

Friends of the Desert

Issue 68 - Spring 2026

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

25 years of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan

Back in 1997, the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl's population collapse and listing as endangered prompted the Tucson community to reckon with growing development pressures in the desert.

The Coalition for the Sonoran Desert Protection Plan (our original name!) was created out of this community response. After years of negotiations, stakeholders across Pima County finally agreed that **we all benefit from a protected, valued, and healthy Sonoran Desert**—and that a conservation plan was the way to achieve it.

This was formalized in 2001 with Pima County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP) and its Conservation Lands System guidelines. The award-winning SDCP continues to **balance responsible growth with the protection of natural and cultural resources**.

CSDP is the **leading watchdog** for the SDCP, helping to ensure that other plans, policies, and development projects respect the high biological-value land and critical landscape connections it protects.

Maybe this is your first time hearing about the SDCP, or maybe you were there fighting for the pygmy owl in the late 90s. This year's **25th anniversary of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan** is a chance for us to reflect on what we've collectively achieved and on what we, as a community, still want to accomplish.

This work continues, and there's a place for all of us in it.



The cactus ferruginous pygmy owl's listing as endangered was the spark for the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan over 25 years ago. We continue to work on its behalf today. Photo credit: Aaron Flesch.

Reconnecting the Tucson Mountains

Rapid development in the next 20-30 years could entirely cut off the Tucson Mountains and their parks (including Saguaro National Park West and Tucson Mountain Park) with serious impacts on genetics, ecology, and landscape resilience. That's why restoring the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains Wildlife Linkage is our top priority: species need to be able to move freely.

The passing of the RTA Next plan in March 2026 is great news for this project, with **\$50M now available to fund wildlife linkages in Pima County**. Read on to learn more about other work under way.

Saving space within a critical wildlife linkage

Rapid population growth on the Tortolita Fan continues to shape how the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains Wildlife Linkage functions. In just one example, a public park is proposed in Marana directly next to I-10 and the future wildlife crossing bridge site, which would mean putting a busy multi-purpose recreation facility where wildlife are exiting the east end of the bridge. **Examples such as this show how important it is to set land aside as open space, permanently.**

We continue to work with Pima County to **acquire open space**, especially near the future wildlife crossing bridge, and with Marana to ensure properties on the Tortolita Fan can **support both people and wildlife.**

New wildlife camera findings

Last year, we installed **five new wildlife cameras** at the abandoned railroad underpass beneath the I-10 freeway just east of the Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp, at the approximate location for the future wildlife bridge. This is the **only safe area for miles** where wildlife can cross the interstate.

In just a few days, we documented the **first-ever footage of coyotes and bobcats using this underpass** to travel in both directions across I-10.

We were relieved to see wildlife movement, however, **we're only seeing urban-tolerant species near I-10** and not sensitive species like kit fox and desert bighorn sheep. The construction of the wildlife crossing bridge will **help support the movement of all desert species** and not just those adapted to human barriers.

A pair of javelina explore the new Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp.





Photo Credit: Frank Staub

Addressing wildlife barriers, together

In February 2026, we **co-hosted the first meeting** of Pima County's new Wildlife Connectivity Advisory Team (WCAT), created at our recommendation and inspired by the success of the Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp project. WCAT aims to **gather local wildlife expertise to improve movement through flood control facilities**. Our five new cameras at the Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp are already contributing data on seven species, including javelinas, coyotes, and even a white-nosed coati!

Exploring Ironwood Forest

These past few months, we've been busy **hosting field trips with our partners**, including Friends of Ironwood Forest, for government officials and their staff to Ironwood Forest National Monument. We visited one of the many ranches within the monument, made stops at Shiva, the 80-armed saguaro, and spotted desert bighorn sheep on Ragged Top Mountain with the help of the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society. We have also seen areas that would be **permanently, visibly destroyed if the monument lost land to recent mining interests**.

Our extensive public lands here in Pima County form the **backbone of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan**. In an effort to protect both Ironwood Forest National Monument and 25 years of regional conservation planning, we continue to get **key decision-makers** out on the landscape.

Pima County's new Wildlife Connectivity Advisory Team, created at our recommendation, tours the new Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp.





Desert updates

With our new strategic plan, we continue to do what we do best: **defend the desert from short-sighted development.** We are also sharpening our focus on the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains Wildlife Linkage, a priority made more urgent by projects like I-11 and the surrounding Town of Marana’s projected growth. Marana is expected to account for roughly a **quarter of the region’s population growth over the next decade.**

We also continue to celebrate conservation wins. This April marks the 10th anniversary of the Oracle Road wildlife crossings, the **first voter-approved and funded wildlife crossings in the United States.** It’s also the 25th anniversary of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, which has underpinned many of our efforts.

None of this work happens in isolation - it’s the result of a community that **continues to show up for the Sonoran Desert.** Thank you!

For the desert,
Kate and Kathleen



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

Kate Hotten
Co-Executive Director

Kathleen Kennedy
Co-Executive Director

Nick Maya
Program Manager

Jessica Moreno
Wildlife Biologist

Jonni Zeman
Program and Communications Coordinator



Mule deer in the Tucson Mountains.
Photo credit: Joseph Thomas

Invest in local progress!



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

**738 N. 5th Ave., Suite 205
Tucson, Arizona 85705
520.388.9925
sonorandesert.org
@sonorandesertprotection**

We are a 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.