



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

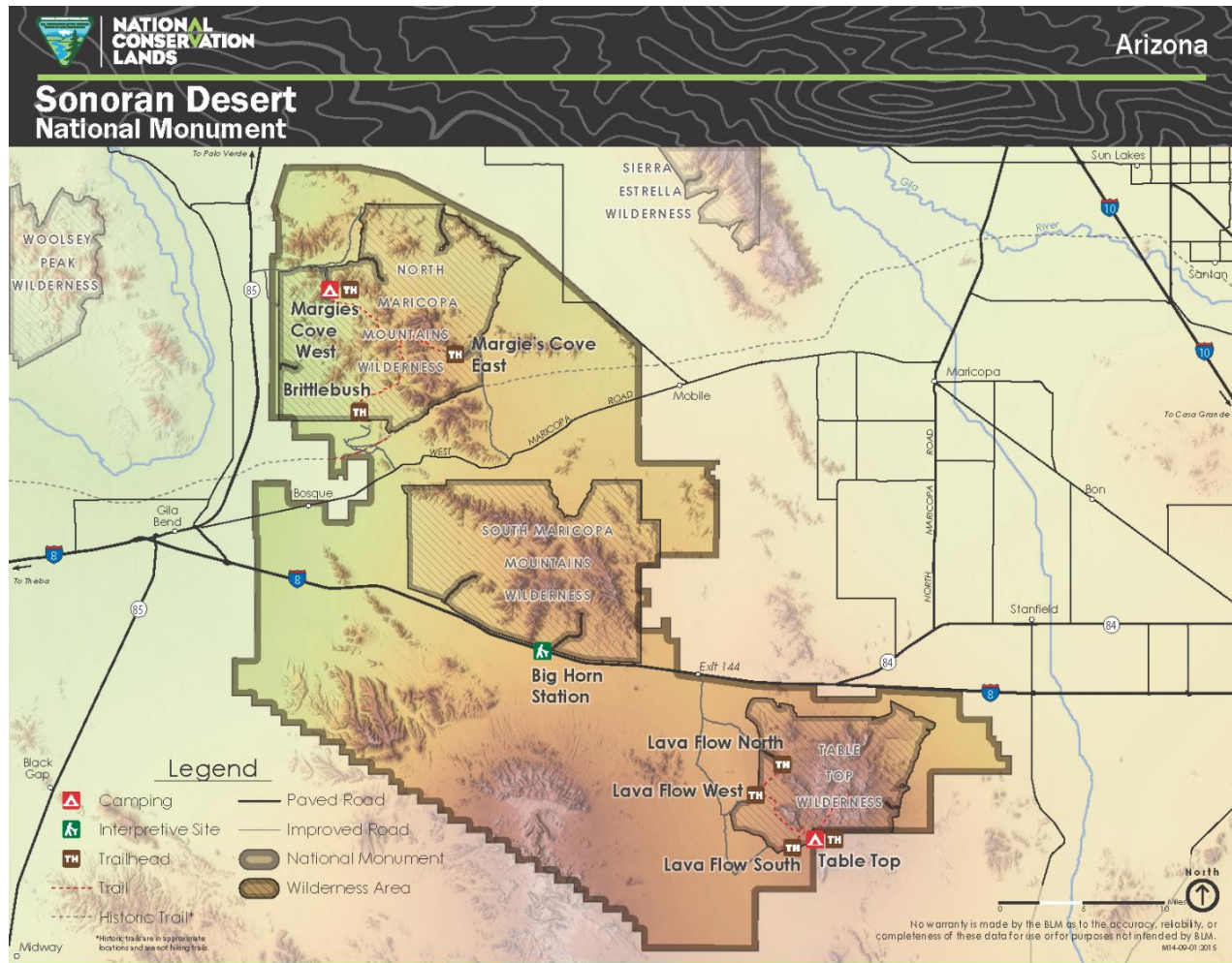
Arizona

2021: Annual Manager's Report

Sonoran Desert National Monument



Map



Accomplishments

The Sonoran Desert National Monument (SDNM or Monument) had many accomplishments this year, despite challenges presented by COVID-19. In the spring of 2021, partial funding for Phase I of the Estrella-Wayside Recreation Site was received and a contract for construction was awarded in fall of 2021. This project will provide camping opportunities on the SDNM under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) and would provide for long term sustainable development while also protecting cultural resources. This will also enhance heritage tourism opportunities through the interpretation of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, SDNM portion, as well as the other historic trails in the vicinity.



Challenges

The pandemic has presented numerous challenges for effective on the ground management of the SDNM. The staff, however, found ways to persist with normal day to day activities to monitor and protect the resources consistent with the Proclamation designating the Monument. The cultural program maintained effective communication with our potentially affected tribal partners who consider the SDNM to be an integral part of their ancestral homelands. In addition, new protocols were developed in coordination with Arizona State Parks to ensure that the Site Steward Program could continue with their tireless efforts of monitoring our most at-risk cultural resources. This was especially critical considering the increase in recreational activities and the uptick in illicit border activities. Boundary fence damage continues to occur in areas along the southern border of the SDNM from illicit border activities.



