

Middle Rio Grande Conservation Initiative



*A Citizen's Report: Strengthening Our Heritage
in the Middle Rio Grande*



July 2012

Middle Rio Grande Conservation Initiative

Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

The Secretary's Committee for the Middle Rio Grande Conservation Initiative strongly affirms that the Middle Rio Grande is a region of profound importance to New Mexico. The combination of the MRG's natural and cultural resources are also nationally and globally significant.

Like many western river ecosystems, the MRG faces numerous challenges in balancing competing needs within a finite water supply and other resource constraints. Historical practices by our ancestors and immigrants to the MRG have established the conditions that we have inherited. Long-term drought exacerbated by climate change, however, is changing conditions that affect natural and human communities as we strive to improve our precious Rio Grande. The

needs of a growing populace must be met while still preserving natural systems, the agricultural economy, and the cultural practices of Pueblos and villages up and down the valley.

The Secretary's Committee found widespread efforts to address these challenges in the MRG, and many strong programs in the areas of conservation, recreation, and education. Numerous outstanding local, state, federal, tribal and private-sector programs are present; many of which have been underway for years (see Appendix A for maps that identify important sites and programs in conservation, recreation, and education).

This report strives to identify what a broad group of MRG valley residents—from farmers to kayakers to birders and teachers—would like to see considered as we build upon current



Sunset at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge. © Marvin DeJong

Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

efforts to develop long-term strategies for managing valued resources for the good of the whole while supporting existing communities and economies. " There is an awareness that the river is the life blood of our region but also a realization that we can do better. " This document speaks to the immense potential of the MRG; the report is a vision for improving conservation efforts on both private and public lands, improving sustainable agriculture and local food security, increasing recreation and educational opportunities, and ultimately improving the quality of life and economy for MRG residents through a comprehensive collaborative effort among the many stakeholders, agencies and communities that care deeply about the MRG.

Overall, the Committee saw the need for action and improvement in several key areas:

- **Water Management.** Increasing demands on a limited, and perhaps declining, water supply is the fundamental regional challenge. Existing water management systems are evolving to address these challenges, while maintaining and protecting vested water rights, yet actions that would conserve water, improve water management, and enhance river restoration efforts that have been identified and have yet to be acted upon or fully implemented.
- **Landscape Level Conservation and Restoration.** Effective, long-term conservation

Thousands of snow geese winter in the Middle Rio Grande
© Marvin DeJong

of the MRG requires: an ecosystem approach that addresses the entire 180-mile stretch; restoration of biological, hydrological, and geomorphological processes in the MRG to the extent feasible; conservation stewardship and landscape-level connections of publicly-owned protected areas and private working lands; and appropriate recreational use that allows the public to enjoy and connect with the resources. " The notion of a living river and river restoration must work within the reality of the river's modern water supply and management and recognized and protect vested water rights in the MRG. All of these efforts must be guided by strong science-based adaptive management principles to address major conservation goals such as restoring the Middle Rio Grande to sustain listed species, other wildlife, and the ecosystem in general. Broad-based education efforts must be included as a key element for maintaining public involvement and support for the long-term.

- **Investment.** Programs focused on conservation, education, and recreation in the MRG must be viewed as community, regional, and national investments that will pay short- and long-term dividends to society. Funding for these programs at the local, state, federal, and tribal levels is presently inadequate across the board. " The MRG should be a national priority area for federal funds from numerous applicable programs, but federal dollars must be leveraged with increased local and state funding.



Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

The average man, woman or child, is in need of a place within walking distance of the city where he can enjoy a breath of fresh air and a sight of a few trees, a few birds, and a little water.

*-- Aldo Leopold,
Albuquerque, 1917*

- **Governance and Coordination.** Past and present regional coordination structures, such as the MRG Bosque Initiative and the MRG Endangered Species Collaborative Programs, have achieved successes, but do not adequately integrate a broad ecosystem approach to conserving and restoring the Rio Grande nor do they address the needs for recreation and education identified in this report. Modifying the management structure to address connecting these initiatives in a comprehensive manner needs serious consideration.

"The region—its people, organizations and leadership—must affirm the vision of a healthy, integrated, living river and ecosystem along the entire middle Rio Grande (not just at isolated, separated sites). The Middle Rio Grande valley contains a precious network of traditional communities and life ways ways, and historic agriculture, and requires choices that respect and protect that cultural fabric.

