

We're Celebrating Our 50th Issue!

Friends of the Desert

Issue 50 Spring 2016

A Strong Voice for the People and Wildlife of the Sonoran Desert

Photo: Tom Wiewandt

What Future Do You See for the Sonoran Desert?

New aerial photos showcase both recent successes and ongoing challenges

Declining wildlife numbers. Fragmented habitat. Increased roadkill and wildlife-vehicle collisions. Sprawl and haphazard development.

Thriving wildlife. Connected and preserved open spaces. Safe highways for people and wildlife. Thoughtful and well-located development.

Which of these visions for the future do you want to see?

In February, the Coalition organized a flight over the Marana and Oro Valley areas to document both our protected open spaces and ongoing threats from new development and our expanding roadway network. From thousands of feet in the air, our volunteer photographers captured stunning images of both our successes and our ongoing challenges.

Spectacular photos of the new Oracle Road wildlife bridge showcase this amazing accomplishment. This new wildlife crossing now connects open space leading west to the Tortolita Mountains and east to the Santa Catalina Mountains. While dense development exists nearby, the wildlife bridge was clearly built in a critical place within this linkage. A large wildlife underpass, not visible in the photos, provides an alternative crossing location a mile to the south.

Other photos reveal Interstate 10 and the devastating barrier this highway



An aerial view of Pima County's first wildlife bridge providing animals a safe passage across Oracle Road. Photo courtesy Thomas Wiewandt.



Interstate 10 divides the Tortolita Mountains (out of the photo to the left or east) and the Tucson Mountains (just peeking out in the upper right of the photo), threatening the genetic diversity of local wildlife populations. Your support allows us to monitor local wildlife here. Photo courtesy Thomas Wiewandt.

poses to wildlife trying to travel between the Tortolita and the Tucson Mountains. Right now, this practically insurmountable obstacle threatens the genetic diversity of wildlife populations in Saguaro National Park, one of the crown jewels of southern Arizona, and Ironwood Forest National Monument further to the northwest, along with locally-managed preserves such as Tortolita Mountain Park and Tucson Mountain Park.

With your ongoing support, we have made some impressive accomplishments together. Yet, as these photos show, many challenges remain. Developments need to be thoughtfully and carefully designed with minimal impact to the surrounding landscape. More open space needs to be protected. More wildlife crossings need to be built. More wildlife need us to advocate and fight for them.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the Sonoran Desert. You've made a difference. And we look forward to even more successes together this year.

The nonprofit organization Lighthawk, Inc. and their volunteer pilot Greg Bedinger enabled our recent flight to take these aerial photos. Thank you!

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Carolyn's Corner

We Have an Exciting Year Ahead of Us!

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.

Coalition Member Groups

- Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest
- Arizona Native Plant Society
- Bat Conservation International
- Cascabel Conservation Association
- Center for Biological Diversity
- Center for Environmental Connections
- Center for Environmental Ethics
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Desert Watch
- Empire Fagan Coalition
- Environmental and Cultural Conservation Organization
- Environmental Law Society
- Friends of Cabeza Prieta
- Friends of Ironwood Forest
- Friends of Madera Canyon
- Friends of Saguaro National Park
- Friends of Tortolita
- Gates Pass Area Neighborhood
- Genius Loci Foundation
- Native Seeds / SEARCH
- Northwest Neighborhood Alliance
- Protect Land and Neighborhoods
- Safford Peak Watershed Education Team
- Save the Scenic Santa Ritas
- Sierra Club – Grand Canyon Chapter
- Sierra Club – Rincon Group
- Sky Island Alliance
- Sky Island Watch
- Society for Ecological Restoration
- Southwestern Biological Institute
- Tortolita Homeowners Association
- Tucson Audubon Society
- Tucson Herpetological Society
- Tucson Mountains Association
- Wildlands Network

Construction of the wildlife crossings on State Route 77 (north Oracle Road) is now completed and “open for business!” And so begins our work to document their effectiveness, monitor human impacts, and continue to excite the public about why this is important for healthy and functioning wildlife habitat! We will also be focusing our efforts to research and fund options for wildlife crossing infrastructure to re-connect the fragmented wildlife linkage between the Tortolita and Tucson mountain ranges so stay tuned about this.