Visitors

Despite lifting the COVID-19 interstate travel limitations, SDNM visitation decreased in 2021 with an estimated 24,728 visits and 23,737 visitor days. Many SDNM visitors stay on the highway and enjoy the scenery from waysides during short visits. Others use the waysides to access the SDNM's undeveloped areas, where visitors generally stay a few days to a week. The increased visitation this year was due to higher in-state tourism and continued local use.

The SDNM is a popular destination for hunters seeking deer, small game, and gamebirds. The SDNM sees its highest levels of visitation during the fall big-game hunts and during winter months when the weather is more amenable to recreational activities.

Partnerships

During October of 2020 and February of 2021, there were several volunteer projects to remove old unmaintained fence from the SDNM south of Interstate-8. This area was closed to cattle grazing through the Proclamation, but many miles of old range and pasture fencing remain in the area. These fences are being removed to improve wildlife movement and to prevent wildlife injury. Two Eagle Scout projects took place in October 2020, south of Interstate-8. Each project removing approximately one mile of old range fence.



North of Interstate-8, there is an old earthen stock tank, known as Gap Tank, which was fenced to keep out trespass livestock. When the fencing was installed, it was not a wildlife friendly fence. On February 2, 2021, Aaron Ellertson led his scout troop, for his Eagle Scout project, retrofitting the fence to make it wildlife friendly.



The Arizona Site Steward Program's Central Arizona Region, led by Doug Newton, spent countless hours both monitoring existing cultural sites and documenting new sites. Among the newest discoveries, a large prehistoric Hohokam ballcourt village was identified in the southern portion of the SDNM. This site came as a surprise to both seasoned stewards and BLM specialists alike due to its remote location away from major water sources. Efforts for FY 22 will continue in this area as new sites are being identified all the time.

Site stewards were also instrumental in helping to protect imperiled sites both on and off the monument. Their consummate professionalism in working with the BLM and other partners like Archaeology Southwest is unparalleled for a volunteer program.

Archaeology Southwest, based in Tucson, Arizona, has been an essential partner for the SDNM. They continue to conduct important work within the Monument, including the ongoing documentation of important prehistoric travel corridors like the storied Komatke Trail. Consultation among the BLM and the Akimel O'odham has yielded important ethnographic information to help substantiate the manifestation being discovered on the ground. This important travel corridor, once identified, will be further protected through future designations within the Monument and the LSFO.



Science

In FY20 an Environmental Assessment was prepared for the reintroduction of endangered Sonoran pronghorn on the SDNM south of Interstate-8. In preparation for the release a temporary holding pen was constructed by the Arizona Antelope Foundation on October 17, 2020. Unfortunately, due to extremely dry conditions in 2020, it was determined by the Sonoran Pronghorn Recovery Team, a binational group of scientists and land managers, that the conditions were not optimal for the release to occur. The t-posts were left in place and the fence material was taken down.



For the second year, cultural survey efforts were once again conducted within the SDNM with nearly 230 acres of Class III inventory and the documentation of two previously unrecorded sites. This survey, which initially began in 2020, has resulted in the discovery and documentation of dozens of petroglyph panels, prehistoric trail segments, temporary habitation areas, food processing locales, and artifact concentrations. FY 21 work resulted in the documentation of numerous intaglios, rock cairns, and additional petroglyph panels. Trail segments leading to and from the area were also documented. Major research questions were formulated from the empirical survey results. Most importantly, why was this portion of the SDNM so significant for traditional activities? The relative paucity of water at many of these locales suggest a pilgrimage to and from this significant landscape at one or more times a year. Further data collection and consultation with local tribal groups will help to solve this ancient mystery.

Climate Impacts

Solar powered water pumps, storage tanks and troughs were installed at two wells on the SDNM south of Interstate-8 to make water available for wildlife. The Vekol Valley well is a production well that was drilled by USGS in the 1980's and was never put into use. The Johnson well is a hand dug well that was part of an old range improvement. There has not been any water pumped to the surface there in many years. Both wells are now providing water to wildlife. These water sources are important to wildlife, especially during the hot and dry conditions prior to the summer monsoon rains. In recent years, these types of water sources have become even more important because of long-term drought conditions.



Words from the staff

From my very first experience working on the SDNM, I have been amazed with this unique and beautiful landscape. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about it is its vastness. It never ceases to amaze me how important this seemingly desolate landscape is to the tribes of southern and western Arizona. I have found innumerable examples of their presence here depicting that they not only survived its aridity but thrived, through good times and bad, for thousands of years. Truly a treasure like no other. The agency has a unique trust responsibility to help protect these ancestral homelands for future generations to come. - Amber Redger





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