



2026 Strategic Plan

Coalition for
Sonoran Desert Protection

Mission

We advocate for the protection and connection of the Sonoran Desert in Southern Arizona and defend against short-sighted development.

Vision

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

Where we work

Our geographic focus is eastern Pima County, Arizona, where most economic development and growth is taking place in Southern Arizona. However, our work can extend into Pinal, Santa Cruz, or Cochise County.

Collaboration

We work with, through, or as part of our Coalition's members, individual volunteers and supporters, local jurisdictions, and state and federal agencies, learning institutions and research centers, experts on topics that complement our work, such as light pollution or watershed management, and regional collectives, such as the Desert Fence Busters and Santa Cruz River Refuge coalition.



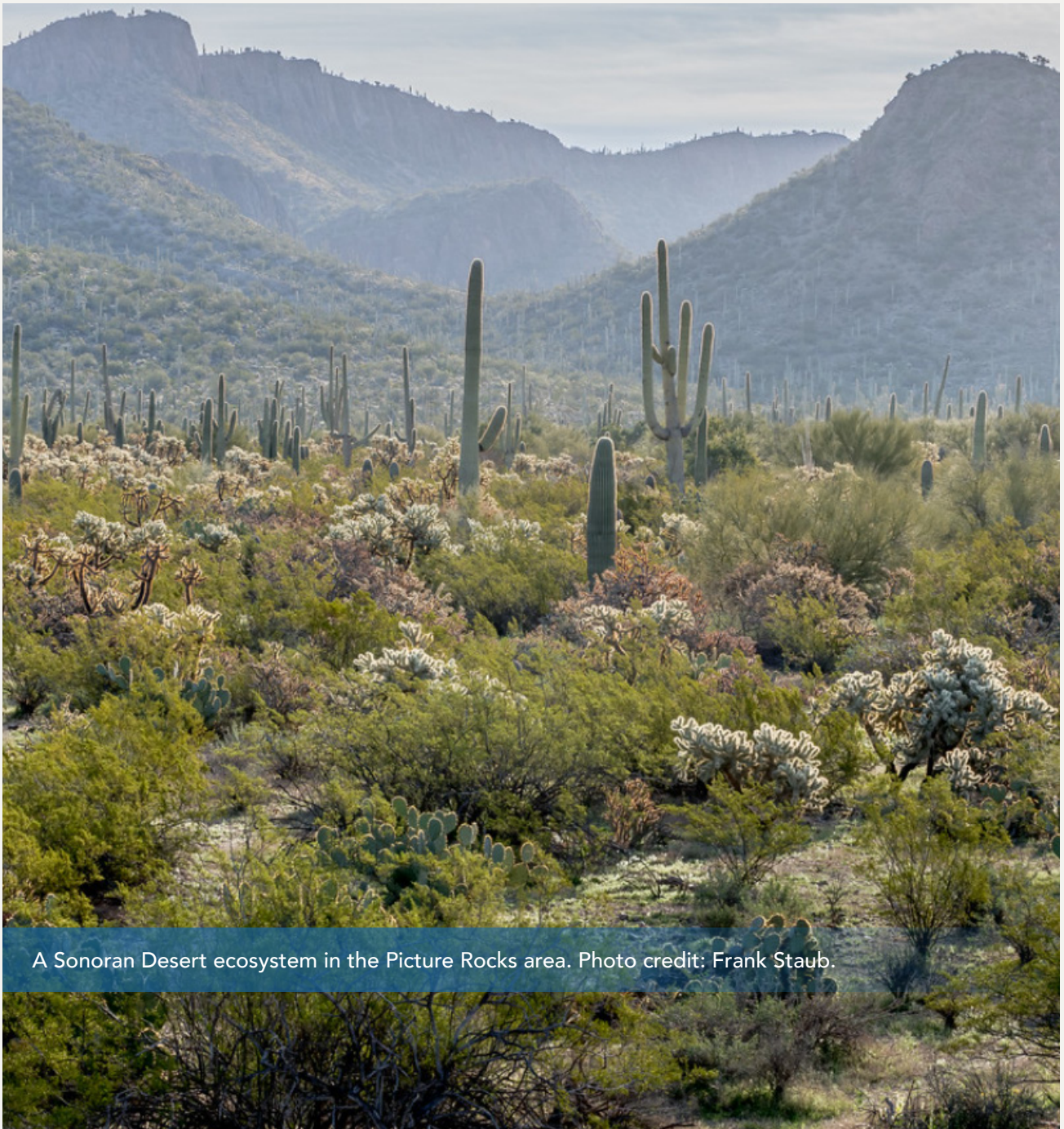
A Vermillion Flycatcher captured on a wildlife camera that we monitor with Arizona Land and Water Trust in the Sopor Creek area.

