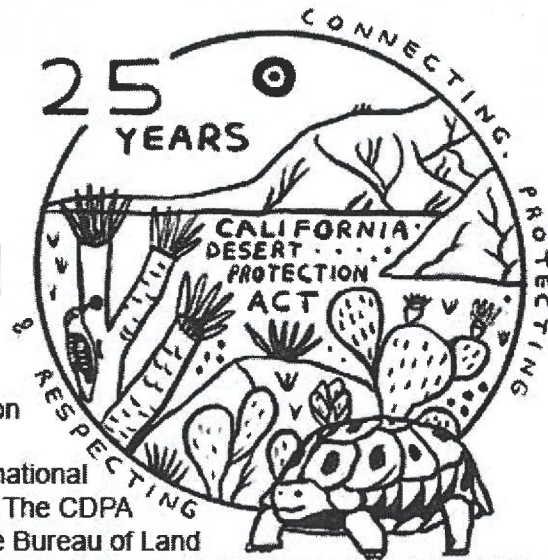


Twenty-five Years of California Desert Protection!



October 31, 2019 marks twenty-five years since the signing of the 1994 California Desert Protection Act (CDPA), which, in addition to enlarging and re-designating Joshua Tree and Death Valley as national parks, established the Mojave National Preserve. The CDPA also created 69 wilderness areas managed by the Bureau of Land Management in the California desert, including the Mecca Hills Wilderness. The CDPA catalyzed 25 years of desert protection measures which have brought enormous benefits to the desert region, including five national monuments and millions of acres of lands specifically to be used for recreation and conservation. Those include: the San Jacinto, Santa Rosa, Sand to Snow, Mojave Trails and Castle Mountain National Monuments, the National Conservation Lands identified through the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, and places like the Whitewater River and Alabama Hills which gained new recognition through the Dingell Protection Act of 2019.

Desert land trusts, National Park units, conservation groups, community members, and chamber and tourism organizations that want to showcase the values of the region have come together to design a series of events throughout the fall to highlight lands protected through the last twenty-five years. There are celebration events planned in San Bernardino, Inyo, Riverside, Kern, Los Angeles, and Imperial Counties in September, October and November. Events include museum exhibits, guided hikes, star parties, trainings, bike rides, fireside chats, ranger tours, and art exhibits.

Groups involved in this effort include: the National Park Service; Joshua Tree National Park Association; The Wildlands Conservancy; Friends of the Desert Mountains; the Greater Palm Springs Convention & Visitors Bureau; Mojave Desert Land Trust; Joshua Tree Association for the Arts; Sierra Club; Friends of Big Morongo Canyon Preserve; Morongo Basin Conservation Association; VisitCADesert; Visit 29 Palms; National Parks Conservation Association; Amargosa Conservancy; Friends of the Inyo; Ridgecrest Chamber and Tourism Bureau; Imperial Valley Desert Museum; Red Rock Canyon Interpretive Association and more!!!

Twenty-Five Years of Desert Protection

Desert Communities Lead the Way

- As part of the effort to enhance visibility and support for protected desert lands, communities throughout Southern California are considering resolutions recognizing the 25th Anniversary. The hope is the communities of Coachella Valley, as environmental leaders in the region, will help catalyze this effort towards a goal of *twenty-five resolutions*.
- Communities showing support can build ownership and recognition of local protected places with their residents, increasing local visitation and awareness. We hope this is part of a larger statewide effort to draw attention, and visitation to the desert region, including harder to reach areas, creating and supporting new 'gateway communities.'

Desert Protection brings economic benefits to the region through visitation

- Over the last quarter century the protected lands of the California desert have created an economic windfall. The economic benefit of desert travel, including visitor spending, industry earnings and government revenue, is increasing every year to 7.62 billion in 2018. Travel industry-generated employment in the California desert region has increased by more than 35% since 2010 alone, with more than 73,000 employees in 2018.¹ This trend has been an economic boom for the Coachella Valley, where in 2017, visitors contributed revenue of \$7 billion, bringing in 13.6 million visitors.²
- A large part of the benefits to the Coachella Valley have come from its proximity to landscapes such as Joshua Tree National Park and, more recently, the Sand to Snow, Santa Rosa and San Jacinto National Monuments. In 2018, 2.9 million park visitors spent an estimated \$146 million in the local gateway regions while visiting Joshua Tree National Park. These expenditures supported a total of 1,830 jobs, \$71.9 million in labor income, \$122 million in value added, and \$196 million in economic output in local gateway economies surrounding Joshua Tree National Park.

