

## How conservation and humanitarian groups respond to production of border security on the Arizona–Sonora border

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US policies for securing the border with Mexico are driven by multiple political concerns, including the desire to control illegal trade and immigration in a way that conveys “border security” to a national audience. Highly visible border enforcement near urban centres and via the border fence has pushed migrants into far less visible and remote wilderness areas, driving both ecological degradation and a humanitarian crisis. This study employed ethnographic methods to explore how natural resource agency employees and humanitarian volunteers in Altar Valley Arizona perceived and responded to the production of border security. We found that both groups recognised human rights and environmental concerns, although they assigned different priorities and addressed them through conflicting means. As in other cases where consumers are separated from production practices, there was a general consensus among informants that it was important to raise the consciousness of the national audience about the negative externalities of producing border security.

**Keywords:** environmental justice; Arizona; Altar Valley; migration; commodity fetishism

### Introduction

The mobility that characterises modernity means that borders are increasingly spaces of interaction and transaction between people, ideas, and goods, but these interactions are interrupted when states enforce their borders as expressions of sovereignty (Donnan and Wilson 1999). States prioritise interactions they want to allow at their borders – often trade in goods and tourism – and fight interactions they want to deny – often illegal drug trade and labour migrations (Andreas 2003, Gardner and Osella 2003). These decisions impact not only the economic or political entities that are directly included or excluded, but also numerous social, cultural, and environmental processes both at and away from international borders (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Coleman 2007). Along the US–Mexico border, targeting undocumented migration at points-of-entry near population centres touched off a range of effects not immediately associated with border enforcement. These included the deaths of undocumented migrants, reduced quality of life for borderlands residents, and degradation of unique border ecosystems (Cornelius 2001, Murphy Erfani 2005, Defenders of Wildlife 2006). Such human rights and environmental problems have been most evident in Arizona, where border traffic, border enforcement, and migrant

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distress increasingly converge on protected forests, wildlife refuges, and national parks (Murphy Erfani 2005, Defenders of Wildlife 2006).

The environmental and human rights disasters (Coalición de Derechos Humanos 2006, Ellis 2006, Terrell 2006, Schultz 2008) associated with efforts to produce border security are generally missed in media reports, which largely focus on the number of migrants apprehended along the border (Robbins 2006). Abuses on the border thus go largely unrecognised by US residents – the majority residing away from the border – who demand border enforcement and its promise of security. This illustrates a distinct separation between the sites where the idea of border security is produced and where it is consumed. Modernity tends to mask environmental and social traumas associated with production from consumers (Harvey 1989, Hudson and Hudson 2003), and border enforcement is no exception.

Border enforcement's attempt to control undocumented migrants produces the illusion of border security for all US residents to consume, but the social and ecological relationships required to produce the commodity are hidden from consumers (Marx 1976, Goodman and DuPuis 2002). Just as the sometimes brutal production conditions for food items are obscured by advertisements and smiling models (Hudson and Hudson 2003), presenting border security as a commodity that can simply be purchased with tax dollars obscures the conditions and relationships which produce it. People located directly on the border – the site of production – are able to see past this commodity mask. As national security continues its prominence in political rhetoric and governmental initiatives, research addressing how people in borderlands perceive and resist negative externalities associated with the production of national security is needed.

In this article, we begin addressing this need with an ethnographic study of two groups on the US border with Mexico: No More Deaths humanitarian aid volunteers and federal conservation agency workers. Viewing border security as a commodity good, we theorised that individuals working at the site of production could see behind the commodity mask and understand the socio-ecological relationships hidden behind the mask of border security. We focused on how the two groups perceived and framed their responses to the production of border security. We suggest that unmasking the knowledge of people working at the site where border security is produced lays the foundation for both ethical debates regarding production of border security and the creation of political change to reduce socio-ecological traumas wrought in the borderlands.

### Study area

Since 1994, federal actions to control migration across the Mexico–US border have concentrated enforcement at points-of-entry near population centres (Andreas 1998–1999, Office of Homeland Security 2002). Declining numbers of undocumented persons apprehended at these locales was initially interpreted as a sign of successful deterrence (Andreas 1998–1999), but the continuing US demand for labor simply diverted border-crossers away from traditional points-of-entry along the border and spurred increased traffic through less-inhabited areas of the borderlands, such as the area between Nogales, AZ/MX and Sasabe, and AZ/MX (Rubio-Goldsmith *et al.* 2006).

