

Ironwood Forest National Monument

Preserving Our Precious Desert

*By Korene Charnofsky-Cohen
Photos courtesy of Friends of Ironwood Forest*

There are 129,000 acres of critically important desert habitat calling out for our help. The Ironwood Forest National Monument, in Marana's backyard, is a treasure that must be saved.

The Ironwood Forest National Monument (IFNM) was established in 2000 to preserve an important desert ecosystem and evidence of human occupation spanning 5,000 years. The Monument is 25 miles northwest of Tucson, with access points at Interstate 10 and the Marana Road exit, and at I-10 and the Avra Valley exit.

Although there are no facilities, you'll find opportunities for hiking, camping, and viewing a large variety of animals and plants, along with some spectacular scenery. There are several mountain ranges including the Silver Bell, Waterman and Sawtooth ranges. The habitat found in the Monument is associated with more than 600 plant

and animal species, including the last known population of indigenous bighorn sheep in the Tucson basin.

The Monument contains evidence from campsites to villages occupied by ancient hunter-gatherers, the Hohokam, and the Tohono O'odham. There also are remnants of a small mission constructed in the late 1700s by Tohono O'odham laborers for Spanish Franciscan friars, and remnants of mining camps and cemeteries dating to the 1800s.

The area's signature plant, the desert ironwood, is found only in the Sonoran Desert, and the Monument contains the highest density of these trees ever recorded. While the ironwood is not officially an endangered species, its populations in the United States and Mexico is dwindling due to woodcutting, development and invasions of non-native plants such as buffelgrass and fountain grass.

Left - Unlike other desert trees, the ironwood rarely sheds all of its leaves, providing year-round shade and protection from frost and extreme heat for a variety of plants and animals.

Below - Prying out a large clump of the invasive buffelgrass sometimes requires two people. A digging bar is used to loosen the soil around the roots, making the grass easier to pull out.

The ironwood, a member of the legume family, is a hardy, slowly growing tree that can live 800 years or longer. This tree serves as a "nurse plant" to many species including the saguaro cactus, providing a sheltered environment for seed germination and healthy growth. Ironwoods also serve as roosting sites for hawks, owls and other birds, nesting sites, forage for desert bighorn sheep, sheltered burrowing areas for tortoises, flowers for native bees and protection from sunburn for the night-blooming cereus and other cacti. Throughout the history of the Sonoran Desert, people have used ironwood trees for fuel, food, medicine, agricultural and household tools, artwork, and for ceremonial purposes.

Friends of Ironwood Forest (FIF) is one of the groups diligently working to protect the IFNM. The Monument is under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and is woefully understaffed, considering the wide expanse of territory that needs to be monitored and preserved. FIF strives for the permanent protection of the biological, geological, archaeological and historical resources for which the Monument was established. Their members volunteer for many essential projects including monitoring roads and cultural resources, removing non-native, invasive plants, removing trash and reclaiming routes carved into the desert by people driving off designated roads.

"Educating the public about the Monument and the Sonoran Desert as a whole is another important aspect of our work," says

Lahsha Brown, executive director of FIF. "We want to broaden people's understanding of who and what we share this space with, and the importance of saving this habitat. What is cool about this area is the lack of development, the unique biological community and historical sites. When you visit, you get this feeling of a primitive experience -- a landscape untouched by modern development that looks like it did when the Hohokam lived here."

FIF was founded in 2007 and, in 2010, received the Bureau of Land Management's National Making a Difference Volunteer Award and the Landscape Stewardship Award from the Public Lands Foundation. These awards were given for the organization's work in helping eradicate buffelgrass, recognized by the BLM as the biggest biological threat to the Monument. Buffelgrass is a non-native species that grows in dense stands, crowding out native plants, with the possibility of fueling devastating fires. This grass competes for water, weakening and killing native plants including cacti and large trees such as ironwood and mesquite. FIF works with other groups to hand-pull or spray the buffelgrass with an herbicide. They have work days throughout the year when groups of volunteers gather to remove this invader from key areas.

