

Introduction to the Sixth Symposium on the Natural Resources of the Chihuahuan Desert Region Conference and Proceedings

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The desert, its resources and researchers! The two intersected for the 6th time as the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute hosted over 200 participants for the symposium held at Sul Ross State University, 14th-17th of October 2004. The cumulative years of research experience, knowledge, and publications among participants was truly impressive, and all tied together at the conference by their individual care for, and research interest in, the natural resources of the Chihuahuan Desert region. By its bi-national nature, the conference represents a broad focus on the rich and complex biodiversity, ecosystems, and biogeography of the Chihuahuan Desert, with even greater representation at the conference (topics, titles, and authors) of the northern portion of the desert in northern México and the southwestern United States of America. As at the previous five conferences, the topics were diverse. The human dimension in the desert (uses, impacts, influences, and appreciation) was included and this time, a major synthetic overview of ecoregional planning and assessment of conservation concerns, values (species, natural communities, and ecosystems), specific sites, and predominant threats throughout the entire Chihuahuan Desert (visit cdri.org for a complete copy of the Ecoregional Conservation Assessment for the Chihuahuan Desert).

The potency of such a convention is of course, much more than just the excellent and professional presentation of papers and posters. It is also the hallway and after-hours conversations, exchanges of ideas and recollections, reunions and introductions. This conference covered a depth and breadth that has become the hallmark of the conference by reputation and inclusiveness. The range of topical sessions spanned from species-specific papers and sessions; to focus on specific conservation sites; to groupings like the desert herpetofauna and mammals; to sessions about aquatics, cacti, and exotic species; to ecosystems; and then the composite Chihuahuan Desert

conservation overview.

The conference was launched by Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute Executive Director Cathryn Hoyt's conference welcome, which was followed by the plenary Keynote Address given by Dr. Dean Hendrickson of the University of Texas at Austin. He set the tone for the conference with a sterling conservation message and alarm for one of the desert's most notable biodiversity treasures—Cuatro Ciénegas, Coahuila. His presentation looked at the history and future of Cuatro Ciénegas and the effects of regional problems that are catching up in this time-lagged gem of the Chihuahuan Desert.

The threads and themes of the individual presentations and topical sessions also spanned the geography and topography of the northern Chihuahuan Desert. The basin-and-range physiography was covered from the grasslands of the basins to the forested sky island mountain ranges. Water is the most crucial and vital (and certainly limited and limiting) resource of the desert hence the topical foci on aquatic resources from rare fishes and turtles to invertebrates and limnology in several sessions. There were topical sessions such as a panel presentation and group discussion on exotic species including salt cedar (*Tamarix*) and riparian restoration along the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, and a separate session just on exotic animals that threaten species, habitats, and natural communities, and which warrant concern and management.

This conference took on a markedly different angle from previous conferences in that there was considerable focus on landscape ecology, systems, and processes. An elaborate and sequentially-presented multi-session topic led by the Jornada Experimental Station research team covered landscape linkages and cross-scale interactions in the northern Chihuahuan Desert rangeland context; tying together soils, hydrology, and ecological management of complex ecological drivers within highly dynamic systems. Five full sessions were structured with a particular emphasis on semiarid grasslands specifically, with three on grassland vegetation ecology and restoration, another covering ecology of semiarid grassland mammals, and yet another devoted to semiarid grassland birds. Another session included fire effects and ecological ramifications, trajectories, and outcomes of fire in the desert and mountains.

Finally, a full session was dedicated to natural resource interpretation and informal education within and about the desert. Presentations focused from a national park perspective; to interpretation as a conservation tool; to the importance of place and familiarity with an ecoregion, bioregional education; to field schools and backyard habitats. The unifying theme was tying the natural resources of the

desert to the people who use, visit, reside within, conduct research, recreate, or merely appreciate the desert and wanting to know it better, and fuller. To this end, there was a special multi-day workshop on interpretive guide training and certification offered in conjunction with the Symposium. Held prior to the actual symposium, and hosted by the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute in association with the National Association for Interpretation (the umbrella organization of natural and cultural resource interpretation), the program was facilitated and led by a professional interpretive trainer as a hands-on field school at nearby Camp Mitre Peak. Scholarships for attendees was generously provided by the Rio Grande Institute.

An additional rangeland health workshop was conducted following the Symposium. The workshop was titled “Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health: an Introduction to the Qualitative Rangeland Assessment Protocol” led by scientists from the USDA/ARS Jornada Experimental Range.

Sul Ross State University’s Museum of the Big Bend featured an exhibit developed in conjunction with the conference that opened as the conference began titled “Boundaries to Blair: Eight Scientists in the Big Bend.” The display included books and archival materials that highlighted the biological investigations and scientists of the borderlands from the early days of settlement up to the baseline-establishing biotic province surveys of W. Frank Blair, a University of Texas zoologist who was a keen early supporter of CDRI in its formative years.

The conference truly had at least bi-national representation with a registration of approximately 200 people. Just as significantly, the total number of presenters of technical presentations included 90 papers (by a cumulative 256 authors or coauthors) and 16 posters by 46 authors or coauthors. There were 26 moderated sessions, with student award competitions for the best paper presented from among 17 student competitors and for the best student poster.

Conference Coordinator Recognition

The Local Arrangements Committee performed yeoman’s duty in putting the conference together, with backdrop planning and most all logistics. Chaired by Dr. Jim Mueller, the committee included Melissa Brady, Liz Hightower, Dr. Cathryn A. Hoyt, John Karges, Dr. Elizabeth Measures, and Dr. Jim Whitford Stark. The Program Coordinators were Dr. Hoyt and John Karges. Student Paper Competition was chaired by Dr. Measures, Poster Coordination was directed by Christopher Ritzi, Media Coordination Services was provided by Kendall Craig, and Arthur May

provided translation services. We are indebted to the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute staff and the many volunteers, donors, and all participants who made this conference possible.

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We certainly thank all of the presenters (of papers and posters) for their contributions to the conference in its sterling breadth and depth. Among them are those who chose to present manuscripts of their work, either as original scientific research or syntheses and interpretation of what is currently known, and pose questions for future inquiry. We thank also those who suggested and facilitated topical sessions with a unified theme such as the rangeland and landscape ecology sections or the Chihuahuan Desert Ecoregional Assessment and Plan portions. Additionally, we thank each moderator for keeping concurrent sessions punctual and fluid, and promoting questions and dialogue between the authors and the audience as time allowed.

Lastly, but not least, we want to thank the many reviewers for their time, hard work, suggested improvements and corrections, and role in improving the quality and contents of the manuscripts, and voting yay or nay on publication.