Between 1994 and 2009, an estimated total of 3861–5607 migrants died along the US–Mexico border, the majority in the Arizona borderlands (Coalición de Derechos Humanos 2006, United States General Accounting Office 2006, Jimenez 2009). At the same time, ecological degradation occurred in vulnerable borderland ecosystems protected by federal parks, refuges, and forests. The Altar Valley region of Arizona includes an 80-km

section of the 3200-km US–Mexico border that has seen a marked increase in undocumented migrants, and in response there has been an increase in federal border enforcement operations. Altar Valley itself is a section of generally flat land that is enticing to smugglers who need to move people or drugs quickly; alternatively, the nearby mountain ranges provide a cover from border enforcement agents for smugglers who can take on more physical risk by crossing through the mountains. The semi-desert grassland and desert scrub land is highly vulnerable due to relatively low rainfall – precipitation averages 20–60 cm/year – and a past history of overgrazing, resultant loss of grasses, and soil erosion (Sayre 2007). This area includes the US Forest Service Nogales Ranger District of the Coronado National Forest (CNF), the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge (BANWR), and the desert camps of the humanitarian aid group No More Deaths. Personnel from both the agencies, both on-site and in nearby Tucson, and volunteers from No More Deaths partnered in this study.

The Nogales Ranger District of CNF totals 140,000 ha at the eastern edge of the study area near Nogales, AZ, with 48 km of international border. This is the district of CNF crossed by the greatest number of undocumented migrants. BANWR is around one-third the size of the Nogales Ranger District, covering 48,000 ha at the western edge of the study area, near Sasabe, AZ. Refuge land includes 7.2 km of international border with Mexico, with the border fence abutting the southern edge of the refuge. In October 2006, virtually all refuge land along the border, reaching approximately 2 km inward, was closed to the public due to the threat of violence from both border bandits and smugglers. Increased border enforcement promoted human smuggling by rendering the traditional approach of relying on knowledge passed from friends or family members for border crossings less effective relative to paying professional smugglers (Massey *et al.* 2002). High demand for these human smugglers (*coyotes*) has allowed them to evolve into sophisticated, binational smuggling groups which can charge higher fees because they take on more risks in the face of an increasingly militarised border (Andreas 1998–1999).

No More Deaths runs a desert camp near Arivaca, AZ, which is situated at the intersection of BANWR and CNF lands. At any given time, there are 10–20 volunteers living in the camp, and groups of hikers go out twice a day to leave water along migrant trails and provide first aid to any migrants in distress. Volunteers are able to access migrant trails both on and near agency lands, thereby providing aid to persons travelling through and beyond both protected areas.

## Methods

We used an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Mason 2002) to understand how informants perceived and framed their responses to the production of border security. Rachel Shellabarger conducted all fieldwork, and thus her interactions with informants were a part of the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In order to engage more fully in the research environment, the researcher lived and volunteered with CNF for 4 weeks in May and June 2008, and with BANWR for the month of July 2008. The researcher volunteered with No More Deaths from June to August during summer 2007, and for 3 weeks total in June and July 2008. The proximity of the three groups allowed the researcher to travel among all three sites throughout the study.

We used triangulation of data from documents, interview transcripts, and participant observations (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Silverman 2001). We reviewed documents dated from 2007 to 2009. Reports and press releases from the three groups, literature from

other humanitarian groups and conservation agencies in the region (e.g. Coalición de Derechos Humanos 2006), local news stories, government reports (e.g. United States General Accounting Office 2006), and academic research were assembled to create a better picture of responses to production of border security. Field notes taken during volunteer work with each of the three groups provided data on behaviours related to conservation or human rights.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (30 min to 3 1/2 h) with 27 informants from May through July 2008. The researcher used an interview guide, but allowed informants to guide and direct the flow of conversation. In this way, the informant's view of the situation emerged throughout the interview (McCracken 1988). Informants within each community were consulted until it was clear that data exhibited saturation within each group. Interviews were conducted with nine informants from each group. All 27 informants were asked to review interview notes, confirm themes, and suggest further avenues for research as a means of improving the data quality (Lincoln and Guba 1985, McCracken 1988, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Analysis involved systematically identifying and grouping similar pieces of data (quotations and observations reflecting border security, environmental harm, etc.) into themes. Verbal repetition (both within and across conversations), repetition among sources (interviews, observations, and documents), and context (e.g. some themes were rarely expressed because informants were uncomfortable talking about them) shaped the development of themes.

