Arizona's National Forests...Ecosystems at Risk

Kaibab

Surrounding both the north and south rims of Grand Canyon National Park, the 1.6 million acre Kaibab National Forest provides a critical biological link between the forests of Utah and Arizona.

The North Kaibab contains the most extensive old growth forest in the Southwest and represents our best opportunity to restore the ponderosa pine ecosystem and to protect old growth dependent species. One of these species, the Kaibab squirrel, is found nowhere else in the world and is an example of evolution through geographic isolation.

The North Kaibab also contains the largest population of Northern goshawks in the Southwest. Goshawk populations are in decline, primarily due to the loss of old growth habitat from logging. A Forest Service proposal to "update" goshawk protection guidelines will actually result in more logging of old growth trees.

Eighty-four million board feet of old growth and large trees are targeted for cutting as part of a salvage logging project across 10,000 acres that were burned by the Warm Fire in June of 2006. These larger trees are critical to post-fire ecological recovery. Salvage logging is very destructive, compacting soils, increasing erosion and spreading exotic plant species.

Coconino

Covering 1.8 million acres, the Coconino National Forest ranges from 2,600 feet in elevation along the Verde River, to 12,633 feet at the top of the San Francisco Peaks. Sacred to thirteen Native American tribes, the Peaks also provide habitat for threatened plants and animals. The dense forests and drainages at higher elevations are home to Mexican spotted owls and black bears, while mountain lions hunt deer on the lower slopes.

The lower elevation piñon-juniper woodlands have sustained human and animal life in the Southwest for tens of thousands of years. At least 150 vertebrate species live in the piñon-juniper ecosystem, including bats, birds and reptiles. The red rock canyons of Sedona and the Mogollon Rim contain rare perennial streams and riparian habitats.

Wildlife habitat across this diverse forest is at risk from off-road vehicle (ORV) use. The spread of noxious weeds, erosion, wildlife disturbance, noise and conflicts between ORV users and other visitors is among the worst in the nation. Only by reducing the current spider web of motorized routes–over 5,000 miles–can the forest provide safe places for wildlife as well as tranquility for people.

Prescott

The Prescott forest contains 1.25 million acres. Although the smallest forest in Arizona, the Prescott has an incredible diversity of habitat: Sonoran Desert at the lowest elevation, rising to chaparral and piñon juniper with ponderosa pines at the highest elevation.

The grasslands of the Prescott National Forest provide critical range for pronghorn herds. Pronghorn populations have been dwindling over the last 20 years due to loss of habitat from cattle grazing and habitat fragmentation from new development.

Rare desert bald eagles are found along the Verde River and two lakes in the Prescott National Forest. While hundreds of eagles winter in Arizona, fewer than 50 breeding pairs nest year-round.

Winding through three national forests, including the Prescott, the Verde is one of the largest perennial rivers in Arizona. Plans to drill deep wells in the Big Chino aquifer to support local development, will severely impact the Verde, already under stress from eleven years of drought. Hydrologists from the United States Geological Survey have calculated that over 80% of the base flow in the upper Verde River comes from the Big Chino aquifer. Heavy pumping of the aquifer will destroy this rare desert jewel.

Apache-Sitgreaves

Covering over two million acres of mountainous terrain in East central Arizona, the Apache-Sitgreaves includes most of the 200-mile long Mogollon Rim. With 34 lakes and reservoirs and 680 miles of rivers and streams, the Apache-Sitgreaves has been called an angler's paradise. The same habitat that invites human recreation, provides a ribbon of life for migratory bird species, native fish and amphibians.

The forest also contains the 173,762-acre Blue Range Primitive Area. Managed as wilderness, this rugged terrain was chosen as the spot to restore the Mexican gray wolf. Started with eleven wolves in 1998, the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area, covers 7,000 square miles in Arizona and New Mexico. Ninety-five percent of the recovery area is made up of public lands.

Wolves have persisted through recapture, relocation and the illegal killing of 18 wolves. A population high of 59 wolves in 2006 is far short of the 102 wolves wildlife managers predicted. Conflict between livestock and wolves has been the dominant factor inhibiting success of the wolf restoration program. The federal government has allowed the concerns of a few anti-wolf ranchers to take precedence over the restoration of Arizona's wild legacy.

Tonto

Nestled just below the Mogollon Rim, the Tonto National Forest has three million acres of rugged country ranging from pine forests to cactus-studded desert. With four million people in the Phoenix area on its southern boundary, the Tonto is one of the most visited "urban" forests in the nation. Almost 600,000 acres of designated wilderness and two major river systems attract 5.8 million people a year.

The Salt and Verde River systems are important migratory corridors for birds, providing habitat for the endangered southwestern willow flycatcher and the bald eagle. Thirty thousand acres, or 1%, of the Tonto is considered to be riparian habitat. This small percentage of habitat is home to 400 vertebrate species and 21 threatened, endangered, or sensitive species. Ten species of native fish, seven of which are listed as endangered and three threatened, survive on the Tonto.

Riparian habitat on the Tonto is threatened by copper mining operations, which suck water out of drought-stressed streams and contaminate what little water is left behind. In July of 2007, the perennial stream flow in Haunted Canyon ran dry as water pumping for the new Carlota Mine, expected to operate for 10 years, was tested for just three weeks.

