

Caja del Rio – New Mexico



AERC Trails Grant, completed 2008



A local spot to ride for AERC member Deirdre Monroe turned into a calling – to turn neglected trails into a prime riding spot

by Marsha Hayes (2015)

Did a \$5,000 AERC trails grant in 2007 pay off? What is happening in northern New Mexico's Caja del Rio?

The Caja del Rio is a spectacular 100,000-acre expanse of public land west of Santa Fe, New Mexico. When it comes time to update status on something formed about 30 million years ago, it becomes imperative to narrow the update, sparing everyone a required geology degree and a lifetime of reading. Fast forward through the volcanos and the plate formation, and examine the forces AERC member Deirdre Monroe has set in motion since she first rode the area in 1995. And after this examination, decide: did a \$5,000 AERC grant in 2007 reap the expected benefits?

When Monroe first rode the Caja in 1995, she was not looking for project. She sought solitude and an environment that encouraged introspection. The Caja filled her needs and satisfied her soul. To give a non-horse person perspective, a mountain-biking webpage describes the area as “a huge and desolate collection of old volcanos, wells, horse traps, and other remnants of the old west . . .”

The Caja triggered something in Monroe. “I’ve drawn strength from the rides I’ve taken there. Finding the Caja was a happy accident in my life,” Monroe explained.

She fell in love with the land's colors, scents, views, and mysteries. And as lovers are wont to do, she began an improvement project. There were illegal dumps marring its beauty. Vandals used the Caja for target practice and left beer cans and whiskey bottles amongst the sage and piñon. There was stock water, but no gravel on the roads, and no signs, maps, or horse-friendly gates.

Monroe also wanted to introduce everyone she knew to her beloved Caja. In 2004 she managed the first AERC event there, attracting 74 riders. The experience was invaluable in clarifying what was needed to make the location a riding destination. “We had to bring in porta-potties, haul water to remote roads, and I had to be on all trail-marking parties because no one else knew the trails,” recalled Monroe.

Looking back, she utters the the phrase “nervous breakdown” a few times. If certain inaugural riders had kept a diary of that event, one entry could have read, “Finished 50 strong. Had to go back out and find safety riders.”

If You Map It, They Will Come

Monroe had been playing with her GPS in the Caja since 2000, mainly for her own pleasure. The 2004 ride event clarified for her the need to produce a detailed, professional-quality map to allow others to know the Caja. She also knew any ride manager should be able to answer a question like, “Where is Ortiz Mountain?”

She reasoned that if she could attract wholesome recreational users, they would force out the dumpers, the shooters, and the vandals. Visitors to Monroe’s Pojoque, New Mexico, home during this period could count on being driven through parts of the Caja for hours, verifying GPS points and searching for new trails.

The first map was published in 2005 by Otowi Crossing Press and covered the northern Caja area only. It sold well in area outdoor stores, but the new users the map attracted did not help address the absence of toilets, signage or road maintenance. Still, the map was the key to knowing the Caja and being able to show others its potential.

Please Give Me \$100,000

Monroe was simply following the conceptual plan of Thomas Jefferson when he sent Lewis and Clark up the Missouri, except Monroe went herself. If the maps of Lewis and Clark and others opened the West, it was Monroe’s map that opened the falling-down gates to the Caja. Monroe now needed to fund her vision of graveled roads, signs and bathrooms facilities. She began to write a Recreational Trails Program grant application. It was during the grant-writing process that Monroe discovered the importance of friends.

The “before” picture of this story finds several interest groups uncertain and a little wary of each other. In one corner, the North-ern New Mexico Cattlemen’s Association, whose members held grazing permits on the Caja, were understandably uneasy about having more people in the area, since some of the previous visitors were the ones dumping trash and shooting things, sometimes things like cows. The cattlemen are very important to the Caja. Their stock tanks, which they maintain, make long-distance riding possible. The grazing tradition on the Caja lands dates back some 300 years. On the other hand, the Forest Service had not even heard of AERC, and they held major cards in the game.

