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### Wildlife connections and TMA activities

Residents of the Tucson Mountains were recently delighted by the news of a pair of Bighorn Sheep, which showed up in our very own Tucson Mountains, took a tour, and then departed. Sadly, Bighorn Sheep are no longer residents of the Mountains the way they were half a century ago, but their recent visit emphasizes that the Sonoran Desert is a connected place, and the Tucson Mountains remain connected within it. As these columns have been emphasizing, one of TMA's goals is to keep it connected, as that is how the Mountains can remain biologically healthy into the future.



Bighorn Sheep spotted in the Tucson Mountains

There has been much celebration recently with the new wildlife crossings on Oracle Road. They are in place and they work. These crossings allow the wildlife corridor from the Tortolita Mountains to the Catalina Mountains to continue across the road. But equally, we should be



Wildlife crossings on Oracle Road

celebrating the fact that the wildlife corridors, namely broad stretches of natural open space on both sides of the road joining the mountain ranges, have been preserved. Wildlife crossings without wildlife corridors do not make sense, and equally corridors without suitable road crossings cannot function properly.

What of the Tucson Mountains? They are still connected to places further west as the recent sheep tour attests, but maybe they will not remain that way if development occurs in the Avra Valley. That is one of the dangers of the proposed interstate I11 (see public meeting notice below). Will it be built and what route will it take? If it goes west of the Tucson Mountains and connects to I19, Big Horn Sheep, and all the other species regularly moving between the mountain ranges, will have a much harder time. But the bigger problem right now is to the east. As the Tucson basin fills up with development, there is a major risk that the Tucson Mountains will be cut off from the Tortolita Mountains and the Catalina Mountains. The failure of the bond election last fall means that funds are not available to buy some of the critical connections to the east right now, and it is a race against time before development forecloses the possibility.

Some limited funds do remain for purchasing connections within the Tucson Mountains, and TMA has been working with the County in evaluating parcels for purchase. But private land, provided it is not developed too intensely, can still function as habitat for wildlife and as wildlife corridors. Indeed, there is much valuable habitat on private land in the SR zoning of the foothills of the Tucson Mountains where development is restricted to one home per 3.3 acres. Your board is working hard to keep it that way. We opposed a recent proposal to develop a 78-acre parcel on Sunset Road as a cluster development with double the density that SR would have allowed. Although, the cluster would allow a significant amount of open space, the high number of homes would restrict wildlife movements of land that now functions as a wildlife corridor from the Tucson Mountains down to the Santa Cruz River in the critical area between its junction with the Rillito River and Cañada del Oro. We are working hard in the hopes of ultimately having some of the proposed homes removed to keep the area better functioning as wildlife corridor.



Housing development with land for wildlife

We are also having discussions with the owner of land at the corner of Sweetwater and Silverbell emphasizing that all the undeveloped land near the Santa Cruz River has an important role in facilitating wildlife movements in the region. If all this land can keep its zoning and be looked after by its owners, or be developed in some alternative way that does not increase the density substantially over SR and provides for adequately preserved open space, we can be optimistic about the future of the Tucson Mountains. A final issue, though, is the publicly owned land along the Santa Cruz River. Much of it is degraded, and to function adequately as wildlife corridor it needs to be restored and not build upon. Some is likely to become sports fields but we are arguing that it is critical that serious provision for wildlife be made. Then all the pieces will be in place. We have been having some very positive meetings with the County in discussing this idea, and we look to your support.

### **Interstate I11 is being planned**

The idea is that it would join Mexico at Nogales to the Western USA with a big road all the way to Canada. It may pass through Tucson, and may cut between the Tucson Mountains and natural areas further west, fostering development there and putting more barriers to wildlife movement between the Tucson Mountains and elsewhere. Regardless, big impacts on our region are to be expected. Attend one of the six public meetings this summer and let your voice be heard for the environment. The most convenient meeting for local residents is

Wednesday, June 22, 4-6:30 PM,  
Arizona Riverpark Inn  
777 W. Cushing St.  
Tucson

Check the following website for details and other times and locations.  
<http://i11study.com/Arizona/>

## **Habitat Competition for Kids, and for Everyone**

TMA has launched a new contest for kids, fashioned after our Wildlife Habitat Competition. This could be a great opportunity for your kids, or other kids you know, to get involved in learning about our desert environment. We have defined age categories, to make the contest realistic even for the younger kids.

Basically, kids can send in photographs and/or written materials, showing how they have learned about, protected or restored the places where wildlife can make homes. This may include simply leaving fallen branches and rocks in place and observing how wildlife uses such things.

Winners will receive certificates and ribbons at our annual meeting in October. For more information, see our web site.

Our habitat competition for everyone still exists. If you are proud of your property, please enter our competition whether or not you are a kid. See the website for details.

## **Buffel Grass in the Sweetwater Preserve**

Buffel Grass is an invasive species from Africa that threatens the Sonoran Desert environments around Tucson. It spreads, forming large patches, which dry out and make the area flammable. It also smothers our local plant species inhibiting their growth and germination. All round it is bad for our environment. But it has gotten into many parts of the Santa Catalina and Tucson Mountains. You can learn more about it and how to fight it at the following website:

<http://www.buffelgrass.org/>



Buffel grass in Tucson

Have you seen buffel grass in the Sweetwater Preserve? Fortunately, there is very little there, thanks in part to our intrepid TMA president who has been scouring the Preserve for it, and pulling out any patches that he finds. He thinks he has removed all significant patches of buffel grass within the Preserve, but even a single plant can eventually grow into a dangerous patch. You can help keep it free of buffel grass by letting us know if you think you find it. Tell us where it is, and we will send our president out there to check and remove it if you are right. Remember, it is not the only grass in the Sonoran Desert or the Sweetwater Preserve. In fact, there are many native grasses, but they do not get out of control the way buffel grass does, and they are not a threat. They are part of our environment. So do not pull out the wrong grass. Study the identification guides first at <http://www.buffelgrass.org/> if you want to remove it yourself, or join a volunteer group (<http://www.buffelgrass.org/volunteeropportunities>).

## **Call for new board members**

We are always looking for people to join the TMA board. Naturally, it involves time and effort, but there are many rewards. You get to work with other people committed to working for our local environment, learn about the issues in detail, and derive satisfaction from the successes that

we have. If you are interested in becoming a board member, or know of someone who would be a good board member, please get in touch with one of the current board members listed on the first page.

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