

NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

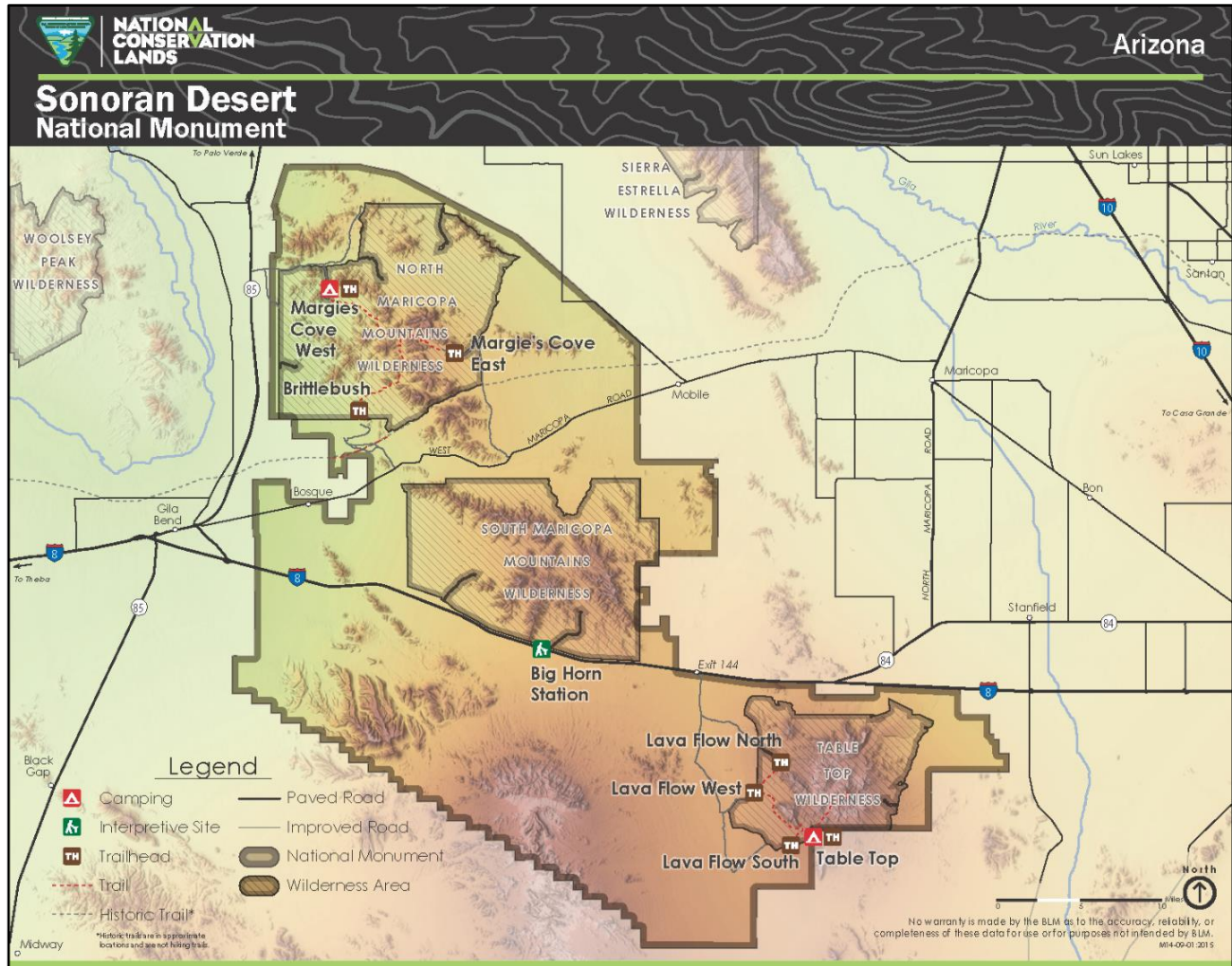
Arizona
2023: Annual Manager's Report

Sonoran Desert

National Monument

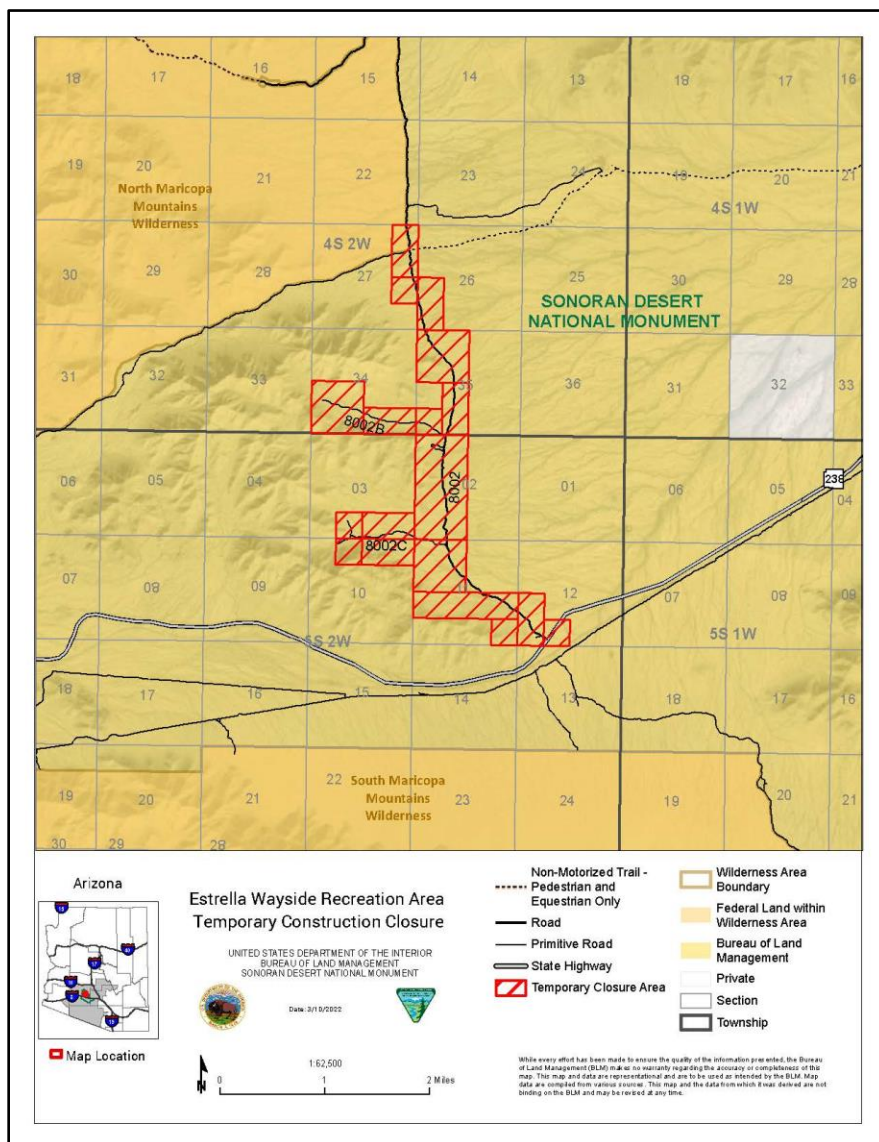


Map



Accomplishments

The Sonoran Desert National Monument (Monument) construction and road closures published in the *Federal Register* for the Estrella-Wayside recreation site in 2023. Picnic site construction is expected to begin later in 2024. Also, the project will provide camping opportunities on the Monument under the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) and will provide long-term sustainable development while also protecting cultural resources. This will enhance heritage tourism opportunities through the interpretation of the monument portions of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, the Butterfield Overland Stage Route, the Mormon Battalion Trail, and other historic trails in the vicinity.



Challenges

The increased recreational use, management of the Estrella Wayside site closure, and ongoing shooting sports and grazing use conflicts have been the largest challenges for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) staff this past year.



Visitors

Due to construction closures, Monument visitation decreased in 2023 to an estimated 37,972 visits and 27,438 visitor days. Many visitors stay on the highway and enjoy the scenery from waysides during short visits, while others use the waysides to access the undeveloped areas, generally staying for a few days to a week. The Monument is a popular destination for hunters seeking deer, small game, and gamebirds. The highest levels of visitation are during the fall big-game hunts and the winter months when the weather is more amenable to recreational activities.



Partnerships

Partnerships through Arizona Game & Fish Department (AZGFD) were utilized for pronghorn well maintenance and monitoring released Sonoran pronghorn. There are three wells maintained by BLM staff and AZGFD pulls water from them to use at various wildlife waters they maintain for game species and pronghorn. Additionally, there are still ongoing fencing removal efforts with the Arizona Antelope Foundation (AAF) and the Arizona Wildlife Federation (AWF).



Science

Sonoran pronghorn were monitored by BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, and AZGFD personnel. Aerial surveys were also conducted with AZGFD in November 2023 to observe the herd population. An additional twenty-two pronghorn were released on January 14, 2023, in the Vekol Valley. On January 25, 2023, ten more were released.



