



OTERO MESA

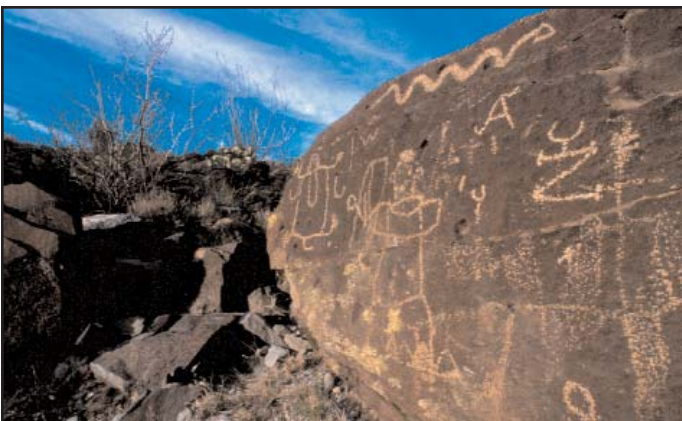
New Mexico Wild Land Under Siege

THE LARGEST DESERT GRASSLAND OF ITS KIND REMAINING IN NORTH AMERICA, THE OTERO MESA IS HOME TO A RICH VARIETY OF WILDLIFE AS WELL AS NUMEROUS ANCIENT NATIVE AMERICAN ARTIFACTS. THE VIBRANT LANDSCAPE IS DOTTED WITH PRONGHORN ANTELOPE, COLORFUL SONGBIRDS, AND THE CATTLE OF RANCHERS WHO HAVE GRAZED THESE LANDS FOR GENERATIONS. BUT THE OTERO MESA IS BEING THREATENED BY THE BACKROOM DEALS OF THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY AND ITS ALLIES IN THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION TO DEVELOP AMERICA'S MAJESTIC PUBLIC LANDS.

A RICH HERITAGE

Otero Mesa is a unique and diverse desert ecosystem in southern New Mexico that includes swaths of lush black gramma grassland, rolling red hills, and deserts brimming with cholla cactus. The area is home to numerous endangered species that are protected by law, including the black-footed ferret, northern aplomado falcon, and bald eagle. Otero Mesa also supports New Mexico's healthiest herd of majestic pronghorn antelope, which can be seen grazing on the mesa's verdant growth in the springtime.

Native American tribes, such as the Apache, settled in Otero Mesa over 10,000 years ago, and much of their rich cultural legacy still remains in the form of ancient petroglyphs etched along rocky surfaces and boulders. Stone axes, mauls, and other tools have also been discovered in the mesa, making it a treasure trove of early indigenous artifacts.



Ancient petroglyphs from the early Native Americans who settled in Otero Mesa thousands of years ago still exist to this day (Photo by Stephen Capra).



Graceful pronghorn antelope share the Otero Mesa with many species of wildlife and cattle (Photo by US FWS)

Although Native Americans have long left the area, the mesa's sunny climate and abundant vegetation have made it a prime region for grazing. In fact, some family ranches that rely on Otero Mesa have grazed the land for five generations. Preserving the area's grasslands and vegetation is critical to maintaining their traditional way of life

THE THREAT OF BIG OIL & GAS

Not everyone sees the value in preserving Otero Mesa's natural and cultural heritage. Large oil and gas companies have long eyed the mesa's potential gas reserves. With the Bush administration in office, these companies have found a strong ally in their quest to reap enormous profits off of America's public lands.

Under the Bush administration, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is encouraging widespread oil and gas development in virtually all parts of the largely unroaded natural area. The BLM has been meeting with oil and gas

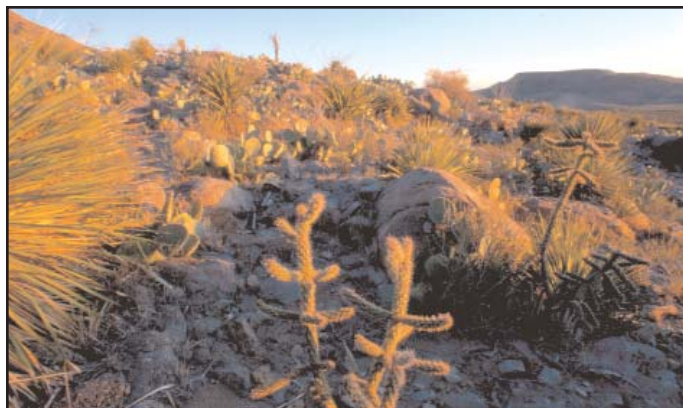
representatives to develop an energy plan for Otero Mesa, but has excluded the public from any participation—a direct violation of federal law.

Government wildlife experts have also complained that their warnings about the threats to Otero Mesa's wildlife have mysteriously disappeared from government documents after the Bush administration met with the oil and gas industry. In addition, the wildlife experts claim that BLM greatly underestimated the environmental damage to Otero Mesa because the agency did not consult any existing scientific literature when making its estimates.

EARTHJUSTICE STEPS IN

In an effort to bring more transparency to the table, Earthjustice represented the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and The Wilderness Society in a suit to acquire documents explaining the Bush administration's proposal to open up Otero Mesa for drilling. Although the proposal directly impacts public lands, BLM initially decided to share these documents with oil and gas companies rather than with the American public. The suit ultimately forced BLM to turn over some of the documents, but the agency still withheld more than 10,000 pages of information on the potential environmental impacts of the Otero Mesa energy plan.

The Bush administration's attempt to keep the public out of the decision-making process has even drawn the ire of New Mexico's governor, Bill Richardson. The governor has vowed to use every legal measure to stop the administration from ruining one of New Mexico's most cherished public land. In 2004, he signed an executive order making it a state policy to prevent drilling in Otero Mesa.



Cholla cactus, yucca, and other desert plants contribute to Otero Mesa's unique desert environment. (Photo by Stephen Capra).

THE LEGAL BATTLE HEATS UP

Despite intense opposition from the State of New Mexico and many conservation groups, the Bush administration is not backing down from its plan to develop Otero Mesa. With the strong backing of the oil and gas industry, the administration decided in January 2005 to open nearly all of Otero Mesa for exploratory drilling. Although it promises to put limitations on the development, conservation groups point out that the plan will greatly fragment the area and lead to a steady decline in wildlife. Ranchers and Native Americans will also lose out as their livelihood and cultural treasures bow out to the profits of the oil and gas industry.

Earthjustice and other conservation groups are now planning their next legal strategy to stop the administration's plans. Earthjustice firmly believes Otero Mesa should be managed for the long-term benefit of the American public—not the short term gains of a few large companies.



Stephen Capra

OTERO MESA: JUST THE FACTS

- The Greater Otero Mesa Area covers more than 1.2 million acres, and is considered North America's largest and most pristine Chihuahuan Desert grassland.

- The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance has surveyed Otero Mesa and found more than 500,000 acres of land suitable for wilderness designation—a category reserved for the most pristine natural lands in the U.S.

- Otero Mesa is home to New Mexico's healthiest herd of pronghorn, and serves as a crucial wintering ground for migratory songbirds, owls, and falcons.

- The oil and gas industry has targeted 250,000 acres of Otero Mesa in the first round of development. Currently 51,600 acres have already been leased, and many more leases are planned for the near future.

- Energy exploration may contaminate the valuable groundwater underneath Otero Mesa, which can supply drinking water for 800,000 people.