Many of Arizona’s public lands are likely to appear on anyone’s list of favorite places. From Grand Canyon National Park in the north to Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge in the south, from the Blue Range Primitive Area in the east to the Eagletail Wilderness in the west, Arizona is blessed with approximately 30.5 million acres of federal public lands. These special areas include a variety of landscapes, plants, wildlife, geology, archaeology and history, as well as recreational opportunities.

Although Arizona is lucky to have a great deal of public land, these lands are not necessarily “protected” nor guaranteed to remain “public.” A growing and increasingly urban population continually places new demands on our natural resources, especially those on our public lands. Urban development and proposed land exchanges that promote urban sprawl, overgrazing by livestock, and mining are a few of the threats. Recreational activities, such as abusive off-road vehicle use, is also destructive to these areas.

Our national forests, national monuments, and other public lands encompass a variety of vegetation types that provide habitat for important and declining species. Arizona incorporates the Sonoran, Chihuahuan, and Mojave deserts; the woodlands of ponderosa pine, piñon-juniper, and mixed conifer; grasslands; and riparian areas. This wealth of diversity provides ideal opportunities to ensure that functioning ecosystems are maintained. These lands are even more critical for their wildlife habitat and watershed values in light of the possible implications of climate change. It is imperative that we protect large areas in order to ensure resilient habitat for native plants and wildlife.

Want to get involved?

The Sierra Club offers a variety of opportunities to learn more and to get involved. Contact us at grand.canyon.chapter@sierraclub.org or 602-253-8633 or visit our website at http://arizona.sierraclub.org.
Threats to Our Public Lands

Development

Arizona is one of the fastest growing states in the nation. As more people move into our state, development continues to expand into natural areas. This development has profound effects on our public lands. Some of the direct impacts include destruction of riparian corridors along our rivers and streams, fragmentation of wildlife habitat, and killing of wildlife by vehicles and pets. Indirect effects include the “urban heat island” from large areas such as Phoenix, increased air and water pollution, heavier use of nearby areas, and the spread of invasive species.

Recreation

Public lands offer prime opportunities for recreation and enjoyment. Unfortunately, some individuals do not conduct these activities responsibly. Some off-road enthusiasts do not stay on trails and instead speed across the landscape, destroying fragile soils, vegetation, and cultural sites; degrading air quality; and disturbing or killing wildlife (e.g. running over desert tortoises). Target shooting at saguaro cacti, petroglyphs, and other natural resources is also a problem.

 Logging

Less than 5% of the Southwest’s original old growth forests remain intact. The last 120 years of logging has taken its toll. Because of this destruction, the National Biological Survey declared the ponderosa pine forests of the Southwest as one of the most endangered ecosystems in the nation. Species that rely on this important habitat, such as the northern goshawk, are in decline.

 Grazing

Many of our public lands are overgrazed by livestock, producing long-term ecological consequences. Some of the problems caused by grazing include eroded soils; spread of non-native, invasive species; and impaired wildlife habitat. Pronghorn do poorly in overgrazed areas, as do ground-nesting birds.

Mining

Mining practices are devastating to our public lands, impacting the environment, wildlife, and human health. Additionally, it is a huge rip-off of taxpayers. Mining leaves lasting scars upon our natural areas, degrades water quality, and produces incredible amounts of waste. Most of the chemicals used to extract minerals are extremely toxic to humans and wildlife.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

- Participate in planning and managing these lands. Attend public meetings, get informed about what the land management agencies are doing, and communicate with them about the public lands issues that are important to you.

- Assist with Sierra Club programs to protect these special places, including national monuments.

- Participate in service trips to restore habitat or survey wildlife. Opportunities include helping with revegetation, removal of non-native species, collecting data about wildlife species, trail building, and educational outreach.

- Write letters to the editor, agencies, and elected officials or blog in support of Arizona’s public lands.