

LA CIÉNEGA

WINTER 2023

Protecting, restoring, and rewilding the biodiversity of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands



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Featured Photo

Carolina Muñoz Cervantes and Enrique Pérez have been taking beautiful photos at Rancho El Uno, such as the one featured here. Both incredible photographers, Enrique is also involved in ranching and lives on their family ranch in Chihuahua, Mexico, where they raise their two girls. They live near Rancho El Uno where they spend much time, and have generously donated many magnificent bison photos. To view their photos, please visit @ranchotrespaplotes on Facebook and @depecar and @rancherswifediaries on Instagram.



FROM THE FOUNDER'S DESK

As we launch into 2023, I wish to tell you about changes and joyous and inspirational moments I had at Cuenca Los Ojos last year and what I'm looking forward to in the coming year.

THE LAND

Highway 2, a federal east-west highway in northern Mexico, bisects Cuenca lands. From the highway north, Mexico joins the U.S. border. To the south is a vast expanse of mountain ranges, upland grasslands, and canyons with rivers flowing through. I love standing on a certain hilltop. From this vantage point I can see mountain ranges one after another with no end in sight, no roads, no habitations, nothing as far as the horizon, and I imagine how this land may have looked in centuries passed. It makes me glad to know it is protected forever now. Bears, lions, bobcats, ocelots and many other precious species live here. Recently, wildlife cameras have photographed jaguars who have moved north to Cuenca's lands looking for suitable habitat. It thrills me to see on camera all the animals. From the images, I learn fascinating things about their habits.

POSSIBILITIES

The team at Cuenca is excited to give others the opportunities to visit, explore, and have a chance to feel out of the ordinary and on top of the world. Towards this end, we invited Sarah Swallow, a professional mountain and gravel rider to map out a system of low impact trails that connect present and historic roads. Over the coming years, we will explore how we can invite small groups of people to experience the magic of Cuenca's lands. This really pleases me because I know many people come to love and appreciate nature by being out in it and from that experience, they learn a respect for nature, and they want to help improve habitats wherever they can.

BISON AND CARBON

For me, the bison is the animal that most represents the West. In the past, thousands of bison traveled in herds across the West fertilizing the soil and manicuring grasses. In so doing, they created conditions for carbon exchange and sequestration. In a relatively short period of time, man very nearly extinguished the bison. Last year, Cuenca was given the opportunity to work with Fondo Mexicano para la Conservacion de la Naturaleza (FMCN) to manage a herd of bison in Chihuahua. Cuenca is thrilled to have hired Nancy Hernandez, an animal science biologist to manage the herd. This year, I participated in a low-stress handling workshop with Whit Hibbard, editor, and publisher of the Stockmanship Journal. I learned how to think more like a bison! I am exceedingly glad to have the opportunity to help bison once again thrive in the West.

CUENCA'S TEAM

I recognize that none of this exciting work would be possible without the people who work tirelessly every day on the ground and in the office. I would like to thank the dedicated team that makes Cuenca's work possible. I feel very fortunate to have a small and talented staff led by Jeremiah H. Leibowitz and José Manuel Pérez Cantú who are turning my vision into a reality.

I wish you all much peace and prosperity in this new year. Let us be grateful for all of the opportunities we have to make our world a better place. May you all be happy.

Founder

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Valer Clark Founder

Jeff Hampton President

Valerie Gordon Secretary/Treasurer

Alejandro Carrillo

Rodrigo Sierra Corona

BOARD PRESIDENT GREETING

Happy New Year to the entire Cuenca network and beyond. While I am not one for contributing to our newsletter, I felt this moment was an important one on which to comment. Cuenca has just completed another bang-up year of conservation, restoration, and community outreach as evidenced by some of our accomplishments in Valer's note. Additionally important, from my vantage point, is the accelerated growth and evolution we have made over the last five years.

While many of you know that Valer has been doing this work in Mexico and the U.S. for over 40 years, what you might have missed is that our organization transitioned to a 501(c)(3) public charity from a private family foundation in 2018. Since then, we have hired our first full-time executive director; permanently protected our northern Sonoran preserve of over 121,000 acres; been hired to manage another 50,000+ acres in Chihuahua that involves managing over 300 head of bison; collaborated with partners to continue scientific research and on-the-ground learning; embarked on a carbon credit project; contended with and adapted to the impacts of the border wall; built alliances with regional stakeholders to advance borderlands conservation; explored ways to share Cuenca with a broader audience; presented at key land conservation conferences; developed a 3year strategic plan; and the list goes on.

