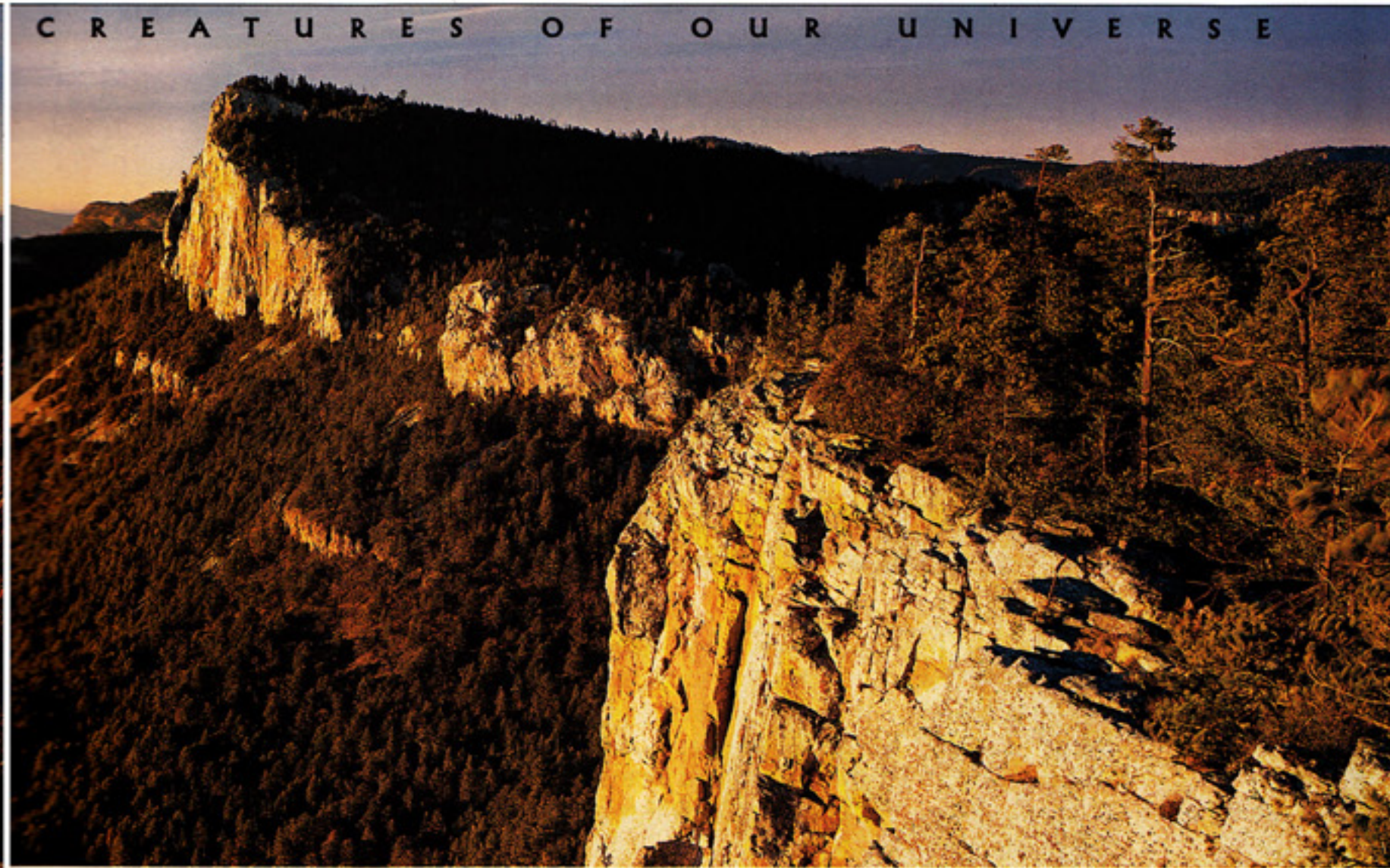


GEOGRAPHICA

THE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND CREATURES OF OUR UNIVERSE



CONSERVATION

Borderland Comeback



Sky islands: That's what ecologists call tree-covered ranges that rise from surrounding desert and scrubland. It suits Maderas del Carmen (above), 515,000 acres set aside for conservation in northern Mexico, part of a growing patchwork of protected Chihuahuan Desert lands along the U.S.-Mexico border. In these limestone mountains live 400 bird species (more than half the number commonly seen in the continental U.S.) and 70 mammal species, including one that's returning after a long absence, the desert bighorn sheep.

"The sheep were all shot out 60 years ago. It's a dream for us

to reintroduce them," says Patricio Robles Gil, president of Agrupación Sierra Madre, a conservation group spearheading the project. In the past two years nearly 50 sheep have been brought from an island in the Gulf of California (far right) to a 12,000-acre enclosure adjacent to Maderas del Carmen. "Once

we build up a herd, we'll begin releasing them," he says. Established in 1994, Maderas del Carmen remains largely privately owned rangeland. Robles Gil recently worked with Cemex,



WHY THE CHIHUAHUAN DESERT MATTERS

You've probably heard of the Sonoran Desert, but you may not know the quarter-million-square-mile desert to its east. The Chihuahuan Desert covers parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and 25 percent of Mexico's land surface. Nearly a quarter of the world's cactus species live here, and the World Wildlife Fund ranks it third in overall desert-species diversity, after Africa's Namib-Karoo region and Australia's Great Sandy Desert.



a Mexican cement company, to purchase 136,000 acres within and bordering del Carmen that will be more strictly conserved.

The expanding range of another del Carmen resident illustrates the value of corridors of protected land. Black bears



(above) now wander into Big Bend National Park, where they'd been absent for decades.

A bear helped teach Robles Gil about balancing the needs of wildlife and humans. He once spent time with a rancher who refused to kill bears even when they

killed livestock. "The rancher had a cowboy who raised pigs, and one day a bear killed one. The rancher said, 'If the bears kill all ten of your pigs, come back and tell me.' The bears killed them all, and the rancher paid the cowboy for his losses." —John L. Eliot

PATRICIO ROBLES GIL, AGRUPACIÓN SIERRA MADRE (ALL)