

Arizona State Trust Lands Conservation Profile: Kartchner Caverns Corridor



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

AVIAN SUPERHIGHWAY

One of Arizona’s most visited state parks, Kartchner Caverns is a spelunker’s delight. It features a show cave with 2.4 miles of passages carved out of limestone and a variety of formations including the other worldly soda straw stalactites.

While Kartchner Caverns is best known for its caves that have been meticulously cared for; the land adjacent to the park now needs attention. The state trust land proposed for conservation abuts both Kartchner Caverns State Park land and the City of Benson. Located just west of the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, this land provides a critical migration path between the eastern flank of the Whetstone Mountains and the Dragoon Mountains to the east. Conservation of these 7,300 acres would create a critical buffer to ensure that the springs that feed the park remain intact and to provide a linkage for this critical migratory path.

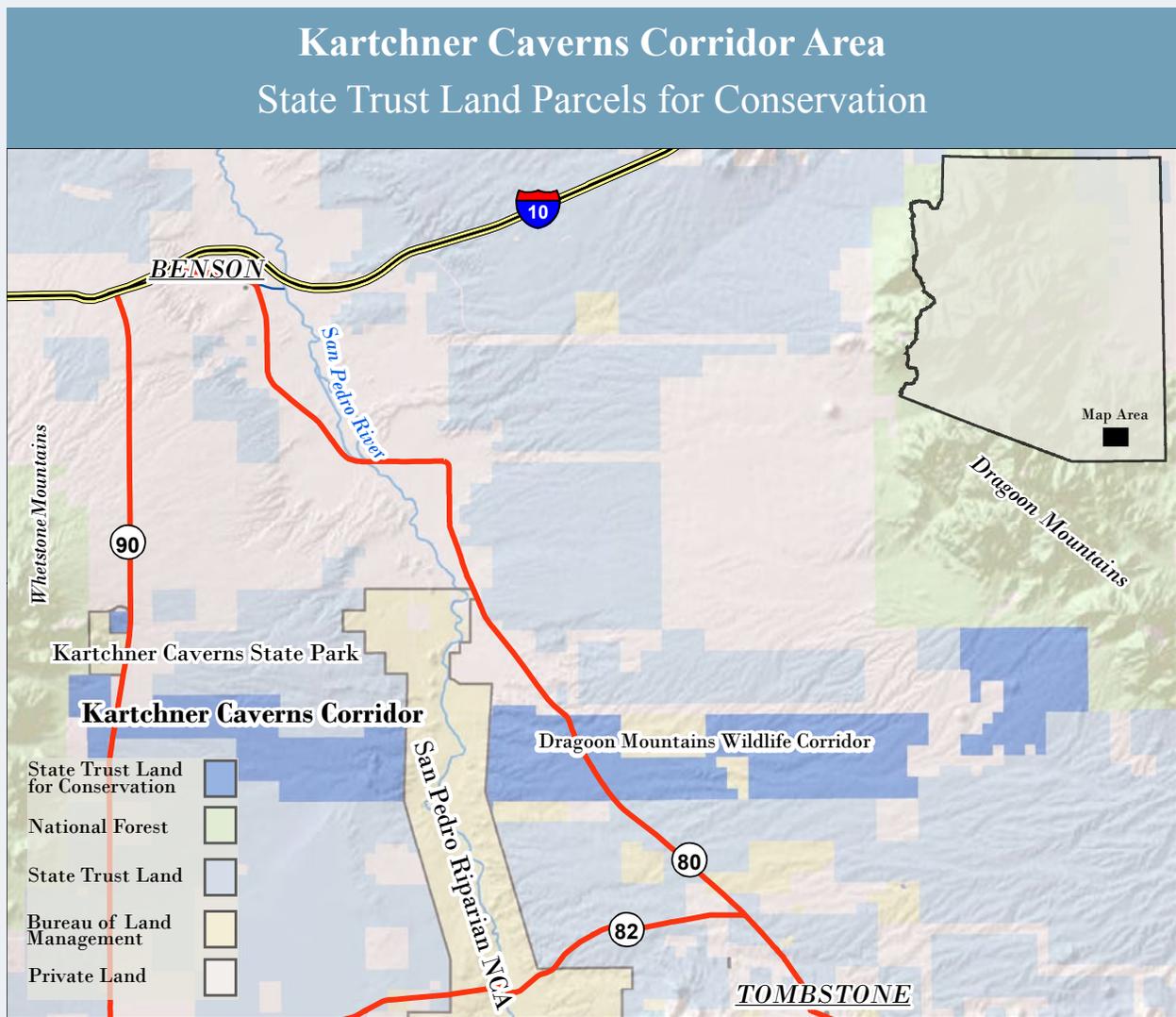
The Park is located in a region prized for bird and bat watching – large and small migratory birds use this “bird superhighway” and the linkage between the two mountain ranges ensure optimal opportunity for migratory success. Noteworthy birds that live here full time or stop on their way include the Ferruginous Hawk, Wild Turkeys, and the Calliope Hummingbird. The myotis velifer, or the common cave bat, also live in this area.

