

Our response to the executive order to review national monuments

By: Friends of Ironwood Forest

Questions have arisen on the impact of the executive order to review previous monument designations. Following, is a review of the benefits of the **Ironwood Forest National Monument (IFNM)** and the position of the Friends on protecting its future.

Scientific studies recommending the need to protect diminishing stands of Ironwoods, along with the preservation of other plants and animals, in the vicinity of the Ironwood Forest NM, **date back to at least 1994**. Reference materials dating back even farther. **These investigations provided support for the protection of the IFNM.**

The designation of the IFNM was recommended and supported by various local groups, including the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, the unanimous endorsement of the Pima County Board of Supervisors and the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection.

The IFNM was designated by president Bill Clinton in June 2000. At that time Bruce Babbitt (former Governor of Arizona) was the Secretary of Interior. **The IFNM covered 129,000 acres, slightly over the executive order's 100,000 acre threshold. The IFNM includes seven mountain ranges:** Sawtooth, Ragged Top, Silverbell, Waterman, Roskruge, Samaniego Hills and the Pan Quemado. The management of the IFNM was assigned to the BLM as part of the National Conservation Lands effort.

The IFNM was created to protect a concentrated but diverse array of natural and cultural resources occurring in a richly endowed section of the Sonoran Desert. A special combination of rugged mountains and depositional plains resulted in this area of geological and biological diversity.

The IFNM includes the highest density of Ironwood trees in the Sonoran Desert. Ironwoods can live in excess of 800 years. The IFNM has the tallest Ironwood recorded in the state of Arizona. **The Ironwood is a habitat keystone species**, supporting a wide range of other plants, rich soils, forage for bighorn sheep, and roosting sites for numerous breeding and migratory bird species.

The IFNM has almost 600 plant species, including the federally endangered Nichol's Turk's Head cactus. The IFNM is the only place in the US with Mexican Devils Claw. It is also the northern most location of the elephant tree.

The IFNM is home to the federally endangered Lesser Long-nosed Bat and contains historic habitat for the threatened Pigmy Owl. **The IFNM's Desert Bighorn Sheep herd is the last indigenous population in the Tucson basin.** The Bighorn Sheep herd, in response to the BLM's resource management efforts, has been growing, with recent sightings in the nearby Tucson Mountains and Saguaro National Park-West.

Archaeologists have determined that **several successive human cultures have occupied the IFNM dating back at least 5,000 years**, with continuing research indicating much older human habitation. **More than 200 sites from the prehistoric Hohokam period have been recorded.** The existence of such cultural history provides a significant portion of the legal basis for designating any national monument. **The IFNM has three separate entries in the National Register of Historic Places:** Los Robles, Cocoraque Butte and the Mission Santa Ana.

The Friends of Ironwood Forest (FIF) was formed in 2007 to support BLM in protecting the IFNM. The current version of the FIF Mission Statement along with other FIF background information can be found on the **FIF website, ironwoodforest.org.**

FIF assists BLM in a number of ways. FIF has added comments to BLM's Resource Management Plan (2013) and to the Transportation Management Plan (2014) developed by BLM as part of their normal land management process.

The Friends group consists of approximately 1,000 conservation-oriented individuals and performs a role in educating the public about the IFNM. FIF conducts an annual Meet the Monument event that includes naturalist speakers and informative nature hikes. FIF also leads several hikes each year into the IFNM interior. And, FIF regularly schedules volunteer workdays for people interested in helping with a wide range of duties to preserve and restore the Monument. These volunteer days have included such things as trash pickup, water diversion, plant restoration, boundary signage, invasive plant eradication, and geocoding sites of interest.

The Friends reaction to the executive order is deep disappointment. For the federal government to review, and consider shrinking, public lands already set aside is a sad **reversal in the direction of conservation efforts that have been in place for over a century.** The national parks and monuments are set aside after many years of study by experts in natural history. The designation of lands to be protected for their unique natural state and their cultural history is a serious step taken in the interests of the people and for the enjoyment of future generations.

Reversing the trend to protect natural areas in the interests of possible short-term commercial gain is not our idea of governing for the people. Exploiting natural treasures, for the profits of a few, is an unfortunate return to the robber barons' attitude of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. **FIF is interested in enhanced preservation of these natural gifts, not a return to their exploitation.** FIF's opinion is that the Antiquities Act does not allow for the shrinking of parks or monuments.

FIF will use its resources to advocate against any reduction to the IFNM, including working with its membership base, local government units, like-minded partners, and public media. FIF will remind everyone of the original reasons why the IFNM was designated and why it should remain protected. **FIF will also encourage federal legislators to keep the Antiquities Act unchanged.**