



# Making Castner Range a National Monument Would Help Nature-Deprived Communities

By Sam Zeno, Shanna Edberg, and Brenda Gallegos September 22, 2022

Over the past half-century,<sup>1</sup> the majority Latino and low-income community in El Paso, Texas, has advocated for protecting the historically and ecologically vital lands of Castner Range.<sup>2</sup> Now, the community is calling on President Joe Biden to designate the area as a national monument.

A new analysis commissioned by the Hispanic Access Foundation and the Center for American Progress finds that the people living near Castner Range experience high levels of nature deprivation—and the vast majority of communities of color and low-income communities in the region are experiencing nature loss at rates higher than the national average. Designating the site as a national monument would significantly help close the nature gap while protecting an essential outdoor space for the area’s population and delivering on the president’s ambitious conservation and environmental justice commitments.<sup>3</sup>

This issue brief details the findings of the analysis—including findings on race and ethnicity, income, and household composition—to illustrate why it is critical to close the nature gap in the area surrounding Castner Range and preserve its cultural and historical significance.

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## The importance of closing the nature gap around Castner Range

Located within the Chihuahuan desert along the Rio Grande, Castner Range sits at the southeastern point of the Franklin Mountains, which stretch from El Paso to New Mexico. The area is the ancestral homeland of the Comanche and Apache people, and its cultural ecology is considered sacred to several Indigenous communities.<sup>4</sup> The area also previously served as a U.S. Army artillery training facility from the 1920s to 1966, which offers it significant historic military importance but means that it is still largely inaccessible to the public. As a noncontiguous part of Fort Bliss, the country’s largest military base, the army still owns the lands of Castner Range.<sup>5</sup> Although

thousands of Mexican poppies bloom there every year, drawing visitors from across the Americas, the majority of the scenic landscape remains closed to the public due to continued concerns that unexploded ordnance may be present.<sup>6</sup> Designating Castner Range as a national monument would safeguard natural springs and one of the largest alluvial fans left in the Franklin mountains, improve wildlife connectivity, and permit additional funding to expedite increased public access through the cleanup of remaining military refuse.

## Glossary

A **nature-deprived** community is one that is experiencing higher-than-average nature loss. This analysis considers a community nature deprived if it experiences higher rates of nature loss than the national average. Communities are defined at the census tract level.

The **nature gap** is the uneven and inequitable distribution of forests, streams, wetlands, and other natural places within communities of color and low-income communities. It is caused by a history of discrimination, dispossession, segregation, violence, and exclusion on U.S. lands.

One of the most compelling reasons to protect Castner Range, however, is its potential to help close the nature gap.<sup>7</sup> Nationally, communities of color are three times more likely than white communities to live in nature-deprived places. This nature gap is even more acute in the communities surrounding the proposed Castner Range National Monument. Over the past two decades, El Paso County lost 11,755 acres—more than 18 square miles—of natural area to development. This new analysis found that 9 in 10 Latinos and almost 95 percent of low-income communities in the area surrounding the proposed monument are nature deprived.

The pervasive nature gap in El Paso is the result of federal action and inaction that has led this community to bear the burdens of inattentive policies that have affected many American communities.<sup>8</sup> The nature gap<sup>9</sup> is a realization and consequence of a long history of systemic racism<sup>10</sup> on American lands and in communities.<sup>11</sup> Texas is the land of Indigenous Mexicans who have faced an intricate history of displacement and segregation and whose current nature gap the Biden administration can and should address. A Castner Range National Monument would be a bold commitment to advancing equity in land conservation and working to rebuild communities that still suffer from nature deprivation and other hardships due to historic systems of racism.

