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# TED TURNER AND THE TROUT

Written by Jonathan Lee Wright



Casting for cutthroat on Vermejo Park Ranch. Credit: Jonathan Lee Wright

Ted Turner bought the Vermejo Park Ranch because Yellowstone and Yosemite were already taken. The comparison is a fair one, as it is an achingly beautiful landscape, with sprawling forests of Lodgepole Pine and Ponderosa giving way to grassy natural parks at the higher elevations. Above it all, far above the tree line, stand snowy alpine peaks tearing against the thin clouds that skate over the southern Rockies.

Vermejo Park Ranch is the largest contiguous parcel of private land in the continental United States, bigger than both Grand Teton and Rocky Mountain national parks combined. Covering over 590,000 acres that straddle the boundaries New Mexico and Colorado -- and the crest of the 13,000' Sangre de Cristo mountain range above Taos -- the ranch encompasses not only a broad swath of property, but also biology. From high desert range to

alpine tundra, Vermejo represents a unique and irreplaceable gene bank. Recognizing this, Turner purchased the ranch in 1996 with an intent of restoring the ecology of the property to act as a preserve for native species, a concept to which he is deeply committed—his work in rebuilding populations of North American Bison on his numerous real estate holdings across the West is widely recognized, and in 2012, Turner

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A chunky Rio Grande cutthroat on Turner's property. Credit Jonathan Lee Wright

was awarded the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Champion Award for conservation.

Paralleling the efforts of government agencies and partnering with them at the project execution level, the privately funded Turner organization has largely been able to sidestep the bureaucratic boondoggles that can hamstring the use of public moneys. In an era where public lands and native species are losing ground under withering legislative assaults, the partnership between state and federal agencies and the Turner organization has proven to be a win for all involved. The upshot of this provides a clear—and likely unpopular—conclusion for traditional conservationists: large private inholdings managed as sustainable commercial enterprises are a key component in the protection of the last remaining wildlands in this country. It could very well be that the Ted Turners and other global scale philanthropists of the world will be the saviors of critically endangered species.

The Rio Grande cutthroat trout is a native fish of the southern Rocky

Mountains, and is considered an indicator for environmental health, living in only the most pristine and remote waters. In addition to being the state fish of New Mexico, it also represents a classic example of what can happen when man extends his influence over nature, as until recently they were a candidate for Threatened Status with the EPA. Cutthroats as a species are closely related to the widely distributed Rainbow Trout, a fish endemic to the coastal northern pacific, with a historical range extending from California to Siberia. For many, landlocked cutthroat in their various forms are seen as emblematic of the Rocky Mountains, especially for fly anglers.

The problem for the cutthroats began when enthusiastic Fish and Game departments, along with private landowners, contracted hatcheries on either coast to introduce other favorite sport and table fish to the West in the late 19th century. The advent of railroads meant that heavy barrel loads of trout held in ice water could be brought across state borders in a matter of days, then dumped into

rivers and lakes in close proximity to rail lines. Rainbows and other unrelated fish like Brook Trout from the eastern U. S. and European Brown Trout—both originating from entirely separate genera, and unable to crossbreed with cutthroat—nonetheless assumed their niches in various habitats.

The cutthroat was not able to compete under the onslaught of the invasive species. With few developed immunological defenses against introduced disease, and no previous competitors for space, cutthroats were pushed out of their native ranges. Brook Trout would wildly overpopulate small stream spawning grounds, and large, predatory Browns would take up residence in slower side eddies where they could pounce on juvenile fish. Worse, the close genetic ties of Rainbow trout allowed them to effortlessly interbreed with cutthroat, creating millions of cross-lineage "cuttbows" that now populate the rivers of the Rockies. At this writing, various subspecies of aboriginal native cutthroat in almost all watersheds outside of the greater Yellowstone have taken refuge in the highest elevation reaches of headwater creeks and lakes approaching tree line, taking advantage of their inherent tolerance of the coldest water that millennia of evolution in an intermountain climate provides.

All this puts the Rio Grande cutthroat subspecies squarely in the area of concern for the Turner effort and their public partner agency, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Carter Kruse is the Director of Conservation for Turner Enterprises, and explained their philosophy. "I think where we might differ from other private organizations in particular is our

willingness to engage. We don't avoid difficult projects or issues. For example, the threat of an Endangered Species Act listing doesn't deter us as it does many, in fact it probably pushes us to get involved".

Kruse clarified this further, saying, "Not only are we willing to cost share a project, and lots of groups will do this, but we are willing to conduct research to improve our understanding of an issue or impacts. We are willing to help write environmental documents, we assist with project oversight and implementation, we provide bodies to do the work, and so forth. We have ownership. We are consistent with our overall philosophy and specific objectives. I think that makes us pretty transparent. Mostly for us it's about conservation gain on the ground."

