

SANGRE DE CRISTO MOUNTAINS: BLANCA AND TRINCHERA RANCHES

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Figure 1. Culebra Range in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains (Hoyt 1999).

Starting in south central Colorado and extending into northern New Mexico are the rugged, picturesque Sangre de Cristo Mountains, also known as the “Sangres.” These mountains form the southernmost range of the Rocky Mountains. They start from Poncha Pass at the north end of the San Luis Valley in Colorado and continue to Glorieta Pass near Santa Fe, New Mexico, a distance of 366 km (231 miles). Their greatest east-west dimension is 80 km (50 miles) wide and in area they cover an estimated 44,530 km² (17,193 sq. miles). They are narrow in form and well defined from surrounding areas. Figure 2, a NASA MODIS (Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer) image offers an overhead view of the mountain chain. The image clearly shows the bright snow-capped peaks in sharp contrast to the darker greens and browns of the surrounding landscapes. Within a short distance the mountains rise, on the average, 1,850 m (6,069 feet) above the adjacent valleys and plains that are already at elevations between 1,500 and 2,300 m (4,921 and 7,546 feet) above sea level. Their east facing slopes have economic farming ties to the Great Plains, and their western slopes have strong, cultural traditions associated with the Hispanic and Native American settlements of the San Luis Valley and along the Rio Grande. Just the name “Sangre de Cristo” reflects the Hispanic heritage of the western slopes. From Spanish it translates as the “Blood of Christ.”



Figure 2. MODIS satellite image, 20 September 2002 (Descloitres 2002; annotated by author 2019).

This mountain chain can be divided into three ranges, highlighted on Figure 2. The northernmost section is the Sangre de Cristo Range. (This name should not be confused with the name, Sangre de Cristo Mountains, that is used to refer to the entire mountain chain.) This is basically a young, fault block range situated between two north-south fault lines. The peaks are rough and dramatic in appearance. On its west side is dryland farming associated with the northern San Luis Valley and on the east side it forms part of the Arkansas River watershed. The middle section is the Culebra Range, sometimes referred to as the Snowy Mountains as illustrated in Figure 1. It is also a long, fault block uplift. It provides irrigation water to the ranches and farms on its west side and on its east side it extends into an old, volcanic field dominated by the East and West Spanish Peaks. The third section consists of several subranges and does not have one single name. Collectively, these subranges are occasionally identified as the Southern Sangre de Cristo Range. Located mainly in northern New Mexico they furnish scenic backdrops for the art/tourism economy found in places like Santa Fe and Taos. This economy centers on the Hispanic and Pueblo traditions of the region. The mountains on the east side supply the headwaters of the Pecos River, an area sparsely populated and rooted in a ranching economy (Wolf 1995).

Sangre de Cristo Grant

After Mexico obtained independence from Spain in 1821, it established 197 land grants in what is today northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. The principal purpose of these grants was to curtail the expansion-minded Americans from entering Mexico via the Santa Fe Trail. Although most of the grants were small, a few were quite large. One large grant was the Sangre de Cristo Grant. This grant was established in 1841 and covered 404,686 ha (1 million acres) and commenced from the ridgeline of the Culebra Range and extended westward down into the San Luis Valley to the Rio Grande. Figure 3 shows the grant's boundary line as it relates to the present-day landscape. After the Mexican-American War, when the area became better protected against Ute raids, Hispanic settlers from Northern New Mexico immigrated to the grant and settled in small plaza centered villages, the largest one being San Luis

(Figure 3). In the 1860s, nearly half (202,343 ha; 500,000 acres) of the grant was sold to William Gilpin, Colorado's first territorial governor. He purchased the mountain portion of the grant. In 1868 Gilpin and his partners divided the property into two large ranches, the Trinchera Estate (northern section) and the Costilla Estate (southern section). The Costilla Estate was also called La Sierra and later known as the Taylor Ranch and the Cielo Vista Ranch. Both estates were about 101,171 ha (250,000 acres). Over the next seven decades the Trinchera section had several owners and except for some small parcels totaling 2,833 ha (7,000 acres) that were sold, no major changes in size occurred with the ranch. In 1939 Ruth Hanna McCormick Simms acquired the ranch and in 1950 her family divided the property into two ranches. The southern portion (60,703 ha; 150,000 acres) of the ranch was kept by the family and it maintained the name "Trinchera." The northern portion (36,422 ha; 90,000 acres) was named "Blanca" and was sold (Draper 2001).