The designation of culturally important sites, especially those located within underserved communities such as those near Castner Range, is vitally important. If the Biden administration designates Castner Range as a national monument, the majority-minority community living in the area surrounding the site will gain greater access to natural spaces along with the benefits<sup>12</sup> that come with having

nature nearby. These benefits include improved mental health, greater life expectancy, reduced rates of chronic illness and disease, and improved regulation of the effects of climate change. In addition, a new national monument will bolster the local economy and create education opportunities for the community.<sup>13</sup>

Protecting Castner Range would do much more than just preserve its value; it would also advance the fight for more monuments that tell diverse American histories and address the need for increased access to nature for communities of color and low-income families. A 2022 analysis by Monumental SHIFT and CAP found that less than one-quarter<sup>14</sup> of national parks and monuments are dedicated to honoring historically underrepresented communities.

More than 70 percent of voters across party lines in Western U.S. states support the use of executive authority to designate national monuments.<sup>15</sup> Castner Range can serve as the first of many widely supported and advocated for opportunities for the Biden administration to demonstrate its dedication to environmental justice. The time is now for President Biden to use his authority under the Antiquities Act to designate Castner Range as a national monument, increasing equitable access to nature and recognizing the conservation efforts of American communities.<sup>16</sup>

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## **Analysis of the nature gap around Castner Range**

A new analysis by Conservation Science Partners, commissioned by the Hispanic Access Foundation and CAP, examined the extent to which communities of color and low-income communities surrounding the proposed Castner Range National Monument experience nature loss. The analysis found overwhelmingly that the majority Latino population of the El Paso area is nature deprived and that permanently protecting the area would help close the nature gap.

The analysis utilized 2020 census data and 2018 data on human modification to measure nature loss in communities by race and ethnicity, income, and households with children under the age of 18. The analysis determined nature deprivation by comparing the rates of nature loss in the areas surrounding Castner Range with 500 random samples of similarly sized areas across the United States. It includes data on communities within a 10-, 25-, and 50-mile radius of Castner Range. This issue brief uses the 25-mile radius as a default.

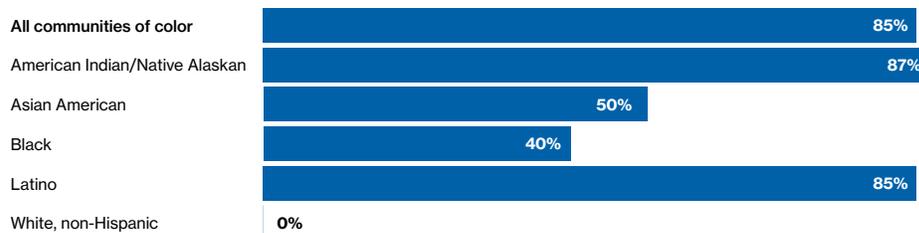
## Race and ethnicity

Making Castner Range a national monument would increase access to nature for many communities of color where the prevalence of the nature gap is pervasive. Up to 490,000 nonwhite individuals—the vast majority of the population around Castner Range—are nature deprived. In this majority Latino area, nearly 90 percent of Latino communities are nature deprived. The findings for American Indian and Alaska Native populations in the area were also particularly stark: These communities are more than 40 percent more likely to be nature deprived than elsewhere in the United States. It is also worth noting that a fraction of the communities surrounding Castner Range are white, and the vast majority of the white communities within a 50-mile radius do not experience above average nature loss.

FIGURE 1

### Communities of color near Castner Range are more likely to be nature deprived than surrounding white communities

Percentage of nature deprivation within a 25-mile radius of Castner Range, by race and ethnicity



*Note: The source uses the term "communities of color" to represent the average nature deprivation of all nonwhite communities within Castner Range.*

Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Closing the Nature Gap: Evaluating How the Proposed Castner Range and Avi Kwa Ame National Monuments May Enable Greater Access to Nature for Underserved Communities" (Truckee, CA: 2022), on file with authors.

## Income

Nearly 20 percent of El Paso residents live in poverty. This is more than 6 percent greater<sup>17</sup> than the national average and is persistent among border communities in Texas due in part to a lack of infrastructure and distance from urban centers. Similarly, there are far more low-income communities than average in the Castner Range area, and the rate at which these communities experience nature deprivation is also higher than the national average. In the Castner Range area, 93 percent of low-income communities are nature deprived. While few high-income communities live within 25 miles of the proposed monument, none were found to experience nature deprivation.

