

US-Mexico border wall cutting through Native American tribal lands

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6 October 2020

Construction of Trump's border wall between the United States and Mexico cuts through and is threatening to destroy sites historically and culturally important to the Tohono O'odham people living in the area. The border wall is being constructed through Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Tohono O'odham lands in southwestern Arizona. Tribal nations have been living in and around these border areas for thousands of years.

The springs in southwestern Arizona are sacred to the Tohono O'odham and Hia-Ced O'odham, who lived in the area as recently as three generations ago, and are one of very few natural sources of water along the immense, rugged Arizona-Sonora borderlands. Without water, endangered species at Organ Pipe, such as Quitobaquito pupfish and Sonoyta mud turtles, will be destroyed. Both the pupfish and the turtle are found only at Quitobaquito Springs, a desert wetland adjacent to the planned route of Trump's wall.

To facilitate the administration's actions, the National Park Service (NPS) issued a "Temporary Closure Order" in the vicinity of Quitobaquito Springs on Monday, September 28, as a "response to considerable public safety concerns associated with border infrastructure construction activities," according to an NPS press release. There was no mention of the duration of the closure order.

Under the guise of this order, the NPS is actively denying access to this area by tribal members, journalists and the public.

Two days later, Native American activists from the group Defend O'odham Jewed issued a statement declaring that their group would be traveling to the Quitobaquito Springs area to protest the construction of the wall, and stating that the construction of the border wall is criminal and genocidal and that the destruction

will be irreversible.

Photojournalist Lucas Mullikin was unable to document the destruction from the US side, but walked across the border into Mexico last week and took a taxi to a remote stretch of MX Highway 2 to document the border wall construction after the NPS barricaded the entire US side of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument to shield the destruction from public view.

Two Tohono O'odham activists protesting the building of the border wall were arrested on September 9 after blocking construction activity near Quitobaquito Springs in the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. They were arrested by NPS police with the assistance of the US Border Patrol.

In response, the protesters issued a warning to the government agents. "You do not have permission to be here. This is O'odham land. You don't have permission to take the water ... our artifacts, our history. You're taking our history. This land means so much more than a wall. The animals mean so much more than your guns, your weapons, your toys." The statement was captured on video as protesters were handcuffed and taken to a police van.

Both of those arrested were charged in federal court with a misdemeanor of violating a lawful order of a government officer and violating a closure order; the area where their actions took place was closed to the public in October 2019 to secure the area for wall construction.

The border wall construction threatens tribal lands all across the Arizona border. The region around the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge is a basin-and-range ecosystem characterized by linear mountain ranges separated by broad, flat basins, known as the Sky Islands.

Surrounded by arid lands, the unique water resources

of the Yaqui River drainage have attracted humans for at least 10,000 years. The Yaqui historically occupied the area as early as 552 AD. In 1533, they repelled a Spanish military expedition that was searching for slaves—a victory that cost the Yaqui countless lives.

Over the next several centuries the Yaqui fought courageously against the Spanish and Mexican troops, and later the United States cavalry, to retain their tribal lands. Ultimately, they were defeated in a major battle at Cerro del Gallo in 1827 and were forced to submit to Mexican authority. The region became United States territory as part of the Gadsden Purchase in 1854.

The US government's border wall construction threatens a variety of animal and plant species. Between the San Bernardino and nearby Leslie Canyon Refuge, at least 335 bird species have been recorded, including many nesting birds. Biologists have also documented 67 mammal, 43 reptile, 13 amphibian, and eight fish species. The two refuges are critical in maintaining a sanctuary for at least 36 plant and wildlife species of special concern.

Aside from the Fish and Wildlife Service employees who manage the refuge, local tribes and the environmental groups that oppose construction, the refuge and other important ecological sites have no protections against border wall construction.

Currently the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, west of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge and Coronado National Forest, east of O'odham lands, already have Normandy-style vehicle barriers that block passage across the border at the wildlife refuge. Crews have started work replacing the barriers at Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge.

All four parks, which are federally protected wilderness areas, are ancestral O'odham lands and include many sites of historical and cultural significance.



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