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### Coming Soon to a Park Near You

The American Southwest is known for its rugged landscape, its sweeping views, and its rich history. Travelers flock from far and wide to visit the region in parks like Zion, Arches, and the Grand Canyon. Soon, however, the southwest may be in the spotlight for an entirely different reason: The Wall. The 30-foot, or possibly 65-foot masterpiece of our Great Leader- who builds the best walls- may soon span the deserts of the Southwest. Attendance will spike in Big Bend as droves of visitors line up for a view of the “physically imposing” yet “aesthetically pleasing” monstrosity of reinforced ego and concrete (“Physically Imposing & Aesthetically Pleasing”). As outlandish as this sounds, the wall could be a reality, and the \$26 Billion price tag will pale in comparison to the ecological damage. Wildlife doesn’t conform to political boundaries. The proposed barrier would split wildlife populations in two, degrade thousands of acres of habitat, and further threaten dozens of endangered species.

Coming soon to a park near you, the biggest ecological disaster America has ever seen. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, the border wall will have widespread impacts that include further threatening 93 endangered and candidate species, degradation of 2 million acres of critical habitat, and physical separation of wildlife populations (Greenwald et al. 2017). These estimates come from an extrapolation of observations from the 1200 miles of border wall that already exist. Take for example the Mexican Grey Wolf, a species that has been slowly recovering from a near extinction caused by a US government order to kill all Mexican Grey Wolves found in the US (Greenwald et al. 2017). The recovery has come from in-captivity breeding programs on both sides of the border. The wolves were bred in captivity and released back into the wild in hopes of establishing a “viable, self-sustaining population” (Greenwald et al. 2017). A border wall would split the range of the wolves and drastically reduce genetic diversity among the population, ruining decades of conservation work and likely sealing the fate of the rare wolves. Similar arguments can be made for dozens of species because,

to put it simply, wildlife does not conform to political boundaries. The desert environment is harsh and for these species to survive they need access to the entire range of their habitat, which includes the US and Mexico.

In places like Big Bend National Park, the border wall is less about species diversity and more about access to water. The southern border of the park is a 118 mile stretch of the Rio Grande river, which separates the US from Mexico. Raymond Skiles, the park's wildlife biologist puts it simply, "The Rio Grande is also the park's most important water source for animals" (Burnett 2017). Given that the river is the border between the two countries, the only place to build a wall would be along the US shoreline. Imagine, an "impassable physical barrier", separating the parks black bear, mountain lion or bighorn sheep from the oasis of the river's waters (Executive Order No. 13,767). A wall separating a desert from a river. Many of the park's animals would go extinct within the park.

I'll admit I have a personal stake in the matter. I've visited Big Bend many times and I can't imagine a 30-foot wall along the bank of the river. In most cases, of course, I mean that metaphorically. I mean that I'm horrified to picture a wall along the river. For some locations however, I quite literally mean that I can't imagine a wall along the bank of the river. Take for instance Santa Elena Canyon. The canyon is cut through a geologic structure called the Mesa de Anguilla. The Mesa is best thought of as a plateau of rock sitting high above the Tornillo Basin. Over thousands of years, the Rio Grande River slowly cut through the rock of the Mesa, down to the level of the Tornillo Basin. Unlike canyons such as the Grand Canyon, Santa Elena is approached from river level. In fact, it is the most popular hike in the park. The trail starts at the mouth of the canyon, where the river finally breaks through to the basin. For 8/10ths of a mile you can walk into the canyon along the narrow embankment that clings to base of the canyon wall. On one side Mexico, on the other the US.

Now, try and imagine the series of events that would have to take place for someone to cross the border anywhere along the canyon. First, the traveler would have to get to the edge of the canyon, and this in itself is not an easy task. The terrain is far too rugged for any vehicle and the closest town (and dependable source of water) is 10 desert miles south of the canyon. After our traveler has trekked the desert, he comes to the edge of the canyon. He peers across the 200 ft gap, too far to jump. Luckily, he brought with him in his 10 miles of desert hiking, all the gear required to climb down the vertical face. 1500 ft of loose and crumbly limestone. More than a quarter of a mile of uncharted and unmarked climbing. To give an example of how absurd this is, consider Half Dome in Yosemite National Park, possibly the most well known climb in the world. The climb is 2000 ft of solid, sturdy granite, with several routes of varying difficulty that are well known and well marked. Many routes have eyelets bolted into the rock for climbers to attach their ropes as they ascend. Even with these considerations, experienced climbers still take two days to ascend, with a night spent on special cots that hang from eyelets. The thought of climbing down an uncharted 1500 ft wall with only the gear one could carry across the desert is absurd. But the thought of a 2000 mile border wall is also absurd, so let's continue with the traveler's journey. Let's say that he is able to make the descent, all 1500 ft. He must then gather his gear and swim across a 50 ft stretch of flowing river without drowning. After he survives the swim, he faces his biggest challenge yet, a two day climb up the opposite side of the canyon. Another 1500 ft of uncharted territory, a feat that would challenge even professional climbers. After a grueling two days of climbing, our traveler makes it to the top. He's done it, he has crossed into the US...or has he? After cresting the top, he comes to the wall. 2000 miles wide and 18 ft tall. "It's impossible", he thinks to himself, "I'll never make it over these last 18 ft." He turns around, spends three more days climbing down and back up the Mexico side of the canyon, and a last day hiking back to the town he left just four days prior. The wall wins. Habitat destroyed, species driven to extinction, and a cherished national park lost, all to stop our impossible traveler.

Similar thought experiments can illustrate the absurdity of the wall for many locations along the proposed 2000 miles. In some places its 100 miles of mountains to cross, others its days of crossing deserts with no access to water. The Black Bear, Jaguar, Mexican Grey Wolf and many other species will be lost to the southwest. Temporary roads and abandoned concrete plants will scar the once pristine landscape. \$2 Billion will have been wasted. Should our Great Leader get his way, his legacy will not be of a safer America, it will be a legacy of environmental destruction.

Works Cited

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