Acknowledged as the southernmost occurring variant of the trout—which includes Westslope, Yellowstone, Snake River, Colorado River and Greenback strains, among others scattered across the West -- the Rio Grande strain historically had a protected stronghold in the headwater creeks of the Vermejo Park Ranch, and it is in the Sangre de Cristo mountains that the trout have the bulk of their remaining numbers. Over one hundred years of stocking of invasive fish, both in the overall region and on the ranch proper prior to Turner ownership created an overly stressful environment for the cutthroat, and in the late 1990's the decision was made to restore the native fish of the Vermejo to their original state. This required the eradication of invasive trout within sixty miles of small streams that run both east and west off the crest of the mountains, and in a good sized, state-managed reservoir providing water which flows off the property to public lands as the

Costilla River. The method of eradication was the same as that used for decades by Fish and Wildlife departments across the country, where the quickly degrading organic piscicide Rotenone is applied upstream of the problematic populations. After almost two decades of effort , Turner Enterprises announced that the Rio Grande Trout Restoration project on the Vermejo is complete as of 2017, and that only Rio Grande cutthroat now live in the streams within the confines of the ranch.

New Mexico has had a dedicated interest in the issue for decades, and provided not only the fish to replenish the streams through its hatchery system, but support and oversight of the overall project. Tucker Brauer is a Rio Grande cutthroat Trout Biologist with the state, and offered more insight into the broader effort.

"While stream treatments are finished on Vermejo Park Ranch, the project is still ongoing. We are continuing to restock and monitor waters on the ranch but we still have stream treatments planned for the coming years on waters surrounding the property on Carson National Forest land. The New Mexico Dept. of Game and Fish is the project lead and Turner Conservation has been a fantastic partner in the effort. The Rio Costilla Project is the largest native trout restoration project in the country and it wouldn't have been possible without their cooperation."

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The extent of scientific interest surrounding the Rio Grande cutthroat extends beyond the geographic boundaries of its home range. 300 miles to the south of the Vermejo, the twin Turner-owned properties of the Ladder

and Armendaris ranches near Truth or Consequences lay across a massive stretch of Northern Chihuahuan desert. Separated by the Rio Grande, but still intimately tied to it, the two parcels provide a showcase and sanctuary for a very different spectrum of flora and fauna from the Northern alpine ranges. Water is scarce outside of the main channel of the big river and its large public impoundments, but what little is there drives entire stream side ecosystems, attracting and supporting subtly complex webs of plants and animals. The canyons that cut from the higher elevation ranges to either side of the Rio provide catchments for winter precipitation and heavy summer rains. Ephemeral creek beds at the bottom of these ravines rarely run with continuous surface water, but dig down a couple feet and you'll find cool wet sand that will fill the hole with water in a matter of minutes. Nonetheless, this subsurface water flows downhill, and protected from evaporation, makes occasional appearances as shallow pools shaded by overhanging Cottonwoods and Ponderosa.

Las Animas Creek (not to be confused with the much larger Animas River in the extreme northwest corner of the state) is the central drainage of the Ladder Ranch. It creates a dense riparian habitat along its otherwise inconsistent channel, and astoundingly, has supported populations of resident fishes -- including cutthroat trout. The Ladder Ranch, today run as an economically self-sustaining business, operates as one of the nations premier eco-tourism destinations, offering visitors insights into an austere desert landscape that is managed with extreme care in its restoration. Recent visitors have included former President and

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# FEATURE

outdoorsman Jimmy Carter and the late UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

In the Southwest, June is the hottest and driest month—the start of fire season—and is typically followed by a summer “monsoon” period of torrential downpours, starting in early July and lasting for about six weeks. Forest fires are notoriously destructive to watersheds, not in the initial conflagration, but rather in the aftermath, where rains wash tons of toxic ash down stream beds. In 2013, Southwest New Mexico suffered a series of wildfires that burned through the Black Range, well west of the Ladder Ranch, but where the headwater catchments of the Las Animas lie on National Forest lands. The resulting ash flows wiped out the trout in the Las Animas, which had unfortunately been subject to the indiscriminate stocking policies of the last century and represented a corruption of native bloodlines.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and the Turner Foundation were then looking at a clean genetic slate, as a natural phenomenon reset the ecology of the stream more effectively than years of fisheries management intervention could ever do.

In 2017, four years after the initial ash flow had been dissipated by subsequent precipitation, a small test population of trout—48 fish in total, sourced from an isolated native population of pure strain Rio Grande cutthroat in Canones Creek in northern NM—were reintroduced by the NMDGF to the upper stream, just inside the boundary of the National Forest west of the ranch.

Since that time, and encouraged by positive survival rates, 138 more fish were stocked by the Game and Fish Department in the upper headwaters in 2018, with a final stocking planned for spring 2019.

The justification for these efforts relates to the origin of trout in the Las Animas, which has been a matter of ongoing scientific investigation and debate for some time. In his monograph *Native Trout of Western North America*, Robert Behnke, Ph.D. stated that the historical extreme southern limit of the range of Rio Grande Cutthroat trout included Las Animas Creek. This is a considerable outlier to the Northern New Mexican populations of the fish, separated by at least two hundred miles of warm, turbid water in the Rio Grande river—a wholly unsuitable environment for any trout, and the only watercourse of significance in the center of the state.