We use a naturalistic approach to report results (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This reflects our purpose: to understand and explore the meanings and processes associated with production of border security in the lives of informants. The naturalistic approach aims not to generalise over multiple meanings with numerical representations, but to recognise and explore the multiple realities that inevitably arise from social circumstances (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Guba and Lincoln 2005). An analysis built from numerous informant quotes allows the multiple realities to be represented directly, as rich descriptions which together form a detailed picture of the groups in their natural settings. This approach allows the reader to assess the coherency and consistency of the research and its conclusions. When quoted, informants are referenced using a pseudonym, followed by "LM" to identify them as CNF and BANWR land-management personnel or "H" to identify them as humanitarian volunteers. Quotations from participant observation are followed by "Field Notes".

## Results

### *Perceptions of ecological degradation*

Both land-management personnel and humanitarian volunteers described ecological degradation as an externality associated with production of border security. Both groups acknowledged that policy-makers utilised the Arizona desert as a means to deter undocumented migrants from crossing the border (Andreas 1998–1999, Cornelius 2001), making it an important element in border enforcement. Land-management informants often pointed out that the border enforcement measures were not constructed to be ecologically sensitive. And in a statement typical of humanitarian volunteers, Cole (H) explained

By forcing migrants into more remote and rugged areas U.S. policy has had an effect on these ecosystems. We should not confuse this issue by saying that migrants are responsible for this reality. What we are talking about is a system of policies that have led to increased human impact on sensitive areas.

Land-management informants pointed to erosion as one prominent form of ecological degradation in the borderlands, both from the migrants moving through the area and the border enforcement efforts in response to their presence. Informants often cited a study conducted by BANWR that found 113 ha of the 48,000 ha refuge was denuded due to unauthorized trails, virtually all of them believed to be migrant trails. Dell (LM) described one way that border enforcement could also lead to erosion, when Border Patrol (BP) agents tried to track footprints. He referenced the practice of smoothing portions of land so that recently-made footprints were more visible:

BP use large heavy rubber tires to drag the roads, then they park on the side of the road, often right by an entrance or turn, and this creates a bald spot. It begins to look like a parking spot, and then everyday users use it to park because they think it's supposed to be there—it turns into a parking lot. (Dell LM)

Informants also discussed the large amounts of trash piled up in the borderlands, and migrant fires that spread out of control. Leslee (LM) was visibly disturbed as she explained

There's a possibility for wildlife to ingest things they shouldn't, and they can die from that. When two [Student Conservation Association volunteers] were cleaning up trash, they commonly found lizards or rodents drowned in bottles. Cattle on nearby ranches have died from swallowing plastic bags.

Agency personnel often pointed out an increase in the frequency of human-caused fires, which they attributed to the increase in migrant traffic in the area. "Before the immigration problem human-caused fires were rare, now they are prevalent" (Aaren LM). Informants associated the changing patterns of fires with the changing patterns of human traffic. "The last two years we've had one mountain fire each year, that's more than the average. This may become the average because the fence is pushing more traffic into the mountains" (Tom LM).

Commonly, informants stated that the combined effect of all the border enforcement impacts was their biggest ecological concern. Charlie (LM) described the widespread impact of undocumented traffic, saying "[human and drug] smuggling is a massively inappropriate use of federal lands, and its impact is no different than any inappropriate prohibited act on forest land, but it covers a larger area and the impacts are harder to get at". In addition to the impact migrants have, Cody (LM) expressed aggravation at the total impact of border enforcement agents:

What about the environmental impact of all the [Department of Homeland Security] endeavors together, instead of an [environmental impact assessment] for each one, where it seems insignificant? BP agents and vehicles out here have a huge impact that doesn't get looked at. It's frustrating that it all gets looked at one piece at a time and not as a whole.

Informants frequently expressed anger or frustration at the total environmental impact on the borderlands, which many viewed as a policy problem:

If the U.S. government were serious about the environment, they would address the root causes of immigration, militarization, and I don't see that happening. I don't see them standing up to the walls being built through the desert, to the policies that cause migration. (Edward H)

Land-management agency personnel often described the energy spent on border tasks as taking away from their conservation goals. As Charlie stated

In some areas we've had to give up the focus on natural resources to help Border Patrol meet their tactical needs—we're hoping to concentrate things near the border and reduce the impact, freeing our Law Enforcement to focus on the "other" segments of "Prohibited Acts" on [National Forest] lands.

