Welcome to the Altar Valley,

where about a dozen families have formed an alliance to care for a 600,000 plus acre working landscape. It all started back in 1995 when a couple of cowboys chatting at the Friday cattle sale did some dreaming and scheming. Their clear vision of gathering folks in the valley to work on protecting ranch land and continuing to enhance the health of the watershed has evolved into an ambitious work plan involving many partners.

Why is ranching in the Altar Valley important? Ranches are a vital part of the conservation solution in the American West. The West and its communities of people, plants and animals, and soil and water are at risk. Urban pressures and development are fragmenting the West. Ranches keep the country open, while producing food and other products from the land and conserving habitat, wildlife and recreation opportunities. The dark skies above the valley, another product of open country, are important for internationally recognized Kitt Peak National Observatory.

The Alliance gathers partners and ideas around this place, and the goals of keeping it healthy and open with a productive ranch economy. Our tools are sweat, science, policy, law, and most of all, the strength of our commitment to this beautiful valley where we work and live. We can’t do this work without partners.

We hope The Rainmaker inspires you to be part of the storm nourishing conservation in the Altar Valley. You’ll see project news, as well as an ongoing tour of watershed ranches, natural and cultural history, and issues. Most of all, thanks to all who have pitched in so far!

Eight years after that cattle sale, Altar Valley ranchers find themselves working with a diverse array of partners through the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance, a nonprofit 501(c)3 conservation organization formally established in December 2002. Here’s a bird’s eye view of accomplishments and current projects.

- A Natural Fire Management Plan was coordinated by former Arizona State Land Department fire specialist Carl Jones in the late 1990’s. Endangered species concerns have stalled implementation, a situation that we hope to resolve in our proposed Habitat Conservation Plan.

- The Altar Valley Watershed Resource Assessment Project, completed in December 2000, provided a scientific foundation, as well as Geographic Information System database, to guide stewardship goals and projects. The Arizona Water Protection Fund provided approximately $80,000 for the project, while Alliance members supplied countless hours of volunteer labor.

- Purchase of Palo Alto Ranch by Altar Valley ranchers Ross and Susie Humphreys in 2001 provided a bold and visionary example of ranch land protection. The Alliance accepted a perpetual conservation easement, management contract, and endowment for the Palo Alto Ranch Pima Pineapple Cactus Conservation Bank in December 2002. Also, the $250,000 Palo Alto Runoff Control Project funded by the Environmental Protection Agency begins serious work on Altar Wash restoration and conservation of the Palo Alto Ranch.

- A draft multi-species Habitat Conservation Plan for the benefit of six endangered and threatened species was completed in 2003.

With some luck, US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alliance will sign the implementing agreement in 2004: This $182,000 project is supported by federal habitat conservation plan assistance funds, and includes $63,000 of nonfederal matching funds and/or service, including a grant from the Sonoran Institute.

- Americorps volunteers spent a month in the Altar Valley in the spring of 2002 and 2003 building erosion control structures and surveying for Pima pineapple cactus.

- Altar Wash restoration was jump-started by the Sonoran Institute, through outreach to the restoration programs of the US Army Corps of Engineers. The Army Corps of Engineers will launch a $100,000 study in partnership with Pima County Flood Control and other partners to study restoration of the Altar Wash in the fall of 2003.

All told, the Alliance and our partners have corralled over $600,000 worth of project work on behalf of the Altar Valley watershed. The value of labor by ranchers and conservation cooperators would push the figure over a million dollars easily. Volunteers have pushed the Alliance’s work, with virtually no administrative costs. Not bad for a small ranching community and its partners!

The Alliance and Sonoran Institute are working together as conservation partners to conserve open spaces essential for wildlife, recreation, and livestock grazing in the Altar Valley. The Sonoran Institute, based in Tucson, Arizona, works with communities to conserve and restore important natural landscapes in Western North America, including the wildlife and cultural values of these lands. The Institute’s community stewardship work creates lasting benefits including healthy landscapes, vibrant economies, and livable communities that embrace conservation as an integral element of their economies and quality of life.

On Valentine’s Day 2003, the Alliance and Sonoran Institute signed a Memorandum of Understanding to officially recognize their partnership and commitment to conservation of the Altar Valley working landscape. Together, the two organizations are focusing on:

- Restoration of the Altar Wash;

- A diverse base of financial support for watershed projects and the Alliance;

- Increasing public awareness through a color brochure;

- A presentation at the AZ Hydrological Society Annual Symposium in September 2003;

- Development of a Habitat Conservation Plan.

Sonoran Institute staff member Amy McCoy participates in Alliance meetings, writes funding pro-
A short history of Altar Valley ranching: An overview of the upper ranches to 1890.

