

AFTERWORD

Immigration debates and problems related to the U.S.-Mexico border played central roles in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and continue to dominate headlines. Economic and political issues such as the Great Recession and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy in the Age of Trump offer new challenges to border conservation. In trying to predict the future of conservation for Cabeza Prieta, I've identified three major trends to watch: Immigration Trends, Drug Policy Reform and Border Building.

IMMIGRATION TRENDS

The numbers of undocumented immigrants entering the U.S. have fluctuated since the early 2000s. Declining rates were observed during the “Great Recession” (approximately between 2007 and 2009). Current immigration rates are still far below rates of the 1990s and early 2000s. Between the years 2008 and 2009, the total undocumented population living in the U.S. fell by 1 million people (the lowest number of undocumented immigrant residents in recent years was in 2008, estimated at slightly over 11 million). Since Mexican immigrants make up the largest portion of undocumented immigrants, and fewer Mexicans are immigrating, the number of border-crossers also dropped precipitously during the recession years. According to U.S. Border Patrol, southwest border apprehensions dropped from 1,071,972 in 2006 to a low of 303,916

in 2017, rates we have not seen since the early 1970s. Apprehensions across the entire border have begun to climb again slowly. In 2018 the numbers rose slightly again to 396,579 southwest border apprehensions (U.S. Border Patrol).

There are several related immigration trends to note:

- Legal immigration is on the rise, especially through temporary work visas (12,500 were issued in 1990, compared to 284,000 in 2012 (U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics). A 2015 study by Massey, Duran, and Pren observes that the increase in temporary work visas is the result of “quiet congressional actions” taken since the 1990s to increase the number of temporary visas issued (2015, p. 1017).
- The number of Central Americans crossing the U.S.-Mexico border is increasing, while fewer Mexican nationals are making that journey. The reasons behind the reduction in Mexican immigration are not entirely clear, but the declining birth rate in Mexico and the growing Mexican economy are seen as important factors.
- The rate of child immigration is increasing, especially by unaccompanied minors.
- Undocumented immigrants are more likely to stay in the U.S. rather than risk return or seasonal migration.

It is not yet known how the Trump administration’s tough talk on Mexican immigration will affect overall rates of undocumented border-crossing. The national economy has been strong in Trump administration, so in theory, a stronger economy should lead to more border-crossing attempts. However, it is possible that Trump’s xenophobic political rhetoric will serve as an immigration deterrent. We do observe declines in undocumented immigration in the months following the 2016 election. If the U.S. continues to experience declines in the number of immigrants coming into the country, the economy could be negatively affected. This is especially true for industries like agriculture that are heavily dependent on undocumented Mexican labor. That said, Trump and those who support the “America First” worldview will undoubtedly call any immigration decline a policy success, regardless of the economic impact. More recently, as we observe the rates of apprehensions again increasing along with the border (and then combine the increase with recent influx of asylum seekers from Central America), it seems that the Trump effect may be wearing off. Immigrants still seek to enter the U.S. through the southwest border.

SHIFTING DRUG POLICIES

Trends in drug policies and drug consumer demand could also affect conservation success at Cabeza Prieta. It is probable that marijuana smuggling will decrease in the upcoming years if the U.S. continues to relax pot regulations. Statistics vary greatly, but it is estimated that until recently about two-thirds of marijuana consumed in the U.S. was grown in Mexico (Joffe-Block 2011). However, drug trade is changing rapidly. As of early 2017, 26 states and the District of Columbia have passed some form of pot legalization. If this trend continues, there will likely be an overall decrease in border traffic through Arizona. American-grown pot will likely devastate Mexican marijuana farmers (one study from the Mexican Institute of Competitiveness estimates that pot profits will decline by 22–30% if current legalization trends continue). While this would be a tough economic hit for Mexican pot farmers, it will reduce drug smuggling traffic across the border. Thus, in terms of environmental concerns, relaxing drug policies should result in less degradation. Of course, one big unknown factor is to what extent opiate production and exportation will increase in Mexico to fill skyrocketing American demand.

WALL-BUILDING

“Build the Wall!” was one of the cornerstones of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and remains a lightning-rod issue for Trump supporters. Scholars and policymakers express serious concerns about the environmental repercussions of any such wall built across the entire U.S.-Mexico border. According to *Scientific American*, Trump’s “big beautiful wall” could create “long-term consequences for the ecological life of the U.S. and Mexico borderlands” (Carswell 2017).

Environmental concerns center on the ability of wildlife to migrate and move freely throughout the border region. A 2011 study concluded that *any* new barrier construction (wall, fence, vehicle barrier, etc.) along the U.S.-Mexico border would have detrimental effects for border biodiversity (Lasky et al. 2011). The authors argue that with new barriers, more individual species will be at risk. Further, the species that are already at risk, like the Sonoran pronghorn, will face increasing vulnerability. As discussed earlier in this book, the Sonoran pronghorn already deal with severely restricted habitat space.