They saw law enforcement officers as "spending too much time on immigration issues", and one officer suggested that as much as 95% of his time was spent on border enforcement work in a given day (Field Notes). Given the large amount of money to be made in smuggling, accidentally interrupting smuggling operations also become a significant safety concern for conservation agencies managing remote areas of the border.

Outside of law enforcement and safety issues, other personnel described being asked to complete various tasks necessary for border enforcement. Some personnel mentioned having "packed" materials for BP. This entailed personnel spending a full day bringing supplies into remote areas of the borderlands, where vehicles were unable to venture, so that BP agents could carry out border enforcement operations in these areas. Personnel described the time spent away from conservation tasks as frustrating. Tom (LM) made several statements to this effect, which was common among agency informants:

The refuge spends way too much time on border issues... It's taken a lot of time and resources away from the mission of the refuge, a disproportionate amount of time... There's less focus on the biology of it, so the program delivery has suffered dramatically.

In the same vein, Lee (LM) mentioned, "We have lost the focus of the refuge, which is supposed to be the masked bobwhite quail".

### *Perceptions of migrant distress*

As with the ecological degradation taking place in the borderlands, many informants pointed to border security efforts as contributing to the distress and death of migrants moving through remote areas of the borderlands. Edward (H) explained, "Our policies are from the status quo, they're not well thought-out or humane policies, and these result in suffering and deaths in my state". These informants expressed frustration that the government did not appear to be taking responsibility for the consequences of border enforcement. Cole (H) questioned

If I hurt you through my actions, directly or indirectly, I have a responsibility to make sure you are OK. We teach this idea to all of our children at a very early age. Why is it different in the global community? What is so special about countries and institutions, corporate or otherwise, that they are held to a different standard?

Both land-management and humanitarian informants recalled finding dead bodies in the borderlands, and many were able to point out the exact spot where they had found a body (Field Notes). While driving along the road to the No More Deaths camp, humanitarian aid volunteers pointed to a shrine along the roadside, where the body of a migrant had been found. In another incident, while hiking migrant trails, humanitarian volunteers stopped at a shrine in a dry river bed, where the body of a 14-year-old girl was found 4 months earlier. Driving along refuge and forest roads, several land-management employees pointed to spots where they had found dead migrants. Lee (LM) said, "I'm surprised I haven't found a dead body yet. So many people have, there are so many bodies out there". When a land-management informant learned that the researcher had also worked with No More

Deaths, he asked “How many bodies have you found?” and reacted with surprise when she responded, “none” (Field Notes). For land-management informants, discussion of migrant deaths was often considered alongside the ecological degradation in the borderlands:

The tragic human aspect of the immigrant issue is that persons looking for work or a better life can actually lose their lives in that quest. The trashing of the refuge, the impact on habitat quality and our time and finances is an aggravating problem for the refuge and its staff. But there is a sad and human side to this problem. (Leslee LM)

### *Responses by federal conservation agency workers*

Land-management personnel felt that agency personnel and public individuals located away from the border were unaware of challenges they faced, and struggled to reconcile their responsibility to migrants with their responsibility to policies intended to produce border security. Lee (LM) suggested that “People don’t realize the magnitude of what’s happening here, they can’t accept the reality of finding bodies or having your house broken into repeatedly or the massive trash and the innumerable trails”. Charlie (LM) said it was “hard for people who do not reside down here to understand the situation. . . People who don’t work down here don’t understand it, and we – Forest Service, Border Patrol – are directed by people who don’t understand”. Yet personnel were mostly unsure as to how people away from the border could be better informed. One informant described how he tried to inform every volunteer he met about the human and ecological tragedies occurring in the borderlands. He would then ask the volunteers to tell everyone at home about the problems, so that the news could spread. Personnel said they gave interviews to journalists, and took politicians on guided tours that briefly touched on the problems of the border (Field Notes).

One response to frustration over widespread ecological degradation of the borderlands was to focus actions on mitigating a particular problem. For example, Dell (LM) described a fight to contain an invasive species outbreak:

Buffel grass is a huge threat. . . . However, three small spots have started up on the refuge, one right along a UDA<sup>1</sup> trail. The refuge has successfully eradicated the buffel grass on these sites but the fear is that new sites will be established from grass seeds coming in on the soles of their shoes, which is a source we have no way to control.