And we are awaiting the final US Fish and Wildlife Service’s approval of Pima County’s Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan, which will formalize the many policies and ordinances that Pima County has implemented to conserve our most valuable and threatened biological resources. While Pima County elected officials and staff have been committed to the vision and goals of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, this formal approval will provide assurances that

We want to hear from YOU about how we can best meet the challenges that are facing the Sonoran Desert now and in the future.

future county administrations will continue this conservation legacy. As soon as this permit is issued, Pima County will put conservation easements on all of its conservation lands, so as to protect these parks in perpetuity. And, with your help, the Coalition will remain an active partner in these efforts.

Finally, it is exciting that our Coalition membership continues to grow, and we plan to keep in closer touch with all of you! We want to hear from YOU about the programs that you feel are most valuable in pursuing, about what we can do better, and how we can best meet the challenges that are facing the Sonoran Desert and the planet now and in the future.

Thanks for being such an important part of everything we do here at the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection. Your efforts continue to inspire us in all of our work!



A volunteer finishes the setup of a new wildlife camera in the northern Tucson Mountains.

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The Coalition operates as a fiscally-sponsored project of Coalition member group Sky Island Alliance (EIN # 86-0796748). All donations to the Coalition are fully tax-deductible.

Website: www.sonorandesert.org

Friends of the Desert is printed on 100% recycled paper. Design & Layout: Julie St. John

Arizona Corporate Commission Approves Destructive SunZia Transmission Line

Renowned San Pedro River Valley and highly diverse wildlife will suffer

by Christina McVie, Chair of the Coalition's Advisory Committee and the Conservation Chair for the Tucson Audubon Society

After weeks of sworn testimony in public hearings throughout southern Arizona, last November the Arizona Power Plant and Transmission Line Siting Committee voted 8-0 to approve the SunZia Southwest Transmission Project. SunZia proposes two parallel 500 KV merchant transmission lines, originating in northeastern New Mexico and traversing 200 miles of southeastern Arizona, running parallel to and north of I-10, up the San Pedro River Valley, and then westward to the Pinal Central substation east of Eloy. At the end of the hearings Chairman Chenal stated, "I think this is a perfect example of the effort to find the least worst decision... The jewel, the San Pedro River Valley, is pristine... And my heart just breaks that, you know, there's going to be a transmission line through there." Several members of the Committee cited the lack of an alternative route as a primary factor in their conclusion.

Independent Pro-se intervenors Christina McVie, Peter Else, and Mick Meader provided evidence and arguments against the proposal before both the Line Siting Committee and the Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC). The intervenors provided testimony regarding the economic infeasibility of the New Mexico wind portion of the project, the lack of proof of economic benefit to the ratepayers of Arizona and the lack of assurances that the Project would actually provide renewable energy, as touted by SunZia since its inception. The intervenors and their expert witnesses clearly established that the San Pedro River watershed is an "area of unique biological wealth" (as defined in the Factors to be Considered in granting a Certificate of Environmental Compatibility), and that SunZia could adversely impact this renowned conservation mitigation and bird migration corridor.

In a statement to the ACC, the Salt River Project (SRP), which has the largest utility stake in the project, now says their only interest in SunZia is to deliver coal-fired generation from their power plants in eastern Arizona.

In a 3-2 vote on February 3, 2016, the ACC approved the granting of a Certificate of Environmental Compatibility for SunZia. ACC Chairman Doug Little and Commissioner Tom Forese opposed approval because of the exploitation of Arizona's resources, potential conflicts with our own renewable energy development, and limited benefits to the state. At the end of the ACC meeting, Chairman Little stated, "I am extremely disappointed in the outcome of this decision and believe there were better alternative routes with significantly less environmental impacts

that unfortunately were not approved during the route evaluation process undertaken by SunZia during the National Environmental Protection Act review process. I am truly

saddened that one of the crown jewels of Arizona's unspoiled wilderness will be irreparably harmed by this decision." Chairman Little subsequently issued an eight-page written dissent stating, amongst other concerns, that the record does not establish a need for the Project, that benefits of the Project are highly speculative and questionable, and that consideration of environmental impacts, as required by statute, was limited by not having alternative routes to consider.

