An aerial photograph of the Rio Grande winding through a vast, arid landscape. The river is dark and meandering, cutting through a dry, brownish terrain. In the background, there are mountains under a blue sky with scattered clouds. The overall scene is a wide, panoramic view of the river valley.

THE RIO GRANDE AN EAGLE'S VIEW

Photographs by
Adriel Heisey

Edited by Barbara McIntyre

Foreword by Robert Redford



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Essays by John Horning, Steve McDowell, and Senator Tom Udall



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Rio Reverence

There is a time of year—almost always in the spring and every so often in the fall—when the leaves of a Rio Grande cottonwood tree have a transcendent beauty. It is in those ephemeral moments—especially at dawn and dusk, when a cottonwood bosque’s splendor can transfix people—as if there were not only a light within each leaf but also a magnetic force attracting our eyes to it.

Add the gleam of morning light along the river’s rippled surface to the translucent shimmer of a cottonwood leaf as it pivots in the shifting winds, and such river scenes have the ability to enliven the soul.

I had never seen a photograph contain all of these elements until September 1996, while reading the latest issue of *National Geographic*. When I came upon the low, aerial image of a stream lined with cottonwoods in Canyon de Chelly, I was awestruck that a photographer had captured, all at once, the majesty and fragility of a river winding its way through an arid land.

At the time, WildEarth Guardians and allied conservation organizations were deeply embroiled in a contentious campaign to secure the Rio Grande a right to its own waters. The winter of 1996 had been dry across the Southwest, and the spring’s melt came early and lean. By late April, irrigators in New Mexico and Colorado had

diverted almost all of the drought-weakened river’s flow, putting at risk not only the increasingly endangered native fish and wildlife but also the survival of the Great River itself.

A political and legal tug-of-war erupted over the river’s scarce water supplies. Powerful water brokers sought to protect their asset, with little consideration for the needs of the endangered species. And though conservation groups won some landmark legal rulings and shifted water management policy to require minimum flows that would sustain endangered fish, I felt that somehow we had failed to remind citizens that it was the very river itself whose future was at stake.

So how might we, I asked myself, make people more aware of the tremendous natural abundance that we are losing, little by little? If we only knew the Rio Grande even slightly more intimately, I thought, we would each be more likely to work to save it.

With the river’s plight and my still-vivid impression of that Canyon de Chelly photograph as my catalysts, I tracked down the photographer, Adriel Heisey, hoping he might be intrigued by the challenge I wanted to pose to him: photographing the Rio Grande from his ultralight plane.

Adriel loved the idea, and ever since, we’ve been on



Foreword

The Rio Grande is an important part of the way I see the American West. It has been ever since I was a kid in California, when the river seemed remote and unreachable. Back then, I pictured it as the backdrop for a colorful collection of gaunt conquistadores, stoic Indians living in multi-storied pueblos, and old cowhands. It had an almost mythical quality for me that I'm sure I couldn't have defined.

While I was still a schoolboy, on a summer vacation road trip, I got my first sight of the Rio Grande in New Mexico: a surprisingly wide, green valley backed by sandy mesas and imposing mountains, with summer thunderheads in skies like I'd never seen. Suddenly my mythic river had a landscape to flow through, the first of many scenes that would give it a vast, impressive, and very tangible reality.

About a decade later, I had my first taste of real freedom and a car to go with it, and soon I was back in the Southwest. I spent more time out on the landscape than in the towns and cities, but I began to see how important

water—especially rivers—was to all of it. Visiting Native American communities, I realized I was among people who regarded the Rio Grande as sacred and who considered any deliberate defiling of the river a sacrilege.

America—from dime novels to Hollywood—has loved a West rich in gold, gunslingers, and open-range cattle drives. And with good reason: They've made for some great storytelling. But what I was beginning to see was a West whose most important storyline was often—almost always, I'm tempted to say now—about water.

The Rio Grande I saw decades ago seemed to flow through its rugged canyons and sandy grasslands with untroubled ease, an inevitable, permanent force of nature that could almost be taken for granted. Even then it wasn't true, though I didn't know it; by that time there had already been many schemes cooked up—some of them dating back over a century—that were capable of taking all or most of the water out of the river.

Since then, demands on the river have increased, and its flows have decreased. Three times in the last 20 years,



Toward a Long-Running River

As they reached the Rio Grande for the first time, newcomers used to get a warning about the river, usually conveyed with a wink or a smile: Treat the sandy waters of the meandering Rio Grande with care, they were told—take one drink of those waters, and you’d never be able to tell the whole truth again.

The true and essential nature of the Rio Grande itself, sipped or not, has always been in the eyes of its beholders. And as history has accrued along the river, century upon century, those beholders have seldom agreed about what sort of place it is, or ought to be.