"Besides competing with other plants for resources, buffelgrass fills in spaces that are usually open," Brown points out. "When this grass dries out and there is a fire, it will burn hotter and faster than native vegetation, and the fire will be more widespread, possibly wiping out an entire species in the area." Brown cannot emphasize enough the importance of removing this threat to our desert.

If getting out in the desert and whacking weeds is not your thing, there are many other roles for volunteers in this preservation effort. Some volunteers do public outreach and education by giving talks to clubs, businesses, church groups and other groups. Brown says the organization plans to put together some tours of the Monument to help people experience and understand this great area. You can help with festivals, such as the recent Ironwood Festival held at the Audubon Society's Mason Center. You can write articles for their newsletter or write letters to government agencies and officials in support of protecting the Monument. Of course, FIF always welcomes donations.

FIF also advocates for better law enforcement since some areas of the Monument are known pathways for illegal

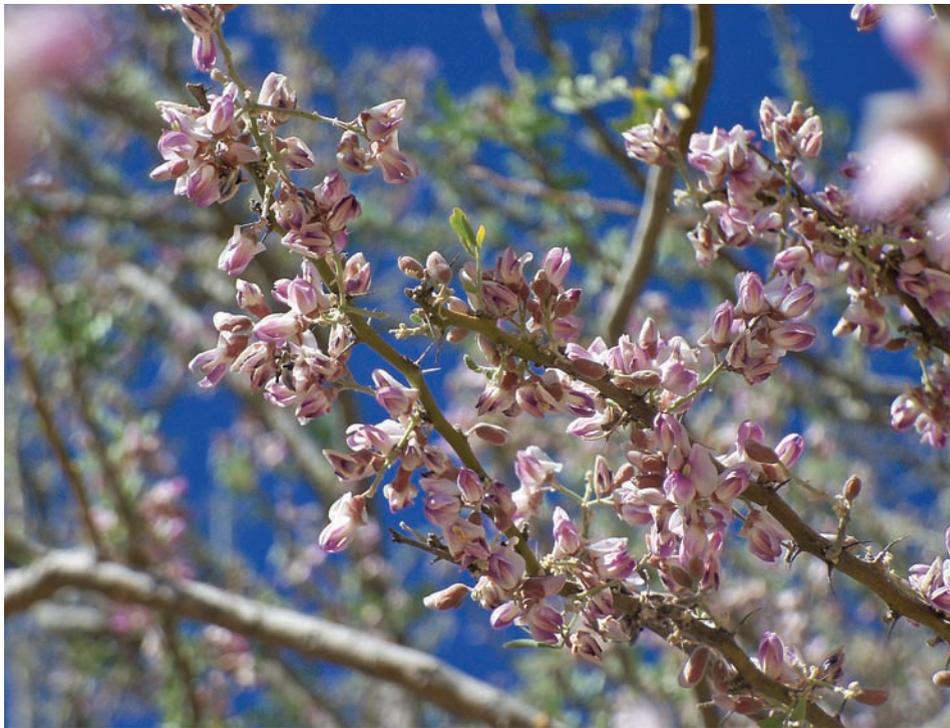
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immigrants and drug smugglers, and also the Monument's plants, geological formations and historical sites are sometimes targeted by vandals. FIF partners with other organizations to achieve common goals of preservation and the creation of a safe place for visitors.

Here are some safety tips for visiting IFNM. Cell-phone service is often out of range in some of the more remote areas. Make sure of your location as there are no helpful information signs. Do not pick up or approach hitch hikers. Do not travel off well-marked, established roads. Report suspicious behavior at (623) 580-5515. I'm sure you all know the usual tips: bring extra water and food, wear appropriate clothing, use sunscreen and don't mess with the wildlife!



Top - Ragged Top Mountain is one of the dominant features in the landscape of the Ironwood Forest National Monument.

Bottom - Ironwood trees bloom profusely in the spring, creating a lavender hue across the desert. The blossoms resemble those of other plants in the pea family.

For information on the IFNM including specific directions, contact the BLM at (520) 258-7200 or at www.blm.gov/az.

For information on FIF, including membership and upcoming events, call (520) 628-2092 or visit www.ironwoodforest.org.