The Sonoran Desert

The Sonoran Desert spans Southern Arizona, southeastern California, and parts of northwestern Mexico, including Sonora and Baja California.

It is the most biodiverse desert in the world, with over 2,000 plant species and a wide variety of mammals, birds, and reptiles.

The desert's unique climate includes two rainy seasons and extreme temperature ranges, supporting unique biomes such as tundras, coniferous forests, deciduous forests, grasslands, and riparian habitats.



A Sonoran Desert ecosystem in the Picture Rocks area. Photo credit: Frank Staub.

The theory behind our work

Also known as our theory of change, this maps the steps we take — and why — in pursuit of our vision.

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

We believe this vision is best reached through:

- A biodiverse and connected network of natural, undisturbed open spaces that are protected in perpetuity;
- Science-informed, enforceable land use planning and policy tools developed and implemented in partnership with local governments;
- A diverse, collaborative and well-informed community of advocates.

We prioritize specific actions to help us realize this vision:

1. We invest in long-term, high-impact conservation planning
2. We create advocates
3. We collaborate
4. We build on trust in us
5. We drive forward relevant research

We'll know it's working when:

- Today's protected open spaces remain protected in perpetuity, and have been expanded upon using enforceable planning and policy mechanisms
- These open spaces include room for wildlife corridors
- Infrastructure exists to connect those corridors where needed most
- There exists a broad and influential community of advocates for the Sonoran Desert
- Long-term decisions, especially local decisions, are routinely made and enforced in the Sonoran Desert's favor
- These outcomes have a direct, measurable, and positive impact on ecosystem health, with benefits for all



Long-term goals

Conservation and land use planning is long-term work that requires continuity, collaboration, and vision across generations.

Our 25-year goals reflect this commitment to ensuring our actions today are moving us towards our collective vision.

Over the next 25 years and beyond, we hope to achieve the following outcomes:

- Today's **protected open spaces** remain protected in perpetuity and have been expanded upon using enforceable planning and policy mechanisms
- These open spaces include room for **wildlife corridors**. Infrastructure exists to connect those corridors where needed most
- There exists a broad and influential **community of advocates** for the Sonoran Desert
- **Long-term decisions**, especially local decisions, are routinely made and enforced in the Sonoran Desert's favor
- These outcomes have a direct, measurable, and **positive impact on ecosystem health**, with benefits for all

A curious bobcat. Photo credit: David Pederson.





Sitting in a fairy duster. Photo credit: Sheryl Hester.

Our programs

Our work is delivered across two complementary program areas.

Program 1: Land use planning

Our land use planning program defends the Sonoran Desert from short-sighted development by promoting responsible growth, protecting corridors and habitats, and advancing tools like conservation easements, open space bonds, and habitat plans.

This work is built upon the award-winning *Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan*.

Program 2: Landscape connectivity

Our landscape connectivity program works to reconnect habitats with tools such as wildlife crossings, barrier removal, and environmentally sensitive transportation planning.

With community science, field stewardship, adequate funding mechanisms, and coalition building, we advance projects that ensure safe passage and restore ecosystem health.

“One of the most successful advocacy organizations in the history of Pima County.”

- Adelita Grijalva, 2024, then Pima County Board of Supervisors Chair, now Congresswoman

Our project areas

Our project areas represent some of the most critical wildlife linkages in Southern Arizona, as defined by Pima County's *Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan* and other leading research. While our work extends beyond these areas, you'll hear us reference these often.

