

**By Gary Paul Nabhan and Austin Nuñez**

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President Biden has pledged that there will “[not be another foot](#)” of the Trump border wall built. But his first weeks in office demand more than stopping construction of the towering barricade that has fueled humanitarian crises and ravaged the desert environment.

Border towns from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Coast have suffered disproportionately, sacrificed to policies that ignore lives and livelihoods in favor of a dubious 450-mile long monument to presidential hubris.

Over the last four years, border residents have experienced systematic discrimination and environmental destruction. Absent intervention, much of the [damage to communities](#) on both sides of the border will be long-lasting.

The insults include [extreme rates of Covid-19](#) infection because of botched state and federal responses to the pandemic, the loss of [thousands](#) of agricultural jobs as a result of tariff wars and the intertwined catastrophes of drought, fire and flood, which the Trump administration’s hostile climate policies most likely worsened.



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Erika Aguilar, 40, a mother of three, takes out clothes from the washer at her home in Edinburg, Texas. Her kitchen, as seen behind her, rolled over during hurricane Hanna last summer. Credit...Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times

Most counties flanking the international boundary [suffer from poverty levels](#) double that of the U.S. average. In unincorporated settlements known as colonias, from Texas to California, border residents live without such basic services as clean water and waste removal. The Trump administration exacerbated longstanding problems by vilifying the border and those living along it and ignoring the region's vital role in U.S. cultural, ecological, and trade relations with Latin America.

Lands and communities along the international line need help. They need jobs with livable wages and strategies to make desert ranches, farms and towns more resilient to climate change. Damage inflicted by the wall must also be repaired, including the restoration of wildlife corridors between the U.S. and Mexico. Fostering community engagement, cross-cultural exchanges and trade are among the most promising strategies.

Desert communities in the borderlands are already "laboratories for the future" because their residents have been [adapting for decades](#) to the new normal of increased aridity. With hotter, drier conditions expected to [affect some 162 million people](#) in nearly half of North America over the next two decades, border communities have much to teach about climate resilience.

Border inhabitants are also experts in racial and multicultural solidarity, bilingualism and endurance. They have mastered the art of frugality and self-reliance, because so few effective forms of governmental assistance have ever reached them.

Fresh leadership in the White House and Congress offers hope. We urge the Biden administration to signal a new direction to communities on both sides of the border. The administration can fast-track actions to deal with the poverty, marginalization and environmental degradation that worsened during the Trump era.

Here are 10 actions the new administration can take over the next few months to "right the boat" that has run aground along the parched banks of the Rio Grande:

- Terminate wall construction contracts and end the seizure of private and traditional cultural properties.
- Remove segments of the wall where it has interfered with the flow of water, animal migrations, pilgrimage trails and trade between nations. Cease groundwater extraction and turn off unnecessary artificial lighting in wildlife refuges and other sensitive areas.



Land that was cleared up for the construction of the border wall as an enforcement zone is seen to the south side of the wall near Alamo, Texas. Credit...Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times

- Create a youth corps for Hispanic, Anglo, Black and Native American high school students in summer projects restoring habitats and helping to create sustainable livelihoods on farms, ranches and reservations.
- Change immigration and port of entry policies to reunite families divided by the wall, gate closures and unevenly enforced Covid-19 restrictions.
- Grant access to leaders from Native American spiritual traditions and other religions to reconsecrate disinterred burials, bulldozed cemeteries, depleted sacred springs and dynamited mountain sanctuaries desecrated by wall construction.



A colonia near the border with no street lights in Edinburg, Texas. Credit...Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times

- Provide essential services, including security, access to clean water, and solid waste disposal, to people in barrios and colonias along the border.
- Employ rangeland and conservation professionals to monitor impacts of the wall, especially the depletion of aquifers.



An area that is owned by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, next to the National Butterfly Center, in Mission, Texas. The area was cleared up for the proposed wall that was to be built on the levee. Credit...Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times



The mural “Braceros: A Legacy of Triumph” by artist Raúl Valdez, coordinated in collaboration with the City of San Juan, the Smithsonian Institution and University of Texas-Pan American Center for Mexican American Studies in San Juan, Texas. Credit...Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times

- Renew agreements and funding for trans-border conservation, health care and arts programs discontinued during the past four years.
- Support increased appropriations for restoring [public lands damaged](#) by wall construction.
- Increase representation of Hispanic, Black and Native American professionals on committees advising federal agencies working along the border. Renew genuine consultation and collaboration with ranchers, farmers, tribal lands managers and other property owners affected by the wall.

We must reimagine the landscapes we share with Mexico. The border should not be a line that divides cultures and fragments their desert environment. It is a juncture where two nations connect, where history is shared, where cultures are alive and where a common future must unfold.



A gap where a gate will typically go is seen near Alamo, Texas. The taller wall on the right is part of the newer wall where former President Donald Trump visited in early January. Credit...Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times