In Cabeza Prieta, there is already a vehicle barrier wall that impacts the natural habitat. However, in nearby border regions, there are still some

completely unfenced mountainous areas. The Sky Mountains Wilderness to the east of Cabeza Prieta consists of north-south mountain ranges that offer unrestricted movement for migrating birds and wildlife. One example of a threatened species, the jaguar, is often recognized as a symbol of open borders. According to *Scientific American* “a total of 49 mountainous miles remain free of any kind of border barrier in the Sky Island region, with about half of that in a single mountain range.” Any barrier in the north-south mountain ranges will significantly alter wildlife mobility.

Beyond restriction of movement, new barrier construction will have significant environmental impact. Degradation will be most profound during initial construction. The maintenance of the wall over time will further result in increased vehicular traffic and temporary camps for workers, among other impacts. As this book has shown, the environmental cost of policing the border is high, and any new barrier construction will raise the ecological price tag.

Some border wall advocates envision a more “high-tech” barrier as an alternative to a physical wall or fence. I would encourage policymakers to learn about the failed SBInet discussed in this book. Even “virtual” fences have an environmental cost in their construction and maintenance, and SBInet is largely considered a failure in terms of preventing undocumented immigration and drug smuggling (see Maril 2011). Beyond construction and maintenance, lesser-known impacts like visual obstruction of the landscape and the noise of drones and helicopters will plague the areas surrounding virtual or high-tech fencing. The Department of Homeland Security has tried this method before and it failed. There are currently no virtual fences under discussion that would not fall into the same traps as the failed SBInet.

In a stinging critique of the effectiveness of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, Wendy Brown writes “in short, the U.S.-Mexico barrier stages a sovereign power and control that it does not exercise, is built from the fabric of a suspended rule of law and fiscal nonaccountability, has multiplied and intensified criminal industries, and is an icon of the combination of sovereign erosion and heightened xenophobia and nationalism increasingly prevalent in Western democracies today” (2010, p. 38). Given the environmental and humanitarian consequences of wall-building on the U.S.-Mexico border thus far, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Trump’s wall would lead to anything but more environmental destruction and fewer human rights.

A BETTER WAY TO PROMOTE CONSERVATION ALONG THE BORDER

If building a wall is not the answer to stop the flow of undocumented immigration across the U.S.-Mexico border, then what is the answer? Comprehensive immigration reform is the right place to begin. The first step is to recognize the economic importance of Mexican and Central American labor. Andreas (2006) argues that we should consider Mexican labor as a trade export, not a crime. In other words, a shift in perspective is needed; illegal migration should be less about border control and more about “labor market regulation” (p. 68).

Many long-awaited changes in American immigration policy are stalled. The DREAM Act, which would offer young undocumented immigrants a chance to remain in the country, to seek legal employment, college education, and/or military service without fear of deportation, has not yet been passed by Congress. Instead, both the Obama and the Trump administrations have relied on temporary extensions of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which allows these young people work permits, renewable every two years. Trump has committed to “phase out” DACA, and he rescinded the program in 2017. Current DACA recipients remain in a state of limbo. The Supreme Court will ultimately decide the fate of the DACA program sometime in 2020. An estimated 700,000 DACA recipients would lose their work permits if the Trump administration wins in court (Fernandes 2019).

That said, *if* immigration rules were eventually to become less rigid, or if at some point a guest-worker program were established, it is reasonable to infer that the *environmental* impact would be positive. Most importantly, if the overall federal policy shifted from one of deterrence (and all of the fences, vehicles, towers, drones, etc., deterrence entails) to a policy that welcomes and values immigrant labor, places like Cabeza Prieta would see a vast reduction in traffic—both in terms of undocumented immigrants and in terms of Border Patrol agents and related Homeland Security efforts. Similarly, if there were major reforms to U.S. drug policy, such as legalizing marijuana nationally, or reducing addiction to opioids, there would likely be an overall positive environmental impact at Cabeza Prieta due to lower rates of drug smuggling.

The U.S.-Mexican border is the most frequently crossed international border in the world. Studying the intersection of environmental and security policies here surely can offer lessons learned for the rest of the world. There is one thing of which I am certain—if the political agenda remains focused on wall-building and “catching Mexicans,” the environmental

and social impacts of border “control” will continue. The rhetoric behind wall-building is bolstered by deep-seated, racialized fears. As long as a culture of fear is propagated, border conservation will continue to suffer the effects of policies that increase security without restraint, jeopardizing nature conservation and infringing on basic human rights.

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