Priority 1: Tucson Mountains

The Tucson Mountains rise west of the city of Tucson, and are constrained by Interstate 10, Picture Rocks Road, and other development. The critical **Tucson-Tortolita Mountains Wildlife Linkage** is the site of our highest priority program work. This includes our work to see a wildlife crossing span I-10, allowing species such as desert bighorn sheep to move to and from the Tucson Mountains. Without protections, the Tucson Mountains could be entirely isolated from the surrounding landscape within the next 20 to 30 years.

Priority 2: Avra Valley

Avra Valley connects multiple protected habitats west of Tucson, including the Silverbell, Waterman and Roskrige Mountains, Tohono O'odham Nation lands, Ironwood Forest National Monument, the Tucson Mountains and Saguaro National Park, Brawley Wash, and the Tucson Mitigation Corridor. It is divided by the CAP canal and is a major source of Tucson's groundwater supply. The area's ecological viability is threatened by increasing development pressure and the proposed Interstate 11, while wildlife movement is already restricted by narrow canal crossings, barbed wire fencing, and high-traffic roadways.

Priority 3: Catalina Mountains

In Oro Valley, Oracle Road divides the **Catalina-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage** that connects areas such as Catalina State Park, Coronado National Forest, and Honey Bee



Forest on Mt. Lemmon in the Catalina Mountains, one of Southern Arizona's sky islands. Photo credit: Frank Staub.



Grasslands in Las Cienegas. Photo credit: Frank Staub.

Canyon. This linkage is the site of **the first wildlife bridge in the Sonoran Desert**, as well as other successful wildlife crossings structures we helped to make happen. We continue to monitor the success of these structures as well as nearby development.

Priority 4: Las Cienegas

East of Tucson, Interstate-10 divides the **Rincon-Santa Rita-Whetstone Mountains wildlife linkage** between Vail and Benson. This is one of the few remaining north-south wildlife movement areas across I-10, and encompasses several protected areas and riparian corridors, including Davidson Canyon, Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, and Cienega Creek Preserve. The corridor is critically important for species including black bear, jaguar, and pronghorn. While some crossings exist, further mitigation and wildlife funnel fencing are a high priority.

Priority 5: Sopori Creek

South of Tucson near Arivaca Junction, Sopori Creek and the 6,650-acre protected area of Sopori Ranch help connect several mountain ranges including the Santa Rita, Cerro Colorado and Atascosa Mountains, as well as the Santa Cruz River. Water flows year-round here, and the linkage contains a mesquite bosque that provides intact habitat for 33 wildlife species, including ocelot, jaguar, and yellow-billed cuckoo. Partners in this work include the Arizona Land and Water Trust and Pima County.

Priority 6: Ajo Highway

SR-86, also called Ajo Highway, divides the Avra and Altar Valleys and the Tucson and Coyote Mountains southeast of Tucson. Already the location of two wildlife underpass projects, the Tohono O'odham Nation takes the lead with efforts to preserve wildlife movement in this corridor within the Tohono O'odham Nation. Our work supports their priorities, including advocacy for funding and maintenance of new and existing wildlife crossing structures and removal of redundant barbed wire fencing that are barriers to mule deer and bighorn sheep movement.



Brand new funnel fencing, installed by Pima County in 2025, guides animals away from Interstate 10 north of Tucson.

Strategic priorities

An outline for the next 3 – 5 years

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Action 1

Invest in long-term, high-impact conservation planning

Intentions:

- Advocate for enforceable land use planning tools in Southern Arizona
- Lead on landscape connectivity projects that complement open space protections
- Advocate for adequate funding of programs that further our mission
- Amplify good policies and planning decisions and advocate against bad policies and planning decisions

Examples of specific initiatives:

- Continue to advocate for ongoing, consistent enforcement of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, both with individual projects and at a landscape level
- Ramp up our focus on the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage and its significant connectivity challenges
- Continue to advocate for wildlife linkage funding from the Regional Transportation Authority of Pima County and other sources
- Support infill initiatives and other programs that promote responsible development

Action 2

Create advocates

Intentions:

