



Testimony of
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RE: H.R. 715: Saguaro National Park Boundary Expansion and Study Act of 2009

Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
U.S. House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am Kevin Dahl, Arizona Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA). I am testifying today on behalf of NPCA, the Rincon Institute, the Sonoran Institute, and the Tucson Mountains Association.

NPCA is a non-profit citizens' organization, founded in 1919, dedicated to the protection and enhancement of the National Park System. NPCA has 325,000 members, including 9,000 in the State of Arizona.

The Sonoran Institute is a non-profit organization that works collaboratively with local people and interests to conserve and restore important natural landscapes in western North America, engaging partners such as landowners, public land managers, local leaders, community residents, and nongovernmental organizations.

The Rincon Institute's mission is to protect the natural resources of Saguaro National Park Rincon Mountain District, the Rincon Valley and the Cienega Corridor. It is a non-profit organization that works to integrate community and conservation -- through promoting environmental education, conserving open space, encouraging thoughtful development, and fostering a sense of community that supports the area's unique cultural heritage.

The Tucson Mountains Association was founded in 1934 by homesteading families, and as such, it is the oldest neighborhood association in Arizona. Today, the group represents the interests of thousands of families who care deeply about the preservation of this area. Among its goals is the protection of desert open space to ensure adequate wildlife corridors and habitat.

Our four organizations appreciate the opportunity to state our strong support of H.R. 715, the Saguaro National Park Boundary Expansion and Study Act of 2009. We commend Representative Grijalva for introducing this important legislation and thank him for scheduling this hearing. NPCA urges the subcommittee to act favorably and quickly on this bill.

Saguaro National Park – A Valuable Resource

Saguaro National Park's spectacular scenery and recreation opportunities are enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of people who visit each year. The park protects an abundance of plant life and wildlife, including majestic stands of its namesake cactus. Indeed, the incredible sight of these enormous plants, backlit by the setting sun, is perhaps the most enduring image of the American West.

If you were in Tucson in 1933 and wanted to visit the new Saguaro National Monument, established that year by President Hoover, you would take a long drive on a dirt road to reach either the Tucson Mountain District to the west, or the far flung Rincon Mountain District to the east. A trip to the park is easier today, but the visit is just as rewarding – the most incredible stands of saguaro and other arid-adapted vegetation provides an unbeatable outdoor experience. We are indeed fortunate that Saguaro National Park's two units still frame Tucson's western and eastern edges, protecting the densest stands of saguaro and some very diverse assemblages of desert vegetation, for today urban development now fills the 30 miles between them and, for the most part, the wide-open desert spaces of the '30s is gone.

Congress authorized adjustments to the park boundary in 1976 and expansions to the east and west districts in 1991 and 1994. These changes were made as a result of rapid growth in Tucson that was encroaching on the resources within the parklands. Inclusion and protection of lands adjacent to the park units helped to protect the resources within the park and maintain connections important for wildlife and other park resources. In 1994, legislation also changed the unit's designation from monument to park in order to afford the area full recognition and statutory protection as a National Park.

Adjusting the Boundary to Protect Some Important Areas

H.R. 715 would expand Saguaro National Park to encompass approximately 975 acres of private land adjacent to the current boundary. The Tucson Mountain District would be expanded to include 300.18 acres of ecologically significant land. The Rincon Mountain District will grow by 674.41 acres that includes important open space and will protect valuable riparian wildlife habitat along Rincon Creek.

All landowners included in this expansion package are supportive of the effort and are willing to be included within park boundaries. One landowner is a world-traveling professional photographer who has managed his property as a wildlife sanctuary hoping that someday it would be included in the park. Another, whose property was the last to be added to this list, is a native Arizonan who has always known that the piece of land he owns has outstanding natural resource values and belongs in the park.

One parcel has been recently acquired by Pima County by donation. The Pima County Board of Supervisors supported the boundary expansion act of 2007, which is essentially the same as this bill before you. A County official told me that they accepted the donation so that they could turn it over to Saguaro National Park once the boundary expansion has been approved.

Reasons to Include These Parcels in Saguaro National Park

The proposed expansion areas include a variety of unique ecological, geological, hydrological, scenic, historical, and wildlife components, enhanced by the serenity and rural character of the area.

The parcels located along the southern boundary of the park's Rincon Mountain District include three miles of Rincon Creek, a gallery riparian forest, and superb wildlife habitat as well as several small washes that flow south out of the park. The only riparian hardwood woodland in Saguaro National Park occurs along Rincon Creek and wildlife inventories indicate the area is used by rare species such as gray hawks, yellow-bill cuckoos, giant spotted whiptail lizards, and lowland leopard frogs. The purchase would permanently link a large section of this valuable riparian habitat.

The park applied for an in-stream water claim along Rincon Creek as it flows through park property to protect the natural resources within and surrounding the expansion area.

Recreation will be well served by several of the additions. The Rincon Creek section is likely to host a portion of the Arizona Trail, a continuous, 800+ mile diverse and scenic trail across Arizona from Mexico to Utah – this is one of the unfinished sections. One of the parcels in the Tucson Mountain District abuts the popular Camino de Oeste trailhead. Another is very close to the Sweetwater Trail, and will protect the view of hikers who enjoy taking this route up to Wasson Peak.

The expansion area's location to nearby public lands (Coronado National Forest Rincon Mountain Wilderness, Colossal Cave Mountain Park, Cienega Creek Natural Preserve, Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, Tucson Mountain Park, and Sweetwater Preserve) contributes to the protection of the wildlife, view shed, and scenic qualities of the national park.

The Tucson Mountain District parcels have high resource integrity and will help to protect view sheds as well as wildlife corridors which are quickly disappearing. Several parcels are adjacent to the Sweetwater Preserve, a new Pima County desert park of 695 acres with a diversity of habitat types. These parcels are especially critical as a wildlife corridor and would greatly enhance the value of the existing preserved areas.

Tucson Mountain District may lose the presence of mountain lions in the next few years due to loss of habitat and range. Any additional park lands, especially those that connect with other public lands, will help to preserve this key predator.

Boundary Study

There are several additional parcels we believe should be included in Saguaro National Park, and some other areas that should be looked at to determine if they should be considered. H.R.715 wisely calls for a study to identify lands that might be included in a future boundary adjustment.

Conclusion

With the Tucson area growing dramatically and new developments threatening open natural areas, H.R.715 is critical to preserving this ecologically rich park. By immediately protecting nearly 1000 acres adjacent to Saguaro National Park, and then assessing additional lands that might be suitable for future inclusion, this legislation will go far toward preserving vital habitat.

Thank you for inviting NPCA to appear before you today and for considering our views. I would be happy to answer any questions.