FIGURE 2

## A starker disparity in nature deprivation exists between high- and low-income communities around Castner Range than nationally

Nature deprivation rates of communities near Castner Range compared with national rates, by income level



Note: Very few high-income tracts exist near Castner Range. Of those that do, none are nature deprived.

Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Closing the Nature Gap: Evaluating How the Proposed Castner Range and Avi Kwa Ame National Monuments May Enable Greater Access to Nature for Underserved Communities" (Truckee, CA: 2022), on file with authors.

## Household composition

The analysis also measured nature deprivation for families with children through census tracts identified as having a high number of these types of families. Data on these families were broken down by poverty level and by racial or ethnic group. Overall, in the Castner Range area, approximately 80 percent of families in poverty with children experience high degrees of nature deprivation. When this number is broken down by race and ethnicity, additional disparities emerge. Among families with children who are considered nature deprived, white families in the study area live, on average, 5 miles closer to nature than families of color. Latino families with children in the study area are 26 percent more likely than white families with children to live in a place with nature deprivation. Eighty-three percent of American Indian and Alaska Native families in poverty with children experience nature deprivation, which is 31 percentage points higher than the nature deprivation of American Indian and Alaska Native communities elsewhere in the United States. Creating a national monument at Castner Range would work to address many of these inequities.

FIGURE 3

## Near Castner Range, families of color are more likely than white families to live in a place deprived of nature

Percentage of nature deprivation among census tracts with large proportions of families with children, by race and ethnicity



Note: The source uses the term "communities of color" to represent the average nature deprivation of all nonwhite communities within Castner Range.

Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Closing the Nature Gap: Evaluating How the Proposed Castner Range and Avi Kwa Ame National Monuments May Enable Greater Access to Nature for Underserved Communities" (Truckee, CA: 2022), on file with authors.

A new Castner Range National Monument would increase access to nearby nature for many communities of color and low-income families. This is especially true for the 1.5 million people living across the border in Juarez, Mexico,<sup>18</sup> who live within the 25-mile radius of Castner Range but were not included in this analysis due to a lack of available data. Research does make clear, however, that nature loss is particularly acute for Latino communities along the U.S.-Mexico border, with El Paso—the second-largest U.S. international crossing point—considered a hotspot for nature deprivation.<sup>19</sup> Nearly 20,000 people travel from Juarez to El Paso daily for education, shopping, and outdoor recreation.<sup>20</sup> A national monument at Castner Range would support improved quality of life and community unification in what is already a vibrant, transnational area.<sup>21</sup> Closing the nature gap in El Paso would work to support transboundary conservation efforts, habitat connectivity, and overall health and well-being in these border communities.

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## **Castner Range provides an opportunity for community conservation**

The first recorded attempt to gain protection for Castner Range was in 1985 when the Franklin Mountain Wilderness Coalition asked the state government to make it part of Franklin Mountain State Park.<sup>22</sup> Since then, countless organizations have contributed to the campaign to designate Castner Range as a national monument by writing columns, news stories, and letters of support, as well as meeting with members of Congress and administration officials.

These efforts have been well received by local, state, and national elected officials. Castner Range has received unanimous formal support from the El Paso County Commissioners Court,<sup>23</sup> the El Paso City Council,<sup>24</sup> and the Texas Legislature.<sup>25</sup> Multiple members of the Texas congressional delegation have also introduced bills to protect the area.<sup>26</sup>

More recently, advocates have directly asked President Biden to use the Antiquities Act to designate Castner Range as a national monument. In March 2022, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland visited Castner Range to hear from grassroots organizations leading the monument proposal,<sup>27</sup> and on August 16, Gabe Camarillo, the undersecretary of the U.S. Army and an El Paso native, visited the site and stated that the army will maintain responsibility for cleaning up any contamination of the site.<sup>28</sup> Castner Range could be President Biden's first opportunity to use the Antiquities Act much more frequently and intentionally. With partisan gridlock in Congress, even locally built and wildly popular conservation efforts remain in limbo. Monument designation is an important tool in the Biden administration's America the Beautiful effort to protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and water by 2030. Without it, necessary community conservation may go unanswered.

