

Citizens' Council Protecting Sky Island Wildlife Corridor

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Introduction

In 1999-2000, stakeholders involved with efforts to create Las Cienegas National Conservation Area identified lands north of the designated National Conservation Area and Acquisition Planning District boundaries as important to protect as well. These lands, formerly known as the Missing Link and now known as the Cienega Corridor, represent over 50,000 acres of important wildlife habitat and corridors, open space, cultural and economic resources, and watershed for recharge of Tucson's groundwater. The area is under imminent threat of development, however, because it lies just a few miles east of the City of Tucson.

Pima County's growth rate is more than double the national average: an increase of more than 34 percent since 1990. The population is projected to top 1.2 million residents in less than 20 years, while vital resources such as clean water, air, and open space are dwindling. Because of critical habitat designations for endangered species in northwest Tucson, it is expected that much of the future growth will occur in the southeast sector—the Cienega Corridor, which is highly desirable for development because it is adjacent to existing large-scale development on the burgeoning Houghton Road corridor and on Old Spanish Trail. It also offers many amenities including stunning views of and access to protected natural areas such as Saguaro National Park, Coronado National Forest's Rincon Wilderness, and Cienega Creek Natural Preserve.

Additionally, the majority of the lands in the Cienega Corridor are Arizona State Trust Lands, most of which are currently leased for cattle grazing. The Arizona State Constitution mandates that State Trust Lands produce the maximum economic benefit for the beneficiaries of the Trust, most of which are school districts. One of the primary ways in which the State Land Department raises funds is to auction its Trust Lands for commercial or residential development.

If not protected soon, the important cultural and natural values—including the most important wildlife corridor linking Saguaro National Park and Las Cienegas National Conservation Area—will be lost.

Background

In December 2000, President Clinton signed into law the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area Establishment Act (HR 2941). The Act created a 47,000-acre National Conservation Area, including 5,000 acres of State Trust Lands, within a 143,000-acre Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District in southeastern Arizona, five miles from the eastern edge of Tucson. The Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership, an ad-hoc

volunteer group of local residents and environmental, ranching, and recreational interests, worked together with the Bureau of Land Management, the Sonoran Institute, and Congressman Jim Kolbe to achieve passage of the legislation. To move the legislation through the House and Senate in 2000, several changes were made. Approximately 50,000 acres at the north end of the watershed were left out of the initial Federal designation. Although these lands link the National Conservation Area to National Park and Forest lands in the Rincon Mountains east of Tucson (hence the name "Missing Link"), they comprise a mix of State, county, and private lands, which raised concerns in Congress and the Arizona State Land Department about how they would be acquired and managed.

However, the National Conservation Area legislation did require that the Secretary of the Interior submit a report to Congress within two years that describes "the most effective measures to protect the lands north of the [Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District and National Conservation Area] within the Rincon Valley, Colossal Cave area and Agua Verde Creek corridor north of Interstate 10 to provide an ecological link to Saguaro National Park and the Rincon Mountains" (Section 8.a.).

The Bureau of Land Management contracted with the Sonoran Institute to take the lead on gathering and compiling the resource information and public input necessary to prepare the report required by the National Conservation Area legislation. With additional support from Saguaro National Park, the Sonoran Institute conducted a series of workshops and public open houses designed to:

- Generate as much information as possible about the significant natural and cultural resources—including ecological linkages—found in the Cienega Corridor (i.e., the Rincon Valley, Colossal Cave area, and Agua Verde Creek corridor).
- Solicit feedback from resource experts and the lay public on alternative protection options and management strategies.
- Compile and analyze this information, and provide recommendations about which protection measures would be most effective.

Findings

Results indicated there is broad consensus among stakeholders and science experts that the Cienega Corridor is an important and valuable area, and that some form of protection is necessary, and urgently needed, for its varied cultural and natural resources. These include endangered and/or rare wildlife and plant species, open spaces, and recreational opportunities.

Highlights of findings include:

