

The border's deadly landscapes

Demetria Martinez | Jun. 26, 2009



One of Humane Borders' 78 water stations for migrants (Demetria Martinez)

The Arizona sky was a crystal blue the morning the Rev. John Fife drove away from Tucson and headed south, where the city quickly gave way to desert, a tangle of mesquite trees, brush, cactus and wildflowers not yet in bloom. "We can orient ourselves by that peak up ahead, Baboquivari Peak," Fife told me and my two companions. "The Tohono O'odham people believe that the peak is the center of the universe."

As we continued south toward the border the United States shares with Mexico, it became clear that the peak is the center of another, parallel universe: one in which men, women and children perish in their struggle to cross on foot from Mexico into Arizona. According to Department of Homeland Security statistics, 183 bodies were recovered in Arizona during the fiscal year, Oct. 1, 2007, through Sept. 30, 2008, and that statistical pattern appears to be holding for this year.

This catastrophe, which has grown more acute over the years, has forced human rights advocates to create "death maps" to document the most lethal trails and to establish a "Human Remains Project" that uses DNA and other markers to identify bodies. The Pima County Board of Supervisors responded to the crisis by declaring a "public health emergency."

This deadly landscape is one that Fife knows intimately. Driving along he pointed out the windows, left and right. "Over there, a mother from Mexico died in her son's arms ... Over there, we found three bodies." He pointed at a spot near the road where a rattlesnake bit a man in the chest, to a wash where another body was found, and toward an area where 45 backpacks were found, abandoned by immigrants whose fates remain unknown. The listing went on, not always ending in death. Fife pointed toward a thicket of bleak foliage. "Over there a woman gave birth in the desert."



Fife, 69, is one of the founders of Los Samaritanos, which provides

direct medical aid to migrants in distress; on his frequent runs to the desert, he keeps two medical bags in the van which bears a sign, "Los Samaritanos." But Fife is best known as the former pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church, which was declared a Sanctuary for Central American refugees in 1982. In 1986 a jury convicted Fife and seven others of crimes related to transporting, sheltering and aiding so-called illegal aliens. He served no time but was prohibited from traveling to Mexico or Central America as part of his five-year probation period.

The humanitarian crisis in southern Arizona, said Fife, is not hard to understand. The border patrol has put up fences and other barriers along most of the Arizona border -- except for areas most difficult to traverse, including mountains, canyons and terrain obscured by vegetation that is guaranteed to disorient anybody on foot. The majority of crossers, said Fife, come from southern Mexico, people displaced by the North American Free Trade Agreement. Lost, their feet torn up, hungry, injured, dehydrated, disoriented and exposed to brutal heat or freezing temperatures, people die -- including growing numbers of women and children. The border authority's policies are working, Fife said. "More people are dying. It's by design."

He slowed the van down and peered out his window. "Here's the drill," he said. "If we spot any immigrants, you get out of the van and ask them these questions: How long have you been out in the desert? When did you last eat? When did you last have something to drink? Do you have any injuries? When did you last urinate? Are there any others left behind? I'll follow with my medical bags to treat any injuries."

Within minutes we spotted two men sitting at the side of the road. We quickly exited the van and approached the men. From the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, they had been lost in the desert for two days.

One man pointed at his left eye, explaining that he'd hit up against a metal post. He opened his mouth to say more when the sudden shriek of brakes silenced him. A border patrol agent had pulled up in a vehicle migrants call a *perrera*, because of its resemblance to vehicles used to deliver dogs, *perros*, to the pound. An agent ordered the men into the back. Dust shot up from the *perrera*'s back wheels as they took off, mission accomplished, two more immigrants captured for detention in Tucson and deportation to Mexico.



The men, like so many other people, were in the wrong place at the wrong

time, and no wonder, Fife explained. The landscape is riddled with traps: towers with high-definition cameras and ground radar systems designed to track people's movements -- information that is streamed to laptops of

immigration agents; Anvil Ranch, one of the bases for self-proclaimed Minutemen who carry arms, hunting for immigrants as if it were a sport; buses owned by a private company for transporting immigrants after border agents, their roadside vehicles at the ready, have rounded up enough people to load up a bus and pack them off to detention centers; and further south, a fence near the Sasabe, Ariz., port of entry made of steel bars filled with concrete, a seven-mile stretch over undulating hills.

But Tucson-based human rights groups have made their mark on the landscape too. Blue flags flap in the breeze, indicating the placement of a barrel marked "AGUA." A group called Humane Borders maintains 78 water stations throughout Arizona and has been credited with saving scores of lives. Members of Derechos Humanos can be found documenting the militarization of the desert terrain and tracking border patrol abuses.

And about 70 miles southwest of Tucson are two campsites, bases for volunteers -- including medical professionals and attorneys -- who provide a year-round presence as part of the "No More Deaths" campaign.

Fife pulled up at one of the camps, a modest array of tents that serve as shelter for volunteers, a first-aid center and a mess hall. We met up with three people who were preparing for an influx of students and others from around the country -- participants in No More Deaths "alternative spring break" programs.



Each day for one week participants will follow members of the camp's core

group, fanning out on known migrant trails in search of people in distress, Fife explained. With Samaritan volunteers, they'll provide medical aid, food and water as needed, and transportation to hospitals in life-and-death situations -- activities protected under international and other laws, legal precedents immigration officials at times disregard. The most well-known incident occurred in 2006, Fife said, when two young volunteers were indicted for transporting immigrants in need of life-saving aid, in a clearly marked Samaritan van. Following a national outcry, the charges, carrying a potential 15 years in prison, were eventually dropped.

We left the camp and drove a few miles away to Arivaca Lake where we got out to stretch. Fife went to the back of the van and pulled out a hand-held Global Positioning System (GPS). He explained that No More Deaths volunteers leave numbered water bottles on trails. The locations where the bottles are dropped off and where immigrants leave them behind is tracked using the GPS, thus allowing for a clearer sense of what routes immigrants are taking. Such technology also allows human rights groups to create maps of where bodies are found, documents of the most perilous trails.

"People are crossing through mountains," said Fife. He pointed past trees toward mountain crests and canyons. "Twenty-five miles in that direction is Mexico."

Volunteers, he said, have found a shrine erected by immigrants in one of the canyons. They leave behind candles, rosaries, pictures of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and holy cards with the image of Santo Toribio Romo, a Mexican patron of immigrants. The shrine is another center of the universe, marked by signs of a mighty faith. "Imagine," Fife said, as we got back into the van to return to Tucson. "With all that immigrants must carry in their backpacks -- they somehow bring along votive candles."

Demetria Martinez writes from Albuquerque, N.M.

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