

Payback time

Unusual hand behind US-Mexico wildlife project

REUTERS, El Carmen, Mexico

BILLY Pat and Bonnie McKinney used to wake up in the Big Bend National Park in Texas and gaze in awe across the Rio Grande river to the sun-scorched 9,800-foot-high Sierra El Carmen in Mexico.

The mountain range, once a hideout for Apache Indians and gun-slitting outlaws, surges out of bone dry desert. Its lower rolling flanks are grasslands and its peaks are dense forests of firs and spruce - not unlike the Rocky Mountains.

El Carmen is one of the most unique and biodiverse ecosystems in North America, home to at least 400 plant species, 220 bird varieties, more than 50 mammals and with 64 reptiles and amphibians species also recorded.

The McKinneys, who worked for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, crossed over the river a year ago to join an unusual project to manage and preserve El Carmen.

It's unusual because it is not the government but one of Mexico's largest corporations - the world's third largest cement maker Cemex - which is driving the plan that will effectively create a private national park.

"We had a great life in the Big Bend National Park, but we used to dream of working in these mountains. They are so beautiful, so unique; so when we got the chance, we jumped at it," said Virginia-born Bonnie McKinney.

Cemex, whose industry is not the most environmentally friendly as it scrapes up huge quantities of raw materials that are then used to create concrete urban jungles, is giving something back to Mother Earth.

El Carmen, a collection of huge private ranches in Coahuila state stretching over 800 square miles or about half the size of Rhode Island, was designated a national park by Mexico in 1994, which put an end to logging and mining.

Cemex has under its control about a quarter of the national park after buying up two huge tracts and agreeing to manage and preserve another 50,000 acres with another local landowner.

The Monterrey-based company would love to look after all of El Carmen, which is so remote the endangered Mexican

black bear has found a last refuge there and is healthily reproducing.

Focus on whole ecosystem

The McKinneys lead a dozen young environmentalists living permanently at a base camp at the foot of the mountain range and just outside the El Carmen national park.

"So many wildlife projects focus on one species. This one focuses on the whole ecosystem," said Bonnie McKinney at the camp, a seven-hour drive across desert from the gritty northern Mexican industrial city of Monterrey.

"This whole area has been mined, logged and overgrazed. No one had the resources to set up a conservation project. It took a different line, like the input from Cemex, to get this project started," she added.

First stages of the project were to clean up El Carmen - tearing down barbed wire and fence lines from the area's bygone cattle ranching days. Massive overgrazing of delicate desert grasses has meant vast areas have lost their seed banks - rebuilding the seed bank is also on the project agenda.

The project workers currently are making a baseline inventory of all the fauna and flora in the national park, counting all the species of mammals, birds, reptiles and plant life they find at El Carmen.

Many species are endemic such as the Carmen white-tailed deer and the cliff chipmunk. Others are threatened such as the northern harrier, jaguarundi and the Texas horned lizard.

In the future, a permanent exhibition about the national park will be set up and further research on its flora and fauna will be encouraged.

Plans are to allow Cemex clients to visit the park - throwing in horse riding and hiking tours - and low density ecotourism might also be allowed for the general public, said Armando Garcia Segovia, Cemex's executive vice-president of development.

"It cannot be a place for very intensive visits because ecosystems are fragile," Garcia said. "We have to find a way of allowing visits but with a certain degree of care."

"The end result should be a world class place for people to

visit," said Billy Pat McKinney.

Hunted to extinction

Plans also include the reintroduction of animal species, starting with the desert big horn sheep, hunted to extinction in Coahuila and not seen wild in the state since the 1940s.

And if there is evidence that El Carmen also used to be home to elk, buffalo, grisly bears and wolves, these animals all could follow in the reintroduction plans, Garcia said.

Reintroducing lots of different large animals at El Carmen is key to making sure there is a balance of wildlife. If only sheep were reintroduced, the mountain lions would have a feast. "We'd be just releasing food for the lions," Garcia said.

To reintroduce the desert big horn sheep, Cemex has constructed a 15,000-acre reserve and brood park on land it owns just outside the national park, with high, predator-proof electric fencing.

Desert big horns from western Mexico have been released into the reserve - which is so big the sheep have no clue they are in an enclosed area - and after this year's breeding season, now number 53.

"Before we released the sheep, we captured two bears and one mountain lion that were inside the reserve and released these big predators back into wild," said Bonnie McKinney during a tour of the enclosure.

"When the big horn numbers are big enough we'll start wild releases of them in El Carmen," she added.

Mexico, where environmental concerns are often not a high priority of governments or companies, has close to 150 national parks, but the federal budget only provides sufficient cash to run about a dozen of them adequately.

Cemex, with operations in more than 30 nations spanning four continents, has invested an insignificant amount in El Carmen considering it had sales of \$6.9 billion in 2001. It would not reveal the amount of investment in El Carmen.

It hopes other Mexican firms will follow its example.

"We are trying to inspire other companies to do the same because we believe we are making an important contribution to the world, to the patrimony of mankind," said Garcia.

ENVIRONMENT WATCH

Earth hotter in 2002 as US cools

REUTERS, Washington

El Nino's return in 2002 helped to hike global temperatures to the second highest on record and scorch the earth with widespread drought, US government forecasters said on December 17.

The weather anomaly El Nino caused drought in India and Indonesia and record high temperatures in Australia during the year, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said.

Scorching temperatures and lack of rain caused severe drought over half the United States this past summer. A series of storms and an active hurricane season brought rain aplenty to the southern and eastern US, but about one third of the country is still drought-stricken.

Still, the average temperature for 2002 for the contiguous United States is expected to be 53.6 degrees F, about one-half degree cooler than 2001, NOAA said.

"There is a clear trend toward warmer conditions, and it is a very significant trend," said Tom Karl, director of NOAA's national climate data centre.

In its winter forecast last week, NOAA meteorologists said El Nino will affect US weather through March or April, bringing a mild winter to the northern half of the country while pounding the South and East with more storms.

El Nino is an abnormal warming of waters in the Pacific Ocean that wreaks havoc on global weather patterns.

Forecasters said the current El Nino will not be as devastating as in 1997-1998 when nearly 25,000 people died due to weather-related conditions. That El Nino also caused billions of dollars in damages due to drought in Indonesia and floods in Ecuador and Peru.

The average global temperature in 2002 rose nearly 1 degree from last year to 57.8 degrees Fahrenheit, the second-warmest year since the United States started tracking weather data in 1880. The highest temperature on record was 58.0 F in 1998.

Nine of the 10 warmest years recorded on earth since 1880 have occurred since 1990, NOAA said.