Reflecting on 2015, Looking Ahead to 2016

Thank you for creating a more protected and connected Sonoran Desert!

It's that time of year, when we reflect back on everything we've accomplished together in 2015 and look ahead to our plans for 2016. What are our major accomplishments from this year? What was challenging or failed? What lessons can we learn from both? And how will we apply these lessons moving forward?

Wildlife Linkages Protection

2015 was a BIG YEAR for protecting and re-connecting our critical wildlife linkages. Thank you!

ADOT installed wildlife fencing between the two large wildlife underpasses on State Route 86 near Kitt Peak and put the finishing touches on this project. Wildlife cameras continue to document a wide variety of wildlife crossing this road safely and wildlife-vehicle collisions have dropped to almost zero.

After so many years of hard work and planning with your support, the Oracle Road wildlife crossings were finally built. They will be officially “finished” in Spring 2016 but this year they really took shape. And before they were even done, animals started using them! Javelina and desert tortoise have both been found in the underpass and javelina tracks have been spotted on the bridge. Deer have also been seen near the bridge, ready and waiting! Miles of wildlife fencing was also built and will funnel wildlife to these two crossings, leading to greatly increased safety for both wildlife and motorists driving on Oracle Road.

In 2016, we'll be celebrating the official “opening” of the Oracle Road wildlife crossings and launching a new volunteer-driven Wildlife Crossing Stewardship and Monitoring Program. This program will complement monitoring being done by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and ensure these crossings are working as effectively as possible into the future. We'll also be shifting focus to the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage, perhaps the most challenging linkage in our region with Interstate 10 as the major barrier.

Open Space Protection

Much of our work in this area in 2015 was focused on advocacy for Proposition 430 in the November bond election. Ever since $174 million in bond funding was approved for open space protection by voters in 2004, we've been campaigning for a new Open Space Bond. This is because without connected open space, vulnerable wildlife populations will suffer, genetic diversity will drop, and our Sonoran Desert ecosystem will decline. Thank you for supporting this campaign in so many ways.

With your support, among other things, we were able to hire a part-time consultant to work specifically on campaigning for Proposition 430 and our Executive Director gave over 30 presentations to a variety of local community groups about the importance of open space protection. Even though the 2004 Open Space Bond passed with 66% of voters voting “YES,” polling this fall indicated that Pima County voters were fairly evenly split on the bond election. As with any election, we tried to make strategic decisions and present the best case possible but it is the voters who are ultimately in charge. It was a huge disappointment when Proposition 430, and all of the bond propositions, failed on November 3.

We are currently reflecting and strategizing on the best way to move forward. The fact is, Pima County still needs more protected open space to fulfill the required mitigation outlined in their Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan. And Sonoran Desert wildlife species still need more connected and protected open space to survive. With roads and development continuing to be built, water resources under strain, and the impacts of climate change, the sense of urgency is only growing.

In 2016, with your help, we'll continue working with local elected officials and private developers on the inclusion of connected open space in their projects. While these pieces of open space are often small, they can collectively provide a crucial network of open space in our community. We will also continue to do what we often do best: think...
Ah the dreaded cold, dark and dreary winters that we suffer through here in the Sonoran Desert! In reality, the winters aren’t that long, or that dreary. And as Winter Solstice arrives to signal the start of “winter,” we will be celebrating a warmer time than we have during the last two weeks.

The recent rains point to a vibrant, colorful Spring that is right around the corner! Before we know it, the birds will be singing, eggs will be hatching, the poppies will be popping up along with the penstemons, the palo verdes, and then the ironwoods.

Spring will also bring the completion of the Sonoran Desert’s first wildlife bridge, a concept that is new to our local residents but one which is embraced by so many. So this Spring, we will be know what species are bold enough to take advantage of this bridge. The wildlife underpass on Oracle Road will be complete as well. And animals have been seen venturing over and under these structures already. Because they can!

November brought us unhappy news about the results of the open space bond vote. But, like the Sonoran Desert, we are a resilient community that will fight all the more ferociously (and creatively) to ensure permanent protection of some of our most treasured and biologically important areas.

2016 brings me hope. 2016 brings us a new energy to continue this most important work, work that we do in partnership with all of you — our volunteers, our supporters, our friends.

Here at the Coalition, we hope to see a lot of you, whether it is in the office, out on a project, or on a walk in this glorious place that we love so much.

Happy New Year,

Carolyn Campbell

The Coalition works to create a community where: ecosystem health is protected; nature and healthy wild animal populations are valued; and residents, visitors, and future generations can all drink clean water, breathe clean air, and find wild places to roam.