Why? In part, at least, because the Rio Grande changes character so often, and so abruptly between its sources and the sea, that it might fairly be described as an array of rivers. In its loftiest incarnation, it’s an icy, capering, clear-watered creature of glaciated tundra, stealthily gathering snowmelt and strength from alpine cirques, tarns, and moraines. Downriver, it cuts a thundering cascade of whitewater through sagebrush basins, relentlessly carving at deep canyonsides among bastions of obdurate black basalt. And in yet another reach, it’s a placid, lackadaisical current easing its way past Sabal palms, thickets of thorn-bearing brush, and stands of trees whose names—Ebano, Tenaza, and Anacuita among the many—nicely suit their almost tropical air.

Perhaps most characteristically of all now, the river is an engineered, often-levied interlude between reservoir pools—pacified behind dams and diversion structures from its headwaters nearly to the Gulf of Mexico. Tamed and confined, its waters patiently await conveyance to non-riparian destinations: onto flood-irrigated lands, mostly, but increasingly into the myriad arteries, veins,

and capillaries of pipe that turn the once high, wide, and handsome river into tapwater.



On an otherwise ordinary day nearly five centuries ago, a weatherbeaten, footsore wanderer with three companions walked to the edge of a low bluff somewhere in today’s Texas and caught a heartening first glimpse of a long, green, sinuous desert oasis: a river and its tree-lined banks stretching away north and south beyond sight.

For thousands of years before him, travelers had been approaching this oasis much as he did, trekking on foot—since none before him had ever seen a horse—over a wide, sandy gauntlet of parching desert to reach water. Most of them were probably desperately thirsty when they got there, and most were probably immensely, perhaps even reverently, grateful for the damp fragrance and flashing reflections of sunlight off water that meant they’d reached a riverside.

Yet if he was typical in one sense, this was nonetheless a wanderer with a difference. All the travelers who’d preceded him were Native American; this man, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, was a shipwrecked and stranded Spaniard, the first European we know of to stand on the banks of the river and take firsthand written notice of it.

First can be best, but Cabeza de Vaca’s account of the river was terse, to say the least. This river and its lower valley were home, water source, and sometime refuge to buffalos and bears, beaver and big cats. Hundreds of butterfly species rode the breezes of its teeming riverine air, and even more species of birds. Some of its fish, feeding on delta fertility, weighed hundreds of pounds. Everywhere around him there were riverside trees and





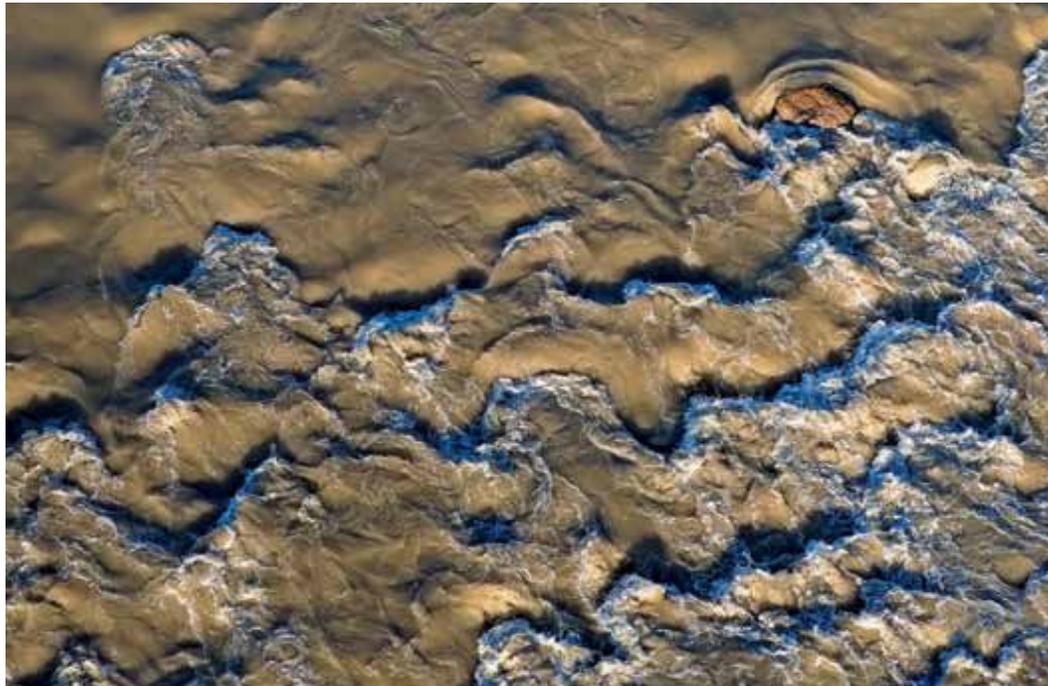
The River itself has no beginning or end.