- Educate and empower decision makers
- Use community science as an engagement and collaboration tool to reach multiple generations
- Inspire action through outdoor experiences and volunteering — show people the impact we collectively have on the landscape, good and bad

Examples of specific initiatives:

- Continue to invest in relationships with elected officials, including outside of Pima County
- Ensure a strong foundation for the Tucson Mountains community science program, creating meaningful work for the community to participate in
- Launch a field trip program with experiences for a variety of abilities

Action 3

Collaborate

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Intentions:

- Maintain a healthy coalition
- Work with and through groups beyond our coalition and region
- Listen to and broadcast diverse landscape knowledge
- Offer a variety of ways for the community to be involved

Examples of specific initiatives:

- Reintroduce forums for coalition members to meet and exchange information
- Re-establish relationships with agencies and other partners — many of which peaked with the Oracle Road project and will now be important for our Tucson Mountains work
- Through the Dose of Desert Joy newsletter and other tools, continue to encourage the telling of and connection to landscape stories
- Offer in-person, virtual and field-based volunteer opportunities and events

Action 4

Build on trust in us

Intentions:

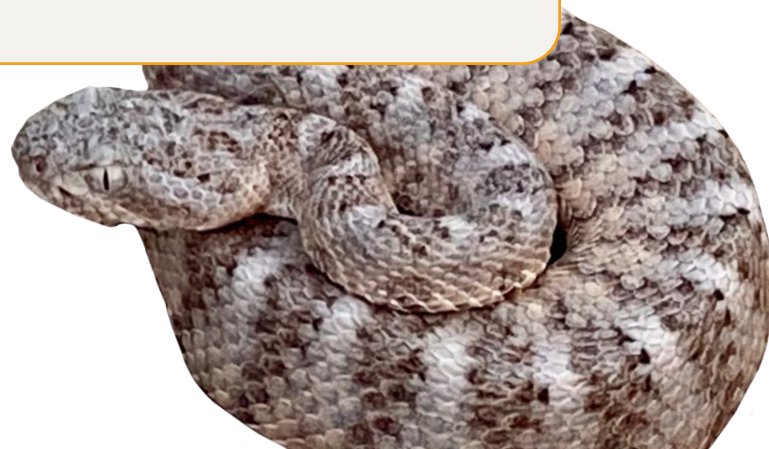
- Be transparent, timely, and clearly in support of the desert
- Maintain independence through appropriate and diverse funding
- Be fiscally responsible, striving for financial sustainability
- Have clear, publicly-available programs and position statements

Examples of specific initiatives:

- Expand on CSDP's board of directors and governance structure
- Increase foundation funding
- Successfully fund additional staff (including internships), allowing us to have more impact
- Improve program descriptions in printed and digital materials

CSDP's donors often send notes of encouragement — here's one, and another on pg. 17!

“The coalition is an environmental force in the community!”





A manzanita, common at higher elevations in the Sonoran Desert's sky islands.

Action 5

Drive forward relevant research

Intentions:

- Advocate for those creating original research
- Contribute what we can to original research
- Use community science to argue for more robust research
- Use research and data to strengthen our advocacy positions and our voice

Examples of specific initiatives:

- Make CSDP's camera data available for public use
- Continue to support research in the Avra Valley
- Improve on CSDP's community science reporting and cartography
- Regularly report on our community science efforts in the Tucson Mountains

Core values

Since 2020's strategic plan, we have regularly reviewed and refreshed our core values.

We feel our current values below best reflect our Coalition, both today and for the future we envision together. These values center around lasting and community-led conservation work.

- **Collaborative.** We acknowledge, support, and celebrate strengths and differences, reject the idea of one "right" way, and challenge each other with respect.
- **Inclusive.** We act on our belief that the conservation of biological diversity is best advanced by diverse voices, experiences, and cultures.

Volunteers plant a native tree in the Catalina-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage. Photo credit: Jonni Zeman.



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- **Responsible.** We take responsibility for the impact of our words and actions, learn from our mistakes, and share what we learn openly.
- **Committed.** We embrace difficult work and conversations that drive meaningful change.
- **Knowledge-based.** We ground our decisions in shared knowledge and the best available science.
- **Results-focused.** We use resources wisely, including in our daily work, and think long-term and at a landscape scale.
- **Inspired!** We bring humor, fun and joy into our work, inspired by the wonders of our desert landscape.



