

Arizona State Trust Lands Conservation Profile: The Tortolitas

CRESTED SAGUAROS AND IRONWOOD FORESTS

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.

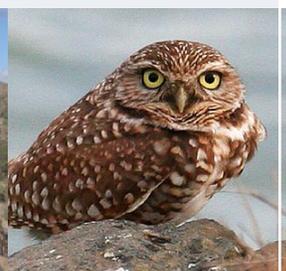


Shaping the Future of the West

Rare and magnificent crested saguaros and stands of ancient ironwood trees dot the area in and around the Tortolita Mountain range. The 20,000 acres of state trust land proposed for conservation touch the east and west sides of this range. The range is one of the oldest geological features in the Tucson area, which includes 4,651 foot Tortolita Peak, the highest point in the range.

Both sides of this range feature exemplary riparian washes – prime habitat for desert dwellers. Honey Bee Canyon, Sausalito Creek, Big Wash, Twenty-Seven Wash, and Wild Burro Wash all provide a distinctive habitat that serves as home to a variety of wildlife species, including mountain lion, gray fox, and a small herd of feral horses. A prized, dense forest of ironwood trees is tucked away on the southwestern edge of the mountains. This extraordinary spot in the proposed conservation area is regarded as prime habitat for the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl, a listed endangered species.

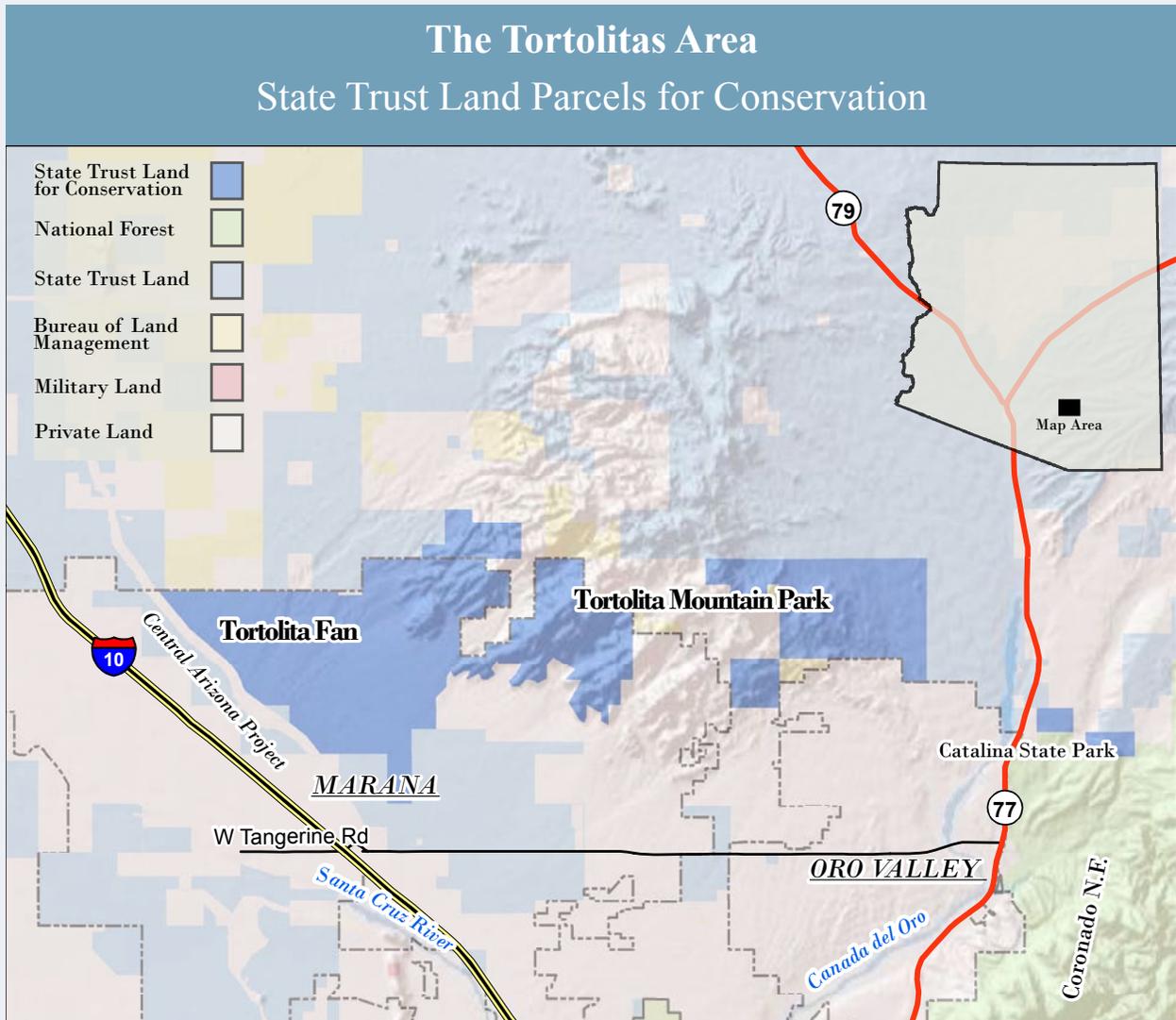
Suburbanization of Tucson and other cities and towns close to the Tortolitas place pressure on three sides of this range and imperil this ecosystem.



LOCATION

The Tortolitas

Tortolita Mountain Park was established in 1986, when Pima County approved the expenditure of bond funds to acquire 3,000 acres in the Tortolita Mountains for park purposes. The areas proposed for conservation are noncontiguous parcels of state trust land located north and northwest of Oro Valley and bound on the east by the Central Arizona Project (CAP) with Tangerine Road marking the southern border.





REASON FOR CONSERVATION

The Tortolitas

The Tortolita Mountains are well known for their biodiversity and abundance natural resources that exist within and around the range. The plant life, wildlife, and scenic resources are exceptional and worthy of protection. The variety of flora across this relatively small geographical area is robust and includes palo verdes, scrub oaks, cottonwoods, willows, and hackberrys. These trees constitute habitats that shelter a variety of animal species and allow them to survive even as humans push ever closer.

The reasons to conserve the proposed 20,000 acres of state trust land abutting Tortolita Mountain Park and the nearby Tortolita Fan are many and include the preservation of the rare ironwood forest and its owl habitat; the numerous and rare crested saguaros; protection of the natural drainage patterns that help create riparian washes; and protection of the unspoiled viewsheds of the Tortolitas, which extend from the Pima-Pinal county line to planned communities north of Tucson. Recreation opportunities abound, but are threatened as residential development encroaches upon all sides of the park. Conservation of these 20,000 acres would provide the additional buffer from this encroachment the Tortolitas need.



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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