

# **Proposal to Expand Saguaro National Park (Rincon Mountain District and Tucson Mountain District) and Conduct an Assessment of Adjacent Lands**

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## **I. PARK EXPANSION PROPOSAL**

### **A. Boundary Expansion**

#### **1. Summary**

This proposal to expand Saguaro National Park includes approximately 975 acres of private land adjacent to the current boundary. The Tucson Mountain District will be expanded to include 300.18 acres of ecologically significant land. The Rincon Mountain District will grow by 674.41 acres that includes important open space and encompasses valuable riparian wildlife habitat along Rincon Creek. The adjustment of the park boundary to include these properties will protect valuable natural resources, maintain wildlife movement corridors, and protect some of the last remaining productive riparian areas near the park. It will enhance the value of existing preserved areas by ensuring connections between them.



All landowners included in this expansion package are supportive of the effort and are willing to be included within park boundaries. As the city of Tucson and Pima County continue to grow around the boundaries of Saguaro National Park, many adjacent private parcels are threatened with subdivision and development. These parcels are important to protect the

integrity of the natural resources within the park and provide important visibility and momentum for county-wide species protection.

Congress authorized adjustments to the park boundary in 1976 and expansions to the east and west districts in 1991 and 1994. These changes were made as a result of rapid growth in Tucson that was encroaching on the resources within the parklands. Inclusion and protection of lands adjacent to the park units helped to protect the resources within the park and maintain connections important for wildlife and other park resources. The 1994 legislation also changed the unit's designation from monument to park in order to afford the area full recognition and statutory protection as a National Park. This current project proposes to add an additional 975 acres of ecologically significant lands to the National Park while concurrently initiating an assessment of the surrounding land will build on previous efforts to manage habitats rather than individual and separate units.

#### **2. Data Supporting Boundary Expansion**

- The expansion includes a variety of unique ecological, geological, hydrological, scenic, historical, and wildlife components enhanced by the serenity and rural character of the area.

- The parcels located along the southern boundary of Saguaro National Park Rincon Mountain District include three miles of Rincon Creek, a gallery riparian forest, and superb wildlife habitat as well as several small washes that flow south out of the park. The only riparian hardwood woodland in Saguaro National Park occurs along Rincon Creek and wildlife inventories indicate the area is used by rare species such as gray hawks, yellow-bill cuckoos, giant spotted whiptail lizards, and lowland leopard frogs. The purchase permanently links a large section of this valuable wash land habitat.
- The park applied for an in-stream water claim along Rincon Creek as it flows through park property to protect the natural resources within and surrounding the expansion area.
- The expansion area's location to nearby public lands (Coronado National Forest Rincon Mountain Wilderness, Colossal Cave Mountain Park, Cienega Creek Natural Preserve, Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, Tucson Mountain Park, *and* Sweetwater Preserve) contributes to the protection of the wildlife, view shed, and scenic qualities of the national park.
- Local conservation efforts are working to protect the Cienega Corridor, an area that connects Saguaro National Park East with Las Cienegas National Conservation Area to the south.
- The Tucson Mountain District parcels have high resource integrity and will help to protect view sheds as well as wildlife corridors which are quickly disappearing. Several parcels are adjacent to the Sweetwater Preserve, a new Pima County desert park of 695 acres, with a diversity of habitat types. These parcels are especially critical as a wildlife corridor and would greatly enhance the value of the existing preserved areas.
- Tucson Mountain District may lose the presence of mountain lions in the next few years due to loss of habitat and range. Any additional park lands, especially those that connect with other public lands, will help to preserve this key predator.
- Lands located adjacent to the park are an immediate concern as increased development pressures are occurring along park boundaries and throughout Pima County.
- The properties have a high potential, if developed, to negatively impact and disturb the water, wildlife, and vegetation of the National Park.



## **B. Appropriation**

Acquisition of the expansion lands will require legislation to authorize the purchase of the acreage and an assessment of adjacent land. It subsequently will require either the reallocation of existing funds or the appropriation of additional funds for this purpose. While some pressure has been reduced in the real estate market in the Southwest over the last year, it is anticipated prices will continue to increase in coming years as the city grows, so now is an opportune time to expand the park. It is fiscally beneficial for the park service to purchase these expansion lands as quickly as possible.

## II. ASSESSMENT OF ADJACENT LANDS

### A. Summary

In addition to the expansion, we propose a study to assess lands that might also be suitable for inclusion to the park. The study should assess the natural, cultural, recreational, and scenic resource value and character of the lands adjacent to the park (including open vistas, wildlife habitat and corridors, buffer considerations, and public benefits). This study should be completed within two years of the start date.

The study will take a comprehensive look at properties surrounding the park. It will assess the importance of adjacent lands that provide both resource protection and a buffer to nearby growth and encroachment. These potential additions have diverse uses with a mosaic of ownership which requires a more complete assessment of their potential as park additions.

### B. Specifics of Land Assessment Study

- Specifically address lands within riparian zones.
- Assess and include federal land participation in the Pima County Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, a plan developed by local county officials and citizens to protect the biological core of the area.
- Allocate funds to conduct the land assessment.
- Prepare a report that contains the findings of the land assessment, and make recommendations to Congress regarding action that may be taken with respect to the land described in the assessment.
- Request authorization of the purchase of the land, an appropriation for the identified parcels, and funds to carry out the recommendations of the land assessment.