I am amazed by each milestone we hit and the speed at which we advance to our next objective. In my nonprofit career (and at my age), it is truly exhilarating to be a part of the action. With that said, I also wanted to acknowledge our many partners, fellow conservation NGOs and advocacy groups, state and federal agencies, and the many individuals who have joined with us to advance borderland conservation - thank you! Most importantly, listed on the next page is the heart of Cuenca . . . our employees are simply "the best". Their devotion to Cuenca has made all our dreams and accomplishments possible. As the saying goes, there is no "I" in team, and Cuenca is grateful for its teammates.

With another great year of conservation work under our belt, we are excited about the new year and new possibilities that lie ahead. Thank you for your continued support, interest, and encouragement as we continue to explore and offer solutions to address desertification, habitat restoration, landscape connectivity, species migration, improving biodiversity, restoring water cycles, and continuing to connect people to the land.



Jeff Hampton **Board President**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR GREETING

It is hard to imagine that we have just completed another trip around the sun, and what a trip it has been for Cuenca. From record monsoon rains and new projects and partnerships, to exploring ways to open Cuenca to more people, it has been another great journey. Exciting for me and the organization's direction was the work we did at the beginning of this year to develop our three-year strategic plan. Why, you might ask, am I excited about a strategic plan? Well, it was the process as much as it was the outcome. Organizational change and transitions are very tough, and not all of them succeed. What encouraged me and gave me hope for Cuenca's future was engagement, discussion, passion, and commitment displayed by our board, staff, and stakeholders in genuinely investing their time and energy into helping Cuenca chart out its short-term course over the next three years, as well as generating a vision of where we want to be in the next 50 years. Wow! Key to this process was capturing Valer's vision of Cuenca now and in the future. Her vision, coupled with the strategic plan, provides a clear roadmap of Cuenca's goals and objectives in the near term while concurrently not losing sight of our long-term direction. It gives teeth to our mission and ensures that all levels of our organization are on the same page about priorities of work and resource allocation. Again, a accomplishment given our history and organizational changes, and I want to thank all of those involved who made it happen. I firmly believe we are set up for success as we embark on 2023's journey and want to wish all of you great health, happiness, and much conservation in the new year!



Jeremiah H. Leibowitz

In Cadence,

Executive Director

CUFNCA STAFF

Jeremiah H. Leibowitz **Executive Director**

José Manuel Pérez Cantú Conservation Director

Mauro Salinas Aaustin Maintenance Assistant

Santiago Navarro Almeida Restoration Assistant

Jesús Lorenzo Aldav Bacame

Oscar E. López Bujanda **Environmental Technician**

Omar Caballero Hernández **Ecological Technician**

Rubén Castillo Chanes Maintenance Assistant

Ever Castro Chávez Maintenance Assistant

Ramón Herme Quijada Córdova **Restoration Technician**

Andrés Rodríquez Corella **Restoration Technician**

Inocente Sarellano Díaz Foreman

Ofelia Migdalia Campos Escarcega Housekeeping

Alejandro Gámez Felix Foreman

Mireya Ochoa Felix Cajon Bonito Steward

Gerardo H. Lagarda Lagarda Field Technician

Karen Guadalupe Suarez Lira Administrative Assistant

Martin Martinez Montiel Cajon Bonito Steward

Fernando Sobarzo Robles Restoration Technician

Nancy Hernández Rodríguez Manager, Rancho El Uno

Cristóbal Coronado Sánchez Maintenance Assistant

Cesar Tomás Bustamante Sarellano Maintenance Manager

Mauro García Valdez **Rstoration Technician**

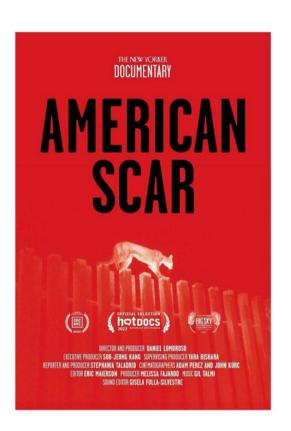
Elizabeth Valdovinos Administrative Coordinator

AMERICAN SCAR DOCUMENTARY

Cuenca, Sky Island Alliance, and Wildlands Network participated in a virtual screening of The New Yorker magazine's documentary short film, AMERICAN SCAR, on May 4. Following the film was a panel discussion about the impact of the border wall construction on communities, water, plants and animals. Panelists director/producer, Daniel included Lombroso: producer/reporter, Stephania Taladrid; photojournalist, Kurc; Borderlands Program Coordinator for Wildlands Network, Myles Traphagen; and, Cuenca's conservation Director, José Manuel Pérez Cantú.