Intervenor Peter Else has filed a request for a rehearing before the ACC.

SunZia will adversely impact this renowned conservation mitigation and bird migration corridor

April 5th is Arizona Gives Day!

On this day, advocates from across Arizona support nonprofits doing amazing work.

Want to see a better connected and protected Sonoran Desert?

Visit sonorandesert.org on April 5th to donate.

Thanks for all you do!





Sonoran desert wildlife captured from our remote cameras are ready to use the new wildlife crossings across Oracle Road. Funnel fencing will direct them to the crossings, including the new wildlife bridge. *Wildlife bridge photo courtesy Thomas Wiewandt.*



If You Build it, They Will Come

Monitoring of the Oracle Road Wildlife Crossings Starts Soon!

With construction of the Oracle Road wildlife crossings in the very final stages, it's time to start monitoring both the wildlife bridge and underpass for wildlife use. We are so excited to share the next phase of this project with you and thank you again for helping make this happen!

Thanks to your support, we will be collaborating with Game and Fish to monitor the crossings for the next four years.

While wildlife crossings are a proven and tested way to make our roads safer for wildlife and people, this is the first time crossings of this

size have been built in the Sonoran Desert and on the edge of a large urban city. The Coalition and our amazing volunteers will be collaborating with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) on a comprehensive four-year monitoring program starting this spring.

AGFD has developed a three-part monitoring program:

- Conducting roadkill surveys to confirm a reduction in roadkill in the project area, and
- Providing recommendations for adaptively managing the crossings into the future.

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The Coalition's volunteers will be monitoring new wildlife cameras in the approaches to the crossings. We expect it will take some time for all wildlife to adapt to using the crossings. Our new cameras will provide valuable data on which wildlife species use the crossings right away and which wildlife approach the crossings at first and then turn around.

Coalition volunteers will also monitor the miles of wildlife fencing for holes and breaches, record evidence of human use of the crossings, and provide regular "eyes on the ground" about any problems with the crossings. This stewardship will be critical moving forward and we are so grateful for our volunteers who have already stepped up for this important job!

AGFD expects to have their cameras installed by the end of April. We will be raising funds to move forward with our part of the project. Stay tuned and thank you again!

Volunteer/Donor Spotlight: Sarah McKenzie

"Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread." —Edward Abbey

The Sonoran Desert intrigued and captivated me from the first day of my Tucson visit. On the second day I persuaded my husband that we should build a house near Catalina State Park. We never looked back and now make Catalina our home.

As a Minnesotan transplant, I quickly learned how different the desert is from the lush Mississippi Valley (and I'm not even talking about politics). The desert is full of contradictions — tough, thorny, poisonous and at the same time, fragile, delicate and sweet. I wanted to help preserve this most amazing place.

I soon learned of the critical role the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection played in conservation in Pima County including:

- Development of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (Pima County's innovative and comprehensive plan for balancing conservation with development),



- Passage of the 2004 Open Space bonds, and recently,
- Building of the wildlife crossings on Oracle Road.

I wanted to get involved with an effective group and I found one. I volunteer with interesting like-minded people, monitoring a wildlife camera, helping with mailings, and lobbying in Phoenix.

Financial support is the life blood of a non-profit and is how it carries out its mission. I've found giving to be easy and satisfying by setting up an automatic monthly contribution through the website.

"La esperanza muera ultima. Hope dies last. You can't lose hope. If you lose hope, you lose everything."
—Jessie de la Cruz, retired farm worker.

Supporting the Coalition though volunteering time and money is for me a strong antidote for the powerlessness I can feel watching the disappearing wilderness.

Thank you Sarah for all your hard work as a volunteer and your ongoing support as a monthly donor!