CSDP staff at the Oracle Road underpass.

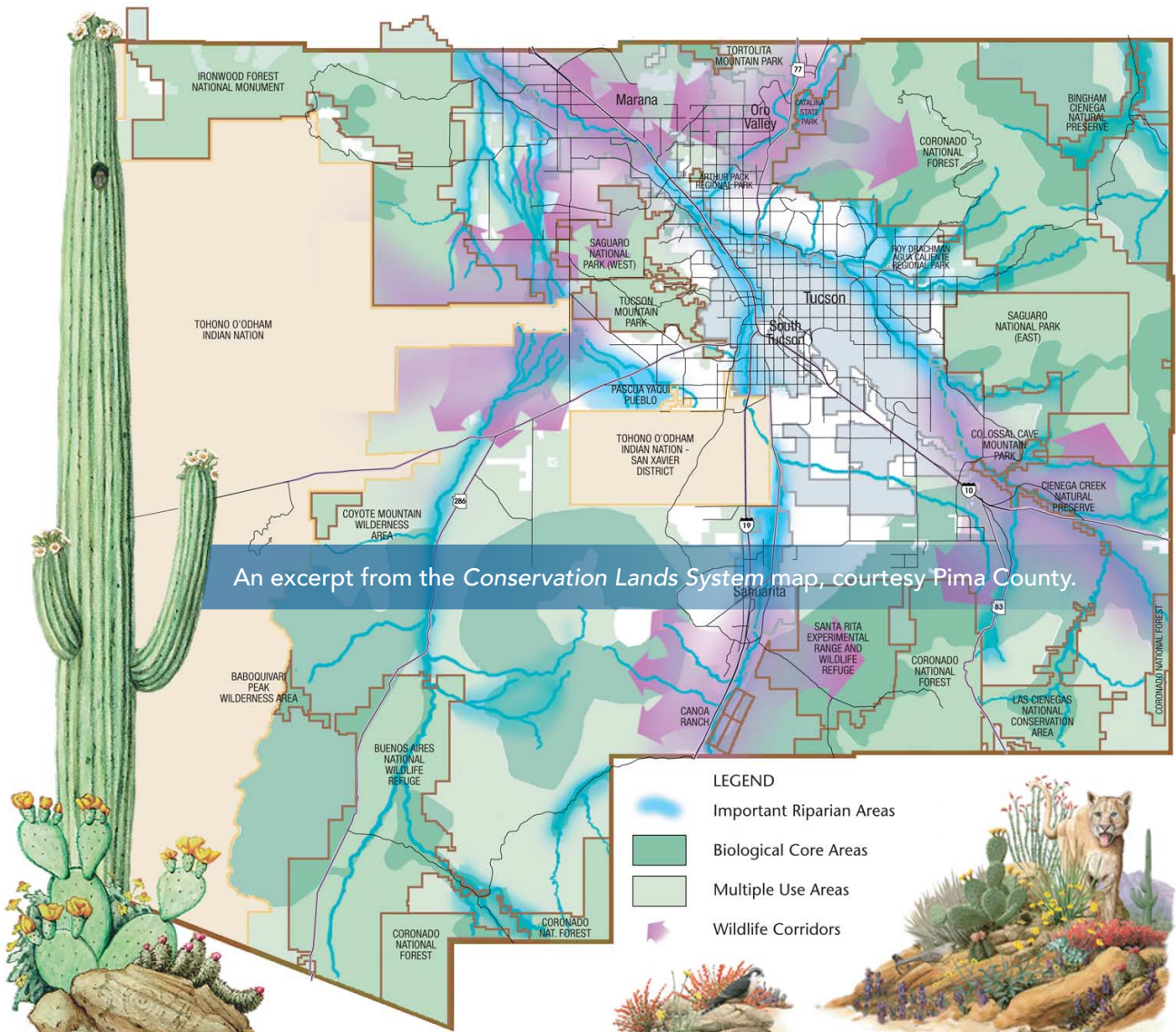
Our impact to date

How it all began

In 1997, the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl received federal protection under the Endangered Species Act. This spurred over 40 conservation and neighborhood groups to come together to form the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection in February 1998, with the main goal of creating a conservation program with Pima County. That plan was launched in 2001, and is the award-winning Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

CSDP currently includes 28 coalition members that work towards our vision alongside our community of volunteers, supporters, and donors. The Coalition's small staff works on a grassroots level, leveraging the expertise and experience of our coalition members and other partners into long-lasting positive change for the Sonoran Desert.

