

# 2010 Clarence Burch Award Winner Altar Valley Conservation Alliance

In 1995, ranchers in the Altar Valley southwest of Tucson came together to create the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance (AVCA). Inspired by the Malpai Borderlands Group, the ranchers wanted to return fire to their high desert grasslands and keep the valley as a working landscape unfragmented by subdivisions sprawling across much of southern Arizona. AVCA became a 501c3 not-for-profit organization in 2000, the same year it completed an assessment of the Altar Valley watershed funded by the Arizona Water Protection Fund.

Those were hard years. During the late 1990s, Arizona was ground zero in the Western range wars. With its headquarters in Tucson, the Center for Biological Diversity targeted the Chilton family and its Montana allotment in Coronado National Forest. Co-founders of the Alliance, the Chiltons fought back, suing the Center for malicious libel. Courts eventually awarded the Chiltons \$100,000 in damages and \$500,000 in punitive damages, but rancor and bitterness were the order of the day. Conflict between ranchers and the first director of the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, which occupies the southern third of the valley, only added fuel to the fire—a cultural conflict that did not benefit the land.

Today, the Buenos Aires and Chilton family have something in common: Both have established refugia for the Chiricahua leopard frog, an endangered species, on their land. Neighboring Santa Margarita Ranch is also cooperating with biologists to protect leopard frogs in its stock tanks. AVCA and Buenos Aires are close partners who share personnel and equipment as they carry out conservation on the ground, not in the media or the courts. Thanks largely to the efforts of AVCA, land managers in the Altar Valley are starting to think like a watershed instead of as a patchwork quilt of competing jurisdictions.

The Alliance spearheaded the development of the Altar Valley Fire Management Plan, one of the largest in the West. That plan will be put into action through a 2010 grant of \$150,000 from the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) Sky Island Grasslands initiative. Five prescribed burn plans are currently being written; the burn plans will cover Bureau of Land Management, Buenos Aires, Arizona State School Trust, and Pima County as well as private ranchlands. Another key partner is the Arizona Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), which will provide liability insurance in return for having its fire manager supervise the burns. Paraphrasing the fire manager for Buenos Aires, the Alliance is stimulating its county, state, federal, and private partners to think outside the box and work together across boundaries to accomplish conservation on a watershed scale.

The Alliance also ramrods an Altar Valley Watershed Restoration Plan, sponsoring workshops by water flow expert Bill Zeedyk and Steve Carson and bringing together volunteers and the Pima County Transportation Department to restore gullies and redesign rural roads to reduce erosion. These projects are directed by AVCA's half-time Restoration Coordinator, David Seibert. David has obtained grants from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), Buenos Aires, and Freeport-McMoRan Copper and Gold Foundation, to restore upland washes across the



*Long time Altar Valley ranchers Charley Miller and John King were dreaming and scheming at a cattle sale back in the fall of 1995, and so began the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance.*



*Pat & Cora. Conserving the Altar Valley for future generations through restoration, community education and science.*

valley. He is one of two part-time employees the Alliance has been able to hire to take our all-volunteer organization to the next level of organization and commitment. The other is Project Administrator Sherie Steele.

The collaborative environment facilitated by the Alliance has contributed greatly to regional conservation efforts. In recent years, Pima County has emerged as a major partner in the Altar Valley, with ownership and management interest in over 200,000 acres of private and leased land. These lands were purchased by Pima County between 2004 and 2010 in support of the County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, and are now part of Pima County's Maeveen Behan Conservation Lands System. Just a few weeks ago, after years of collaborative effort, Alliance partners and Pima County staff were successful in gaining support for addition of a \$1.5 million Altar Valley watershed restoration project to the next Pima County bond initiative project list. This project would carry out an in-depth scientific and engineering study of the watershed, focused on designing restoration solutions for the highly eroded main stem of the Altar Wash; and it would provide funding to continue and build on the restoration and fire programs well underway. While the bond initiative is not on the ballot in Pima County yet, the ground swell of public support for considering watershed based conservation infrastructure as an important community and regional endeavor is an accomplishment onto itself.

Fifteen years of common projects and face-to-face communication have created a network of partnerships in the Altar Valley based upon mutual trust. AVCA works closely with the Arizona Game & Fish Department, USFWS, Arizona State Land Department, NRCS, TNC, and Pima County's Natural Resources, Parks, and Recreation Department, among others. AVCA Community Meetings generally bring thirty to fifty people together---ranchers,

citizens, representatives from county, state, and federal agencies, members of other conservation NGOs---to share news, learn about issues, collaborate on conservation projects, and just stay in touch. The Alliance newsletter *The Rainmaker* then disseminates these stories to partners and the public. Our website--[www.altarvalley-conservation.org](http://www.altarvalley-conservation.org) ---will soon come online as well.

The mission of the Alliance is to leave "the next generation with a healthy, productive watershed, a thriving agricultural community, and rural life enriched by the culture and history of the Altar Valley." A new Science Advisory Board will help guide conservation efforts and select the recipient of the \$5000 Altar Valley Watershed Research Fellowship, awarded annually to encourage natural or social science research in the valley. This year's first fellowship went to Greg Butler, a student of Dr. George Ruyle at the University of Arizona, who is going to conduct a study entitled "Evaluating the Effects of Grazing Land Conservation Practices on Southwestern Watersheds" for his dissertation. The Clarence Burch Award funds will be added to an endowment for this fellowship, helping AVCA to utilize the best science available to make our mission come true.

#### Altar Valley Conservation Alliance

Mary Miller,  
Vice-President

Tom Sheridan,  
Community  
Representative



*Restoration Coordinator David Seibert doing the work he loves best!*