

Valles Caldera draws out passion, support, challenges

By: Dave Menicucci, Special to the Monitor

Standing outside a Valles Caldera public meeting, Tracy Hephner, a Trustee, mused aloud. "I thought that water rights issues drew out passions, but nothing compares with this place," she said. Indeed, for the past seven years of its existence and for many decades prior, the preserve has engendered perhaps more ardor for its size than any other public entity in the country.

With an area of around 89,000 acres, the preserve represents only about a tenth of one percent of the state's land area. However, it has attracted the interest, curiosity, labor, and enthusiasm of hundreds of individuals and scores of organizations all working in some way to support the preserve or to fashion it according to their specific vision.

This phenomenon is probably explained by the preserve's distinctive character. Created by Congress as an experiment in public land management, it beacons for novel ideas and summons the efforts of the surrounding communities to achieve its ultimate, stable state.

Some of the oldest and most influential groups associated with the preserve include the local Indian tribes, including Jemez, Santa Clara, Jicarilla, San Ildefonso, Santa Domingo, and Cochiti. The interests of these people are steeped in centuries of history, far preceding the time of Spanish and Anglo settlers. According to Bill Keleher, Valles Caldera Trust chairman, numerous special provisions have been written into the preserve's founding legislation to protect and preserve the Indians' unique connection to the property.

The assortment of volunteer organizations can be roughly classified into three categories: supporters, overseers, and challengers.

Perhaps the most influential oversight group is newly evolved from one that had existed long before the preserve's formation. Called Caldera Action, its goals are fundamentally congruent with those of its predecessor, the Valles Caldera Coalition. "Our vision is the restoration and protection of the Preserve's unique natural and cultural heritage so that present and future generations can experience the sense of wonder that comes from individual discovery in this ecologically and culturally significant landscape," said Tom Jervis, Caldera Action board member.

Tom Ribe, Caldera Action's president explained how this new group is distinguished from its predecessor. "While the coalition was dedicated to preservation and restoration, its actions were often constrained because it had a significant diversity of views in its ranks," he reported. "We are structured to speak for a public including mountain bikers, hikers, backpackers, horse back riders, skiers, and fishermen. For example, the preserve is not complying with water quality standards on some stretches of their creeks and we are pressing for correction."

The main support group, Los Amigos de Valles Caldera, was created at the request of the Valles Caldera Trustees. One of its primary purposes is to help the preserve meet its financial obligations by organizing volunteer labor and garnering financial resources to help meet the goal of self-sufficiency.

Larry Icerman, Secretary/Treasurer, explained that Los Amigos is an IRS qualified 501c3 non-profit business, which is basically a charitable endeavor. "This designation helps us facilitate the receipt of grants, particularly from large, philanthropic foundations and for-profit organizations," he said. Although the Trust itself is qualified to take grants, being a wholly owned government corporation, may be dissuasive to some donors.

Los Amigos operates independently but with general direction from the Trust, which identifies activities and needs of the preserve. Icerman said that they choose from that list to plan their support program. For example, Los Amigos provides volunteers to help staff the information center and gift shop, located in Jemez Springs. They have also secured a \$150,000 grant from the EPA to improve wetlands on the preserve. Volunteers, both laborers and professionals, carry out the work.

Icerman added that they capitalize on the fervor stimulated by the preserve to attract volunteers. Los Amigos currently has about 200 members, most of whom are active in some way.

As Los Amigos marches forward, a growing challenge is looming. The Northern New Mexico Stockman's Association, a 20 year-old organization representing around 15,000 families, has initiated political efforts to significantly change how the preserve is managed, particularly with respect to elk hunting, cattle grazing and public access.

Dave Sanchez, an association board member and cattle grazing permittee said that there is growing frustration and impatience with the Valles Caldera Trust and management. "The preserve is clearly not living up to the legislative goals to enhance the economic well being of the surrounding area," he stated.

He explained that elk, existing in abundance on the preserve, frequently wander outside the preserve and consume some of the best forage. "Then the Forest Service assesses the forage availability and reduces our grazing allotments," he stated. "In many areas we are grazing at only 65% of the potential." Sanchez, a descendant of some of the earliest settlers in the area, asserted that the situation is destroying an historic way of life.

Bob Parmenter, the preserve's chief scientist recommended that more data be taken to understand the situation. "We don't really know where or when the elk move on or off the preserve," he said. Parmenter and New Mexico State University are proposing a comprehensive study of game animals in the Jemez Ranger District, the first of its kind.

Sanchez is also critical of the preserve's access policies. "Their fees for hunting and fishing are excessive," he claimed. "They are running a country club that excludes most of the people. We are all tax payers and entitled to use the preserve." Sanchez said the Association is working with the NM congressional delegation to hold congressional hearings in New Mexico to address these concerns.

Jeffrey Cross, the preserve's executive director, is philosophical. "It is normal to find this kind of discourse surrounding public property," he said. Bill Keleher, the trust's new chair, added that they "will listen carefully to all sides before making any decisions to change policy."

Sidebar

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A list of some of the many groups involved with the Valles Caldera National Preserve is included below along with their websites, if applicable.

Caldera Action!, www.caldera-action.org.,

Friends of Bandelier (<http://www.friendsofbandelier.org/>),

Jemez Pueblo, <http://www.jemezpuablo.org/>

Los Amigos de Valles Caldera, <http://losamigosdevallescaldera.org/>.

National Wild Turkey Federation (<http://www.nwtf.org>)

NM Council of Guides and Outfitters (<http://www.nmoutfitters.com/>),

NM Trout (<http://www.newmexicotrout.org/>),

Quivera Coalition (<http://www.quiviracoalition.org>)

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (<http://www.rmef.org/>),

Seeking Common Ground

Trout Unlimited (<http://www.tu.org>)