

**Written Testimony of Matt Skroch
Executive Director of the Sky Island Alliance
Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Hearing on H.R. 3287
Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness Act of 2007
Tuesday, November 13, 2007.**

Chairman Grijalva, Members of the Committee and staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Matt Skroch. I am the Executive Director of the Sky Island Alliance, a regionally-based non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and restoration of the unique natural heritage of the Sky Island region of southwest North America. We are a membership-based organization, representing more than 1,200 residents of southeastern Arizona, southwest New Mexico, or throughout the country.

On behalf of Sky Island Alliance, I would like to thank Congressman Grijalva and his staff for the hard work that has gone into this legislation. Their process has been fair, and they have worked hard to listen to the concerns and recommendations from all interested parties.

H.R. 3287 is a wilderness bill built upon nine years of local citizen efforts. It addresses the management of certain lands of the Coronado National Forest in Santa Cruz County, Arizona. This legislation represents a significant and worthy addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System and we ask for your support in passing this important measure.

Allow me to begin with a history of the initiative that is before you today. Five years ago, a small group of landowners and concerned citizens met in the living room of Bill and Ellie Kurtz, good folks who have lived in the northern shadow of the Tumacacori Mountains for over thirty years. Bill, who worked as an exploration geologist, came to southern Arizona in 1952 and Ellie followed four years later. Most of the other folks at the meeting had also spent a considerable number of years living in and around the Tumacacori Highlands, collecting stories and memories from a time previous to Arizona's explosive growth. I had the pleasure of attending that meeting. Mostly, I listened to their stories. I heard about the mountain lion that harassed their horses, the big floods of 1983, and the various ranches that, over time, have been sold for development.

My role at that meeting was to present the previous four years of work that Sky Island Alliance and other collaborating organizations had accomplished in the Tumacacori Highlands. Through extensive field assessments, volunteer weekends, aerial flyovers, historical research, and biological studies, we had prepared a draft analysis of the Tumacacori Ecological Management Area, a 300,000+ acre unit of the Coronado National Forest northwest of Nogales, Arizona. Included within this unit of federal land were several roadless areas, one of which stood as the largest unprotected roadless area on National Forest lands in Arizona. The question arose among the residents – how can we ensure that these lands remain untrammelled in perpetuity, free from the development

we see around us and kept in a state of naturalness becoming more rare with each passing year? The idea of designating a portion of the Tumacacori Highlands as Wilderness was born.

Wilderness here was not a new idea. In 1978, the Coronado National Forest identified Tumacacori unit 03-114 as “a very large and very wild mountain range...known intimately by very few people and held to be the best hunting grounds in this part of the state.” During the RARE II process that ensued, the Forest Service received 430 letters regarding the potential for Wilderness designation there. 399 of those letters — all personal correspondence excluding form letters — supported Wilderness. The sufficient acreage, outstanding views, rare biological characteristics, and overwhelming public support warranted the Forest Service recommendation in support of Wilderness, and throughout most of the review they did. Unfortunately at the last step in the RARE II analysis, the area was classified as “Further Planning” by the Regional Forester, who simply stated “Little interest. Volume of public comment was low. Interest was evenly divided but local response favored non-wilderness.” Explanation for the disconnect was never given, nor was there documentation for why the Tumacacori unit was listed as a Non-Wilderness recommendation in the Final Environmental Impact Statement. The Tumacacori Highlands were left behind, but not forgotten.

Characteristics of the Tumacacori Highlands

Twenty years later in 1998, five years previous to the aforementioned meeting, Sky Island Alliance began a science-based review of the Coronado National Forest. Over the next five years, more than 1200 volunteers would donate their time photographing roads, helping scientists conduct biological surveys, and identifying important wildlife linkages between the isolated “Sky Island” mountain ranges that speckled the southeastern Arizona landscape.

Home to more threatened and endangered species than any other Forest in the nation, the Coronado bridges the temperate Rocky Mountains to the tropical Sierra Madre, pulling from both biogeographies to create a continental meeting point unparalleled in biodiversity. The review we conducted along with former studies confirmed that among all of the splendid places in our nation, more mammal, reptile, bird, ant, and bee species occur in southeastern Arizona. We also discovered that of the eighteen mountain ranges in southeastern Arizona, the Tumacacori Highlands stood out as an unusually rich region.