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outside the box and leverage the collective resources of our member groups and their expertise to develop new strategies for protecting open spaces. We’ll keep you posted!

And thank you once again for being by our side as we work through these challenges.

Endangered Species Protection

Since Pima County submitted the final draft of their Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in December 2012, we’ve had to be patient as Fish and Wildlife works through their review process. However, we expect 2016 to be the year when this long-awaited plan is finalized and implementation begins. What does this mean? It means that Pima County’s plan for protecting vulnerable, threatened, and endangered species will officially be sanctioned by the federal government as “mitigation,” under the Endangered Species Act. With your support, we worked with Pima County for 15 years on the development of this plan. And once it is given official approval from Fish and Wildlife, we will continue to work with Pima County on its implementation. This includes management and monitoring and a host of important conservation measures centered on our most vulnerable wildlife species such as the desert tortoise, a variety of bats, the western yellow-billed cuckoo, burrowing owl, Gila chub, Northern Mexico gartersnake, the Pima pineapple cactus, and many more (44 species total).

Wildlife Camera Project

Lastly, 30+ volunteers continue to monitor 17 cameras near the Oracle Road wildlife crossings. Since April 2012, these cameras have captured thousands and thousands of stunning photos of local wildlife. These photos are the only pre-construction monitoring of the crossings and have provided invaluable data on wildlife diversity in this area. Into the future, they will be used by Arizona Game and Fish Department as part of their post-construction monitoring of the crossings.

Starting this month, we are launching a new wildlife camera project in the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage. Starting with 10 cameras, 13+ volunteers will be monitoring wildlife diversity in this highly threatened linkage. This new project is being named in memory of one of our first wildlife camera volunteers, David Kelly, who spent countless hours in our office sorting thousands of photos during the first two years of the project.

Volunteers make this project possible and we couldn’t do it without them! Thank you to all our wildlife camera volunteers and welcome to our new participants!

And More…

Thanks to your support, we continue to be the lead organization that provides feedback and recommendations on local environmental policies and ordinances and keeps a close eye on how these policies do (or don’t) integrate with the vision of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. We also keep track of and make recommendations on larger projects such as renewable energy projects, transmission line sitings, and state legislation.

Thank you for everything you do for Sonoran Desert protection. Your time, your voice, your encouragements, your constructive criticisms, and your financial support are the foundation of all of this work. We really couldn’t do all this without you — thank you.
Wildlife Soon to Have Safe Passages Across Oracle Road

Thank you for helping to protect and reconnect one of our most threatened wildlife linkages

The finish line is getting closer for the completion of the wildlife underpass and vegetated wildlife bridge (the first in Pima County!) across Oracle Road. Once these crossings are completely finished, wildlife will be able to travel safely between the Santa Catalina and Tortolita Mountains. We are proud to see this project nearing completion and are grateful for your support that helped make it a reality. Because of you, we have captured thousands of photos of stunning Sonoran Desert wildlife through our remote camera project near the wildlife crossings. Soon, animals like deer, badger, bobcat, javelina, coyote, and mountain lion will be able to take advantage of these crossings! Already, javelina tracks have been documented in the underpass and a desert tortoise interrupted construction crews as it made its way beneath Oracle Road (inset photo above). Special wildlife fence on either side of Oracle Road will help guide wildlife to the crossings. **Thank you for making this possible!**

Both the wildlife underpass and overpass are funded with 2006 voter approved funds from the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) for projects related to wildlife linkages.

In October, we teamed up with Sky Island Alliance, Tucson Audubon Society, the Santa Catalina Catholic Church, and many dedicated volunteers to plant a vegetated barrier with native plants between the eastern approach to the wildlife bridge and the entrance to the Santa Catalina Catholic Church. This barrier will be important to shield wildlife from human impacts, such as artificial lights and noise, as they make their way to the bridge. The finishing touches were completed in November and this month. **Thank you to all the volunteers who helped with this important project.**

In 2016, we will continue to gather post-construction data with our wildlife cameras and implement a “Wildlife Crossing Stewardship” program which will include a comprehensive post-construction monitoring plan. 2016 will be a big year for connected and protected wildlife linkages! **Thank you!**

Volunteers helped make this vegetation project a great success!
The Genius Loci Foundation began with a place that we love, a certain section of the Sutherland Wash just north of Catalina State Park. More than 80% of Arizona’s wildlife relies on riparian habitat to survive, yet less than 3% of our landscape remains riparian. Learning this we felt protective. For us there’s also an additional layer of meaning that this particular place holds for us. It’s like the difference between a house and the dream of a home, or the difference between a job and finding a life’s work. When we heard the term, genius loci (a Latin phrase for the protective spirit of a place), our dream was given a name.