During this Strategic Plan, we will celebrate 25 years of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan and 30 years of CSDP.



Progress update: 2020 – 2025

We've summarized our progress towards some of our goals from CSDP's last Strategic Plan.

Program goal

Protect and restore Sonoran Desert wildlife linkages

With the success of the Oracle Road crossings, which improved connectivity for the Santa Catalina-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage, we turned our focus to two other wildlife linkages: Tucson-Tortolita Mountains and Rincon-Santa Rita-Whetstone Mountains.

We partnered with Pima County Flood Control District, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and several others on the design and construction of the **first ever custom designed wildlife ramp out of a steep river levee**. The Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp is a tangible step towards improved connectivity over the Interstate 10 and railway at Avra Valley Road. And in 2021, we also **helped to found the Desert Fence Busters**, which has already removed over 80 miles of redundant barbed wire fencing from critical wildlife linkages in Pima County.

From 2023 onwards, we also worked hard to **improve the habitat on and around the Oracle Road wildlife crossing structures**. Both were suffering from poorly established planting, erosion, and invasive species, but, through a series of volunteer workshops, we have re-established native plants and built natural anti-erosion structures. We're hopeful that this work has had a positive impact, including encouraging more wildlife to use the structures. Our wildlife camera data, which is still being processed, should give us some insights.

Finally, we kept the pressure on the Regional Transportation Authority throughout this strategic plan and — right at the end! — the RTA Next plan was approved by the RTA board, with **a \$50 million budget for wildlife crossings** included (and a \$5 million contingency).

We suffered some setbacks, too. Despite trying, plans for a wildlife bridge over Rattlesnake Pass have not yet materialized — and we missed the window of opportunity to couple this construction work with the other planned road improvement works. However, there is still an opportunity to retrofit this linkage. We also weren't successful in getting improved connectivity protections on Interstate 10 near Las Cienegas — such as wildlife



Great horned owl. Photo credit: David Pederson.



CSDP's wildlife biologist, Jessica Moreno, leads a tour at the wildlife underpass on Oracle Road. Photo credit: Leslie Epperson.

Program goal

Protect important open spaces

In our last strategic plan, we aimed to see the Interstate 11 proposal halted or re-routed away from Avra Valley. That hasn't happened, yet, and our lawsuit against the Federal Highway Administration and Arizona Department of Transportation is ongoing. We were successful, though, in getting them to agree to **re-evaluate I-11's environmental review** — also providing another opportunity for public comment against the project. Stay tuned in 2026 for more news.

We also set a goal to continue to see land set aside in perpetuity. One of our main wins in these last five years was the **acquisition of Kelly Ranch** by Pima County, also satisfying our wildlife linkage objective. Kelly Ranch borders Catalina State Park and is adjacent to the Catalina-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage that includes the Oracle Road wildlife crossing bridge and underpass.

This was **one of many land use projects** we worked on — we also input on numerous development plans, including the extensive H2K PAD development in southeastern Pima County, in order to lessen the landscape impacts. We primarily focus on projects that overlap with the *Conservation Lands System*, areas considered by Pima County to be the highest biological value land. In 2025, we also got the City of Tucson to agree to apply the county's *Conservation Lands System* — a win for conservation collaboration!

Organizational development goal

Conservative fiscal management and expanded capacity

Over the last five years, we saw our expenses increase from around \$240,000 to around \$400,000, with our income increasing from \$275,000 to \$436,000. While our expenses increased modestly more than our income, **we continue to raise more than we spend**. **Our impact also continues to grow** alongside our budget. We grew our team from four



Identifying a bobcat track in Tortolita Preserve. Photo credit: Jessica Moreno

to five people, and we launched our first ever internship program. We're excited to further this growth with an expanded board of directors.