Figure 3. Boundary and location of the Sangre de Cristo grant. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2012).

Trinchera: Malcolm Forbes

In 1969, Trinchera was sold to Malcolm Forbes, the publisher of *Forbes* magazine. He paid \$3 million for the ranch that covered 60,702 ha (150,000 acres) (Armstrong, 1978). Forbes was a capitalist and free market trader; he was not an environmentalist or rancher. Initially he wanted to have the ranch as a private hunting preserve and was going to fence in the entire ranch to keep the wildlife from escaping. The State of Colorado stopped this endeavor indicating that the wild animals did not belong to Forbes and he could not contain them. Next he tried cattle ranching by mainly leasing high meadow land as summer pasture to smaller ranchers. The ranch also supplemented its income by harvesting trees for lumber and providing big game hunting, especially for elk.

In 1971, just two years after acquiring Trinchera, Forbes divided a large section of the ranch into 2 to 8 ha (5 to 20 acres) rural residential lots and created an unincorporated subdivision named the Sangre de Cristo Ranches. It had 8,000 lots, mainly situated in the piñon pine and juniper portions of the ranch, at elevations ranging from 2400 to 2600 m (7874 to 8530 feet). Lot sales were completed in 2000. Next, in the mid 1970s, he created a second subdivision and named it, Forbes Park. This subdivision is forested with aspen, spruce and fir trees interlaced with alpine meadows and ponds. The Park's elevation varies from 2,560 to 3,140 m (8,400 to 10,300 feet). Although developed by Forbes it is now maintained by a landowners association as a gated community. In the early 1980s a third subdivision, named Forbes Wagon Creek Ranch, was established, again removing land from Trinchera. Like Forbes Park it is located in an alpine environment both with respect to vegetation and elevation. It is also a gated community with a landowners association. This subdivision as well as the second subdivision has "Forbes" in its name. This attracted a number of investors, (domestic and foreign) to acquire lots in these subdivisions expecting the lots to increase in monetary value because of the Forbes' name.

Table 1 summarizes the amount of Trinchera land consumed by these three subdivisions. With

11,604 subdivision lots and 35,070 ha (86,600 acres) of land almost 58% of the original ranch was fragmented into rural residential lots. Access roads were needed to reach these lots. In Forbes Park alone 182 km (113 miles) of dirt roads were bulldozed out of the alpine environment.¹ Figure 4 illustrates spatially the fragmentation of the Trinchera Ranch. Forbes discovered that the profit level was much better in selling real estate than farming the ranch. Based on how quickly he moved to establish the first subdivision after purchasing Trinchera it is apparent that he was viewing the ranch more as a real estate venture rather than a farming endeavor.

Trinchera is located in Costilla County, one of the poorest and most sparsely populated counties in Colorado. The county government is the main source of employment. Part of the ranch's economic structure relates to its low agricultural tax base. By selling portions of its land it reduced the amount of property taxes it was paying. However, the owners of the subdivision lots have to pay higher property taxes due to the land being reclassified as residential in nature. For a poor county like Costilla this additional tax revenue helps in providing financial support for its people, but at the same time it faces the issue of how much support it gives to the fragmentation of the mountains (Wolf 1995).

In 1982 Forbes purchased the 36,421 ha (90,000 acres) Blanca ranch, which is across U.S. 160 from the Trinchera (Figure 4). The two ranches were renamed the Forbes Trinchera Ranch. Again, Forbes stated he wanted to create a hunting preserve but as with Trinchera the State of Colorado stopped him. Forbes brought out his bulldozers to carve out roads for a new subdivision on Blanca. These roads are still visible on the slopes of Mt. Blanca. In order to keep more land from being fragmented Colorado and Forbes came to an agreement on the issue of hunting.

In 1990 Forbes died and his family inherited the Forbes Trinchera Ranch. In 2004 the family placed the Trinchera portion of the ranch in a conservation easement by donating it to the Colorado Open Lands, a 501(c)3 nonprofit land trust.² This was

¹ Google Earth's path tool function was used to ascertain mileage. In total area Forbes Park is the smallest of the three subdivisions but it has the greatest density of roads.

