

Ironwood Forest National Monument

A summary of economic performance in surrounding counties



Photo courtesy Bob Wick, BLM

BACKGROUND

The 189,600-acre Ironwood Forest National Monument was designated in 2000 to protect lands that encompass rugged Sonoran Desert mountains, dense stands of rare ironwood trees, and rich archaeological sites. The monument provides habitat for desert bighorn sheep and other wildlife while offering opportunities for outdoor recreation alongside cultural preservation. Located in Pima County, Arizona, the monument is managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

PUBLIC ACCESS AND USES

The monument allows primitive camping, hiking, mountain biking, wildlife and plant viewing, hunting, birdwatching, fossil and geologic sightseeing, and historic and archaeological sites. In 2023, the monument attracted 125,000 visitors.¹

TRAVEL AND TOURISM

Travel and tourism are important to communities in the Ironwood Forest region, representing about 17% of total private wage and salary employment, or 61,440 jobs, in 2024.² Recreation contributed more than \$14.5 billion to Arizona's economy in 2023.³

SUMMARY FINDINGS

Research shows that conserving public lands like the Ironwood Forest National Monument helps to safeguard and highlight amenities that draw new visitors, businesses, and residents to surrounding communities.⁴

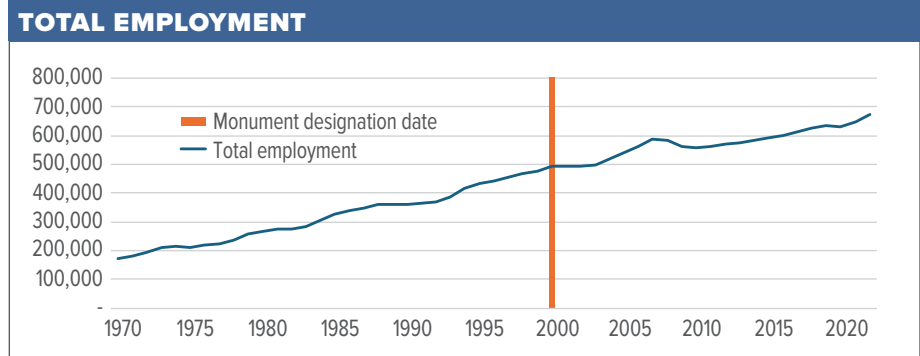
Western counties with protected public lands, like national monuments, have been more successful at attracting fast-growing economic sectors and as a result grow more quickly, on average, than counties without protected public lands. In addition, protected natural amenities—such as the desert mountain ranges and iconic plants like the namesake ironwood, saguaro, mesquite, and creosote bushes found at Ironwood Forest National Monument—also help sustain property values and attract new investment.

ECONOMY GROWS AFTER DESIGNATION

The economy of Pima County neighboring the Ironwood Forest National Monument grew after the designation of the monument, continuing previous growth trends.

From 2001 to 2022 in the Ironwood Forest region:⁵

- Population grew by 45%.
- Jobs grew by 37%.



SERVICE JOBS INCREASING

Service jobs—such as doctors, hospitality workers, and teachers—reflect economic diversification for many communities. These jobs are increasingly mobile, and many entrepreneurs locate their businesses in areas with a high quality of life.

From 2001 to 2022 in the Ironwood Forest region:⁵

- Service jobs grew from 316,569 to 485,773, a 53% increase.
- Non-service jobs grew from 77,502 to 81,121, a 5% increase.

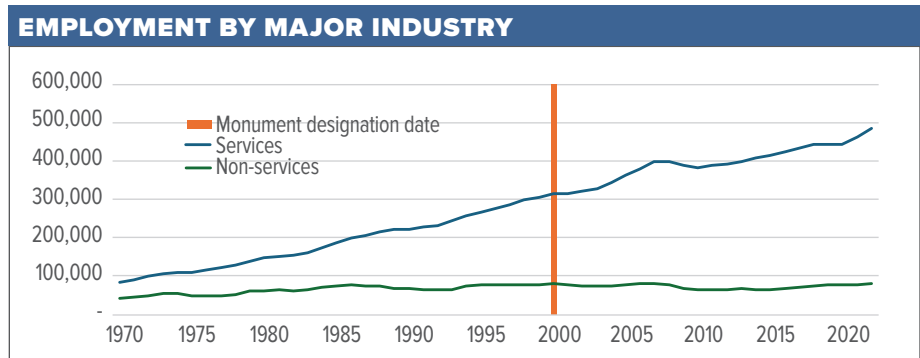




Photo courtesy Bob Wick, BLM

The communities in Pima County neighboring the Ironwood Forest National Monument experienced strong growth since its designation in 2000. The increases in population, jobs, personal income, and per capita income mirror other Western counties with national monuments or other protected lands.