1. The area is biologically and geologically significant:
 - The Cienega Corridor provides habitat for four Federally endangered plant and animal species, and ten species of special concern.
 - According to data gathered in field studies conducted by the Sky Island Alliance, the Cienega Corridor lands are important movement corridors for “Sky Island” mountain mammals, especially black bears, mountain lions, coatis, and mule deer.
 - Resource specialists, including biologists working with Pima County on its Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, place the land in the Cienega Corridor at the highest-level priority for protection because of its habitat for endangered and threatened species, as well as its value as a wildlife corridor in an area classified as “biological core” by the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.
 - The watershed, including Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, provides the City of Tucson with up to 20% of its groundwater recharge system, according to data from the Arizona Department of Water Resources (an average of 16,000 acre-feet per year, out of an estimated 50-60,000 acre-feet total).
 - The area contains some 21 distinct and rare soil types, as well as numerous unique and rare limestone caves such as Colossal, Arkenstone, and Carter Caves. These caves are important because they provide habitat for the endangered lesser long-nosed bat and the Mexican long-tongued bat, as well as for several species of rare invertebrates.
2. The area is culturally and economically important:
 - Numerous archaeological sites dating to 8000 B.C. and many historical sites, including Butterfield Stage stop and working ranches, are scattered throughout the Cienega Corridor on unprotected lands.
 - The open space in the Cienega Corridor provides multiple recreation opportunities for the rapidly growing Tucson population: hiking, birdwatching, biking, horseback riding, scenic drives, photography, hunting, camping, cave exploration, and picnicking.
 - Meeting recreation needs within the Corridor will help alleviate overcrowding of current protected lands adjacent to city limits, including Tucson Mountain Park and Saguaro National Park.
 - The historical regional identity of the Rincon Valley is strongly based on Western rural lifestyle values, which include ranching and love of wildlife, open space, and outdoor recreation.
3. There is strong local support for protection of the resource:
 - Strong support for protecting open space and ecological linkages already exists in the Rincon Valley region, through the work of the Bureau of Land Management, community collaborators in the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership, the Sonoran Institute, and others to establish the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area in 2000.
 - A poll conducted in spring of 2002 indicates that of 400 high-propensity voters surveyed, 63% consider preservation of wildlife habitat to be extremely/very important.

- A local non-profit conservation and community stewardship organization—the 15-year-old Rincon Institute—is well-established in the region, providing local conservation leadership. The Rincon Institute has established community-rallying points such as its highly successful Rincon Valley Farmers’ Market.
 - Local land agencies and managers are currently working well together and are favorably inclined toward protection of the Cienega Corridor.
4. Of thirteen alternative protection measures considered for the area, “establish a community-based, nonprofit, non-governmental organization whose mission is to protect resources in the Missing Link” was chosen as the final recommendation for resource protection.
- Other alternatives included: “expand Las Cienegas National Conservation Area” (by far the public’s top choice), “expand Saguaro National Park,” “expand County Parks” (these were essentially tied for second), “expand Coronado National Forest” (the only other alternative to receive significant community support), “establish a National Wildlife Refuge,” “establish a State Park or Preserve system,” and “incorporate the area into a new municipality that could acquire the lands for creating a city refuge or other form of land preservation.”
 - Of these, none were deemed feasible upon investigation by natural resource experts and the public at a series of workshops.
 - Particular concern was expressed regarding the three alternatives that involved expanding the boundaries of Federal lands because: (1) they would have required an act of Congress; and (2) some members of the public might have viewed such an expansion as a Federal “land grab.”

Final Recommendation

The final recommendation, therefore, was to support local partners in launching a community-based, non-governmental, nonprofit organization that would take a collaborative management approach to protecting the Missing Link lands. This would include creation of an ad hoc organization with a governing board comprising land managers, landowners, and local stakeholders including ranchers, recreationists, and other land users. The approach would have the effect of moving ahead with locally driven, on-the-ground protection and management of the landscape.

Cienega Corridor Conservation Council

In response to this need, the Sonoran Institute facilitated formation of the *Cienega Corridor Conservation Council* in early 2003. The *Council*’s mission is to protect and enhance the biological and cultural resources of the Cienega Corridor through two major strategies: cultivation of an organized voice for conservation and development of a cooperative management agreement.

To grow the local voice and increase awareness about the Cienega Corridor, the *Cienega Corridor Conservation Council* co-sponsored a first-annual spring outreach event with the Sonoran Institute, Colossal Cave Mountain Park, and Rincon Institute on March 27, 2004. “Cienega Corridor Pioneer Day” resulted in one conservation easement donation underway and one easement under discussion, drawing about 1,000 visitors and 100 volunteers.

In addition, the *Cienega Corridor Conservation Council* was asked in August 2003 to prepare a report for the Pima County Conservation Bond Advisory Committee detailing land protection priorities for the May 2004 bond planning committee. Based in part on the *Council* recommendations, \$44 million in priority was prioritized for open space protection in the Cienega Corridor. *Council* participants also spoke at two public hearings to support Pima County’s solicitation for an Arizona State Transportation grant. The grant was awarded to help the County acquire and protect critical riparian parcels along Davidson Canyon wash—an important tributary to Cienega Creek.

The second approach for resource protection is to develop a cooperative management agreement among diverse partners.

A cooperative management agreement is a voluntary memorandum of understanding that articulates how *Cienega Corridor Conservation Council* partners will work together to protect the natural and cultural resources. The agreement will link to a strategic plan outlining specific roles and responsibilities for signatories, who range from local landowners and citizens to government agencies. Some elements of the strategic plan include: collaboration on protection strategies and policies, data sharing, and communications.

The strategic plan will also include governance, monitoring, and adaptive management models to illustrate how partners will sustain and monitor progress toward resource objectives. The cooperative management agreement and strategic plan establish a framework through which citizens can engage in local resource protection and build relationships with key partners and decision makers. It may also link to a cooperative agreement between partners collaborating on resource management of Las Cienegas National Conservation Area. Once a cooperative management agreement is completed, the focus will shift to implementation of “pilot projects” outlined in the strategic plan. A draft cooperative management agreement is expected by early 2005.