² A conservation easement provides perpetual protection of natural habitats and wildlife corridors on private lands, and thereby, eliminates the fragmentation of private land through

Table 1. Trinchera subdivisions.

	Time Established	Area	Number of Lots	Lot Size	Percent of Total Ranch Land
Sangre de Cristo Ranches	1971	22,727 ha. (56,160 ac.)	8000	2.0 to 8.0 ha. (5 to 20 ac.)	37.44%
Forbes Park	Mid 1970s	5,463 ha. (13,500 ac.)	3200	0.40 to 2.8 ha. (1 to 7 ac.)	9.00%
Forbes Wagon Creek Ranch	Early 1980s	6,880 ha. (17,000 ac.)	404	16.2 to 28.3 ha. (40 to 70 ac.)	11.53%

done for income tax reasons. In 2005, the family created the company, Forbes Trinchera Ranch LLC, as a means to maintain its conservation easement tax status and at the same time develop another subdivision. The company would lease 2,023 ha (5,000 acre) lots. The easement allowed hunting and under this arrangement individuals could lease a lot and build hunting lodges. The family would keep ownership of the land with its tax status and would make an estimated \$70 million (Bloomberg News 2005). This subdivision did not materialize mainly because in 2007 the family sold the Forbes Trinchera Ranch.

Trinchera-Blanca: Louis Moore Bacon

In 2007, Louis Moore Bacon, founder of Moore Capital Management, purchased the 69,606 ha (172,000 acres) ranch for \$175 million. Bacon is a self-made billionaire and a conservation philanthropist with over two decades supporting environmental endeavors throughout the world. In 2012 he donated the Blanca section of ranch as a conservation easement to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Mac, 2012). The Trinchera section was already in a conservation easement. With this donation the entire western slope and high peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains fell under some type of environmental protection. The only exceptions are the three subdivisions developed by Forbes and some small ranches. North of Blanca are the San Isabel National Forest, the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, and the Nature Conservancy's Zapata Ranch. South of Blanca are the Trinchera section of the ranch, the Taylor Ranch

subdivisions. A private landowner donates his/her land to a qualified conservation organization or a local, state, or federal government agency. The landowner continues to use the land

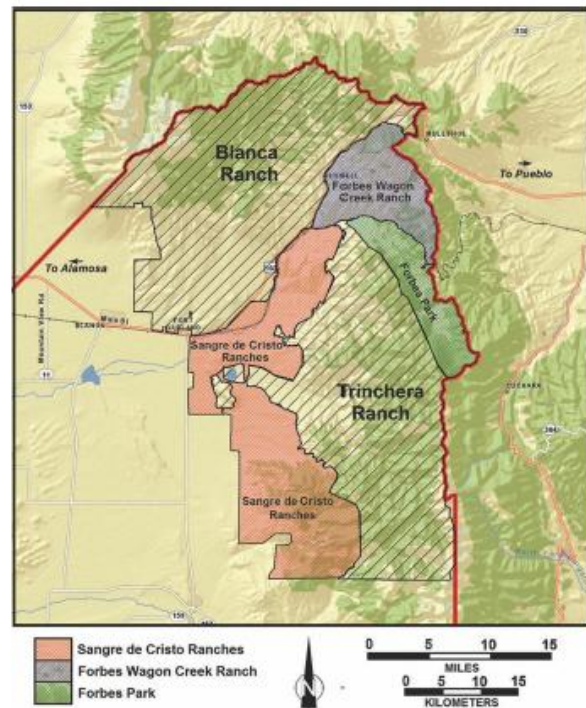


Figure 4. Trinchera Ranch's subdivisions (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2012, modified by author 2019).

that is also under a conservation easement, the 226,624 ha (560,000 acre) Ted Turner Vermejo Park Ranch (Turner is a noted philanthropist and environmentalist), and three national forests. A protected natural corridor of 2,023,428 ha (5,000,000 acres) now exists the entire length of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, allowing wildlife to move freely. The only breaks in this corridor are

within the confines of the easement contract. The easement is linked to the property's deed and continues to exist with the property when it is sold or transferred to another person.

U.S. 160 over La Veta Pass and U.S. 64 through the mountains east of Taos.