At the end of the last ice age, climate and precipitation patterns were considerably wetter in the American Southwest, with the progressive desertification of the last 12,000 years leading to shrinking river systems and ecologies, but during the late Pleistocene, large permanent snow fields in the high country of Southern New Mexico would have provided robust watersheds for cold water fish to populate. Officially recorded presence of aboriginal, native trout in the Animas prior to 1900 is sketchy at best, but there exists one tantalizing clue as to their existence: a thousand year-old Native American pictograph pecked into a rock wall of the upper canyon that appears to represent a fish with a second dorsal fin -- the fleshy adipose, an identifying feature

of trout and salmon. Warmwater Catfish also express this trait, but the stream gradient of the Upper Animas does not provide the kind of slow muddy flows that those fishes prefer to support their predatory behaviors. This faint message from the past leads researchers to lines of thought that may have been otherwise dismissed. Rather than representing random graphics or religious iconography, the rock art in the canyon may have been intended to be interpretive signage, signaling the presence of trout in the canyon waters upstream.

The implications of the genetic history of the cutthroats of the Las Animas are profound. Fed by cool snow melt, the Rio Grande river of ancient times would have supported a wide network of tributaries such as the Animas, all potentially teeming with cold water fishes. It is then of scientific importance to understand how some of them survived and adapted to the extreme environmental conditions of a regional climate shift in the desert Southwest over the last few thousand years. Northern, high-country cutthroats thrive in highly oxygenated water that is generally too cold for other competing species, and yet the trout of the relatively warm southern Las Animas seem to have been able to survive. If this indicates that the Animas cutthroats—along with other members of their genus—have an innate ability to adapt to large temperature variances in their environment, this shows a potential significance for understanding how humans and other species could do the same at a genetic level in the face of global climate change. Restoring self-sustaining populations of Rio Grande cutthroat to the most challenging environment they have

been known to inhabit could yield unexpected insights into biological dynamics not yet understood.

These kinds of questions are what make the entire concept of environmental conservation crucially valuable. The deep ecology of the ancient natural world may hold the keys to our own survival.

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Winter at 8,000' elevation comes early, with skiffs of snow catching

proximity to the gravel bars where their mates had laid the eggs that ensured their progeny. Now, the Rio Grande cutthroat—a spring spawner, like all members of its genus—holds dominion over the waters of the ranch. The final restoration stocking of fish in the one to two-year-old class over the last several years meant that successful maturation and natural reproduction of native fish was one to two seasons away from the time of reintroduction. In many small high country streams, cutthroats top out at a maximum size of under one foot in length, a function

fish. They have chosen flies that imitate the abundant grasshoppers of the surrounding meadow, and methodically investigate the water with short casts, more hunting than fishing.

Suddenly, the water erupts not twenty feet in front of David, and he expertly tightens up on the line, raising the flexible rod above his head. A large fish smashed his Hopper only inches from the overhung grass on the bank. I shout my surprise and encouragement as he expertly prevents it from diving back under cover where roots and rocks could easily part the thin nylon leader. It takes several minutes to tire the trout to the point where it can be handled.

A male. Heavy-bodied, with breathtaking colors and of about 17" in length, it will easily go over 2 1/2 lbs.—a bucket list specimen for any committed fly fisherman. It comes into the shallows unwillingly, making a few last efforts at escape. Finally, with wet hands, David cradles the fish for a few photographs, and then eases the fish back into the flow after removing the barbless hook. It hesitates, then darts back to its hidden lair, none the worse for wear.



"Home-base" on the sprawling Vermejo Park Ranch property. Credit: Jonathan Lee Wright

the highest peaks surrounding the Vermejo Park Ranch starting in mid-September. Changing colors in the aspen groves create classic conditions for the limited private hunts which bring sportsmen from all over the world for a chance to take an elk returning from summer grazing grounds for the Fall rut. The streams of the ranch are now in transition. In the past, nonnative Brown trout would be in spawn, with aggressive males killing almost everything in

of the overall abundance of available aquatic prey at altitude.

David Barfield and Mel Johnson are both seasoned fly-fishing guides on the Vermejo, each with a lifetime of experience catching trout in a wide variety of terrain elsewhere in the West. I watch them slowly stalking alongside the banks of Costilla Creek above the reservoir, where they probe the small niches and corners of the stream that typically hold larger and more wary

The three of us look at each other grinning, and realize that without question, the native trout of the ranch are back.

*Editor's note: We ran this story, not only because it is interesting, but also because in an era when we're all (rightfully) about increasing public access, it's worth discussing how private lands can and do play a role in conservation. And in fact, if a certain species of native trout survives another several generations, we might have landowners to thank for that.* 