In cattle growers, the Altar Valley seems a natural place to raise cattle. Particularly at the southern end of the valley, which is still under montane forests and dissected by a few small streams, the temperature is mild and the rainfall is sufficient to support a dense growth of grasses and shrubs. The Altar Valley was one of the few places in Arizona where cattle could be raised successfully, and it quickly became a major source of beef for the east coast.

The first cattle ranch in the Altar Valley was established by Lt. Col. William S. Sturgis of Chicago in 1869. Sturgis was an experienced cattleman, having previously worked in the Texas cattle business. He chose the Altar Valley because of its favorable climate, abundant grasses, and ready access to water.

Sturgis built a fort at the mouth of the Gila River and established a herd of cattle. He soon began to realize the potential of the Altar Valley as a cattle ranching area, and he purchased additional land, including the land that is now the site of the University of Arizona campus.

By 1870, the Altar Valley was home to several ranches, each with its own herd of cattle. The most prominent of these was the Sturgis Ranch, which later became known as the University of Arizona Ranch.

By the 1880s, the Altar Valley was well known as a center for cattle ranching, and many of the large ranches that are still in existence today were established during this period.

The University of Arizona Press

Ranching, Endangered Species, and Urbanization in the Southwest

Within the past decade, there has been a growing interest in the preservation of the Altar Valley. This interest has been fueled by the increasing numbers of ranches and urban development in the area, as well as the realization that the Altar Valley is a unique and endangered ecosystem.

The University of Arizona Press

Recent research by S. F. Payne and J. L. Thompson has shown that the Altar Valley is a critical habitat for several endangered species, including the Altar Valley spadefoot toad and the Altar Valley kangaroo rat.

Conserving the Altar Valley for future generations

The Altar Valley is a unique and diverse ecosystem that is of great importance to the people of Arizona. It is important that we continue to work together to preserve this precious resource for future generations.
The pioneer edition of The Rainmaker was made possible through the generosity of Elkhorn Ranch guests, who remind us that the wild open ranch lands of the West are both a national treasure and a keystone for conservation of our country’s resources and heritage.

**ELKHORN RANCH**

This first issue of The Rainmaker is dedicated to the memory of John (JD) Cathcart, who helped form the Alliance and served as the first Community Representative on the Board of Directors. JD’s presence and editorial urged consideration of the nation here at home while making the community a better part of the nation. He was a community patriot.

JD, the press is rolling here in the Altar Valley!

*JD Cathcart and his son Jason, who cowboys for the Anvil and Elkhorn Ranches and caretakes at the Palo Alto.*

**Special thanks** to the organizations and individuals who have expressed hope for the Altar Valley through contributions and service to the Alliance thus far! Your faith in the Alliance during these early years is especially appreciated!

- Americorps Volunteers
- Arizona Game and Fish Department
- Arizona State Land Department
- Arizona Water Protection Fund
- Betts Printing
- Boyd, Bill
- Buchanan Family
- Cathcart Family
- Chilton Family
- Coe, Nancy Bell
- Coronado Resource Conservation & Development District
- Devine, Kevin and Cynthia
- duPont, Mrs. B.G.
- Egan, Kristen
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Fox, Heather and colleagues at Sierrita Mining and Ranching
- Graff, Mary and Bill
- Helen Clay Frick Foundation
- Humphreys, Ross and Susan
- Iams, Richard and Donna
- Isamen, Betty
- Jones, Carl
- Kasupilis, Rob and Mary
- Kay, Tom and Deena
- King Family
- King, Mrs. Joe
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- McGibbon Family
- Meyer Family
- Miller Family and Elkhorn Ranch
- New York Times Foundation
- Oliver, Jim and Kitty
- Noon Family
- Pima County
- Pima Natural Resource Conservation District
- Provost, Cherry and Lou
- Robideaux Foundation
- Robinett, Dan
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- Santa Marigita Ranch
- Sayre Family
- Sheridan, Tom
- Short, John
- Sonoran Institute
- Tucker, Gene and Charly
- Urry, Deanne and Tom
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- US Natural Resource Conservation Service
- West and Resources, Inc.
- Wohl, Alice and Helmut

The Rainmaker editors Peggy Rowley and Mary Miller greatly appreciate contributions from Mary Kasupilis, Pat King, Amy McCoy, and Ross Humphreys.

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**Please share your ideas and questions with us!**

The Altar Valley Conservation Alliance needs your ideas and support! Please contact any of the Executive Committee by phone or by mail at:

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*The Rainmaker is published by the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance twice per year. Articles may be freely reprinted for nonprofit purposes, provided that credit is given to the author and the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance.

Please contact the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance for a complimentary copy of The Rainmaker. Copies of The Rainmaker will be distributed to all Alliance partners and supporters. Please contact the Alliance with questions, ideas, concerns, or address changes at: Altar Valley Conservation Alliance, c/o King Anvil Ranch, HC 1 Box 97E, Tucson, AZ 85736.*

Designed and Printed by Betts Printing, Tucson, Arizona.