In April 2023, Lower Sonoran Field Office (LSFO) Archaeologist Amber Redger conducted an inventory of 150 acres on the western edge of the Monument. Along with two assistants and Law Enforcement Ranger Rick Alvarado, the crew surveyed a vast bajada region looking for temporary use sites that may have been associated with local trail networks through the region, including the legendary Komatke Trail. Though nothing of cultural significance was identified through the course of this initial survey, future surveys in the region will take place in 2024. Survey information is also being utilized for Resource Management Plan alternatives that could limit target shooting within Monument boundaries.

Climate Impacts and Resiliency

The LSFO Range Specialist, Chris Bowman-Prideax, has led the charge in climate resiliency on the Monument by recruiting graduate interns from Arizona State University to study the current precipitation and temperature trends on the Monument. The interns will be starting in 2024. The research that the interns will be gathering will better inform management of the Monument in the coming years.

Events- Monument Clean-Up

Throughout the last year, park ranger staff for the Phoenix District has collected trash at over 100 sites. Staff have replaced signs at the North Maricopa Mountains Wilderness (north end of Monument) boundary with more than 100 markers. They have also replaced wilderness route signs and installed six Monument portal signs. Additionally, ten illegal routes that lead into the wilderness were decommissioned. Through Operation Securing America's Border Resources (SABR), 37 sites were cleaned, and 5,500 pounds of smuggling trash were removed during the Tabletop Wilderness cleanup.



Tribal Consultation Efforts

The Gila River Indian Community and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community's Tribal Historic Preservation Officers and staff attended a large meeting at the Phoenix District Office on June 29, 2023. The agenda revolved around discussing the Tribes' collective concerns as it pertained to target shooting on the Monument and was part of the ongoing consultation on this issue. The LSFO has been working on a detailed analysis to determine where target shooting could be considered compatible with the protection of monument objects. Tribal input has been instrumental in developing a strategy to minimize effects to cultural resources and other features considered to be traditionally important to affected tribes. A decision on the Resource Management Plan Amendment is expected in 2024.



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