communities from accessing natural resources and lands, and consequence of a long history of systemic racism on indigenous lands and communities.

As someone who grew up in El Paso, right next to Castner Range, some of my earliest memories began with my family and I driving by the range on our way to the El Paso Museum of Archaeology. I remember listening diligently as my father discussed our history and our stories of the land. As we explored the museum, I would dwell on thoughts of my ancestors, the majority of whom were from Mexico, and the reason why there has always been a certain moment of connection and grounding that occurs for me in seeing the thousands of Mexican poppies bloom at the range every year. It's a moment that consistently brings me back to my family and reminds me how rapidly the landscape and climate is changing. Today, it brings me encouragement to know these memories and cultural experiences will not end with me.

As a pastor, I had always felt compelled to talk about the responsibility and role that we play in the land we've been provided by God. In order to take care of our communities, we must be good stewards of the land and take care of our home too. God gifted us beautiful landscapes and natural wonders, however, the price of beauty is its vulnerability to destruction. The designation is a first step in taking adequate measures to protect this creation for the next generation and the commitment to protect Castner Range serves as motivation for us to continue our grassroots efforts. This feels like a step towards healing from the trauma we've endured in the uncertainty of what would happen to the sacred site.

While the majority of the scenic landscape at the range has remained closed to the public due to concerns that unexploded ordinance may be present, I believe that designation will help us safeguard the sacred land by protecting one of the largest alluvial fans left in the Franklin Mountains, ensure wildlife survival, and permit and expedite additional funding for cleanup of



remaining pollutants from heavy military use. For years, my community, faith groups, and conservation groups in Texas have been advocating to protect the historically and ecologically-vital lands of Castner Range, in a majority-Latinx community. Groups and communities near Castner Ranger had felt the intense *desesperación* (desperation) and emotional toll that came from massive efforts to care for the land, without any official governmental support to back us up. The lack of restrictions on development, and the changes in the climate had sown fear into our communities, and as weather anomalies and extreme climate changes continued to impact the Southern Border, our agriculture, health, and people had been heavily impacted by climate change. According to a 2022 analysis by Monumental SHIFT and Center for American Progress, less than one-quarter of national parks and monuments are dedicated to honoring historically underrepresented communities. The designation of Castner Range as a National Monument does more than just preserve its value and significance; it reflects on the need to protect more diverse American histories, especially for communities of color and low-income families.

The designation lays the foundation for addressing the nature gap, and will allow our community to continue fighting dangerous pollutants in the area, and begin recovery from the impact they've had on our physical and mental health. Ranging from symptoms of depression, to breathing difficulties due to the air quality in El Paso, our communities have drastically suffered some of the worst effects of minimal climate and environmental laws. Over the past two decades, El Paso County lost 11,755 acres—more than 18 square miles—of natural area to development. Considering that water levels in the Rio Grande area are low too, it was alarming to hear that the connection to our neighbors in Mexico had been becoming slimmer and that the lack of water was affecting our livelihood and disconnecting us from our origins. I remember when we were small we would go swimming in the river, and we would be in areas where you could see kids swimming on the other side of the river. I remember very well that we felt all in one world. Without any fronteras, any discrimination, without any differences, we were all just one. If the Castner Range had been left unprotected, our very essence might have ceased to exist too.

Nationally, communities of color are three times more likely than white communities to live in nature-deprived places, and 9 in 10 Latinos and almost 95% of low-income communities in the area surrounding the proposed monument are nature deprived. Texas is the land of Indigenous communities and? Mexicans who have faced an intricate history of displacement and segregation. The Castner Range National Monument designation is a bold commitment to advancing equity in land conservation and working to rebuild communities that still suffer from nature deprivation and other hardships due to historic systems of racism.

Across the country, groups and coalitions like [Monumental SHIFT](#) are helping lead this work alongside communities like mine. Sharing why racially and ethnically diverse leadership, conception, funding, and stewardship of national monuments in the United States is necessary if we are to better represent and honor lands and places sacred to our communities.