



Morongo Basin

A MODEL PROJECT EMERGES IN CALIFORNIA

The Morongo Basin is a fragile and diverse ecosystem of Joshua Tree forests, ancient plants, unique wildlife, mountains, and dry lake beds located in the Mojave Desert of Southern California. While development pressures differ in scale from other areas of the state, uncoordinated development patterns are impacting the treasured landscapes, open spaces, and vistas that residents value and visitors enjoy.

Engaging Communities to Act to Protect Wildlife

The Sonoran Institute is leading an effort in Morongo Basin, California, to stitch together a comprehensive conservation plan that will protect wildlife habitat and key migration corridors in a defined 1,300-square-mile project area located deep within the stark, desolate beauty of the Mojave Desert.

This project is unique since the Morongo Basin lies between Joshua Tree National Park and the U.S. Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms (which is the largest military training center in the nation), and a multitude of lightly populated but highly independent communities within San Bernardino County. Regional planning and community outreach in this vast web of overlapping government jurisdictions and private lands are enormously challenging!

The wildlife species targeted in the project include mountain lion, bobcat, desert bighorn sheep, the desert tortoise, and others. Wildlife need room to roam for survival, and in some cases that means hundreds of square miles, particularly when water resources are limited and food is scarce. ■





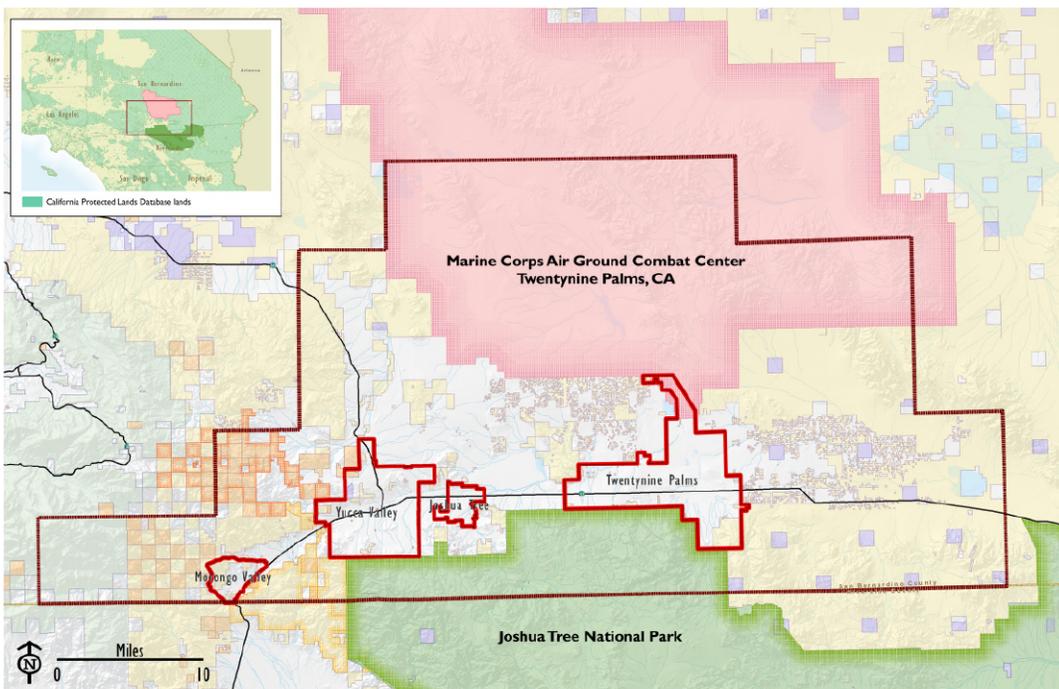
Pushing the Envelope of Collaboration

Working with local partners, the Institute has accomplished several important milestones in the project, including completion of an extensive community outreach process to engage local citizens in helping to identify important community values and key land areas in the Basin as conservation priorities for protection.

The Institute has been active in this region for more than 10 years, having first been encouraged to come to the area by local community champions, Paul and Jane Smith, proprietors of the historic 29 Palms Inn. In 2008, we were brought into this project by community leaders to help lead and provide professional support to the Morongo Basin Open Space Group, which has been hard at work since 2006. The Open Space Group initiated regional land-use planning in response to booming growth and unsightly rural sprawl that had begun to spread across the area.

Our project manager in the Basin, Stephanie Weigel, is a highly trained land-use planner who mixes energy and enthusiasm with a disarming Midwest sensibility (she hails from South Dakota) to build relationships and achieve results. Stephanie is also deeply experienced in conservation work in California and understands the workings of the government agencies in the region. Importantly, Stephanie has built an excellent working relationship with the Superintendent of Joshua Tree NP and with the leadership of the Marine Corps base. The Marine Corps base and Joshua Tree NP are the economic anchors in the Basin.

The plan being promoted by the Open Space Group, an eclectic band of public and private agencies, nonprofits and spirited citizens, is ambitious and far-reaching. It includes providing more protection for lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM); protecting land in sensitive



Morongo Basin
Project Area





areas for wildlife; promoting community values; preventing and mitigating encroachment on the mission of the Marine Corps base by neighboring development; beefing up management of public lands to prevent further destruction by illegal off-highway vehicles, and encouraging communities to adopt wildlife protection measures into local codes and ordinances. ■

Citizen Involvement Drives a Custom Conservation Plan

A plan is essential, but it must be informed and customized using local ideas and values. “You need the science, but you also need the community values,” says Stephanie. “We need to know what local residents treasure about this region and their community.” To maximize local participation, we applied techniques and models pioneered by our partner, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Success was measured by the hundreds of residents who chose to engage in the process.

In our outreach, we found that local residents placed the highest value on Joshua Tree NP and—interestingly—their own backyards. Local residents really understand the benefits associated with having Joshua Tree NP as a neighbor. And, they also covet their own space within the community, their privacy and the quietness of the area.

Ultimately, our product will be the Morongo Basin Regional Open Space Conservation and Stewardship Plan. This plan will include results and recommendations from a 2009 Priorities Setting Workshop we held, which evaluated over 64,000 parcels in Morongo Basin for certain key conservation values.

“When asked, the people of Morongo Basin most often say ‘their backyard’ as the most important reason for living here. They see conservation as an investment.”

Stephanie Weigel
—Sonoran Institute





The plan will also include results from another outreach initiative with the city of Twentynine Palms focused on developing a plan for a non-motorized vehicles trails system, which would feed into a master Trails Plan for the entire Morongo Basin area.

We are also partnering with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and other experts to prepare a series of alternative “what if” growth models for Morongo Basin. This work will include a fiscal impact analysis for the region which will provide community and county leaders with a “roadmap” for critical policy changes needed for sustainable development patterns in the future.

A draft of the plan will be circulated to citizens and local communities by May 2011, with adoption anticipated for later in the year. ■

Local Involvement Drives Local Results

Our project work in Morongo Basin is a reminder how crucial local involvement is to all aspects of our conservation efforts. We have worked to gain the attention and trust of the Joshua Tree NP officials, as well as the Marine base. Our work—and future successes—in the region depend on the full support of these organizations, members of the Open Space Group, and the local citizenry of Morongo Basin. ■

The Sonoran Institute inspires and enables community decisions and public policies that respect the land and people of western North America. Founded in 1990, the Sonoran Institute is a nonprofit organization that is working to shape the future of the West.

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