

Resource Brief

Sky Island Restoration Cooperative

Fiscal Year 2014



The Sky Island Restoration Cooperative (SIRC) is a coalition of restoration practitioners, scientists, and land managers, working together to restore the ecological processes and systems of the Sky Islands in the Madrean Archipelago of the US-Mexico Borderlands.

Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor Protection and Management

Borderlands Restoration, Wildlife Corridors LLC, AZGFD, USFWS, USFS

Abstract

Facilitated by Borderlands Restoration and its newly-formed habitat protection and management entity Wildlife Corridors LLC, this project will permanently protect 916 acres of the Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor. The corridor stretches across the only remaining tract of undeveloped habitat between Patagonia and Sonoita, Arizona. Short- and long-term goals are to restore breeding, foraging, and migratory habitat for six federally endangered, threatened and candidate species; to enable a viable combination of human habitation and recreation in designated areas adjacent to, but protective of the corridor; and to increase public awareness, support and input on enhancing and celebrating the rich biological wealth of southeastern Arizona.

Keywords

Wildlife corridor, habitat management, public-private partnerships, jaguar, ocelot

Project Background

Open space and wildlife habitat in southeastern Arizona are being threatened by rapid growth of urban areas and residential development in rural areas. In 2004, Arizona Game & Fish Department (AZGFD) funded a team of conservation biologists at Northern Arizona University (NAU) to identify critical linkages important for wildlife movement. The resulting Wildlife Linkages Assessment identified a number of important places for wildlife migration, including the Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor. The Corridor was ranked by the NAU team as an important linkage for black bear and mountain lion and as the most highly

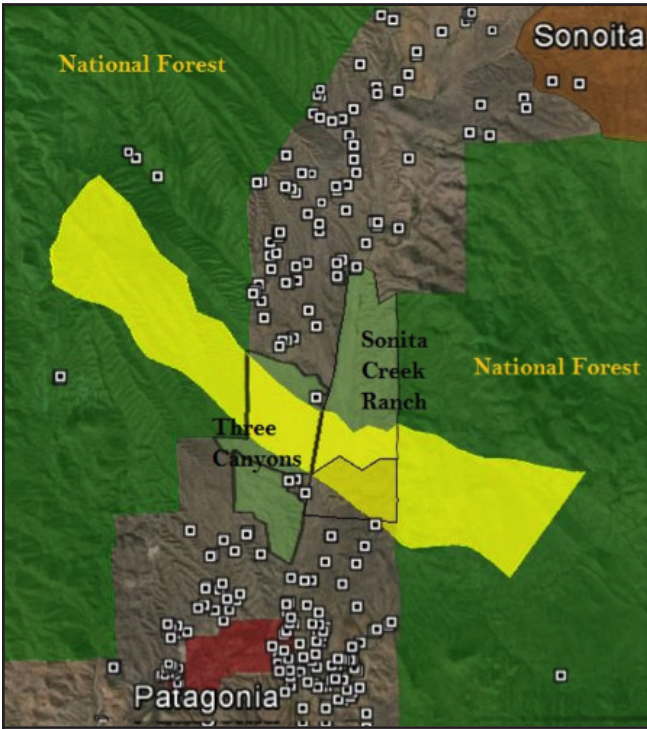
ranked linkage for jaguar moving from Mexico and the Huachuca and Santa Rita Mountain ranges. Although not specifically included in the NAU study, ocelots have recently been documented in the Huachuclas, Patagonias, and Santa Ritas. The Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor remains a vital and strategic location to facilitate ocelot and other species' movements among these mountain ranges.

Project Activities and Outcomes

The Corridor forms a bridge between the Sierra Vista and Nogales Districts of the Coronado National Forest, and crosses a two-mile strip of private land consisting of the Sonoita Creek Ranch east of highway 82, and the 3 Canyons Ranch west of the highway. AZGFD has a plan to acquire and protect Sonoita Creek Ranch. The adjacent 3 Canyons Ranch was slated for a 189-lot residential development in the heart of the identified wildlife corridor before the developer went bankrupt in 2008. Roads, power, and water were installed on the southern one third (Phase I) of the property but the northern two-thirds (Phase II) remains undeveloped. This nearly 1,000-acre section will be the heart of the Corridor, and several lots remaining in the southern portion of the property, where



Jaguar / SIA



Sonita Creek Wildlife Corridor overlaid on the Three Canyons property / BR

roads and sold lots already exist, will be sold and profits contributed to a Corridor Management Fund. In addition, AZGFD suggests that we identify one of the roads in the southern, developed portion of the property to serve as an officially-designated Forest access point, which will result in a lump sum payment to Wildlife Corridors that will also be used for Corridor management.

Stakeholder Involvement

Multiple local community members continue to provide guidance and support for the project, recognizing the benefits of multi-use, yet protected landscapes. Friends of Sonita Creek group in Patagonia has expressed great interest in assisting Borderlands in public outreach work in order to encourage local community members to provide input into the management and care of the land. The Sonoran Institute, the current holder of

the conservation easement, hopes to transfer ownership of the easement to Wildlife Corridors, after which we will re-plot the northern $\frac{3}{4}$ of the property, and thereby transform what had been an ineffective “swiss cheese” easement with greater housing footprints than open corridor space, into a viable and effective pathway for wildlife movement. Other private and public entities continue to express interest as we advertise the project.

Agency-specific Funding

As of December 2014, all funding for the Corridor acquisition has been raised by Borderlands Restoration from private sources. Funding proposals are underway now for application to USFWS/AZGFD Section 6, endangered species protection funds. Applications are pending to the Packard Foundation for a bridge loan that would enable Wildlife Corridors and Borderlands to pay off the high interest loan, in favor of a little to no interest loan that will free up funds for increased restoration and management activities.

Secured:

\$700,000 invested by “friends and family” private partners interested in corridor protection, multi-use landscapes, and conservation easement expansion. Each of these partners will receive a percentage of ownership in the property; some will build modest houses on the few lots remaining for sale, while others may purchase lots with the idea that they are expanding the corridor and easement footprint.

Proposed:

Section 6 proposal: \$900,000
 Packard Foundation proposal: \$700,000
 USFWS Partners program proposal for restoration and endangered species habitat and species recovery work: \$75,000



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 Editor: David Seibert

