

# Friends of the Desert

Issue 76 - Fall 2025

We envision a community in the Sonoran Desert where ecosystems are healthy, valued, and protected, with benefits for current and future generations.

## Our vision: the Tucson Mountains, reconnected

### *Improving the critical Tucson-Tortolita wildlife linkage*

The wildlife linkage between the Tucson and Tortolita Mountains is **deeply compromised, but it's not too late**. This linkage is split by Interstate-10, a nearly impassable barrier for wildlife movement.

Species in the Tucson Mountains are also at risk of becoming **completely isolated in the next 20-30 years due to encroaching development**.

Building on two decades of success at the Oracle Road wildlife crossings, **we are now working to ensure that native wildlife can safely move** across this increasingly fragmented landscape—an essential function for genetic diversity, species survival, and ecosystem resilience.

### How do we plan to reconnect the Tucson and Tortolita Mountains?

- The new **Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp**, completed this summer, helps wildlife cross the river and its steep levees. Funnel fencing guides wildlife through this passage. See image below.
- We dream of, and are advocating for, a **new wildlife bridge over I-10** at Avra Valley Road to allow animals to safely traverse I-10.
- Existing and new **protected open spaces** east and west of the wildlife bridge will create a **functional pathway** for wildlife between the mountain ranges.



The new Santa Cruz River wildlife ramp, with the Tucson Mountains to the west. Your support makes this work possible! Photo credit: Nanda Srinivasamurthy.

# Planning for our future

## Resource-intensive data centers

In early summer 2025, news emerged of a new, and large, data center proposal in Pima County with the code name *Project Blue*.

Threats of resource-intensive development aren't new — think Copper World, or the South32, mines — but this one was particularly secretive.

In June, the Coalition began **calling for increased transparency** and a NO vote on the proposal given the **extraordinary natural resources that the project would require**.

Since then, we've worked to strengthen policies and ordinances that address resource-intensive development across our region. And we're **pushing back on similar threats — including a proposed Pinal County data center** that would disrupt key wildlife linkages and Ironwood Forest National Monument.

CSDP is just one of many working to protect our natural resources from data centers. **Our region deserves both economic development and conservation**, and we will continue to advocate for policies that make responsible growth possible.



Santa Cruz River. Photo credit: Frank Staub.



Our work to steward the Oracle Road crossings continued this spring and summer! Pictured is the crew from our erosion control and tree planting day. Thanks to Strategic Habitat Enhancements for their partnership on this work!

## Funding a new wildlife bridge over I-10

### The role of the RTA Next plan

The RTA Next plan is a **once-in-twenty year chance** to secure funding for additional wildlife crossings in Southern Arizona.

The **RTA Next plan will head to voters in March 2026**, when the community will be asked to vote on continuing a half-cent sales tax that will fund transportation projects through 2046. **RTA Next includes a \$50 million budget for wildlife linkages**, critical funding that will encourage other state and federal funds.

Thanks to you, there was nearly ten times as much community support for wildlife crossings than for any other item in RTA Next — a reminder that **your voice matters!**

## Improving the Oracle Road wildlife crossings with our volunteers

This summer, we **surveyed the wildlife funnel fencing** that shepherds wildlife towards the crossings to identify and report damages to ADOT, who is responsible for its maintenance.

We found and reported **59 breaks in the fence**, around half caused by animals and the rest by erosion or people.



Volunteer Erik Donkersley surveys the funnel fence.

# Protecting Ironwood Forest National Monument

## Familiar threats against our public lands

Ironwood Forest National Monument is once again under attack. **The current administration is eyeing boundary reductions to allow for mining**, which would threaten the wildlife and plant species, cultural resources, geology, and open spaces that make this landscape so special.



June's rally at the monument. Photo credit: Frank Staub.

Since the news broke in April 2025, we've rallied with partners to defend the monument. That work has paid off: **Pima County, the Town of Marana, and the City of Tucson all stand with us** and officially oppose reductions to the monument's boundary. They also issued proclamations this June to celebrate Ironwood's 25th anniversary with Friends of Ironwood Forest.

These aren't the first threats against the monument, and we expect they won't be the last. **If you love your public lands and Ironwood Forest National Monument, let your representatives know!**



# Desert updates

## Resisting short-sighted development for 27+ years

threats to Ironwood Forest National Monument and other public lands, and transportation projects such as Interstate 11.

**With your continued support, we can keep pushing back against such short-sighted development,** advocate for smarter alternatives, and ensure decision-makers **hear the voices** of those who care about protecting the Sonoran Desert.

**For the desert,**  
Kathleen and Kate

## Coalition members

- Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest
  - Arizona Master Naturalist Association
  - Arizona Native Plant Society
  - Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum\*
  - Bat Conservation International
  - Cascabel Conservation Association
  - Center for Biological Diversity
  - Center for Environmental Ethics
  - DarkSky Southern Arizona\*
  - Defenders of Wildlife
  - Environmental Law Society
  - Friends of Ironwood Forest
  - Friends of Saguaro National Park
  - Friends of Tortolita
  - Gates Pass Area Neighborhood Association
  - Great Old Broads for Wilderness – Tucson
  - Living Desert Alliance\*
  - Native Seeds/SEARCH
  - Save the Scenic Santa Ritas
  - Sierra Club – Grand Canyon Chapter
  - Sierra Club – Nopales Group
  - Sky Island Alliance
  - Tortolita Alliance
  - Tucson Bird Alliance
  - Tucson Herpetological Society
  - Tucson Mountains Association
  - Wildlands Network
- \*NEW in 2025!**

## Our team

**Kathleen Kennedy**  
*Co-Executive Director*

**Kate Hotten**  
*Co-Executive Director*

**Jessica Moreno**  
*Wildlife Biologist*

**Jonni Zeman**  
*Program and Communications Coordinator*



We've seen nocturnal kit foxes on our Tucson Mountains cameras since 2022, including a mated pair — but we have yet to see any cubs. Let's keep working together for this vulnerable species!

## Invest in local progress!



**Stay informed, speak up, show up, volunteer, and donate today!**

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We are an independent nonprofit and tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization. Contributions to the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law. Our EIN is 82-2156664.