Formed by the convergence of three mountains, the Tumacacori Highlands encompass, from north to south, the Pajarito, Atascosa, and Tumacacori ranges. Characterized by deep and well-watered canyons, soaring lichen-drenched cliffs, and rolling hills of subtropical oak savannahs to the west, the Highlands represent an ecological niche extremely rare in the current National Wilderness Preservation System. Perhaps its rarest and most heralded quality is that only here scientists have confirmed resident jaguars living in the United States. With dozens of photographs of the cats spanning six years, the jaguar continues to roam the Highlands today. Needing large, unfragmented land left in its natural state, the jaguar is testament to the current conditions that make the Tumacacori Highlands an appropriate home for this magnificent cat. Other species of wildlife

reinforce the quality of the land. The most intact breeding population of Chiricahua leopard frog, rare populations of Mexican vine snakes, and consistent sightings of gray hawks, five-striped sparrows, elegant trogons, and Mexican opossum are just a few additional animals that reach their northern limit in the Tumacacori Highlands.

The Tumacacori Highlands are more than good wildlife habitat. The mountains are cherished by the people of southern Arizona as well. Since 1933 when the fire lookout was constructed atop Atascosa Lookout, generations of families have enjoyed the moderate trek to one of southern Arizona's top rated scenic vistas. Walking about the wooden planks that surround the now-restored cabin, visitors enjoy 360 degree views of valleys and mountains in every direction. Looking down onto Bear Valley and the jagged tooth of Baboquivari Peak to the west, the expanse is of unbroken wildlands as far as the eye can see. For the more adventurous, the perennial waters in Peck Canyon or the towering cliffs in Pine and Beehive Canyons provide a level of solitude rarely found on the Coronado National Forest. Hunting is popular here. As one of the best white-tailed deer units in the state, sportsmen and women flock to the area in the fall hoping to find a place for their tag. Photographers, horse enthusiasts, botanists, and bird-watchers come to the Highlands for its wild country, beautiful views, and unlimited opportunities for exploration. The impetus for the initiative before you is designed precisely to ensure that these values remain long into the future.

Growth

I suspect that most of the members of this committee have had occasion to visit Arizona. Still shaped by its majestic public lands, Arizona is defined more by its explosive population growth today. It is the fastest growing state in the nation, and any visitor who travels to Phoenix or Tucson will readily understand the phenomena taking place. Since the millennium, our population has increased by more than 20%. This rate is more than 300% of the national average. Regardless of the increased tax base, our cities, towns, and counties struggle to keep infrastructure and services on par with the breakneck growth.

Our parks, forests, and other public lands have struggled as well. Visitor numbers have sky rocketed as land managers scramble to protect resources and balance recreation demands. Since 1998, the number of off-road vehicles in Arizona has increased 347% to more than a quarter million machines. At the same time, public demands for high quality recreational opportunities have increased as well. While thousands of miles of authorized or unauthorized routes and trails have appeared on public lands in the last decade, Wilderness acreage has not increased since the 1990 Arizona Desert Wilderness Act. On Forest Service lands, Arizona hasn't added a Wilderness Area since 1984 when our state's population was less than half of what it is today.

Arizona's growth is not confined to urban centers. Rural Santa Cruz County's population growth follows the same trajectory. Today, there are plans to add more than 15,000 homes in the northern portion of the county. This growth provides new jobs, and more often than not our new residents refer to the beautiful desert and mountains as important aspects of their quality of life. The Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness Act is a part of

ensuring that our quality of life and access to premier wilderness lands keeps in step with the new demands placed upon our landscapes.

In 1964, the United States Congress had the foresight to plan for the unintended consequences of growth. At that time, bi-partisan legislation creating the Wilderness Act proclaimed that

“In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

After 43 years, these words are very relevant to how the Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness fit into a larger effort to appropriately manage and respond to our population growth.

Process and Stakeholder Input

In that living room meeting five years ago, the small group of folks left for home with an understanding that Wilderness was an appropriate option for a portion of the Tumacacori Highlands. We affirmed that in moving forward with the idea, we must make every effort to lay forth an open, fair, and transparent public process. We vowed to seek the widest spectrum of input possible, and to be open to change as the initiative took shape. Hence, a five-year grassroots outreach effort ensued.

The need for public dialogue and stakeholder outreach was strongly reinforced when proponents presented the initiative to Congressman Grijalva in 2003. In his January 2004 remarks below Tumacacori Peak, the Congressman made it clear that a long path lay ahead, and that he expected a thorough vetting of the issues often associated with Wilderness. I speak with confidence in saying that over the last four years the Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness Act has been worked and reworked to ensure an appropriate balance of land protection and land use.