Organizational development goal

Effective communication

In 2020, and during the depths of COVID-19 lockdowns, we launched the *Dose of Desert Joy* newsletter. This has been a surprising success — we enjoy receiving your submissions, putting it together every week, and reading your responses.

We have also actively improved our communications with our coalition members and supporters. As just one metric, we went from less than one Instagram post per month in 2019 to around 18 posts per month since. Our newsletter and social media subscribers have increased significantly, too — and this means **more people engaged with our vision and mission.**

“The coalition allows me to think globally, act *locally*.”

Lifetime achievements

We've accomplished a lot together since the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection's founding in 1998. Read on for some of the highlights.

Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan

Initiated by Pima County in 1998 and developed with leadership of the Coalition, the SDCP is the foundation for our conservation projects and goals. It has been nationally recognized and still serves as a model for habitat conservation plans around the country. The Coalition continues to be the leading community advocate for the SDCP.

Conservation Lands System

Under the direction of a team of renowned scientists and community partners, including CSDP, Pima County adopted the Conservation Lands System (CLS) in 2001. This map and its associated policies have resulted in the permanent preservation of thousands of acres of important wildlife habitat around Pima County on both private and public lands. The CLS continues to be applied today to private developments and Pima County projects, and we act as a watchdog for its application.

Habitat Conservation Plans

After more than 15 years of planning, Pima County's Multi-Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) was approved in 2016, providing federal protection for 44 vulnerable, threatened, and endangered species—and many others. The Coalition partnered closely with the County to ensure the plan includes strong, science-based conservation policies.



CSDP's Jonni Zeman leads a hike in the Tucson Mountains. Photo credit: Keith Kleber.



Working to prevent erosion at one of the wildlife crossings on Oracle Road. Photo credit: Jonni Zeman.

Open space acquisitions

In 2004, Pima County voters overwhelmingly approved the Open Space Bond with two-thirds of voters giving the thumbs up to open space protection. The Coalition led the public education and outreach campaign leading up to the election. This bond included \$174.3 million for the purchase of important open space. Pima County now protects over 200,000 acres of open space with this money — an incredible accomplishment!

Ironwood Forest National Monument

CSDP was the leading voice advocating for the monument's creation, and we pitched an expanded boundary that was ultimately accepted when President Bill Clinton created Ironwood Forest National Monument in 2000. We then helped to found the Friends of Ironwood Forest, and we continue to defend the monument to this day.

Ann Day Memorial Wildlife Bridge

Thanks to CSDP's advocacy, Pima County's 2006 Regional Transportation Plan included \$45 million to support wildlife linkages that ultimately funded \$25 million in research and crossing infrastructure. The Ann Day Memorial Wildlife Bridge on Oracle Road was built with this funding and continues to be a success story, helping more than 2,000 animals move safely across the road each month.

Community science

With our Oro Valley study, CSDP ran the longest-continuous wildlife camera monitoring program in Southern Arizona. We continue to operate a fleet of cameras in our project areas, alongside our new community science roadkill study.

Interstate 11

The Coalition is the lead community organization opposing the Recommended Alternative "West Option" route for federal Interstate 11 in Southern Arizona. We are actively engaged in a lawsuit against the Federal Highway Administration and Arizona Department of Transportation.



Water flows in Aravaipa Canyon. Photo credit: Frank Staub.



Photo credit: Dulcey Lima.

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

Maricopa Bird 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

Our team

Staff

Kate Hotten

Co-Executive Director

Kathleen Kennedy

Co-Executive Director

Nick Maya

Program Manager

Jessica Moreno

Wildlife Biologist

Jonni Zeman

Program and

Communications

Coordinator

Board of Directors

Christina McVie

Chair

Martin Baumrind

Treasurer

Joy Herr-Cardillo

Secretary

Keith Bagwell

Carolyn Campbell

Plus nearly **200 amazing volunteers** and our fantastic seasonal **interns!**



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