Due to the scope of work that the Committee adopted, recommendations in this report are aimed mainly at the river corridor and its "greenbelt." The Committee believes, however, that a watershed approach is the best framework

for planning and action. Recommendations and actions can and should be applied throughout the watershed.

Expanded, improved, reorganized, more efficient and better-funded programs are needed across all three major subject areas that the Committee considered—conservation, recreation, and education. Many efforts in these areas are complementary and should continue to move forward concurrently. While the Committee did not "rank" these three subject areas, the Committee does regard the progress toward meeting conservation/restoration objectives as the overriding concern. Without a healthy river ecosystem, irreplaceable natural and cultural values may be lost forever. Recreation and education based on a degraded and declining ecosystem can still occur, but these activities themselves will be reduced in quality and public benefits from them will be limited.

It is not to say, however, that major steps forward in recreation and education should be delayed until more plans are written or until broad-based, long-term conservation goals are fully achieved. Indeed, stronger educational efforts for people of all ages, coupled with appropriately managed recreation, are key to achieving conservation and restoration goals, and some appropriate actions that do not compromise conservation and restoration activities cannot and should not wait.

The Middle Rio Grande is indeed important to the entire nation; its enormous challenges are also worthy of an enormous effort. Efforts to restore the river, and deliver high quality recreation and education programs, will need to be on par with major campaigns aimed at other iconic American landscapes, such as the Florida Everglades.

Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

From surveying the scope of existing efforts and through the public input received, the Committee believes that there is a tremendous reservoir of public support for the bold actions necessary to maintain ecological and community health and secure diverse benefits for present and future generations. The Committee also believes that regular and extensive citizen stakeholder and community input and engagement is fundamental to moving forward on all recommendations identified in this report. Indeed, the Committee sees this report as the start of a process to further discuss, refine, and implement recommendations, develop consensus, and establish more specific funding needs and milestones for conservation, recreation, and education efforts in order to move forward with comprehensive programs in the MRG.

Major Recommendations

The following are the most significant Committee recommendations. They are a subset of the complete list of recommendations for conservation, recreation, and education that appear at the end of each respective chapter.

Regional Collaboration, Interagency and Partnership Action:

- The region should embrace, promote, and invest in conservation, outdoor recreation/tourism and outdoor education.
- Building on the successes and lessons from the Middle Rio Grande Bosque Initiative, the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program, and relevant “adaptive management” programs, re-structure the inter-governmental communication and collaboration entities in the Middle Rio Grande (or establish a new structure entirely); establish mechanisms to better identify federal agency leads and coordinate conservation, recreation, and education

efforts across local, state, federal, tribal, and non-governmental organizations.

- Promote efforts to rethink water supply, demand, and quality. Educate the public about the long term water crisis challenges within the Middle Rio Grande and how it is being exacerbated by climate change. Proactively promote measures identified in the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan as well as additional planning efforts to: use adaptive management to administer water in the Middle Rio Grande without an adjudicated system in place; use adaptive management to help administer water in the Rio Grande, expedite water right adjudication; quantify and protect Pueblo water rights; conduct aggressive water conservation in conjunction with mechanisms for putting the saved water to environmental beneficial uses; create enhanced upstream storage; improve linkages between land use/development decisions and water resources; and test “payment for ecosystem services” to promote protection of water quantity and quality.
- Develop and implement collaborative, voluntary, market-based water transaction programs, in collaboration with the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, the Office of the State Engineer (e.g. Strategic Water Reserve), federal agencies, Pueblos, and non-governmental conservation organizations, to acquire and dedicate water for environmental flows, ecosystem processes, streamside riparian and wetland habitat restoration, and recreation. Promote the Albuquerque-Bernalillo Water Utility Authority “Living River Fund” and expand on this concept region-wide in order to build public engagement and financial support for river restoration.
- Continue to implement the Bosque Biological Management Plan, which remains an excellent overall road map for the conservation

Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

and restoration of the river and bosque (the riparian forest). Strive to mimic and restore natural systems where feasible within current conditions and constraints.

