

An aerial photograph of the Rio Grande Gorge. The river winds through a deep, rugged canyon. The canyon walls are steep and rocky, with patches of green vegetation. Thick white clouds fill the lower part of the gorge. In the distance, a small hot air balloon is visible against a blue sky with scattered clouds.

# AGUA es VIDA

In New Mexico, water is life. The Rio Grande is the mightiest waterway in the state — and the third longest in the United States — flowing from its Colorado headwaters, through the narrow canyon of the Rio Grande Gorge near Taos, and to the metropolis of Albuquerque before becoming part of the international border with Mexico. It feeds us — irrigating farm fields and sustaining wild ecosystems amid the state's high desert environment. It also feeds our local culture, inspiring not only photographers and poets but also outdoorspeople. Here, six New Mexicans reflect on their connections to the Rio Grande in their lives and work.

AS TOLD TO ASHLEY M. BIGGERS





## CHRIS DAHL-BREDINE, PHOTOGRAPHER

*Based in Taos, Chris Dahl-Bredine captures aerial views of the Rio Grande from his seat in his ultralight aircraft. See his fine art photography and learn more about his aerial photography workshops at [shotfromabove.com](http://shotfromabove.com).*

**The Rio Grande has been a huge part of my life for a long time.** I grew up in Southern New Mexico [in Silver City]; the Rio Grande flows down there. I've been here in Taos since the late '80s. I was a rafting guy. I've seen kind of an intimate view of the river from all different angles — floating it and flying above it.

**In 1999 I was in Taos Ski Valley skiing Kachina Peak after a big snow.** I was exploring this zone above a cliff area, and the next thing I know a little avalanche broke above me and just swept me off this huge cliff. There was nothing I could do. I was still standing in the avalanche, and this river of snow coming down the mountain was above my armpit. When my skis hit the rocks at the edge of the cliff and I saw where I was going, the last thing I remember thinking is, "This is it. I'm done."

**I slowly started coming to at the bottom of the cliff.** I was buried up to the top to my neck, and I was in and out of consciousness. I think I left my body for a while. Slowly I started to remember what happened. I was so happy that I was alive. I fractured my T1 vertebra and broke my wrist, but it led me to a whole series of decisions that changed the course of my life.

**I had always wanted to fly something open, like a hang glider.** And that's when I found these trikes, which are basically powered hang gliders. I decided it was time to go follow that dream.

**It was a dream come true,** to be able to, all of a sudden, see all these incredible places that I knew from the ground. It was so exciting to basically go wherever you want to, as long as you have fuel and good weather.

**I just wanted to share what I was seeing with everyone,** just because I was so in love with the landscape from above. I started bringing a camera.

**When you see [the Rio Grande] from up above,** you see how the current is affected by a turn in the river, or you see how it's affected by huge boulders.

**Being on the river really puts you in a meditative state.** That feeling of floating, being carried by the river, is magical. At the same time, you have to stay present, because there are things coming up that you have to avoid and moves you have to make to navigate through the features of the river.

**I hope [my photographs] help people connect to the incredible interconnected landscape that we have here,** the way the water supports our life here in New Mexico, especially in the desert. I just hope it moves people to a place of awe, appreciation, and gratitude for this place. That it gives people a sense of reverence and helps them step out of their busy minds.



## MICHELLE OTERO, POET

*Albuquerque-based writer, poet, artist, and creative coach Michelle Otero has always felt a close connection to the Rio Grande. During her time as Albuquerque poet laureate (2018–2020) the Deming native hosted monthly bosque walks for the public. Her time along the river inspired “Bosque: Poems” (University of New Mexico Press, 2021), a collection written during her poet laureateship. Learn more, including the latest about her forthcoming memoir, at [michelle-otero.com](http://michelle-otero.com).*

**Growing up in a desert, you’re aware of any body of water that’s nearby.** The river I grew up next to was the Mimbres, which is a tributary of the Rio Grande. It was often dry. If we got a big rainstorm, it would be like, “Let’s drive to the river to see if there’s water in it.”

**When I first saw the Rio Grande, it was on visits to El Paso or Ciudad Juárez.** I always felt sad for the Rio Grande, seeing it in these concrete barriers.

**I first lived in Albuquerque in my 20s.** At first [the Rio Grande] was just a place to walk, to go jogging. When I came back in 2006, I was more conscious of its ecological significance. I thought about the beauty of a place that has a perfect memory and really holds all the history of a particular place in it.

**When it came time to be poet laureate of Albuquerque, the project that made the most sense was to get people into the bosque.** Part of what feeds me creatively, as a human being and as a writer and poet, is being in community with other creative people. I wanted to create a platform for other poets in the community, to be able to celebrate the work of somebody I appreciated, and have them share some of their favorite spots along the river.