ABOUT

This fact sheet is part of a series created by Headwaters Economics that assesses the economic performance of local communities adjacent to national monuments. For more information, see <https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/economic-performance-national-monuments>.

1. [Tucson.com](https://tucson.com). (2025). *Ironwood at 25: Monumental milestone arrives with little change to desert preserve*. Tucson, AZ: [Tucson.com](https://tucson.com). Retrieved from https://tucson.com/news/local/environment/article_3ed0dfbe-fe17-11ef-8f22-738263619c3d.html
2. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). *Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/cew/>
3. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. (2024). *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved from <https://www.bea.gov/data/special-topics/outdoor-recreation>
4. Headwaters Economics. (2021). *National Monuments Can Boost Local Economies*. Bozeman, MT: Headwaters Economics. Retrieved from <https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/national-monuments-studies/>
5. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. (2023). *Regional Economic Accounts*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved from <https://www.bea.gov/data/economic-accounts/regional>
6. Lawson, M. (2019). *Non-Labor Income in the Rural West*. Bozeman, MT: Headwaters Economics. Retrieved from <https://headwaterseconomics.org/public-lands/papl-lawson/>

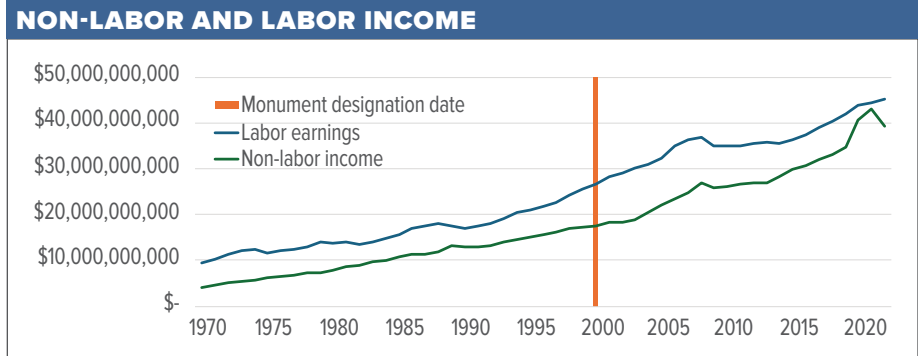
NON-LABOR INCOME GROWS FASTEST

One of the largest and fastest growing sources of new personal income in the Ironwood Forest region is non-labor income, which is made up of investment income such as dividends, interest and rent, and government transfer payments such as Social Security and Medicare.

For people with investment income and many retirees, protected public lands and recreation provide important aspects of a high quality of life. Non-labor income already represents more than a third of all personal income in the West—and will grow as the Baby Boomer generation retires.⁶

From 2001 to 2022 in the Ironwood Forest region:⁵

- Non-labor income grew from \$18.3 billion to \$39.4 billion, a 115% increase.
- As a result, in 2022 non-labor income made up 47% of total personal income.



TRADITIONAL JOBS HOLD STEADY

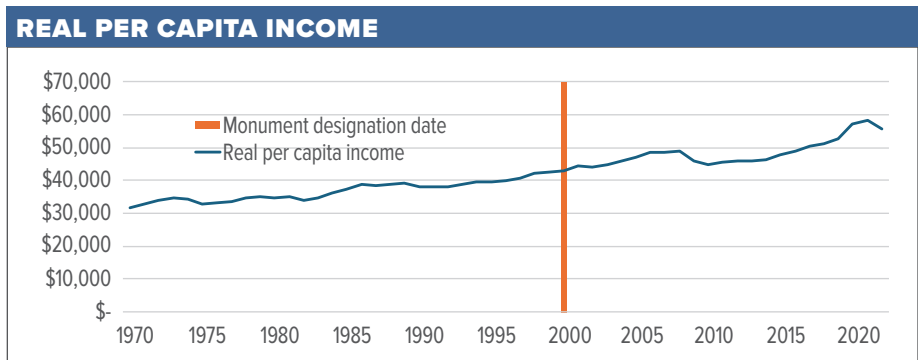
Long before the monument's creation, commodity industries (agriculture, mining, timber) were becoming a smaller share of the overall economy in the Ironwood Forest region. These industries remain part of the region's economy today.

PROSPERITY ON THE RISE

As the economy has grown since the designation of the Ironwood Forest National Monument, per capita income has risen as well. This indicates growing prosperity in the region.

From 2001 to 2022 in the Ironwood Forest region:⁵

- Real per capita income grew from \$44,601 to \$55,602, a 25% increase.
- Real earnings per job grew slightly from \$62,185 to \$62,754, a 1% increase.



Headwaters Economics is an independent, nonprofit research group that works to improve community development and land management decisions.