Since informants did not feel they could mitigate many of the widespread problems like erosion, they focused on repairing fencing frequently cut by migrants, or installing cattle guards where gates were frequently left open (Field Notes). Personnel also described attempts to work with BP agents in order to limit their ecological impacts, and support for community efforts at trash clean-up.

Informants frequently described feeling a moral obligation to respond to the migrant deaths and distress occurring on agency lands, but also expressed a dilemma regarding how to follow through. “I think we have some responsibility. . . I think we have to address it, we don’t like to, but have to face the fact of what these people are dealing with” (Tom LM). Agency personnel attempted to balance concern over the welfare of migrants with mitigation of ecological degradation and law. When a humanitarian aid volunteer was cited for littering after leaving gallon jugs of water for migrants on refuge land, many personnel could see both sides of the issue:

I flip-flop on supporting giving water or not—it’s harsh out there. I’ve felt the impacts of the heat in my situations, can only imagine what it’s like for them. Personally, I feel that if we can

help get water, like with Humane Borders stations, that's good. . . It's not just an issue with leaving water, though, but also leaving big bags of food, and we can hardly keep up with the trash. (Cody LM)

As Charlie (LM) stated

I don't mind people giving [the migrants] water, but. . . legally, I can't let them put water on forest land. I have to be able to guarantee that any water given is safe, of certain quality, must meet municipal drinking water standards, and when water is left out and those who left it walk away, I can't ensure the quality of that water.

Personnel thus responded to migrant's distress with both personal and agency concerns in mind. Runar (LM) described his typical protocol when encountering migrants: "During my day to day job, I may encounter people, and will give them water and call Border Patrol". Similarly, Aaren (LM) described a method of providing basic aid without breaking agency policy:

Forest Service people are not trained to respond to the human element. We will respond to humanitarian situations with the first aid we have training for, generally CPR, some EMTs. We try not to take an active role, leaving that up to the sheriff's department. Do best to render first aid and provide info, try to avoid direct contact.

### ***Response by humanitarian aid volunteers***

Humanitarian responses were not constrained by allegiance to the policies intended to produce border security. The No More Deaths humanitarian aid group was established in 2004 in response to "a morally intolerable situation" (Field Notes), and from this starting point, volunteers have expressed their commitment to directly addressing migrant distress in the borderlands, as well as educating others about its existence. Every informant expressed their role as necessary but temporary, with one informant stating the desire "to work ourselves out of business" (Field Notes). Informants described their work as a response to government deficiency, as Sol (H) stated

We are doing humanitarian work on the border that should be done by government agencies. They should be giving water, food and medical treatment to migrants. We'll be happy to turn this work over to them when they respond as they should.

Most volunteers described a clear ethical imperative to address the symptoms of national efforts to produce border security. As Hallie (H) stated, "The desert of Arizona is how I define who I am, where my home is. It's wrong to let people die in my home, regardless of who they are or why they're here". Atticus (H) described his reason for volunteering as coming "out of a feeling of commitment to alleviating the conditions faced by migrants crossing in the region that [No More Deaths] is based". Many volunteers echoed this feeling of commitment to the migrants, often because they blamed US policy for the migrants' situations:

People in the US benefit from the policies that perpetuate violence in Central and South America and help drive the migrant experience. People in the US benefit from the work of migrants on a daily basis. I know that that is an issue of contention but let's just take it as true. If we benefit from a system of violence we have a responsibility to understand and prevent that violence on moral grounds if nothing else. (Cole H)

No More Deaths volunteers recognised a need to unmask the negative externalities occurring in the borderlands. “There is a lack of education [about the effects of border policy], and the blind cannot lead the blind” (Shayna H). Though No More Deaths’ provision of direct aid in the borderlands was often acknowledged as being a “band-aid solution”, volunteers suggested that making direct aid visible to the public played a valuable role in unmasking the crises on the border. This was most clearly illustrated by the parable of the babies, told one night at the desert camp to a group of visiting students (Field Notes). In the parable, a community is situated alongside a river. One day a baby is seen floating down the river, and a villager goes in to save it. As days go by, babies continue to be seen in the river, with more coming each day. The community organises a monitoring system to detect and remove any babies in the river. As more babies show up in the river, this system gets more complex. Finally, someone decides to go upriver, find out why the babies are being put in the river, and stop this from happening. The parable-teller explained that No More Deaths constituted the villagers going into the river to save the babies, because this was the most urgent need. He then asked the visiting students to be the villagers who go upriver and stop the forces sending the babies into the river. Sol (H) described the worth of educating others through this type of direct action, saying “That may be our greatest contribution to the larger issue of immigration reform – making others aware of the suffering and death on the border”. Beyond educating about the problems occurring in the borderlands, volunteers emphasised educating people about their cause. “There’s a need for more education on the economic context of migration, understanding and acknowledging that the wall doesn’t separate us from the decisions we make that affect people all over the world” (Annina H).