Coronado

The Coronado National Forest consists of 12 widely scattered mountain ranges across 1. 78 million acres in Southeast Arizona and Southwest New Mexico. Rising dramatically from the desert floor, these "sky islands" provide habitat for a broad range of wildlife and plant species.

The Coronado is home to more threatened and endangered species than any other national forest in the United States. Invasive non-native species, urban development, and habitat fragmentation are threatening to destroy this varied landscape. Mountain lions in Sabino Canyon are killed when urban development encroaching on their habitat, causes interaction with humans.

Sharing a border with Mexico, the Coronado provides habitat critical for the survival of jaguars living in Mexico. The opportunity to restore the endangered jaguar to Arizona is threatened by six projects approved for 2007 to build 74 miles of fence along the Arizona-Mexico border.

The border fence, constructed of 15-foot tall, concrete-filled metal tubes set four inches apart will prevent the passage of larger animals such as bobcats, pronghorn and jaguars. The Sierra Club is supporting a combination of vehicle barriers and high-tech virtual fencing as a better solution to protect our borders and our national wildlife legacy.

Forests Forever!

A Vision for a New Century

The Grand Canyon Chapter of the Sierra Club believes that a forest management plan based on restoring natural processes, such as fire, is necessary to restore fully functioning ecosystems to Arizona's national forest lands. Called Forest Forever!, the Sierra Club alternative seeks to protect the unique habitats, watersheds and cultural resources of Arizona through a conservative approach to forest management.

We need your help

New Forest Plans should provide specific direction for the protection of forest-wide blocks of wildlife habitat and the species they support. Instead, the Forest Service has proposed a change in planning rules that will weaken forest land management plans to the role of vision documents with no set standards and guidelines.

Your participation in the forest planning process is essential if we are to convince land managers and politicians to adopt an environmentally sound approach to forest management.

Please attend forest planning meetings and Sierra Club workshops in your area. Visit the Grand Canyon Chapter website for a copy of the Forest Forever! alternative and a schedule of upcoming workshops and meetings.

Contact Us

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Management Recommendations

- Protect ecosystem integrity from the impacts of long-term drought and climate change by planning on a landscape scale rather than on a project-by-project basis.
- Reduce road densities to protect wildlife, riparian areas, archaeological sites, plants, soils and air quality. Issues raised in a separate process–travel management planning–should also be addressed in the forest planning process.
- Restore riparian areas by protecting water flows, vegetation and water quality. In 2005, water diverted for hydropower was returned to Fossil Creek, beginning the restoration of a rare desert river.
- Protect water quality by prohibiting livestock grazing and off-road vehicle use in riparian areas.
- Old growth trees, regardless of size, should be saved. These rare old growth trees are critical to restoring a healthy ecosystem.
- Protect the next generation of old growth by saving larger, more fire resistant trees.
- Restore wildlife, especially predators, to promote ecosystem health.
- Restore fire to the ecosystem using prescribed burns to reduce forest debris.
- Focus limited dollars on thinning and prescribed burns near communities with a high fire risk.
- Protect Arizona's remaining wild places with wilderness designation for the 1.2 million acres of inventoried roadless areas in our national forests.

photos by Dr. Robin Silver

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The environment of Arizona is typically associated with desert vistas and dramatic canyon views. Yet Arizona is home to the largest contiguous ponderosa pine forest in the United States. From the sky islands of Southern Arizona to the Kaibab Plateau along the Grand Canyon's North Rim, the forests of Arizona are home to a remarkable diversity of plants and animals, some found nowhere else on earth! As wild habitat throughout the Southwest is fragmented by development, public lands play an ever-greater role in the preservation of diverse and unique species.

Forests at a Crossroads...You can lead the way

Eleven and a half million acres of the forest and woodlands covering Arizona are managed by the U.S. Forest Service. The Forest Service has started a process to create new land management plans for all six national forests in Arizona. With your help, we have the opportunity to correct the results of over a century of mismanagement and create a "greener" vision for the 21st century.

Management practices based on the production of commodities have caused significant changes in the condition of southwestern forests. Through intensive logging, forests once dominated by fire-resistant old growth trees have been replaced by stands of young, dense, fire-prone trees. Heavy pressure from cattle grazing, mining operations, development, and agricultural uses have resulted in the destruction of 90 percent of Arizona's historic riparian acreage.

New impacts associated with urban sprawl, such as increased recreation demands, communications towers and water sources for growing cities are responsible for a forest riddled with roads. As energy and mineral prices soar, the filing of new mining claims on public lands has increased dramatically and mines long dormant are restarting operations.

Arizona's forests are already under stress from the current prolonged drought cycle. The situation is expected to get worse, with warmer temperatures predicted as the result of changing regional and global climates. Poor management decisions will further exacerbate the effects of drought and climate change. For example, allowing grazing on damaged grasslands, excessive water withdrawal from riparian areas and off-road vehicle use in sensitive ecosystems strains natural recovery processes.

Your participation in the forest planning process is vital! We need you to be an advocate for saving old growth trees, restoring native grasses and protecting critical wildlife habitat. You can speak for predators such as wolves and mountain lions, keeping ecosystems healthy and restoring a sense of wild to our national forest lands. With your help, we can save Arizona's forests for the enjoyment of future generations.