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## An Overview of The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan

### *A Vision for the Future by Conserving the Past*

*Great communities are no accident. They are born out of natural strength and beauty and have a deep respect for ecology, history, culture and diversity. They are inspired by the vision of residents drawn to them. They are brought to maturity through hard work and investment. And they survive because of compromise and consensus. In a sense they achieve balance. Such balance is at the heart of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.*

The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan has been developed using science-based principles shaped by public review and discussion, resulting in a plan that reflects community values.

Most urban areas have plans or programs that protect to some extent natural, historical, and cultural resources and a different set of ordinances that regulate the built environment. Pima County, Arizona was no exception prior to the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. What Pima County has now achieved is the integration of all natural resource protection and land use planning activities into one plan.



### Origins of the Plan

In 1998 the Pima County Board of Supervisors initiated discussions on land use planning and conservation, but redirected the battle-weary vocabulary of the growth debate to include biological and scientific language and concepts. This was a bold stroke by the Board – to undertake science-based planning, and depart from placing political considerations at the front of land use decision making.

Work on the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan fulfills three areas of need: a science-based conservation plan, an update of the comprehensive land use plan, and compliance with federal regulations that protection of endangered species be addressed through a multiple species conservation plan.

Numerous individuals and agencies with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints recognized the importance of this effort and dedicated time, thought, and cooperation to its success. The initial elements of the plan to be studied were:

- **Critical Habitat and Biological Corridors**
- **Riparian Restoration**
- **Mountain Parks**
- **Historical and Cultural Preservation**
- **Ranch Conservation**

### Planning for Sensible Growth

For several decades Pima County has undergone rapid population expansion. It has been estimated that each year new construction consumes approximately ten square miles of desert. At the same time, the Sonoran Desert, rich in biodiversity, has been identified by the Nature Conservancy as one of the top eco-regions world-wide, deserving of special conservation attention.

The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, mindful of the factual correlation between growth and the consumption of natural resources, gives high priority to preserving and protecting our most important natural resources. Growth should be directed to areas with the least natural, historic, and cultural resource values. The Plan is not about whether Pima County continues to grow, it is about where the county grows.

The challenge faced by citizens of Pima County is how to direct growth and protect the lifestyle and quality of life that makes Pima County a unique and wonderful place to live. The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan meets this challenge.

The area covered in the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan is 5.9 million acres located in



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Pima County, Arizona which includes the Tucson metropolitan area. It includes two major eco-regions known as the Sky Islands and the Sonoran Desert, the second largest Native American Nation, and 850,000 residents from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The conservation planning effort addresses the problems of declining natural resources and the loss of cultural identity in one of the fastest growing parts of the country.



### **The Planning Process**

From its inception, the Pima County Board of Supervisors fully recognized that the success of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan required the support and approval of the people of Pima County. Pima County has made broad participation by many agencies, organizations and interested citizens a top priority for its conservation planning effort. Public participation has included public meetings and comment periods, a citizens' steering committee of over 80 members meeting since March of 1999, over 400 public meetings, a series of educational sessions and workshops, meetings of 12 advisory and technical teams and numerous informal meetings held with a variety of interest groups and concerned citizens. More than 150 scientists have contributed their expertise. Nationally recognized peer reviewers have provided insights and suggestions that have been incorporated.

Local jurisdictions and state and federal agencies have participated in meetings, on committees, and as members of the Science Technical Advisory Team (STAT) and Government Working Group, and their concerns have been made part of the reserve design and conservation planning process. The Government Working Group will further function as a collaborative interagency partnership with Pima County to support and benefit from a successful implementation of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. Geographic Information System Contributions

The availability and dissemination of high quality information was and is essential for decision making and effective implementation of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. Decisions are critically dependent upon the quality of information.

Early in the process, the decision was made to make extensive use of Geographical Information System (GIS) technology. This was recognized as the only feasible approach to assemble the extensive existing data, both digital and non-digital, identify critical gaps in the data and potential remedies, and to provide a means for analyzing the information on biological and physical resources over the six million acre study area. The GIS data and analytical results were used to make science-based decisions and recommendations for action.

### **Contributors to the SDCP**

### **Implementation**

The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan will be implemented continuously. Plan conservation principles will guide all future land use decisions of the County. It will also guide where public money is spent to conserve open space, how cultural and historic resources are protected, and how our western lifestyle continues. The Plan will live on and guide our actions, not simply be adopted and forgotten.

### **Your Role**

The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan is an innovative and far reaching blueprint for growing in an intelligent and graceful manner in Pima County. The Plan is designed to benefit the natural systems and residents of Pima County and to save our best lands and most precious resources for future generations to enjoy. The Pima County Board of Supervisors invites you to join other Pima County citizens in support of what is really an initiative to define ourselves as a community – one that understands and respects both its potential and its limits.



**Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan**

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