While No More Deaths volunteers addressed the humanitarian problem, they also described an obligation to mitigate the ecological damage wrought by production of border security. Sol (H) pointed out the resonance between humanitarian and conservation goals. “The sacredness of life is not just human life—it’s all of creation. Rescuing life in the desert does not mean just migrant life; it’s all life in the desert”. Much of the desire to mitigate the ecological damage was verbalised in terms of stopping the rerouting of migrants into remote areas. Hallie (H) simply stated, “The environmental impact of the whole border deal would end if NMD is able to end the issue”. A similar sentiment was expressed by Shayna (H), who said “In the larger picture, if we can get just immigration reform passed we won’t have people moving through the desert, leaving trash, etc”. Volunteers took environmentally conscious measures such as picking up trash and recyclable plastic jugs as they hiked migrant trails. They also collected usable clothing and backpacks from rest and layover sites along migrant trails, to be washed and donated to shelters in Tucson. For volunteers, both the direct humanitarian aid and these endeavours to mitigate ecological damage were all connected to global forces:

The tensions, conflicts, and integrative aspects of globalization are played out on the human body (fashion, mortality rates, value standards of beauty and success, poverty-aggravated illness, etc.) and the earth’s body (ecological devastation, areas of dense population, protected wilderness areas, “natural disasters”, etc.). The border stories show this . . . blistered feet and a desert scarred by walls and human traffic, are the marks of the conflict in our changing world.  
(Carma H)

## Discussion

Both land-management agency personnel and humanitarian volunteers believed that attempting to produce border security was causing human suffering and environmental

degradation along the US south-west border. Federal land-management employees were caught between an ethical desire to mitigate and prevent environmental and human abuses and their duty to uphold the policies of their employer and nation. No More Deaths volunteers faced less of an internal struggle in their conceptions of the problem, as they clearly described opposition to border enforcement and willingness to break laws to prevent human suffering. Volunteers' perceptions of the problem resonated with Massey *et al.*'s (2002, p. 4) study of Mexican immigration, which criticised the juxtaposition of increasing economic, communication, social, and cultural ties with Mexico alongside increasingly stricter border policies as "fundamental contradictions".

As informants on the border responded to abuses inherent to production of border security, they posed ethical questions of how they should address the abuses, and what priorities they should take as they sought to create change. The ways that land-management agency personnel and No More Deaths volunteers resisted the negative externalities associated with production of border security reflected their conceptions of it. Federal land-management personnel tried to balance their personal ethical conceptions and professional circumstances, focusing on directly mitigating some ecological damage and human distress (when they encountered it), and educating others about it. In addition to these actions along the border, personnel from land-management agencies have testified before House Subcommittees (Ellis 2006, Terrell 2006, Schultz 2008) regarding the numerous environmental problems associated with border enforcement. No More Deaths volunteers also emphasised educating others about the abuses in the borderlands, including a report presented to members of the US Congress (No More Deaths 2008). Their direct action along the border involved intensive efforts to locate and mitigate human suffering.

The process informants went through – first understanding the abuses on the border, and then posing ethical questions about what to respond to and how to do it – supports our assertion that on a broader scale, consumers of border security must first unmask border security (Hudson and Hudson 2003). Only then can consumers engage in debate about how to move forward. Unmasking abuses on the border and then engaging in ethical discussions about appropriate courses of action are necessary precursors to reforming problematic approaches to border security.

In February of 2008, No More Deaths' direct action came into conflict with land-management agency rules, and a volunteer was cited for littering after leaving gallon jugs of water for migrants on BANWR land. The ensuing public relations and court battles polarised the issues of human and environmental distress in the borderlands, and each group became a staunch advocate of addressing its primary concern (ecological degradation or human suffering). In the end, the judge convicted the volunteer of littering without any punishment attached.<sup>2</sup> This ruling reflected the entangled fate of human rights and conservation in the borderlands, as it recognised both ecological degradation through the littering conviction and human suffering through the lack of punishment.

