



Scientists fleeing border, smugglers

Outdoor studies getting riskier, researchers say

Chris Hawley
Republic Mexico City Bureau
Dec. 27, 2007 12:00 AM

MEXICO CITY - Biologist Karen Krebs used to study bats in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument on the Arizona-Mexico border. Then, she got tired of dodging drug smugglers all night.

"I use night-vision goggles, and you could see them very clearly" - caravans of men with guns and huge backpacks full of drugs, trudging through the desert, Krebs said. After her 10th or 11th time hiding in bushes and behind rocks, she abandoned her research.

"I'm just not willing to risk my neck anymore," she said.

Across the southwestern U.S. border and in northern Mexico, scientists such as Krebs say their work is increasingly threatened by smugglers as tighter border security pushes trafficking into the most remote areas where botanists, zoologists and geologists do their research.

"In the last year, it's gotten much worse," said Jack Childs, who uses infrared cameras to study endangered jaguars in eastern Arizona. He loses one or two of the cameras every month to smugglers.

Scientists, especially those working on the Mexican side of the border, have long shared the wilderness with marijuana growers and immigrants trying to enter the United States illegally. But tension is rising because of crackdowns on smugglers by the Mexican military, increased vigilance in the Caribbean Sea, new border fences, air patrols, a buildup of U.S. Border Patrol agents and a turf war between cartels.

Smugglers are increasingly jealous of their smuggling routes and less tolerant of scientists poking around, researchers say.

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument stopped granting most new research permits in January because of increasing smuggling activity. Scientists must sign a statement acknowledging that the National Park Service cannot guarantee their safety from "potentially dangerous persons entering the park from Mexico."

"It's a kind of arms race, and biologists are stuck in the middle," said Jim Malusa, who specializes in mapping desert vegetation. "There's been a chilling effect on researchers."

Higher stakes

Scientists say things have gotten more uncomfortable since 2001, when the United States began fortifying its border after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. In 2006, the Border Patrol embarked on a hiring spree, with plans to raise its personnel from 12,000 to 18,000 by the end of 2008.

Smugglers have responded with violence. Assaults on Border Patrol agents are occurring at a record pace, with 250 attacks reported from Oct. 1 to Dec. 16, an increase of 38 percent over 2006.

"It's a war zone out there," said Mickey Reed, a research technician at the University of Arizona's School of Natural Resources.

As crossing the border gets more difficult, the fees that smugglers charge to guide illegal immigrants through the desert has doubled in recent years, to as much as \$3,000 per person, migrants say. At the same time, Mexico has been stepping up highway checkpoints and port inspections, forcing drug smugglers into the wilderness and onto remote beaches.

To avoid the checkpoints, Mexican drug cartels are moving their marijuana farms northward, from traditional growing areas in Michoacan, Nayarit and Guerrero states to more remote areas in Sonora and Sinaloa states, according to the U.S. government's 2008 National Drug Threat Assessment.

Marijuana smugglers, whose cargo is smellier and bulkier than cocaine, are increasingly abandoning the urban border ports of Texas and California in favor of the Arizona-Sonora corridor, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration says. U.S. authorities seized 616,534 pounds of marijuana in the Tucson Sector alone in 2006, up from 233,807 pounds in 2001.

Smugglers also are increasingly relying on boats moving through the Pacific Ocean, the U.S. Coast Guard said this month. The Coast Guard seized a record 356,000 pounds of cocaine this year, most of it in the Pacific.

Scientists, who once had the ocean and desert all to themselves, say they are increasingly rubbing elbows with bad guys.

"They used to take the easier routes through washes and old river beds, but now, they're moving into the rougher country," said Randy Gimblett, a University of Arizona professor who studies human impacts on ecology. "There's a lot at stake because there's a lot of money tied up in drugs. We're not confronting those folks, but we're seeing more of that activity."

Close calls

There are no statistics on attacks or threats against scientists, said Mark Frankel, director of the scientific-freedom program at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. But among researchers, drug stories abound.

Michael Wilson, a botanist and director of research at the Drylands Institute in Tucson, said he avoids some parts of Mexico's Sonora state since seeing opium poppies, which are not native to Mexico, and mules carrying loads of marijuana down from the mountains. Opium resin is used to make heroin.

Wilson said he has noticed an increase of marijuana cultivation in recent years and more people watching over the fields. Some of his colleagues now carry guns, he said.

"There are a lot of researchers who have ducked out of doing research in Mexico," Wilson said.

David Yetman, a social scientist and host of the PBS series *The Desert Speaks*, said he had to stand in a

marijuana field in eastern Sonora to get pictures during the filming of a 2004 segment on rural liquor-making. He hired off-duty policemen with automatic weapons to protect his film crew during a piece in southern Sonora, an area known for drug trafficking.