Link to AMERICAN SCAR documentary

Link to The New Yorker article



JAGUAR SIGHTINGS

Along with scientists and partners, Cuenca continues its vital on-the-ground work to restore critical wildlife habitat and migration corridors in support of the ecological health of the North American continent. With the international collaboration of several conservation organizations, we can further our understanding of jaguar habitat in order to protect it.



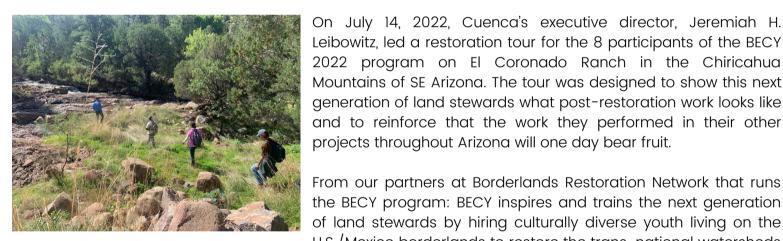


SONORAN FIELD COURSE 2022

The third annual Sonoran Field Course took place July 22-30, in the state of Sonora, Hermosillo, Imuris, Rancho El Aribabi and Cuenca Los Ojos in Agua Prieta. The course was in partnership with Borderlands Restoration Network and Rancho El Aribabi. Participants learned many aspects of watershed and ecological restoration. Some Cuenca staff attended this year to hone and develop watershed restoration skills.

> To experience the course next year, please click link below: Borderlands Restoration Network

BORDERLANDS EARTH CARE YOUTH (BECY)



Mountains of SE Arizona. The tour was designed to show this next generation of land stewards what post-restoration work looks like and to reinforce that the work they performed in their other projects throughout Arizona will one day bear fruit. From our partners at Borderlands Restoration Network that runs the BECY program: BECY inspires and trains the next generation



of land stewards by hiring culturally diverse youth living on the U.S./Mexico borderlands to restore the trans-national watersheds they call home. Youth work with rock, wood, seeds, hands, and hearts to return flowing waters and riverside ecosystems to the arid borderlands.

Youth interns work alongside conservation professionals to make grassroots systemic change in historically overlooked and underserved communities. Simultaneously, youth learn leadership skills and are empowered to develop tiered-leadership roles with increased responsibility, accountability, and empathy. Since beginning in 2012, 170 youth have graduated from BECY.

TRANS-PECOS WILDLIFE CONFERENCE



<u>Please click on link below:</u> <u>Borderlands Research Institute</u>

Jeremiah Leibowitz and José Manuel Pérez Cantú attended the Trans-Pecos Wildlife Conference on August 4-5, in Alpine, TX. The event was cohosted by the Borderlands Research Institute, Texas Wildlife Association, and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The mission Borderlands Research Institute for National Resource Management is to help conserve the natural resources of the Chihuahuan Desert Borderlands through research, education, and outreach. The conference addressed ranch management challenges on big game species, energy development and conservation planning, as well as landowner support programs for habitat restoration activities.

SONORAN JOINT VENTURE LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE

The Sonoran Joint Venture's (SJV) mission is to conserve the unique birds and habitats of the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. They bring together partners from both sides of the border to integrate the strategies, goals, and objectives of existing regional, national, and international bird conservation plans into a single, strategic effort that addresses the needs of their area.

Cuenca recently joined SJV's legislative outreach committee to help advocate for policies and funding at the federal level to advance SJV's mission in the borderlands.

Cuenca looks forward to participating in the Association of Joint Venture Management Boards fly-in to Washington, D.C. in March 2023, to meet with key legislators and agency personnel to share the importance of the work of the Joint Ventures.









BICYCLE ROUTE SURVEY

From October 2-12, Sarah Swallow, Karla Robles, Daniel Diaz, and Adam Gaubert visited the Cuenca properties of Los Ojos, Rancho Nuevo, Rancho El Uno, and San Bernardino to survey the roads and facilities for their potential to develop environmental recreation at Cuenca and economic diversity to the region through events, bikepacking routes, and basecamp bicycling routes. Along some of the routes, the group was joined by Cuenca staff member, Omar Caballero Hernández, and Cuenca board member, Rodrigo Sierra Corona.

We look forward to hosting Sarah Swallow and Ruta del Jefe in March 2024! Stay tuned!

