“From prehistoric times to the present, this region has always been a significant travel corridor—a cultural crossroads.”

- Andy Laurenzi, Center for Desert Archaeology
A LARGER-THAN-LIFE LANDSCAPE

The names resonate with the geography and the history of the West: Saddle Mountain, Hummingbird Springs, the Gila River, Woolsey Peak, Vulture Mine, Oatman Mountain, Yellow Medicine Butte. These places can all be found in an untrammeled part of the Sonoran Desert in and around western Maricopa County. It’s a larger-than-life landscape that has drawn millions of people to Arizona—wide-open country that holds the promise of infinite possibility in its sweeping vistas. “You step out there, and you feel like you can fill your lungs for the first time,” says Eric Gorsegner, an associate director for the Sonoran Institute.

“The area is what Arizona was like before we all arrived.”
- Heidi Vasiloff

The stark beauty of the desert comes alive in its limitless expanse: saguaro cacti march in loose formation toward the distant horizon as mountains cut sharply up into the Caribbean-blue sky. This rugged terrain provides an escape for hikers, hunters, and outdoor enthusiasts of every kind. Home to a wealth of wildlife, from the agile bighorn sheep to the plodding desert tortoise and the Gila monster, bobcat, and eagles, the land also bears a colorful history. Prehistoric Hohokam people, Spanish explorers, U.S. Army expeditions, hard-riding cowboys, ranchers, and hard-rock miners all converged here across generations to shape the area’s rich cultural heritage.

THE PROXIMITY TO PHOENIX

Perhaps the real wonder of this region is that so much can be found within a short driving distance of Phoenix. But the area’s proximity to this growing urban center also poses a danger to its special qualities. By 2030, the Maricopa Association of Governments estimates that 34 percent of the county’s residents will live in the West Valley, transforming small towns into cities and pushing development into stretches of land formerly known for their solitude. Extensive planning is under way for transportation and other infrastructure to accommodate the growth.
CONSERVING OPEN SPACE FOR THE FUTURE

Conserving the special character of our open spaces in western Maricopa County is the goal of the Sonoran Desert Heritage proposal. The project is being led by a partnership working to permanently protect this unique area located on lands owned by all of us, and managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

The Sonoran Desert Heritage proposal envisions a range of conservation designations and management prescriptions that will require congressional action. The proposal preserves natural, cultural, and recreational resources; ensures the viability of nearby military facilities; allows for future renewable energy development; and protects important wildlife habitat and migration corridors.

The conservation vision for the region anticipates future growth while continuing to accommodate a wide range of uses. The idea is to preserve the area’s natural and cultural values so that residents and visitors will reap its economic benefits for years to come. The proposal is supported by a diverse group of local communities, civic leaders, businesses, landowners, and organizations.

The proposal envisions a “special protection plan” for these public lands, established through congressional action.

PRESERVING THE ESSENCE OF ARIZONA

The public lands encompassed by the proposal are in western Maricopa County, and form a rough crescent shape from the northern to the southern portions of the county. Within this broad sweep of land unfolds an amazing variety of terrain: black basalt piles formed by ancient volcanic eruptions; desert basins thick with creosote and bright-green palo verde; jagged mountain ranges and sweeping cliffs along the banks of the Gila River.

“This is some of the most unique geology in the country,” says Craig Weaver, who has been hiking in the area for more than 30 years. These lands also play a pivotal role in the story of Arizona.

“From prehistoric times to the present, it’s always been a significant travel corridor—a cultural crossroads,” says Andy Laurenzi, with the Center for Desert Archaeology in Tucson.

Long before the arrival of Spanish or American explorers, the Hohokam and Patayan peoples lived along the Gila River, maintaining trade relationships with native tribes as far away as the Pacific coast. Significant archaeological sites—reminders of these early inhabitants—can be found throughout western Maricopa County and include Painted Rock, where black basalt rocks are covered with a haunting display of carvings.

The bluffs along the Gila River served as guideposts for generations of travelers. In 1774, the Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza led an expedition through this country on his way to California. Colonel Stephen Kearny and the famous Mormon Battalion traversed the same wild country during the Mexican-American War of the 1840s.

Less than two decades later, the Butterfield Overland Stage line provided an early route to California across the harsh terrain. America’s western
settlement drove successive waves of ranches, gold and silver mines, and hardscrabble communities, some now ghost towns, to take root on these wild lands.

The essence of Arizona’s character—frontier independence and self-reliance—has been shaped by this dynamic landscape and is our state’s contribution to the greater spirit of American individualism. Preserving these pieces of our colorful past will benefit future generations.

A PLAN TO ACCOMMODATE GROWTH AND SCENIC BEAUTY

Heidi Vasiloff remembers hiking in the Harquahala Mountains in western Maricopa County with her father as a child, “just to get outside.” Today, Vasiloff, a former Arizona Game and Fish Department biologist, runs an outdoor classroom program that, in 2010, gave about 2,000 school-age children a chance to experience the same country. Through different hikes, students looked for signs of wildlife, identified native plants, studied water quality, and compared different kinds of volcanic rock.

Many of the children are largely unfamiliar with the desert. For Vasiloff, the landscape is an unmatched teaching tool. “This is a really unique area,” she says. “It’s relatively undisturbed, which provides an opportunity for us to let these kids experience and learn about their state. It’s what Arizona was like before we all arrived.” As more and more of us move here, our public lands become an increasingly valuable resource. In the desert, open space is the equivalent of beachfront property; it enhances the value of nearby real estate. The opportunity for outdoor recreation lures high-end businesses sensitive to the lifestyle preferences of their employees.

As development pushes westward, conserving this landscape will enhance the region’s appeal and its economic viability.

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A TREASURE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Sonoran Desert Heritage proposal would even benefit the military installations in the area. The Goldwater Air Force Range and Luke Air Force Base, in particular, both need open space for overflights. That need will intensify if Luke becomes home to the new F-35 fighter.

Mike Quigley, who works for the Arizona Chapter of the Wilderness Society, has witnessed the air force’s use of the area firsthand while hiking in the Harquahalas. “I was taking wildlife photos when two F-16s came over,” he says. “When the planes left, I was struck by how quiet it really was. I was reminded of how very different things can be complementary.”

Among the marvels of this seemingly austere landscape are the many different ways it benefits our community. But to assure that this national treasure survives for the future, we have to make sure it is properly protected. Advocates of the Sonoran Desert Heritage proposal hope all Arizonans will support the effort on behalf of these special public lands.
For more information about the Sonoran Desert Heritage proposal, visit our website at www.sonoranheritage.org

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