- Complete and link a “String of Pearls” network of conservation, recreation and education sites along the Middle Rio Grande. Implement a program based on public and community involvement for increased recreational access within the MRG that is: compatible with the resources and ecological capacity and irrigation practices; avoids sensitive areas, based on biological and social indicators; and has careful management and monitoring. This program should include the planning, construction, and management of a land and water Rio Grande Trail through as much of the river corridor as is appropriate and feasible, utilizing local, state, and federal partnerships. Increased funding for trails is particularly important. Public access within the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District Project lands requires that the BOR and MRGCD develop a clear procedure for granting use. Recreational access and use, including any river trail(s), must respect tribal sovereignty, private property and the preferences of local communities.

- State, federal, and private entities should coordinate and partner with local government efforts on more detailed implementation plans to improve land and water access and recreation in the MRG, such as efforts by the City of Albuquerque’s “River Corridor Improvement Plan” (part of “ABQ-100 Year Plan”).
- Federal, state, and local entities should complete U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service acquisition and support restoration and management of the 570-acre Price’s Dairy property in Albuquerque’s South Valley to establish the Middle Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge.
- Through public and private partnerships, serve 100% of school children within the Middle Rio Grande with outdoor/environmental education programs every year by 2022; establish a Middle Rio Grande Environmental/Outdoor Education Council to coordinate efforts; make a water resource management/water conservation education program mandatory for all water utilities in the MRG.
- Establish a regional “Rio Grande Conservation Corps” to engage young people in conservation projects, promote service learning, foster leadership, and create jobs.



Sandhill cranes feeding on the plain of the Middle Rio Grande. © Marvin DeJong

Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

- Develop consolidated, centralized public information sources on conservation, recreation, and education in MRG.

Local Action:

- To the extent feasible and consistent with local agencies statutory directives, utilize operating budgets, bonding capacity and new funding initiatives to generate funds to invest in conservation, recreation, and education, and to leverage federal matching funds.
- Link recreation in the MRG to community health and wellness programs.

State Action:

- Target state funds from existing programs on the MRG to enhance conservation, recreation and education (e.g. wildlife funds, boater access funds, Recreational Trails, outdoor education, and other programs).

- Increase and/or establish consistent sources of State funds for public and private land conservation, land and water trails, non-game/non-consumptive wildlife programs, State park and recreation management, and outdoor/environmental education that can leverage other local, federal, and private funds.
- Implement the intergovernmental model of the Rio Grande Valley State Park in Sandoval, Valencia, and Socorro counties (excluding Pueblo lands and private lands, and while maintaining hunting opportunities).
- Amend the New Mexico State Trails Act to facilitate the State's role in planning, construction, and management of a land and water Rio Grande Trail.



Sandhill cranes at Bosque del Apache NWR. © Marvin DeJong

Executive Summary and Major Recommendations

Federal Action:

Elevate the Middle Rio Grande as a National Priority:

- Authorize and fund a comprehensive Middle Rio Grande Restoration and Management Program tailored specifically to the region's needs that builds on the Middle Rio Grande Bosque Initiative, the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program, and other adaptive management programs, involves all key governmental and non-governmental entities, and encompasses aspects of conservation, recreation, and education.
- Increase funding of other federal programs that play a key role in conservation, recreation, and education in the Middle Rio Grande, including: Land & Water Conservation Fund (both federal and stateside elements); Department of Agriculture (Farm Bill) & Department of the Interior private landowner conservation assistance programs; NPS Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program; El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail; and Department of Interior, Department of Education and Environmental Protection Agency environmental/outdoor education programs.
- Fund the USACE Bosque Revitalization program to expand work beyond the Albuquerque reach of the Rio Grande; reauthorize and fund the Rio Grande Environmental Management program; incorporate trail and other recreation components into future authorizations for USACE levee reconstruction projects; increase the limit for recreation components in USACE projects from 10 percent to at least 20 percent of the project budget.
- Increased funding directly to Pueblos to build their own conservation, outdoor recreation and education programs; ensure funding equity for the Pueblos in the application of state and federal funds for conservation, recreation and education in the MRG.
- Fund other key federal tribal partnership programs, such as the BOR e\$orts authorized by the "Rio Grande Pueblo Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2011" and the USACE program under the "Water Resources Development Act of 2007."
- Authorize the National Park Service to conduct a National Heritage Area study for the Middle Rio Grande.