Meanwhile, for more information and to see more spectacular photos of their bike survey please follow: <u>@sarajswallow @karlatrobles @perdidoenbici @andarrescom @rutadeljefe</u> on Instagram, and visit The Radavist.

Photos by: Daniel Diaz @perdidoenbici

SALAZAR SYMPOSIUM





INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON **CONSERVATION IMPACT**

OCTOBER 6-7, 2022

EXPLORING CONSERVATION IN THE BORDERLANDS: TRANSBOUNDARY LAND & WATER • BIODIVERSITY • CONNECTIVITY





October 3, 2022





Jeremiah H. Leibowitz **Executive Director** Cuenca Los Ojos

Rodrigo Sierra Corona Director of Ecological Management Santa Lucia Conservancy



Cuenca was pleased to participate in this year's Colorado State University, Salazar Center for North American Conservation International Symposium on Conservation Impact October 6-7. This year's hybrid event focused on transboundary conservation across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Jeremiah Leibowitz and Rodrigo Sierra Corona kicked off the event with a pre-symposium webinar on October 3 focused on private lands conservation in Mexico. On October 6, Valerie Gordon gave the opening keynote address for the symposium to set the stage for answering the question of how do we define transboundary conservation in borderlands.

Thank you to the Salazar Center for focusing on the southern borderlands!





Keynote **Speaker**

Salazar Symposium October 6, 2022





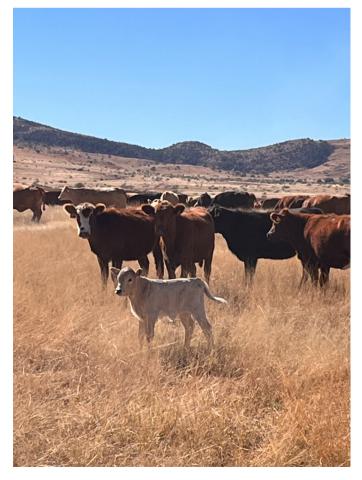
For additional information, click link below: Salazar Center



CUENCA LOS OJOS CONSERVATION SUMMIT

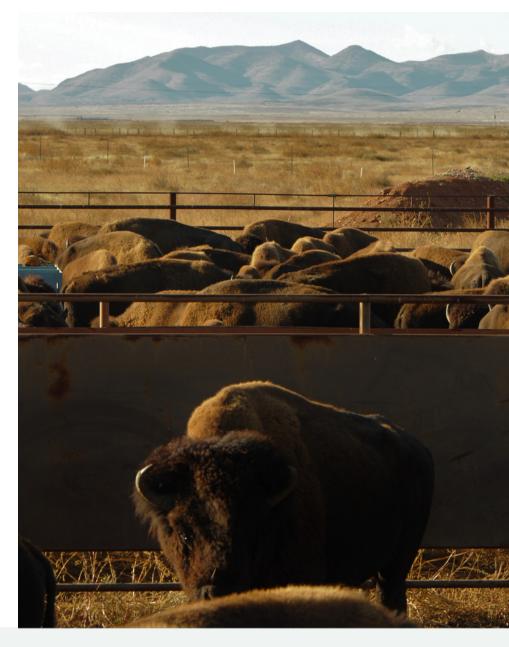
In early November, Cuenca was pleased to welcome fellow conservation innovators: the Bobolink Foundation, innovaciones Alumbra, Rancho Cacachilas, and the Walton Family Foundation to Sonora. Over a two day summit, participants explored some of Cuenca's restoration activities including riparian and wetland restoration with gabions, and grassland restoration with regenerative grazing and controlled burning. It was a great opportunity for Cuenca to share our experiences on the ground but perhaps more importantly, to learn about the work of other restoration practitioners and funders. Cuenca would like to thank: Bobolink Foundation, innovaciones Alumbra, Rancho Cacachilas, the Walton Family Foundation, and Comisión Nacional Forestal. We are inspired by the work you do and look forward to continuing our collaboration and engagement.