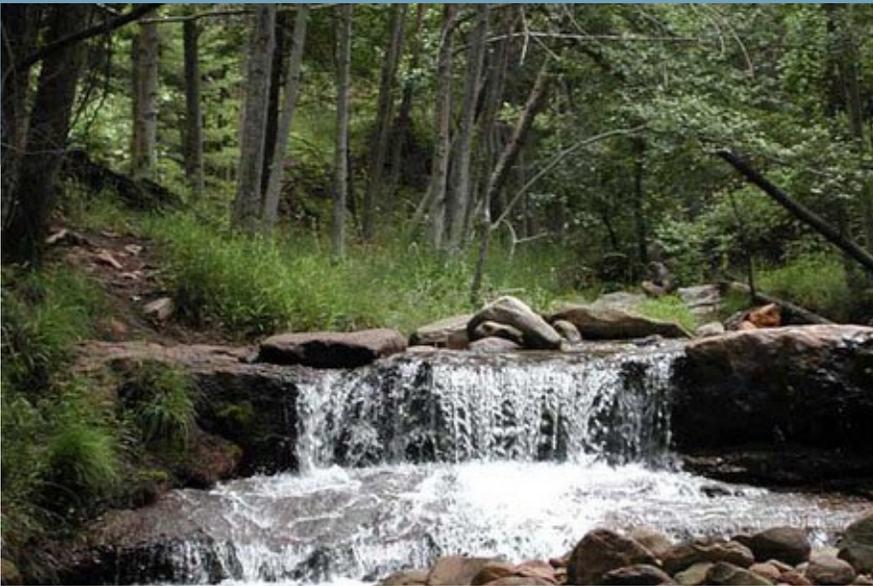


LOCATION

Kartchner Caverns Corridor

The proposed state trust land conservation area is located on both the east and west side of State Route 90 just south of the City of Benson and Kartchner Caverns State Park. The critical migratory route, in part, links the Park with the Whetstone Mountain range to the west and the Dragoon Mountains to the east.





REASON FOR CONSERVATION

Kartchner Caverns Corridor

Geologically, the Whetstones, like other mountains in the Sky Island chain, are a complex mix of formations. Large faults formed through limestone some 15 million years ago have given us the unique gift of Kartchner Caverns and created a special home for common cave bats in the summer months.

These state trust lands include ecology unique to the southwestern United States. The area features transitional grasslands of the Apache Highlands Ecoregion on transitioning bajada slopes that are sandwiched between basins and mountains. The area near the Caverns is known for highly diverse vegetation, which is strongly affected by drought, and in turn, impacts the many avian and mammal species using these lands to travel to and from their summer and winter habitats. Given Benson's proximity to Tucson and its reasonable cost of living, potential for residential development exists on land along the northern edge of these lands proposed for conservation. Additional development poses a threat to this important migration corridor as well as the consistent water source for the cave system.



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 Arizona Wilderness Coalition strives to permanently protect and restore Wilderness and other wild lands and waters in Arizona for the enjoyment of all citizens and to ensure that Arizona's native plants and animals have a lasting home in wild nature.

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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