We were thrilled when Carianne Campbell and the Arizona Native Plant Society brought their enthusiasm to our small Genius Loci Riparian Preserve. That first plant walk in Spring 2014 taught us that we already had more than 60 plant species in place. What really fired us up, however, were the ANPS volunteers! There’s something so invigorating when people band together in awe of the natural world. We saw this again and again with Blue Chip volunteers from the University of Arizona and a tracking workshop visit from the Sky Island Alliance in March 2015. We received a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grant, in partnership with Sky Island Alliance, to mitigate erosion and plant 90 new plants. In April we received federal not-for-profit 501c3 status, so the first part of our mission: to restore, enhance and preserve riparian habitat is well underway.

The second part of our mission: to champion nature and art as profound symbiotic forces is also off to a promising start. In June 2015 we opened our house and land to Tucson artist, Bobby Long, as our first Artist-in-Residence and the results are fascinating. We’ll be showing his work in Fall 2016 and hope additional residencies will be a consistent opportunity for visual artists, writers, scholars and performers. Other educational opportunities through internships, workshops and supervised field trips teaching art and science as mutually awe inspiring endeavors will follow.

As a new member of the CSDP we hope to offer another voice to the many that are making advances in protecting and preserving our unique and astounding sky islands, desert seas, and the connections between, including our own. We believe wholeheartedly in saving large open spaces, but we also believe that linkages between those spaces and riparian corridors such as ours are more than wildlife interstates, they’re like veins and nervous systems that carry the lifeblood needed sustain the vital organs required for life on earth to survive.

For more information, visit [www.geniuslocifoundation.com](http://www.geniuslocifoundation.com)
We’re Adding Wildlife Cameras to Our Fleet!

Our new “David Kelly” cameras will document wildlife in the Tucson–Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage

By the end of this year the Oro Valley area won’t be the only place where we document wildlife! Thanks to your support, we are adding 10 new wildlife cameras to the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage this month.

The Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage is one of the most threatened in Arizona. Interstate 10 bisects the linkage, creating a formidable barrier for wildlife movement. With a growing population, habitat fragmentation and loss of genetic diversity are increasing problems for wildlife. This new camera project will document wildlife presence, diversity, and movement within this linkage and identify other potential barriers to movement. The data we gather will be used to advocate for a wildlife crossing structure across I-10 and preservation of this critical wildlife linkage. This project will expand on the 17 cameras already in operation in the wildlife linkage between the Santa Catalina and Tucson Mountains. We are proud to name this new region in honor of a long-time volunteer and supporter, David Kelly. For the first two years of our camera project, David was a beloved volunteer in our office and patiently sorted through thousands of wildlife camera photos. In his memory, David’s friends and family donated funds to expand our wildlife camera project.

This project is completely volunteer driven. A big thank you to all our loyal and dedicated camera volunteers who have donated over 6,000 hours to this project! If you are interested in volunteering to monitor a camera in the Tucson Mountains or want to sort photos in our office, contact Hannah at hannah.stitzer@sonorandesert.org or call our office at (520) 388-9925.

Thanks to you, we are adding new wildlife cameras to the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage this month!

This expansion wouldn’t have been possible without the donations from David Kelly’s friends and family. What started out as a vision to add just one camera in David’s memory turned into something much bigger! We received such a large amount of contributions we are now able to expand our wildlife camera project to a whole new region. Thank you! We are proud to have created a lasting legacy for Sonoran Desert protection in honor of David.

Planting Seeds Today, for Tomorrow

Interested in leaving a Legacy Gift for the Coalition? View information about legacy giving options at www.sonorandesert.org/legacygiving.
Environmental Lobby Day is February 9!

Do you want to make a positive environmental impact in our State Legislature? One of our member groups, the Sierra Club, is organizing the annual Environmental Lobby Day on February 9th in Phoenix! This is a day when citizen activists from across Arizona meet in groups with their legislators to discuss current bills and environmental issues important to them. Please join us! We have reserved a charter bus that will travel from Tucson to Phoenix for the day. If you would like to participate or want more information, email Sandy Bahr at sandy.bahr@sierraclub.org. If you would like to reserve your spot on the bus, email Hannah at hannah.stitzer@sonorandesert.org. We hope to see you there!

Beat Back Buffelgrass Day is January 23

Join the Coalition, the Catalina State Park Buffel Slayers, and the Town of Oro Valley to remove buffelgrass in beautiful Catalina State Park on January 23. Visit www.buffelgrass.org for details and to sign up!