**In the bosque, content is abundant.** If I’m feeling blocked or dry even, I can go, sit quietly, and just listen. It re-engages me with my senses. I can always tune back into my sense of sound, the feel of the air on my skin. Even if I show up with a blank page, I can leave with a page full of just incredible things that I’ve seen or things that I’ve heard.

**It’s a really tangible way to see what’s happening with the climate.** I don’t know if I would write a treatise on climate change, but I can put in a poem that it’s 60 degrees in February. That the river shouldn’t look like a patchwork of missing puzzle pieces but sometimes it does. I can express things in poems that the river has given me that wouldn’t be as compelling in an essay.

**My relationship with and my love [for the Rio Grande] deepened in the pandemic,** because it was a place to be around people without fear of getting COVID. I think the beautiful thing that rivers do is really hold and kind of carry away a lot of emotion. My worry [during the pandemic] wasn’t really serving my family, and I felt like I could give it to the river. That’s really in alignment with traditional Mexican medicine or pre-Columbian medicines. After you get a cleansing, depending on the herbs, or if they use an egg, you bury it or you release it to the river. It felt like she’s carrying a lot for us.

**I think it’s medicine for who I am as a person and as a human.**







## MATT AND WENDY GONTRAM, **OUTFITTERS**

*River guides through and through, the Gontrams have navigated waterways across the West. They're now behind the oars of New Mexico River Adventures. They bought the company's forerunner and rebranded it in 2010. Although they specialize in rafting the Rios Grande and Chama, they also offer float trips and stand-up paddleboarding. Now a full-service outfitter, the company also organizes climbing trips, ballooning, and other adventures from its newly opened headquarters in Rinconada. Book a trip at [newmexicoriveradventures.com](http://newmexicoriveradventures.com).*

**Wendy:** I think one of the exciting things about running a river, and specifically the Rio Grande, because there aren't traditional dams upstream, is the ever-changing nature of it. That was really exciting to me. It was a new challenge all the time.

**Matt:** I look at rivers as the veins, the lifeblood of our landscape. To be able to visit a part of the country or a part of the wilderness by river is completely unique and incredibly special. There's no way you can see certain parts of the world without being on a raft moving downstream. You can hike into a certain destination and hike out, but to have that continuity through a canyon is an experience. With every bend there's a new surprise. There's this deep connection you feel right away. If you've been lucky enough to grasp it, you hold onto it. We've made it our life and our living.

**Wendy:** I think experiences like [rafting] are becoming even more important. There's so much division in the world right now. It's important for everyone to come together and have to operate as a team, to be discon-

nected from technology, whether it's for a three-hour trip or one of our multiday trips, and to just remember that we can connect, work together, and put maybe what feel like really big differences aside.

**Matt:** When it comes to river conservation, there's no other way to really express how you feel about it than having people experience it themselves. I think that we river runners have turned out a lot of conservationists over the years.

**Wendy:** We just aren't getting the consistency that there once was [with weather and river conditions]. Predictions are harder. The Farmer's Almanac isn't maybe quite as much of a bible as it once was because of all the changes in the climate.

**Matt:** We were river guides living in a van for years. We came here specifically to settle down because [the place] spoke to us. This is where we met, and this is where we've always been drawn and tried to come back to. And this opportunity with New Mexico River Adventures was an amazing opportunity for us. It has shaped our lives in every way.

**Wendy:** There's no shortage of river analogies relating to life. And I do relate to so many of those. You know, sharp rocks being dropped into the river and over time the edges softening. Approaching life in difficult situations the same way that we approach a difficult rapid. Our gratitude is endless for the Rio Grande. It's not just selfish. It's what it provides for our community, for the state. But it's everything to us. It's what feeds our child. It's what makes us happy. It provides challenges every day and inspires growth.

**Matt:** You've heard the rafting guides say it, so here it is: All forward.



## JON NARANJO, FARMER

*Jon Naranjo followed his father's footsteps into tending the land for his family and the people of his native Santa Clara Pueblo. He irrigates a couple 2-acre plots with Rio Grande water. In his day job, he serves as the free, prior, and informed consent manager for the National Wildlife Federation's Rocky Mountain Regional Center to enhance the organization's tribal and Indigenous partnerships.*

**The Rio Grande has played a tremendous part in where our current pueblo is situated.** We moved from Puye [now the Puye Cliff Dwellings, a national historic landmark], which was at a higher elevation. A lot of the planting at that time, in the 1300s, was considered dry farming. An extended drought season forced our ancestors to move down in the valley, which is known as Española Valley, between the Jemez Mountains and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The Rio Grande was able to provide the necessary water.