Desert Protection is key to recreation and quality of life for residents

- The protected lands of the California deserts provide a place for members of the desert community and visitors to hike, bike, and engage in off-road motorized recreation. The protected lands of the California desert also provide a place for residents who enjoy the rural character of deserts, mountains, and wildlands to

¹ The desert region includes Imperial County and parts of Inyo, Kern, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties.
<https://industry.visitcalifornia.com/Research/Economic-Impact>

² 2017 Report on the Economic Impact of Tourism

experience solitude, undisturbed vistas, and glorious sunsets and to gaze up into the night sky free of light or noise pollution.

Desert Protection aids the military

- Military installations located in the Mojave Desert have a significant economic impact on the surrounding communities.³ For example, Twentynine Palms Combat Center is the main economic driver in the Morongo Basin and one of the largest employers in the county. In 2015, the installation contributed an estimated \$1 billion annually to the local economy, supported 16,000 jobs (nearly 52 percent of all employment in the Basin), and direct and indirect spending comprised 48 percent of the area's economic activity.
- Desert military installations rely on desert public lands to protect against development projects that would impact military airspace or recreational activities that might stray onto installations, as well as preventing the overuse of water resources necessary for military operations. Protected public lands provide important habitat for threatened and endangered species, thus keeping military installations from becoming 'refuges of last resort' for threatened and endangered species. To reserve the viability of the military missions that occur in these areas, it is critical that desert landscape retain its natural function and that wildlife be able to migrate freely and protected on and off these lands.⁴

Desert Protection is key to water security

- Groundwater provides more than 40% of California's drinking water.⁵ Life in the California desert is sustained by underground aquifers and springs located in protected areas. Desert protection efforts like CDPA, the Dingell Act and DRECP protect these groundwater resources for desert residents, wildlife and the military.

Why now?

- The twenty-five year anniversary provides an opportunity for local communities to take pride in their local gems. Additionally, as we saw in the early 2019 National Park shut-downs, federal public lands across the nation are in danger of being under-funded or even closed to the public.

³ https://militarycouncil.ca.gov/s_economicdata/

⁴ <https://sonoraninstitute.org/files/ProtectingCalDesertMilitary.pdf>

⁵ <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2019/3033/fs20193033.pdf>

- Equally concerning, the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP), a comprehensive amendment to the California Desert Conservation Area that the BLM approved in 2016, is 'under review' by the current Department of Interior. The DRECP is the result of over eight years of collaborative effort among federal and state agencies, local governments, renewable energy companies, environmental groups, businesses, and citizens. It balances large-scale renewable energy development in the desert with conservation and recreation on more than 10.5 million acres of public lands in Imperial, Inyo, Kern, Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, designating 4.2 million acres of the desert's most sensitive natural and cultural landscapes for conservation and designating 3.6 million acres for recreation.

Desert Protection is critical for climate

- In addition to their solar, wind and geothermal resource potential, California's public lands act as carbon storage banks, and represent our best opportunity to remove CO₂ already in the atmosphere. When these lands are disturbed or lost to development they then become a major source of emissions. The Mojave Desert has specifically been found to be a significant carbon sink—and just as protecting land helps reduce carbon—disturbing it could exacerbate greenhouse gas emissions. Studies show that damage to desert soils can release significant amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.
- Conservation Management Actions in the DRECP include caps on the level of disturbance in conservation areas. This is important for both natural resource protection and climate change, because the network of protected lands provides habitat connectivity for flora and fauna to adapt to stressors, and also keeps the desert's carbon-laden soils intact.