

Organ Pipe: The quiet conflict

By Craig Rullman
Correspondent

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, established in 1937, is composed of 517 square miles of majestic Sonoran desert, bordered to the south by Mexico, to the east by the massive Tohono O'odham Reservation, and to the west by the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. A designated UNESCO biosphere reserve, it is 95 percent designated wilderness. It is home to numerous species of birds, cacti, bobcats, mountain lions, deer, and many historical sites.

It may be one of the most beautiful National Monuments in our country.

It is also one of the most active and dangerous narcotics- and human-smuggling corridors in the world.

On August 9, 2002, 28-year-old park ranger Kris Eggle was shot and killed while pursuing members of a drug cartel, who had fled into the United States after committing a series of murders in Mexico (see column, page 23). This event, combined with others, prompted an 11-year closure of America's "most dangerous national park."

The park was reopened in 2014, but it is still quietly

dangerous.

Organ Pipe lies within the U.S. Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, in the Ajo Area of Responsibility, which includes 64 miles of border, and over 7,000 square miles of hard, unforgiving desert.

Border Patrol agents told *The Nugget* that, while the park is now almost entirely open to visitors, their own estimates suggest that at any one time, as many as 200 people are actively smuggling narcotics or human beings in the hardscrabble mountain ranges and broad desert valleys.

The Border Patrol and Park Service utilize a broad array of technology, old and new, to accomplish their mission, including daily horseback patrols, ATVs, aerial drones, ground sensors, infrared, radar, and sign-cutting techniques. There are over 500 Border Patrol agents assigned to the Ajo station, and they are working 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

And still the people keep coming.

U.S. Border Patrol statistics for 2015 show that in the Tucson Sector alone, which includes Ajo Station and Organ Pipe, over 63,000 apprehensions were made by Border Patrol and Park Service law enforcement agents. Some

6,000 of those apprehensions were unaccompanied juveniles; 14,481 were of people other than Mexican descent. In the same time period, agents seized 746,868 pounds of marijuana, 153 pounds of cocaine, were assaulted 87 times in the course of their duties, and rescued 790 individuals in danger of dying in the vast Sonoran desert.

Of the more than 63,000 apprehension cases, slightly less than half were accepted by the U.S. Attorney's office for prosecution.

Sometimes people just give up, beaten by the desert. For them the Border Patrol has installed rescue beacons, a big red button on a box, affixed to a tall radar tower. Pressing the button means rescue. In Border Patrol parlance, they are referred to as "quitters."

One Border Patrol agent told *The Nugget*, "We find everybody out here. Families of Romanians. Indians, Chinese, you name it, they are all here." He pointed to nearby Sweetwater Pass and Alli Wau, gaps in the Puerto Blanco range. "They have



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

A high-powered spotting scope overlooks rugged terrain where cartel scouts, smugglers, and immigrants move daily.

scouts up there, right now, for days and sometimes for weeks, with full-blown camps, and they have a radio network that stretches all the way to Phoenix."

This agent described finding and dismantling the "spider holes" and campsites, often equipped with solar panels for recharging radios and cell phones.

He said that every move was under observation from both sides of the border, and being communicated over the radio.

One look at the terrain, vast, open, commanded by towering peaks and occupied by armed smugglers, instantly dispels any notion of easy solutions.

Another agent described the intense tension of making large apprehensions alone,

in an incredibly vast desert where backup may take 45 minutes to arrive, and a life-flight helicopter takes two hours from the minute the call is made.

"It's scary," he said. "You never know. It only takes one person in a group to turn the whole thing sour."

Steve Birt, 60, in his third year as a full-time park volunteer, who was assisting Warfighter Outfitters as they dismantled a smuggling site and collected hundreds of pounds of trash — water bottles, running shoes, improvised backpacks, food wrappers, and piles of "carpet slippers," created in an improvised attempt to deter Border Patrol sign-cutters from following smugglers — said, "I

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