

Death of a Pioneer Trail



Just south of the fence separating Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, citizens of one of the largest U.S.-Mexico border cities struggle to survive in suburbs like this that extend for miles. Many of these people consider the uncertainties of trying to cross the border to find a better life for themselves and their families to be insignificant compared with the certainties of their present circumstances. The failure of the United States to appreciate and manage the economic crisis that fuels the Mexican migration northward has prompted an unprecedented effort to seal off hundreds of miles of the wildest land that remains along the border.

Approximately six months ago I sent you and 25 others some photos and information concerning U.S. Border Patrol operations along el Camino del Diablo, the ancient wagon trail that once traversed Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. The BP operations ongoing at that time included extensive alterations to el Camino that permanently destroyed the historic trail surface and contours and construction of a ten-building base from which to conduct daily multiple off-road vehicle patrols, surveillance operations, and policing activities.



This took place inside the wildlife refuge during the annual fawning of the nearly extinct Sonoran Pronghorn Antelope, a time when driving and camping along el Camino is prohibited, ostensibly to protect the wildlife habitat from disruption caused by the half-dozen pickups and SUVs that might pass through the area during a typical month in spring and early summer. But multiple daily patrols over the entire length of the old trail are now occurring twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week throughout the year, including the mid-March through mid-July closure period.

The response to my messages of March and April was spotty, but those who responded were concerned exclusively with threats to wildlife. After a return visit in mid-September, I have concluded that threats to wildlife are minimal, considering the vastness of the area, and that efforts to limit the BP's operations on the grounds of animal habitat disruption are not likely to have much affect on the course of those operations. At the BP's newly constructed "Outpost," ravens attack parked trucks, tearing off windshield wipers, and a pair of snowy egrets pause near the development on their way south toward the Sea of Cortez. The greatest threats of this Border Patrol siege are not to the wildlife who live there but to the wild character of the area and of the trail itself, and to recreational use by the American tax-paying stewards of this unique (former) wilderness.

What follows are pictures from my recent trip over el Camino del Diablo that show the effects of Border Patrol operations along the old trail and on its environment now that construction activity is complete. It is important that in conversations with three Border Patrol officers I learned that not a single illegal alien or smuggler has been caught as a result of these expanded BP operations. As the officer driving the vehicle shown here told me flatly, "Nobody's coming through here."



Sometimes, it is said, a picture can be worth a thousand words. Therefore, I have included below several "before and after" pictures. The "before" pictures show the pioneer trail as it was before the Border Patrol invasion/occupation. The "now" pictures show the highway that has replaced it. Aside from the loss of the historical character of the old trail, and safety concerns raised by the presence of the slippery metal planking, the recreational loss to off-roaders seeking challenges is obvious. But consider the aesthetic degradation and what it means to the visitor seeking solitude in an isolated and primitive setting. Until recently this was the most remote and deserted wilderness in the contiguous United States.

Before . . .

Now . . .



Before . . .

Now . . .



Before . . .

Now . . .



The Outpost is located a mile east of O'Neill Pass in the geographic center of the Refuge and consists of ten air-conditioned modular buildings, plus parking and heliport planking and all support systems necessary to sustain the activities of a team of agents living onsite for three days at a time.



Several patrols depart in both directions from there each day, traveling approximately 60 miles east to Ajo or west to Welton. When not rotating shifts, the several daily patrols turn around at the western boundary of the Refuge, rather than continue into the military sector, where the old trail has already been widened beyond all recognition.



Because construction originated in Ajo, the road surface east of the Outpost has been graded and widened all the way to Ajo. This section used to contain many washes, mini-washes, and sandy spots, and was overgrown with brush and overhung by tree branches in spots. It is now easy to maintain a speed of 45 mph all the way from the eastern boundary of the Refuge to the Outpost. Hazardous metal planking occurs sporadically throughout the Refuge east of the Outpost. To the west of the Outpost, the Playa and lava sections (Pinacate Valley, Pinta Sands) are ungraded and unplanked, but have suffered nearly as much damage from the daily Humvee and 4X4 truck traffic. In addition, over the entire length of the former trail, indiscriminate off-trail driving has caused extensive collateral damage. In other places deep ruts, not there six months ago, are hazardous for standard 4x4 trucks and sport utility vehicles – even when dry. Wet, those sections of the trail are impassible.



Many of the trails that branch off from el Camino, normally closed to everyone but Refuge personnel, as well as areas of open desert, have been “dragged.” A bank of truck tires lashed to a 15-foot beam is dragged over the desert behind a Border Patrol vehicle. Dragging is supposed to help in tracking illegals who may be dumb enough to drive or walk on the prepared surface rather than over the untrammelled brush and kangaroo rat burrows. But the dragging itself is even more destructive than the off-trail driving or hiking it encourages.



I had a several interesting encounters with BP agents during my visit in September. Mostly the agents were courteous, smiling and waving as they passed. But when cornered, they were evasive or blatantly dishonest in answering direct questions like “Are you having any luck catching anyone?” (“Oh yeah.”) “How many do you catch in a day or week?” (“It varies.”), “Do you think it’s making a difference?” (“Oh yeah. Makes a difference all right.”)

As I mentioned above, one uncharacteristically candid Humvee driver, when asked, “Having any luck?” replied, “No. They’re not coming through here.” As I worked my way west of the lava and sand dunes, another patrol vehicle approached, pulling to the side of the trail. Again I asked, “Having any luck catching any bad guys?” “Not today,” replied the driver. “Yesterday?” I asked. The agent did not answer, so I continued, referring to my conversation with the previous agent, “The other guy told me no one is coming through here,” I said. Then the truth came out. “Yeah. But as soon as we leave they will!”

This suggests that although they have not caught anyone, the BP agents believe the patrols, dragging, etc. deter crime. But it is also possible that the vast distances and harsh conditions of the desert itself are adequate deterrents to would-be travelers. That has certainly been the case historically, before the Border Patrol took the devil out of it by widening and smoothing out the roadbed, transforming it from a wagon and jeep trail into a high-speed thoroughfare. But because no job-seeking immigrant or drug smuggler has shown up for them to apprehend despite the huge sums invested in this program they call “Operation Desert Grip,” what else are these federal lawmen, misguided and misplaced out in the middle of nowhere, to believe?