Richard Felger, another botanist, said he stays away from remote mountains in Sonora since being robbed and threatened on research trips.

"I got kind of allergic to pistols being held to my forehead," Felger said.

Gimblett, who relies on buried pressure sensors for his research on park users, said smugglers routinely cut his cables. Childs has tried leaving notes and pictures of saints - even Jesús Malverde, the unofficial saint of drug traffickers - to try to persuade smugglers to spare his jaguar cameras, but to no avail. Each camera costs \$450.

Holes in research

The paranoia among drug smugglers is creating serious gaps in scientific knowledge, researchers complain.

Huge swaths of northwestern Mexico are now off-limits to science, said Andrés Búrquez, a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. The worst is Sinaloa state, home of the Sinaloa Cartel, he said.

"The most serious problem is when you have to visit a specific place in the countryside, places of geological interest," he said. "(Residents) will say, 'You can go to A, B and C place, but not D.' And it turns out that's the place that interests you most."

Childs says he loses one or two months' worth of pictures every time a jaguar camera is destroyed.

He also is unable to put cameras on the Mexican side of the border because of opposition from property owners who are fearful of, or perhaps cooperating with, the smugglers. That has made it harder to answer a key question: whether endangered jaguars are repopulating the United States or simply wandering over occasionally from Mexico.

Krebbs hasn't been out to study the endangered lesser long-nose bats at Organ Pipe in two years. Dean Hendrickson, an ichthyologist at the University of Texas, says avoiding marijuana and poppy fields has set back his efforts to study mysterious species of Mexican trout in Chihuahua state.


"It's going to be hard to do that without comprehensive sampling, and this sort of stuff definitely puts holes in our sampling," Hendrickson said. "There's no doubt: The drug stuff is definitely affecting research."

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It will take time and money, but I believe we will secure the border. Especially to drug runners and people smugglers.

Posted Dec-26 11:35 PM

ToddStallion

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16



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Posted Dec-26 11:58 PM

Oh I see. It is bad when Illegal Immigration destroys cactus and bothers botanists. But it is good when it destroys our cities and kills regular Americans.

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Todd, I think that was the point of this article. That this problem is hurting everyone on both sides of the border and it needs to be taken care of by both governments.

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Posted Dec-27 12:07 AM

It's not safe to be in one of our National Parks because of foreign nationals with guns, smuggling drugs and humans. If that's not cause for our military to take extreme action I don't know what is.

LARAZAISRACIST

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Posted Dec-27 12:59 AM

WAKE UP AMERICA...We are being INVADED...This is outright WAR. Illegal Mexican aliens, human smugglers, coyotes, drug runners, cartels, Mexican Mafia, Mexican Paramilitary..our way of life is under assault. Our freedoms are being taken away from us and we aren't doing a damn thing about it...GET ACTIVE. GET INVOLVED. DEMAND ACTION. VOTE FOR THOSE WHO PROMISE TO END THIS INVASION WITH FORCE.

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www.numbersusa.com
www.fairus.org
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I am going to step out of the boundary on the article as many of you so called natives are oblivious to what sits in your backyard.

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3



As blind as you folks are and are inept to see your own issues....ok I am not a sentimentalist to PETA, Edward Abbey or some kook monkey wrench gang , Sierra Club, Earth First and so on....but how many times do I see

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All you hikers on the local trails with your pooches that never pick up after your canines. Fellow off-roaders of the ignorant side who have habits of relieving themselves in streams and rivers. You boaters that leave trash on shore because you are lazy to take it with you. Target shooters who love using cacti as targets. Fellow hikers that blaze new trails.

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Most of you sit idle in your comfy confines and have no knowledge of what happens in your lovely outbacks. Many times I have come across a make shift meth lab in the Tonto or some weed patch in the Bradshaws. And those cheap quad runners that you will use a few times before they collect dust...just running new trails in some pristine desert.

Last year we even were "taxed" at a camp site if we wanted to stay but everyone in my party had guns and the taxing committee decided it was not in there best interest.

Yea! Blame the south for your issues but also remember

you have trash in those dueling banjo backwoods.



Posted Dec-27 1:27 AM

More proof that the United States is imperialistic. We send troops over to Korea, Iraq, and other far away lands to guard their borders but can't do the basic task of guarding our own!

All I can say is Ron Paul ftw!

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I'm an Arizona native who has been driven out of outdoor sports by the behavior of the idiots out there. The Arizona "outback" of my young days is pretty much gone because of the disregard Americans have for the outdoors and other people, and the terrible management of our environmentally-aware government land managers. This drug smuggling thing is way out of hand, these guys are really dangerous and frequently encountered by innocent recreationists.



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Posted Dec-27 1:59 AM

Maybe more articles (such as this one) will change the mindset of the tree hugger anchor baby loving liberals...

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