Despite recent conflicts over littering, the land-management agencies and No More Deaths share a fundamental objective: making those who demand the production of border security aware of its social and ecological impacts in the borderlands. Efforts to identify and ameliorate human and environmental exploitation in agro-food systems (Goodman and DuPuis 2002, Gouveia and Juska 2002, Allen *et al.* 2003, Hudson and Hudson 2003) provide some insights for efforts to address the externalities associated with producing border security. Similar to actions regarding the externalities of border security, most attempts to bridge the divide between production and consumption in agro-food systems have emphasised unmasking the socio-ecological relationships behind commodities for consumers. However, as Gouveia and Juska (2002) point out, there is

no guarantee that increased information about exploitation will prompt consumers to demand more just systems. Thus public education efforts for agro-food systems have been accompanied by attempts to increase consumer choice in food purchases, change food and labour policy, form alliances between producers and consumers, and create alternative knowledge systems (Goodman and DuPuis 2002, Gouveia and Juska 2002, Allen *et al.* 2003, Hudson and Hudson 2003). The goal of increasing consumer interest in the environmental and social aspects of food is in many ways parallel to the goal of increasing demand for reducing the negative externalities of border security. The same combination of public education, increasing available choices, and policy reform are applicable.

The different groups in this study have clear differences in opinion regarding the primacy of human or environmental abuses, the role of current laws in the struggle to reduce these negative externalities, and the direction of future immigration policies. These differences in opinion predict a difficult road ahead for those hoping to reduce environmental and human distress in the borderlands. Yet cultivating concern for distress in the borderlands among residents across the USA could be a shared objective for all groups involved. The sheer size and momentum of modernity suggest that successful local resistance alone will prove difficult. Political action leading to change requires “an active civil society engaged in real participatory democracy” (Cox 2004, p. 201), which cannot be isolated to particular places or organisational cultures (Harvey 1989). The Sierra Club’s Borderlands Campaign is one example of an effort that mobilises local resistance to socio-ecological abuses on the border to raise national awareness. Indeed, the Sierra Club’s growing efforts to mobilise collaborative efforts between environmental and labor groups (Cox 2010) represents a potential approach for unmasking socio-ecological abuses perpetrated during the production of both traditional commodities such as coal and less traditional ones such as border security. Comprehensive campaigns like this can begin to reach beyond local cultures as Harvey (1989) suggests, providing the knowledge necessary for important ethical discussions about the current approach to producing border security. In the age of the wars on terror and drugs, both of which are played out on the southern US border, debate and dissent over what is purported to be national security is often squashed in light of the perceived crisis. Yet, it is exactly at times of crisis when diverse and dissenting voices must be heard, so that those in power do not abuse their position (Ivie 2004). Production of border security in the USA is one such circumstance. The voices of those along the border are important in the national dialogue because of their specific knowledge of distress in the borderlands. Future research should continue to explore the voices of borderland residents. Of particular interest would be research investigating how environmental and human rights concerns play out on similarly contentious borders (e.g. Israel–Palestine, South Africa–Zimbabwe, North Korea–South Korea), and whether similar socio-ecological abuses are hidden behind masks associated with border security in these locales.

The participants in this study provided an example of the recently hypothesised phenomenon whereby commoditisation, even of ideas, can mask the work of human and ecological workers (i.e. biota involved in producing commodities) from consumers (Peterson *et al.* 2009). In fact, this study provides an example where commoditisation not only erased human and ecological workers from the commodity figuratively by masking them, but erased them literally by destroying ecosystems and killing migrants. Fortunately, the participants are also demonstrating how to unmask the commodity of border security through humanitarian aid and ecological restoration efforts. The command of space is a social power, one that is only conquered through production of space (Harvey 1989). Efforts to produce border security use steel border fences, security stations, surveillance

systems, and an army of security agents to control space in the US–Mexico borderlands. Unmasking the socio-ecological impacts of these activities represents the first step towards contesting the current configuration of space, power, and production in the US–Mexico borderlands.

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### Notes

1. Land-management informants and BP officers regularly used this acronym, short for “undocumented alien”, to refer to migrants.
2. This ruling was overturned in September 2010 in federal appeals court, on the grounds that water did not meet the definition of waste (Williams 2010).

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