



# Arizona State Trust Lands Conservation Profile: Ciénega Creek

Sonoran Institute, in collaboration with conservation groups across Arizona and with funding from the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, has assembled state trust lands suitable for conservation into a single database. The resulting profiles focus on conservation values. Political values are left for another day.



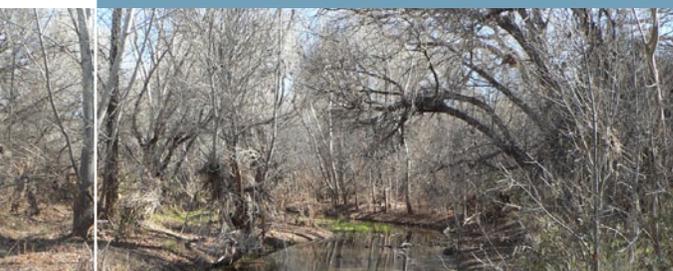
Shaping the Future of the West

## HIDDEN GEM

Zippering along Interstate 10 just east of Tucson, most travelers have no idea they are traversing an ecological gem. A quick stop would provide a delightful surprise; a biological treasure with one of the most intact riparian areas in southern Arizona. This unexpected landscape, with quintessential pools, seeps, and shaded springs supports exceptional biodiversity. On December 6, 2000 the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (NCA) was signed into existence. The 42,000-acre NCA consists entirely of public lands and is managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The biodiversity of the area is notable. It is one of the few remaining streams in southern Arizona that has not been invaded by non-native fish and has a perennial flow. The Las Cienegas National Conservation Area supports the largest natural population of the federally endangered Gila topminnow in the United States, as well as a healthy population of endangered Gila chub.

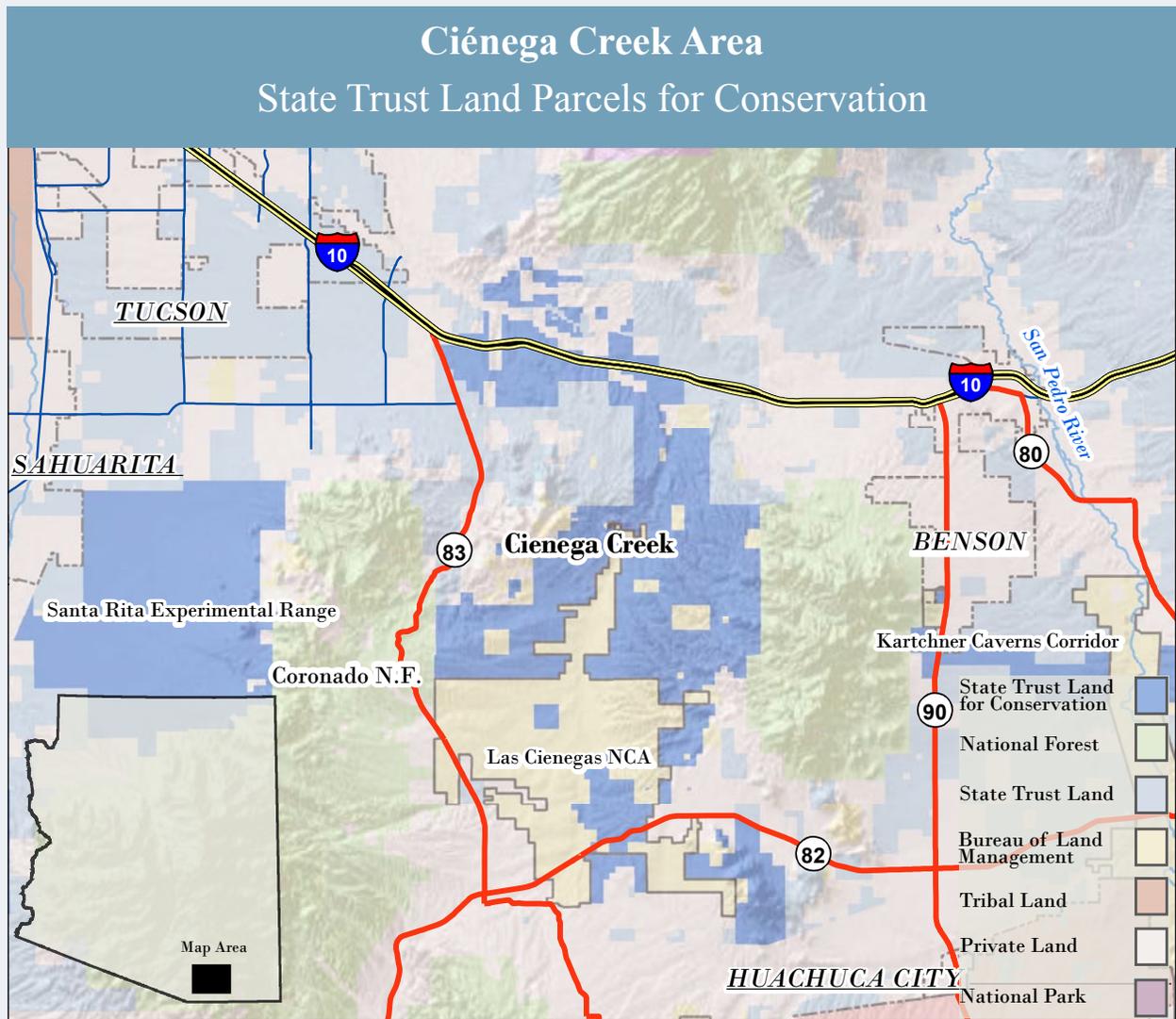
Keeping the pristine nature of the area faces ongoing challenges which include impact from border-related activities, invasive and non-native species that encroach due to residential development, and additional proposed development that could greatly impact perennial flow from aquifer depletion or contamination. 66,000 acres of state trust land adjacent to Las Cienegas NCA is being considered for conservation and would provide the protection necessary for this Arizona treasure.



