

Volcanic cones near peak sacred to tribes gain protection

June 3 2022, by Susan Montoya Bryan



This photo provided by the Trust for Public Land shows the L Bar Ranch on Dec. 9, 2021 near Mount Taylor, adjacent to the Marquez State Wildlife Area, N.M. A national conservation group has acquired the sprawling ranch near a New Mexico mountain peak held sacred by Native American tribes. The Trust for Public Land announced Thursday, June 2, 2022 that land managers will be able create New Mexico's largest state-owned recreation property, near Mount Taylor. Credit: Dave Cox/Mountain Media via AP

A years-long effort to protect land around a New Mexico mountain peak held sacred by many Native American tribes got a major boost Thursday with the announcement that dozens of additional square miles will be set aside for wildlife, cultural preservation and recreation.

The \$34 million effort by the national conservation group Trust for Public Land comes as New Mexico and the [federal government](#) look to preserve more natural landscapes as part of a nationwide commitment. The goal is to increase green spaces, improve access to outdoor recreation and reduce the risk of wildfires as the pressures of climate change mount.

Trust for Public Land partnered with other organizations and foundations to purchase adjoining properties that make up the sprawling L Bar Ranch, which sits in the shadow of Mount Taylor just west of Albuquerque.

The more than 84 square miles (218 square kilometers) includes grassland, rugged mesas and part of the Mount Taylor Traditional Cultural Property, which is on the state register of historic places due to its significance to Native Americans in New Mexico and Arizona.

Generations before the ranch became privately owned, people from surrounding Native American communities would make pilgrimages to the area and its timber, wildlife and plants provided sustenance beyond the ceremonial ties.

The dormant volcano, now covered with ponderosa pine and other trees, also served as a lookout with notable lines of sight to distant mountain ranges to the east.

Tribal leaders say some of the pilgrimage trails are still evident.

"The pueblo is hopeful that once the purchase is completed an [ethnographic study](#) can be conducted to identify areas, locations and sites of cultural significance," said Randall Vicente, governor of Acoma Pueblo.

Part of the property has been conveyed to the New Mexico Game and Fish Department and the rest will be turned over to land managers in the coming years to create what will be the largest state-owned recreation property in New Mexico. A legislative appropriation and money allocated through a federal excise tax on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment helped with the effort.

A management plan will be developed to ensure recreational access with special considerations for areas important to the pueblos of Acoma, Laguna and Zuni and the Hopi and Navajo people.

Jim Petterson, a regional vice president with Trust for Public Land, called the acquisition significant, saying it will serve as an important island for wildlife, allowing them to move and adapt across a wide range of elevations as temperatures get warmer and precipitation more scarce due to climate change.

In the lower elevations, the remnants of volcanic cones jut up from the valley floor. In the distance are dramatic cliffs that form the edge of mesa tops that are home to grasslands grazed by herds of elk and deer. The area also is home to bear, mountain lions and turkey.

"It's a relatively intact, healthy, just spectacular habitat," Petterson said. "Everything that should be there is there right now, and we have an opportunity to create a tremendous state wildlife area that will endure for generations to come. It's really beautiful."

Nearly 625 square miles (1,620 square kilometers) in and around Mount

Taylor, including lands within the L Bar project, were designated a traditional cultural property through decisions made by the state's Cultural Properties Review Committee in 2008 and 2009. The New Mexico Supreme Court upheld the designation in a 2014 ruling.

The movement to protect the area was prompted by proposals to restart uranium mining. In response, tribes took an unprecedented step to detail their spiritual connections to the area in hopes of winning protection.

Similar fights are ongoing with energy development in northwestern New Mexico, where [federal officials](#) have agreed to put a hold on new leasing in the area surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park pending a review.

"The relationship with the land, as Native Americans, we are the stewards of the land. We maintain this harmony with Mother Earth through culture and prayer," Laguna Pueblo Gov. Martin Kowemy said in a statement Thursday. "It is our responsibility to protect and preserve our land for future generations."

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