LOW STRESS BISON MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

Cuenca hosted its second lowstress bison management course led by Whit Hibbard at the Rancho Εl Uno preserve in Janos. Chihuahua. With over 25 attendees of local ranchers, land managers and Cuenca staff. Whit reviewed management concepts, introduced new techniques, and assisted participants in the low stress gathering and handling of over 300 head of bison. Based on Whit's feedback from last year, Cuenca implemented staff corral modifications to reduce stress and improve the safety of both the bison and staff. It was a great event and we appreciate Whit making the trip from Montana to low-stress his share handling knowledge with our team. We would also like to send a special thanks to the U.S. Forest Service's International Seminar on Livestock Grazing Management Small Grants Program, whose grant made this event possible





TRIBUTE TO RON PULLIAM

This past year, one of our founding board members, Ron Pulliam, stepped down from Cuenca's board. Ron's tireless efforts not only helped Cuenca evolve into its current form, but as many of you know, he was the driving force that created Borderlands Restoration Network, Wild Land Corridors, Deep Dirt Farm, and the recently protected, Borderlands Wildlife Preserve between Sonoita and Patagonia.

While a thank you note in our newsletter barely scratches the surface of Ron's contributions and impact to Cuenca, our founder, Valer Clark, and board chair, Jeff Hampton, say it best in their own words:

The day I met Ron Pulliam was one of the most fortunate and rewarding days of my life. By the time I met him, I had spent years trying to restore degraded lands and return water to washes, but I did not have a science background, nor did I have contacts in the environmental community. Ron provided both and throughout his years of working with Cuenca helped bring my vision to reality. Lucky for me, but what I did not know it at the time, was that Ron had served as the science advisor to the Honorable Bruce Babbitt when he was Secretary of the Interior. Over the years, Ron has taught me a great deal and helped guide my work in ways I could have never done without his support, but most valuable to me is that Ron and his wife Janice are great friends. Thank you is not enough, Ron, but I will always be grateful for all that you've done for me and Cuenca. – Valer

I first met Ron when he approached the Arizona Land & Water Trust with his idea of a two-mile-wide wildlife corridor that would connect the Santa Rita Mountains to the Canelo Hills and the Huachuca Mountains. While I applauded his goals, I frankly thought his chances of success were dismal. He would be dealing with a ruthless assortment of land developers and banks. This was the definition of a Quixotic dream. "I was wrong". Through patience, persistence, charm, and great skill, Ron "Did it". My hat has been off to him ever since. Most importantly for Cuenca, Ron was a very stable, wise board member. Always the last to speak, he brought great balance, perspective, and wisdom when he did. Cuenca Los Ojos and I have been blessed by his presence. Thank you and take care, Ron. – Jeff







WELCOME ABOARD, TASHA HARDEN, REFUGE MANAGER San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge

Cuenca would like to welcome Tasha Harden as the new refuge manager of the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge borders a portion of Cuenca's preserve along both critical water and habitat areas used by migrating wildlife between Mexico and the United States. Cuenca's partnership with the USFWS, the Refuge, and its dedicated staff is critical to advancing Cuenca's mission. In addition to Tasha's work at the Refuge, she has worked for many years with restoration projects affiliated with Cuenca's previous work at the El Coronado and Bar Boot ranches in SE Arizona. We are excited to continue our strong working relationship with Tasha, her team at the Refuge, and the USFWS as we seek solutions to improve water and habitat conditions throughout the Borderlands.





PARTNER HIGHLIGHT



Connecting People, Birds and Land

Please visit: www.birdconservancy.org

Cuenca would like to recognize our partnership with the Bird Conservation of the Rockies. Their mission is "conserving birds and their habitats through science, education and stewardship." The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies has helped protect the grasslands of Rancho Los Ojos to improve bird habitat. They have also been conducting winter grassland bird research on Rancho El Uno, a Cuenca managed ranch in Janos, Chihuahua, since 2007. We look forward to our continued relationship!

THANK YOU DONORS

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"We enthusiastically support Cuenca Los Ojos because it strives to demonstrate the sort of conservation action that directly addresses biodiversity loss: landscape renewal and restoration, species recovery, community involvement, applicable research – all at a scale that truly makes a difference." - Wendy Paulson, Chair, Bobolink Foundation



Support Cuenca Los Ojos and help further our mission to protect, restore, and rewild the biodiversity of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands by donating at the link below:

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PHOTO CONTRIBUTIONS

Oscar E. López Bujanda, Jorge Chacon, Daniel Diaz, Omar Caballero Hernández, Jeremiah H. Leibowitz, David Leventhal, Ganesh Marin Mendez/National Geographic, Enrique Pérez, Bill Steen, Elizabeth Valdovinos

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Valer Clark, Valerie Gordon, Jeff Hampton, Jeremiah Leibowitz

EDITOR/ILLUSTRATOR

Elizabeth Valdovinos

CONTACT US

WWW.CUENCALOSOJOS.ORG

INFO@CUENCALOSOJOS.ORG @CUENCALOSOJOS





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