To make the grant application attractive, these various factions had to work together to present a unified front and convince a state committee the money would be spent wisely, efficiently and meet everyone’s needs. “It was harder than mapping,” Monroe admitted recently. “I know the turing point with the cattlemen’s group was when I wrote in the grant, ‘Let’s take this land back from the dumpers and the shooters!’”

Her rallying cry may not live as long as “Remember the Alamo!” but it worked. She said, “I saw something change in their eyes when they read that. That was our common ground. We may not share they same passions, but we share the same villains: those who do not respect the land.”

Bringing the Forest Service on board took meetings with AERC Southwest Region Director Roger Taylor, a jointly developed proposal, and that professional looking map. The grant required a 5% cash match for a \$100,000 project. In 2007 the grant was approved and AERC wrote the \$5,000 check. Today, all work is completed, including the ADA gate design and installation.

In 2008 Monroe was awarded the New Mexico State Trail Advocacy Trail Award. AERC honored her in 2009 with the Trail Advocate Award.

What About Today?

Today, AERC has a national Memorandum of Understanding with both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, plus another Caja-specific MOU. These formal documents lend concrete evidence that AERC is seen as a trusted partner. Even as Forest Service personnel change over the years, this partnership should continue.

The AERC Caja del Rio ride will occur for the 11th time in 2015. Since 2013 the ride has been managed by the Listening Horse Therapeutic Riding Program. In 2014 the ride jumped to a two-day event. When riders arrived for the endurance event last month, they appreciated the gravel parking lot, bathrooms, lovely ADA gates, and a map kiosk. People now know where Ortiz Mountain lies.

Looking at the staging area for the 2015 ride, Monroe was moved. "I look at that gate and that toilet and it just feels good. This came together at the right time."

Since the Forest Service brought in dumpsters in 2005, volunteers set to work, starting with hauling the old TVs and mattresses away. Monroe noted, "Looks like the Caja is pretty much staying clean. Now we have volunteers cleaning and the Listening Horse people have manpower who just do a great job." Every year they have new clean-up days scheduled around ride time.

Last year Monroe released her second, expanded map, now covering 100,000 acres of Forest Service and BLM ground. "I'm pretty sure it will go into a second printing," she said. The map is available on Amazon and retail outlets. When asked what drives her mapping, she explained, "It satisfies the scientist in me. I love the precision, but it also speaks to my artistic side. I love the colors and pictures on a good map. The map is really a self-contained, mini-guide book."

Devoted to the Caja

Today Monroe is busy starting an AERC Rio Grande Distance Riders group to bring riders in Northern New Mexico together, hopefully for some great purpose. Monroe has also been invited on a two-day bus tour in July 2015 to travel and visit with New Mexico legislators about what can be done to expand and enhance trails.

Her devotion to the Caja and trails in general has remained steadfast, but one has to ask if she ever became discouraged. "Yes, all the time. There were days I thought, 'Well, now I'm Queen of the Caja, but what difference does that really make?' There were days it was hard to keep writing and mapping.

"The success of the Caja as a riding venue is not about one person," Monroe points out. "If the Caja depends on one person, there will be no continuity. This story is about the Forest Service, the BLM, AERC, the cattlemen and all the volunteers that carry a torch for this place."

In 2015 New Mexico governor Susan Martinez funded the Rio Grande Trail Commission and Santa Fe County declared Santa Fe to be an "Equestrian Destination." A recent New Mexico press release proposed a Rio Grande corridor trail, stretching from Colorado to Mexico, hopefully passing through the Caja. The corridor trail should draw people from around the world, much as the Appalachian Trail does.

Looking at the Caja today, it appears the \$5,000 investment has paid dividends far beyond expectations.

The Caja hums with a powerful and wild Western melody. It vibrates with the bugle of elk, the rustle of wind in sage, and the rhythm of the rushing water of the Rio Grande. Monroe has written the lyrics to this melody with a GPS and a grant. At least for today, her song's refrain can end with one of her favorite sayings: "Sometimes the good guys win."



Trailhead Gate Installation



New Gate



New Toilet Installation