In addition to the corridor, Bacon has been working at improving the forest health on the ranch. Crowded forest stands, spruce budworms, two recent wildfires, and a 20-year Southwest drought have killed large sections of the evergreen forest over the ranches and surrounding lands. To handle these conditions and create a healthier forest Bacon is removing and processing the dead trees (Hildner 2016). Although logging and thinning of the forests on the ranch had been routinely done in the past, Bacon, in 2016, took the process one step further and built a sawmill that is designed to function as a sustainable timbering operation. Among other things it can handle trees as small as 14 cm (5.5 inches) in diameter (the norm being 30.5 cm; 12 inches) and generate its own power using shredded bits of wood scraps in a boiler. The mill hires between 40 and 60 people making it the largest employer in a poor county. It shows that an area historically associated with a resource extraction economy can have a manufacturing economy based on its resources (Blevins 2019).

He is also addressing issues related to past grazing and lumbering practices on the ranch. Sagebrush is being removed in certain meadows to allow native grasses to return. Conifers are being taken out in riparian areas in order to have more space for cottonwoods and aspens to grow, trees that are native to wetlands adjacent to streams. Dense undergrowth and conifers are being eradicated on some mountain slopes to allow ponderosa pine savanna ecosystems to come back. Actions of this nature are attracting scientists, federal land managers, and other landowners seeking knowledge of how to create healthier forests and to protect wildlife alongside hunting, grazing, logging and other resource development (Blevins 2019). The Colorado Division of Wildlife is using the ranch as an outdoor laboratory (Weber 2018).

Bacon's conservation easement donation inspired U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to establish in 2012 the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area as a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2012). Salazar is a resident of the San Luis Valley, former U.S. Senator, and Interior Secretary in the Obama administration. This conservation area covers the original Sangre de Cristo Grant as outlined in Figure 3. Costilla County, Colorado makes up 79%

of the grant's former territory with the remaining 21% in New Mexico. Turner's huge Vermejo Park Ranch forms most of the New Mexico portion of the grant.

With the mountainous eastern half of the grant area now secured from future fragmentation of land for second/vacation home development, attention has now shifted to the western half of the grant area. This half is relatively flat and covered mainly with sagebrush with very few trees. Some center pivot irrigation fields exist here. In the early 1970s, when Forbes started his first subdivision, several large subdivisions were established in the western half of the grant, the two largest being the San Luis Valley Ranches and the Rio Grande Ranches. These subdivisions stretched out over nearly half of the flat valley floor with their rectangular arranged dirt roads. They had nice views of the mountains but they were not in the mountains as the real estate brochures suggested. The Federal Trade Commission charged Bankers Life and Casualty Company of Chicago and 11 other companies who owned these subdivisions with misleading buyers and described the land as being "worthless, either as an investment or for homesites" (King 1979). The sellers were forced to compensate financially the buyers. Most of this land now sits dormant and is available to be incorporated into the Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area.

Conclusion

A number of large ranches still remain in the Rocky Mountains and on the High Plains. The owners of these large land tracts need to be brought together to explore ways that they can maintain their holdings without fragmenting them into second/vacation home subdivisions. Some of these owners are already looking for ways to protect their ranches and most likely would enjoy exchanging ideas on how they might maintain their land. These individuals might form an alliance to help each other and rather than come together only once have regular meetings. Such meetings might become think tanks and include people from organizations such as Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, and Sierra Club. Two items that this alliance might address are the development of a standard conservation easement agreement document and the establishment of one donation holder for large ranches. At the present time conservation easement documents have various agreement con-

ditions and loopholes exist as illustrated by the Forbes family trying to subdivide the remainder of the Trinchera Ranch into lease arrangements. A donation holder can be a qualified conservation organization or a local, state, or federal government agency. By having one donation holder for all of the ranches under a conservation easement the alliance can become a strong political force in protecting the environment. Having a standard holder would eliminate local and state agencies. A federal agency would have the resources to monitor easements on a regular basis and nationally based conservation organizations such as those previously mentioned have the motivation to make sure landowners remain true to the easement agreements. Having more than one easement holder can lead to piecemeal arrangements. Bacon has to deal with Colorado Open Lands pertaining to the Trinchera portion of the ranch, a situation established by the Forbes family, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with respect to the Blanca section of the ranch. It would be functionally better to have the entire ranch under one donation holder. Keeping these large ranches intact is not only important to the environmental movement but is part of the popular movement to reclaim the spirit of the West (Flores 2002).

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