*In its beginning, it is not yet the River; in its end,
it is no longer the River. What we call the headwaters is only
a selection from among the innumerable sources
which flow together to compose it.*

– T.S. Eliot







In the heart of the Chihuahuan Desert is a place “where rainbows wait for rain and the river is kept in a stone box.” A true treasure of the Rio Grande, Big Bend National Park and its sister parks in Mexico are designated a Biosphere Reserve—at more than a million acres, one of the largest in North America.

Left: Santa Elena Canyon and the Chisos Mountains, Big Bend National Park, Texas
Above: Rapids at Tapado Canyon, Big Bend Ranch State Park, Texas

Colorado

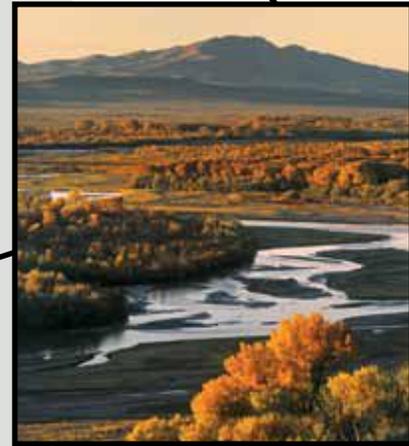
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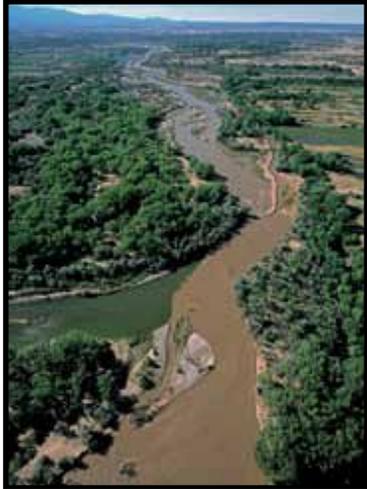
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New Mexico

Albuquerque



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Las Cruces

El Paso

Juárez



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Chihuahua



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Rio Grande Watershed



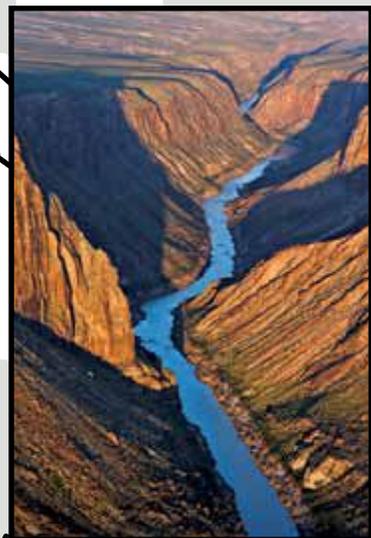
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Afterword

Though all rivers are vital arteries of life, especially in the arid lands of the American West, there is only one Great River, and it is called the Rio Grande.

From its wild, rocky canyons and deep gorges to its great gallery forests of cottonwood in northern New Mexico and palm forests at its mouth, the Rio Grande's greatness is defined, not merely by its 1,900-mile length, but also by its rich biological diversity and the beauty of its plant and animal species. It is a place where one can still see black bear and cougar near its pristine headwaters and catch a glimpse of the elusive jaguar near its still-wild mouth at the Gulf of Mexico. It is the river that truly defines my home state of New Mexico and much of the American Southwest.

The history of the Southwest is essentially a history of the Rio Grande. Its bounty moved native peoples to establish pueblos along its banks. Historians have speculated that regional lines of cooperation first developed in this area as part of an effort to tame the river. In this ac-

count, the Rio Grande was the great grandmother of the region's governments, stable quasi-states that predated European rule by generations.

In 1519, Captain Alonso Álvarez de Pineda and his men spent 40 days at what they called the Rio de las Palmas. When Pineda sailed for Jamaica, he had traveled from Veracruz to Florida, but he recommended only the mouth of the Rio de las Palmas as a site for future colonization. His decision would contribute to fierce conflict and eventually give birth to a new civilization. Over the next century, the Rio de las Palmas would become known as the Rio Grande, and Spanish settlers would transform the region.

The Rio Grande and its tributaries remain an integral part of the region's communities. For generations, New Mexico communities have relied on the local acequias to meet their needs, and this common resource has formed a centerpiece of civic life, bringing the life-sustaining waters into communities and croplands. Like the first pueblo settlers and the subsequent Spanish set-

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