

Border Wall threatens extinction of numerous endangered species

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The US-Mexico border wall severs some of the richest wildlife communities and oldest human settlements in North America. The latest segment runs through the most fragile desert area in the Southwest and has been given bipartisan support for the past 25 years.

The most recent updates were initiated in a 2018 appropriations bill which provided \$1.6 billion for border barrier enhancement and construction, along with an increase in border militarization. This funding was used to begin the first major border wall construction under the Trump administration, severing critical migration corridors for endangered Mexican gray wolves in New Mexico and decimating rare national wildlife refuge habitat in South Texas. A further \$1.3 billion was provided in 2019.

These fund allocations follow attempts in 2013 to pass a “border surge” provision in the Senate bill S744 which would have provided \$40 billion for what Senator John McCain called “all-out militarization” of the US-Mexico border, including \$20 billion for border wall construction. The bill would have destroyed the future for jaguars, ocelots, Sonoran pronghorn and dozens of other endangered borderlands species. It passed in the US Senate with the support of every Democrat in the Senate, plus nominally independent Senator Bernie Sanders, but failed in the House of Representatives.

The building of the border wall along the US-Mexico border began, however, under the initiative of President Bill Clinton within five years after the fall of the Berlin wall. President Clinton’s wall was confined to the cities of El Paso and San Diego, where impoverished farmers displaced by NAFTA had begun crossing in exploding numbers in the mid-1990s. The wall did not stop desperately poor migrants from crossing the

border, it re-routed them through the harsh terrain in the desert Southwest, where thousands of migrants died as a result of the Clinton administration’s “prevention-by-deterrence” border policy. In 2005, more than one million migrants crossed the Mexico border into the US.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US Congress began using the attacks as an excuse for building more walls on the US-Mexico border, even though the attacks had nothing to do with this border or undocumented immigration. This did not stop Congress from passing the Real ID Act of 2005, which allowed the head of the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to waive all laws, including environmental laws, to build a border wall. This was followed by the Secure Fence Act in 2006, which mandated that DHS construct about 700 miles of border barrier along the US-Mexico border. It passed and resulted in about 350 miles of wall being built by presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

The ongoing construction increased an already tragic rate of migrant deaths. It also has destroyed, fragmented and degraded hundreds of thousands of acres of wildlife habitat, and now threatens the extinction of more than 100 endangered species on the border. The 2006 legislation enabled the building of continuous barriers separated by an access road for patrol vehicles on long stretches of the border in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

Environmental activists and the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) raised the alarm in 2006 about this legislation. Environmentalists and USFWS wardens warned that the barrier would disrupt the migration of scores of species from jaguars and Mexican wolves to hawks and hummingbirds along a wildlife corridor connecting northern Mexico and the US southwest.

A chain of 40 mountain ranges links the northern range of tropical species such as the jaguar and the parrot in the Mexican Sierra Madre Mountains, and the southern limit of temperate animals such as the black bear and the Mexican wolf in the US Rocky Mountains.

One of the major habitats that is being destroyed is the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. It lies at the headwaters of the Río Yaqui, a large river that drains portions of southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico in the United States, as well as eastern Sonora and western Chihuahua in Mexico. Within this basin, the San Bernardino ciénega (marshland) has historically been considered the largest, most expansive wetland in northwest Mexico and this part of the Southwest US. It provides an important corridor for wildlife to migrate between Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental and the Rocky Mountains to the north.

William Radke, Manager of the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge (SBNWR) warned that the planned barrier would also sever the rugged highland trails used by "pioneer" jaguars currently crossing from Mexico and repopulating the rugged Peloncillo Mountains east of Douglas, Arizona after decades of absence.

The spotted cats originally roamed the Americas from Argentina in the south to the Grand Canyon, in northern Arizona, but they vanished from the United States several decades ago due to hunting and pressure from human encroachment on their habitat.

The San Bernardino NWR was established in 1982 to protect the rare wetlands in the middle of the desert that are home to a variety of wildlife, including several species of fish that are protected by the Endangered Species Act, like the Yaqui chub, Yaqui minnow and Yaqui catfish. Sitting on over 2,300 acres on the US-Mexico border in southeastern Arizona, close to New Mexico, the refuge is home to hummingbirds, 75 species of butterflies, bats and, most importantly, to these native Rio Yaqui fish, which the refuge was set up to protect.

That no major statement has been issued by either the Democrats or Republicans against the destruction of this region speaks to the bipartisan drive to build the border wall and their indifference toward the environment as a whole.



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