

May, 2006

Dear Members of the Arizona Congressional Delegation:

We support Wilderness designation for the Tumacacori Highlands, the largest unprotected Forest Service roadless area remaining in Arizona. The area encompasses approximately 84,000 acres of biologically rich and culturally important land northwest of Nogales in southern Arizona. The natural character and importance of the Tumacacori Highlands are threatened by increasing urbanization in the Santa Cruz river valley and the rapidly growing metropolis of Tucson only fifty miles to the north.

The Tumacacori Highlands are among the most biologically diverse areas in the United States: a rugged, picturesque, varied land where sub-tropical influences mingle with mountains and desert grasslands. Northern temperate-region species such as Black Bear and Peregrine Falcon converge with southern tropical-region species like Mexican Vine Snake and Elegant Trogon. Additionally, the area is one of the few remaining areas in southern Arizona that provides intact habitat for Gila Top Minnow and federally listed Chiricahua Leopard Frog. Remarkably, the most recent sightings of an American Jaguar in the United States occurred here in 2004. The area provides exceptional and intact habitat for 74 species listed for their rarity by federal and state governments.

Wilderness designation affords the highest degree of federal land protection and is the most appropriate tool for safeguarding ecosystems. Natural areas provide services necessary for sustaining human life such as filtering pollutants from air and water and supporting insects that pollinate our crops. Human pressures on ecosystems have been easier to ignore in the past because the West was once full of open spaces, but as human population increases so does the need for and the threat to ecological services. Scientific research documents detrimental disturbance to intact ecosystems caused by roads, mechanized vehicles, resource extraction, and other human impacts. Wilderness designation would help maintain the benefits provided by this area by preventing the creation of new roads in the Tumacacori Highlands without imposing limitations to currently permitted land use.

Researchers estimate that while one percent of the land in the United States is covered by roads, their impact is much larger, with ecological effects detected on 18-22% of land in the U.S. Of the 3.9 million miles of public roads, 10% are located in National Forest. In contrast to the problems of noise, pollution from cars, and roadkill associated with high volume of traffic and physical features of major roads, the majority of forest roads are narrow, unpaved, lightly traveled, and remote. However, roads in remote areas have substantial negative effects on the environment including influences on species such as habitat loss by road construction and altered behavior, impacts on hydrology such as sedimentation from soil erosion or scouring of stream channels, loss of soil that supports plants. These consequences are unlikely to reverse on their own and are instead likely to be exacerbated over time with continued and increased disturbance.

The Tumacacori Highlands present exceptional recreational opportunities for hikers, hunters, backpackers, bird watchers, canyoneers, photographers, and others. The Highlands are an area where one can still "get away from it all" and experience southern Arizona as it has been for decades: real, natural, wild. The roadless, noiseless character of the Tumacacori Highlands enhances outdoor recreation experiences and is in too-short supply in a rapidly urbanizing region. Population growth in southern Arizona continues to create a demand for low-impact recreation opportunities on public lands, and the need for permanently-protected wild areas. Recreation contributes significantly to local and state economies; we urge you to highlight a commitment to preserving the resources that support those activities by working for Wilderness designation.

Passing U.S. Wilderness bills historically has been a bipartisan effort marked by a common understanding and appreciation of the value of our wildlands and natural heritage. Indeed, the last Wilderness bill protecting Arizona lands was sponsored in Congress by Representative Morris Udall (D-AZ), supported by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in 1990. Today, on the ground here in southern Arizona, there is a broad coalition of businesses, organizations, and individuals working to permanently protect the Tumacacori Highlands as a place for wildlife and wildlife watching, hiking, hunting, tourism, and unique cultural antiquities.

We wish to add our voices and our names to that broad and committed coalition. We urge you to actively support Wilderness designation for Tumacacori Highlands and to work to pass the necessary legislation in this Congress.

Sincerely,

[Note: signatories in alphabetical order; affiliations listed for informational purposes only]

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