While CAP's new analysis clearly shows evidence of the nature gap surrounding the proposed Castner Range national monument, residents' personal stories illustrate even more distinctly how this discrepancy in access to nature plays out in El Paso. The stories below were edited for length and clarity, and the authors retain the original copies.

**Pastor Moses Borjas, senior pastor, Living Covenant Church<sup>29</sup>**

"I grew up in the outskirts of west El Paso. I watched the areas that my father and I used to walk, the arroyos we used to explore, and the nature we used to admire was being taken away by local concrete companies and new building structures. What was supposed to be land that I could talk about, and inherit to my daughters and son as memorable treasures, are now only past stories. El Paso's economy is one of the lowest in the nation. I believe that some of our local governmental leaders are pushing to develop over our open spaces, eliminating much of nature's beauty and wildlife. In trying to make our city stronger and more economically attractive, we are compromising and destroying our cultural and natural history ... We must reinforce the emotional, physical, and spiritual importance of lands to show how access to nature helps people. We must educate the new generation by telling them stories about the history of our ancestors on this land and how we should better preserve it. Castner Range is a key piece to closing the nature gap, not only here in El Paso, but in many other places where outdoor diversity is still lacking. The designation of Castner Range will positively impact the community by improving natural resource management of the landscape, sparking the community's outdoor economy, and preserving the breathtaking views that bring character to Northeast El Paso."

**Brenda Gallegos, conservation program associate, Hispanic Access<sup>30</sup>**

"When I learned about the nature gap in my home of El Paso, I felt validated and seen ... Growing up in a house that was considered the edge of El Paso, I saw firsthand nature disappearing around me ... Nature was never accessible to me – I wasn't even sure what that meant. Over the years, new homes were built, and a highway was added a couple blocks away from my home. I witnessed the view of a natural landscape change into a cement horizon. El Paso will continue to grow. We need to account for access to nature in future infrastructure plans. Castner Range is located right at the edge of the beautiful Franklin Mountains. It would be the easiest nature area to access in El Paso. It also has a sloped landscape, making it easy for beginner hikers and folks with health issues to enjoy. Ensuring equitable access in conservation is the starting point to improving the community's health and livelihood."

**Celeste Borjas, student, University of Texas at El Paso<sup>31</sup>**

"As a young Latina, learning about the nature gap made me feel relieved to know there are people that want to make a difference for our community. El Paso doesn't have many attractions, and being that it's a low-income city, its natural beauty is what made me appreciate my community more growing up. In my upbringing here, I've seen how people have to travel many miles to enjoy nature in other communities. It's not fair to

our Latino community to have to travel elsewhere to appreciate the beauty they have in their own land. It's important to our community, especially the young generation, to know the importance of protecting and conserving what we have around us ... El Paso has so much to offer – we can't take that away from our ancestors and our grandkids. Seeing how my grandfather cared and protected the land taught us that all his hard work cannot be in vain ... Castner Range is a great way to appreciate and to learn about the beauty of El Paso. A national monument there would make it accessible for family activities, as well as make our city even more beautiful. Castner Range connects our community ... El Paso is known to be a city where people are willing to help others with open arms ... A national monument will bring people from around the world to see what El Paso has to offer.”

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## Conclusion

There has long been a harsh duality in conservation, with communities that experience the greatest nature deprivation also facing the steepest barriers to making their stories heard. The effort to designate Castner Range as a national monument provides just one example of a traditionally underserved community passionately voicing its right to access nature. Making Castner Range a national monument would help President Biden achieve his America the Beautiful goals while helping close the nature gap for the El Paso community. Using the Antiquities Act to create a Castner Range National Monument would not only actualize a widely supported conservation initiative, but it would also signal the start of a necessary and overdue federal commitment to equitable land conservation.

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