# LOCATION

## Ciénega Creek

The state trust land being considered for conservation is a series of parcels located south and east of Tucson, within the Basin and Range region of southern Arizona on either side of Cienega Creek. The creek originates in the Canelo Hills and continues roughly 50 miles northwest where its confluence becomes Pantano Wash. Along its route, Cienega Creek flows through the upper Cienega basin, a wide alluvial valley separating the Northern Santa Rita and Empire Mountains to the west and Whetstone Mountains to the east.





## REASON FOR CONSERVATION

### Ciénega Creek

Conservation of 76,600 acres of state trust lands that surround the Las Ciénegas NCA would provide a critical buffer zone for the NCA. Las Cienegas includes five of the rarest habitat types in the American Southwest: cienegas (marshlands), cottonwood-willow riparian forests, sacaton grasslands, mesquite bosques, and semi-desert grasslands. The state trust land that abuts Cienega Creek is considered the lifeblood of this conservation area and helps support the great diversity of plant and animal life, including seven threatened or endangered species.

Pima County regularly monitors groundwater levels in the NCA as they are critical to continued flow of Cienega Creek. Between 2002 and 2005, lower than average rainfall dropped water levels in most of the monitoring wells by 10 to 20 feet. Groundwater levels throughout the conservation area remain at or below levels measured in 2000. In general, stream lengths have decreased over the last five years, with a drop of approximately 3.7 miles since the spring of 2002. The addition of approximately 66,000 acres that abut the NCA would enhance the opportunity to keep Cienega Creek free flowing and ameliorate some of the pressure imposed by development and climate change.

## ARIZONA STATE TRUST LAND

In 1912, the federal government gave 10.5 million acres of state trust lands to the new state of Arizona. These lands are not owned by the state, but are held in trust for the benefit of the state's school system and several other beneficiaries.

Proceeds from the sale or lease of these lands generated about \$50 million for the beneficiaries in 2010. The Arizona State Land Department, in its role as trustee for the beneficiaries, is constitutionally obligated to seek maximum financial return for trust lands.

This requirement has complicated efforts to preserve state trust land for recreational use and environmental protection. The state cannot simply turn a parcel of trust land into a park or nature preserve since it is required to receive full market value for the land. All state trust land is subject to sale or lease to the highest bidder. Preservation of trust land requires sustained community input coupled with legislative action.





# STATE TRUST LAND CONSERVATION

## Collaborating Partners

The Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust seeks to help people in need, especially women, children and families; to protect animals and nature; and to enrich community life in the metropolitan areas of Indianapolis and Phoenix.

The Sonoran Institute inspires and enables community decisions and public policies that respect the land and people of western North America. Facing rapid change, communities in the West value their natural and cultural resources, which support resilient environmental and economic systems. Founded in 1990, the Sonoran Institute helps communities conserve and restore those resources and manage growth and change through collaboration, civil dialogue, sound information, practical solutions and big-picture thinking. The Sonoran Institute is a nonprofit organization with offices in Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona; Bozeman, Montana; Glenwood Springs, Colorado; Sheridan, Wyoming; Twentynine Palms, California; and Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico.



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