Beyond the land itself, what defines the Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness Act is its overwhelming grassroots support. After hundreds of presentations and stakeholder meetings, we reflect upon the fact that support for this bill is larger than anyone initially expected. As local volunteers walked the streets of Tubac, the nearest town nestled in the Santa Cruz Valley east of the Highlands, they spoke with hundreds of business owners and residents about Wilderness and the Tumacacori Highlands. Recently former real estate executive and thirty-year resident of Tubac, Birdie Stabel, remarked that as she visited local shops she “was amazed at how much support there really was” for Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness. As evidenced by the presence of Tubac Chamber of Commerce director Carol Cullen here today, the Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness bill reflects a new relationship between business and wilderness. Her organization, along with hundreds of individual businesses throughout the Santa Cruz River Valley who

support this bill, speak to the new dynamics emerging in the West. That is, healthy landscapes and protected areas equal healthy communities and sustainable economies.

From a hunter's perspective, the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers organization, along with other supporters, will tell you that Wilderness in the Tumacacori Highlands means good game habitat. Especially with the increase in off-road vehicles, sportsmen and women are increasingly demanding prime hunting grounds on their public lands. In this context, access was also raised as an important issue. We often heard from the public and various agencies that the wilderness boundaries must be accessible by vehicle. We agree. After designation, the Tumacacori Highlands will be one of the most accessible Wilderness Areas in Arizona, currently enjoying more than 100 miles of Forest roads providing direct access, including a number of cherrystems that allow visitors to drive further into the interior of the wildland complex. We also support current efforts by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and Forest Service to acquire public easements outside the Forest boundary.

As for wildlife management, proponents have met with the Arizona Game and Fish Department numerous times to discuss their access and management needs. Based on feedback from agency staff, we applaud the Congressman for making changes to the bill that include cherrystemed access to Frog Tank, larger buffer areas around Arivaca and Pena Blanca Lake, and legislative language that refers to agency agreements such as the 2006 Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Policies and Guidelines for Fish and Wildlife Management in National Forest and Bureau of Land Management Wilderness.

Ranching is a historic use in the Tumacacori Highlands. Unfortunately, at least three of the six current ranches that manage grazing allotments with the proposed area have recently been sold for housing developments or are currently on the market. Regardless, we appreciate the attention that Congressman Grijalva has given to this traditionally difficult interface. H.R. 3287 makes it clear that grazing shall continue in accordance with law, including the maintenance of existing facilities, by citing the long-standing Congressional Grazing Guidelines. We also thank the Congressman for supporting the agreement that proponents have reached with certain cattle operations in the area.

The Tumacacori Highlands are near the international border with Mexico, and currently the Border Patrol maintains one of their few remaining horse patrol units in the area because of its rough topography and inaccessibility by vehicle. From the beginning, proponents of the Wilderness bill made it clear that we had no intention of impeding Border Patrol's ability to do their job. We also recognized that the Wilderness legislation should acknowledge this fact and provide clarity on the issue. Section 4(i) of the bill addresses border operations. More importantly, it refers to policies that have been worked out to ensure compatibility between the land management and border enforcement agencies. Specifically, I'd like to acknowledge the 2006 Inter-Agency Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Cooperative National Security and Counterterrorism Efforts on Federal Lands along the United States' Borders. This document was ratified by the Secretaries of Homeland Security, Agriculture, and Interior, providing a solid basis for how the agencies coordinate and operate with Wilderness

Areas along the border. It is an important document that has much bearing on the future of the Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness.

The aforementioned issues have been vetted and vetted again by Congressman Grijalva and the many stakeholders who have participated in the process to bring this bill to your subcommittee. To re-emphasize the tack that proponents took from the beginning, we set out five years ago to strike a balance between protecting this magnificent land in the face of rapid urbanization, and the many uses and interests that come to bear on our public lands. We feel that balance has been reached. It has been reached through a lengthy, fair, and open process that focused on compromise, not ideologies. As Arizona has learned from our late Congressman Morris Udall, who leaves a legacy of wilderness across our great state, we must not alienate but rather unite. He taught us that because of Wilderness's importance and longevity, it must be created respectfully and with great care. Thanks to Congressman Grijalva and the thousands of volunteers and supporters who stand behind this bill, I'd like to think that Mo' Udall would be proud of his legacy coming to bear on the Tumacacori Highlands..

That legacy has been confirmed through numerous editorials and opinions throughout Arizona, including the support of the Arizona Republic, Tucson Citizen, Nogales International, and Green Valley News. It has been confirmed by Arizona Governor Napolitano and former Governor Bruce Babbitt. And it has been confirmed by the hundreds of various organizations throughout Arizona that have pledged their support. From businesses to backcountry hunters, from scientists to homeowners' associations, this bill tells a story that reveals just how popular Wilderness is in southern Arizona. It also speaks volumes as to why the Tumacacori Highlands deserve to be written into the next chapter of Arizona's Wilderness legacy.

Chairman Grijalva, members of the subcommittee and staff, I ask for your support of the Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness Act. Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.

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