

Wild Matters: The Organ Pipe Cactus Wilderness

Tim Tibbitts and Mark Sturm - Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument

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The Organ Pipe Cactus wilderness preserves the natural beauty of an expansive area within the Sonoran Desert Region of North America. Extending over more than 300,000 acres, the Organ Pipe Cactus wilderness occurs along 30 miles of the international border with Mexico, in a region where high levels of illegal border-related activities have continued for more than a decade. The resulting and complex social, legal, environmental and political issues have largely kept corresponding issues about wilderness under the radar of public debate.

Managing this vast conservation area on the border frequently requires federal agencies to work together to balance the needs of both national security and wilderness. Such efforts are exemplified by a 2006 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Interior and Homeland Security. This agreement authorizes border enforcement agents to drive off-road in wilderness under exigent or emergency circumstances that involve threats to human health and safety. Since the MOU took effect, monitoring data have shown that off-road-vehicle impacts have increased and today the agencies generally agree that there are opportunities for improvement.

Unquestionably, the high levels of illegal activity along the entire border need to be addressed. The U.S. Border Patrol, NPS and other law enforcement agencies work hard daily to do just that. They need our unwavering support and cooperation as they perform their mission. The NPS has demonstrated this by supporting national security initiatives in and around Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, including: joint border enforcement operations; the construction of a vehicle barrier and pedestrian fence, and the establishment of a network of high-tech surveillance towers. Considerable other security infrastructure exists and still more is proposed.

The unprecedented level of border-related activity has made managing the Organ Pipe Cactus wilderness challenging. Today, the effects of these activities are visible throughout the monument. We have documented thousands of miles of unauthorized roads and trails. We also deal with trash, graffiti, abandoned vehicles, vandalism, invasive plants and animals, altered ecological processes and degraded habitats. Similar to other conservation areas, our wilderness also shows the effects of other stressors on the environment, like climate change. We spend considerable time trying to understand the cumulative effects of border-related activity, and other stressors, on wilderness character, threatened and endangered species, geological and ecological processes, cultural resources, and visitor enjoyment. The results of this work are already helping us develop and implement a variety of educational, prevention, and resource restoration programs.

The demanding nature of this work sometimes causes us to wonder how wilderness matters here, today. Despite the challenges, opportunities do still exist here to experience true wilderness – untrammeled, natural and undeveloped. Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument remains an internationally recognized example of successful conservation in the Sonoran Desert. In 1976, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

designated the monument as a biosphere reserve, one of only about 500 in more than 100 countries.

The monument's mountains, bajadas, valleys and washes continue to support unique communities of Sonoran Desert life. The critically endangered Sonoran pronghorn, with a U.S. population of only about 100 animals, is still here, thanks to the expansiveness of this wilderness along with the numerous and coordinated recovery actions of diverse partners. The endangered lesser long-nosed bat continues to thrive here, able to reproduce successfully by foraging among the monument's abundant and uninhabited forests of columnar cacti. Quitobaquito, a critically important desert spring and pond system that lies within a stone's throw of the Mexican border, continues to support uniquely adapted plants and animals, including the endangered Quitobaquito pupfish.

History has shown that the Organ Pipe Cactus wilderness can recover from transformative land uses. Not so long ago, ranching and mining were prominent across this landscape. Although still visible, their marks are receding and after more than 30 years of "rest" from such activity, wilderness character continues to improve. We hope for similar recovery of wilderness character one day from the current and prolonged effects of border-related activity.

Until then, we encourage wilderness managers and advocates everywhere to become familiar with what is happening here. Unprecedented issues continue to unfold and much can be learned or lost. A visit here can be instructive and enlightening, and we welcome your questions and comments about our challenges.

The National Wilderness Preservation System embodies our national values. Dedicating vast areas to remain as they have always been – wild and undisturbed, for the world to experience and enjoy – was certainly visionary. The architects of the Wilderness Act never said it would be easy, however. We owe them the accolade of our best efforts, especially in times like these.

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