

Buenos Aires

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

A R I Z O N A

Near the base of the rugged Baboquivari Mountains and less than an hour's drive from Tucson lies Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, a sanctuary established in 1985 to provide critical habitat for the endangered masked bobwhite quail. Kept afloat by a captive-breeding program within the refuge, the rare bobwhites are the only known wild population of the species in the country. The refuge's 118,000 acres are mostly grasslands, but Buenos Aires also boasts cottonwood- and sycamore-lined streams that meander amid expanses of live oak. It's here that other endangered species make a last stand: Cactus ferruginous pygmy owls and southwestern willow flycatchers find shelter here, attracted by streams and ephemeral ponds. Jaguars, although rarely seen, are known to traverse the mountain range. Gila monsters and rattlesnakes claim the dryer sections. Also present are bobcats, coatimundis, javelina and kit foxes.

THE THREAT

Once stripped nearly bare by cattle allowed to overgraze the land, the area now faces an even bigger threat: Immigrant traffic from Mexico, spurred eastward by the clampdown on traditional points of entry through urban areas, now funnel through remote areas of the Arizona desert, damaging the landscape as they desperately make their way across the border for work and a better life. Based on the numbers of undocumented migrants captured, experts estimate that 1.2 million people cross through the desert each year. In one instance, law enforcement officials stationed along a popular foot trail on the refuge counted 1,000 people passing by in a 24-hour period.

In their ongoing efforts to seal the border—and also to prevent deaths on this searing stretch of land—U.S. Border Patrol officials are given carte blanche to drive off-road vehicles through fragile habitat in pursuit of undocumented migrants and drug smugglers. For conservationists, it's a catch-22: Preventing damage to the refuge depends on the Border Patrol's ability to impede illegal movement through the refuge,



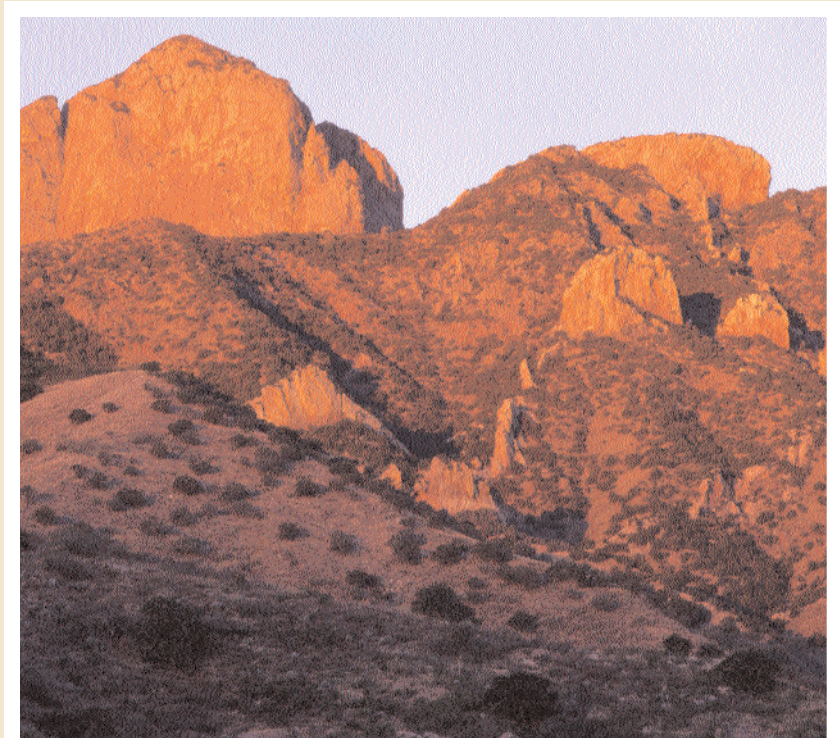
ABANDONED VAN, BUENOS AIRES REFUGE: USFWS

but at the same time the officers cause their own share of damage. The patrol also brings with it a high level of militarization—camps complete with helicopter pads, high-voltage lights and septic tanks. But when these camps go up, the migrants move on, searching for less scrutinized avenues through other areas—with the Border Patrol and more camps close behind.

THE SOLUTION

Using high-tech surveillance equipment and erecting a vehicle barrier along the refuge's border with Mexico are short-term solutions to curb damage to the desert's delicate landscape.

Ultimately these efforts will only shift human traffic further east, creating the same problems in other delicate wilderness areas. In the end, the only lasting solution is to reform the Border Patrol's policy of funneling migrants into the desert and to realistically address the important issue of migrant labor in the United States.



BABOQUIVARI PEAK IN BROWN CANYON, BUENOS AIRES NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE: © JACK DYKINGA