**There's not as many farmers as there were back then.**

**We have been stewards of the land from time immemorial,** working in conjunction and connection with Mother Earth and the Rio Grande, which we refer to as Posoge in our Tewa language.

**I remember playing in the irrigation ditch as my father would tend to the garden.** I [remember] visuals of him working with the soil and planting the seed. I remember him asking me to sing to [the seeds, the water, the earth].

**My love for farming provides our staple foods,** which is the Three Sisters: corn, sweet or for flour; beans, different varieties like lima beans, pinto beans, black beans, and tepary beans; squash, like summer squash, winter squash, and pumpkins. Some other fruits and vegetables from the Spanish, by way of Mexico, were brought in, including various types of chile, which I also grow.

**The crops are primarily shared with family and with some of our cultural and traditional dance ceremonies.**

**The water isn't just used for our crops.** It's used for our livestock, to help our ecosystems, and during our ceremonial practices.

**My concern is, if we don't engage our youth now, then we're setting them up for failure or disappointment.** They should have a fair try at life, and they need to have these values — the teachings of traditional ecological knowledge and intergenerational knowledge transfer — to survive moving forward, because we don't know what the future has in store.

**I am engaging with our grandchildren and teaching them how to nurture the plants from germination to harvest.** It's exciting to see their willingness to engage and be part of it.

**We watch and observe** the growth patterns and [talk about] why some aren't growing, why some are drying up, or why some are thriving.

**In our traditional beliefs, a lot of things have a life, have a spirit.** The trees, the rocks, the native grasses, the earth, even our animals. We extend that to our plants as well. They are recognized as our children. So it's just like caring for our children. At each stage of their life, they require a certain type of nurturing.







## TODD LOPEZ, NONPROFIT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*Since 2003 Todd Lopez has been practicing as a natural resource, water rights, and environmental attorney. He has more than two decades of experience in nonprofit management and is currently at the helm of Rio Grande Return, which uses a minimally invasive approach in riverscape restoration, post-fire restoration, and urban habitat restoration. The organization's diverse projects have included willow and cottonwood planting along the Santa Fe River, regrading slopes at the Conservation Homestead in the Galisteo Basin Preserve, and construction of beaver dam analogs along San Antonio Creek within the Valles Caldera National Preserve. Learn more about Rio Grande Return's work at [riograndereturn.org](http://riograndereturn.org).*

**I call myself very fortunate to have landed where I did** a few years ago with [Rio Grande Return]. I helped a friend form the nonprofit Rio Grande Return back in 2007, never knowing that one day I'd be running it and having the benefit of working with people like Reid [Whittlesey, restoration director] and a whole massive community of folks.

**We use low-tech, process-based approaches** that I now believe to be one of the most impactful, effective, and hopeful solutions for us in terms of drought mitigation, wildfire mitigation, and just resiliency generally. A lot of this revolves around beaver complexes and what we generally refer to as nature-based solutions that are not heavily engineered. They're not reliant upon heavy equipment; they don't require vast sums of money. They can be done with hand crews on the ground, and huge areas of our watershed can be treated in a short period of time.

**With Hermit's Peak, you have a devastating wildfire** that's eradicated any vegetative cover in a huge area. When we have subsequent precipitation events, there's no vegetative cover to hold that water on the slopes, much less in the channels. And so it flashes through those systems, creating devastating flooding and damage to infrastructure. That's an example in the systems that we're working in.

**We physically go in with crews to put material back.** We literally haul material from the slopes to bring woody material back into the system, to place it in the stream system in various strategic and science-based ways, to slow the water down, to pool the water, and to create different types of habitats. And we plant hundreds, thousands of native willows and cottonwoods and other species along those riparian areas.

**We started a project along San Antonio Creek,** which is a popular creek in the Jemez Mountains and travels through the Valles Caldera, maybe six years ago. We've had multiple retreatments, multiple revegetation activities. It's a concerted effort with a large group of stakeholders, with multiple and varied resources. Once we get through the funding that we currently have available, it'll be a 10-year project. That's what these systems require. We need to see that type of sustained, long-term investment because it's not something you can do in a season.

**You can see the difference in the areas that we have restored because they're vibrant, green.** The areas that haven't been treated look totally different. There's no vegetation. They're dry; they're brown. The river is very channelized. And you're only going to be able to visually identify a couple different species of plants, whereas you would have to start crawling on your knees and hands in our spaces, because there's so many different species that are growing and being attracted to that space. We've seen [native species] return to areas that people didn't think they existed in anymore. ■

Todd Lopez along the Santa Fe River, a Rio Grande tributary