

# SUPPORT GEMS OF THE SONORAN DESERT

*Defend the Biological and Cultural Integrity  
of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*



*Quitobaquito Springs, © Jack Dykinga*

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# Unique Biological and Cultural Sites Threatened by the Border Wall at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Arizona

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The planned construction of a 30-foot-tall border wall with permanent lights on Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (Organ Pipe) and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (Cabeza Prieta) threatens unique and internationally significant Sonoran Desert landscapes and sites. Construction plans might include drilling wells every five miles along the border to provide water needed to build the wall. If, in the future, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) modifies these plans, additional sites may be added to this list.

Totaling over one million acres on the U.S./Mexico border, Organ Pipe and Cabeza Prieta are of undisputed importance. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognized Organ Pipe as an International Biosphere Reserve having internationally important biological and natural resources. The adjacent Organ Pipe Cactus Wilderness and the Cabeza Prieta Wilderness areas form one of the largest wilderness areas in the lower continental U.S. Drawn to the protected status and unique diversity of the borderlands, scientists have amassed over a century of research that justifies the protection of several unique areas. These areas were important to prehistoric peoples and remain culturally relevant today.

Supported by this research, we believe:

- No border wall should be constructed within five miles to the west and ten miles to the east of the Quitobaquito Hills Spring Complex as identified by the USFWS.
- No border wall should be constructed within five miles east and west of the additional three areas near the international boundary in Organ Pipe and Cabeza Prieta identified here.



*Border wall construction, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019, Anonymous*



## Quitobaquito Hills Spring Complex, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument

Located in an area that receives about five inches of rain per year, these springs are truly desert oases that provide perennial water for desert-dwelling people, wildlife, and migrating animals. Some plants and animals occur nowhere else in the United States or the Sonoran Desert. Quitobaquito springs and pond are the only sites in the U.S. where the federally endangered Quitobaquito pupfish and the rare Sonoyta mud turtle occur. The oases are within the historically occupied range and potential recovery habitat of the federally endangered Sonoran pronghorn. 271 plant species have been documented from the Quitobaquito wetlands and Aguajita Wash, including many locally rare wetland species.

Quitobaquito is not only a unique natural resource, it also has a deep cultural history. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its importance to our national cultural heritage. More than a dozen tribes claim cultural affiliation with the area. The land is littered with ancient pottery, shells, and other artifacts and features; more items lie under the surface. Archaeologists have found that people lived at or passed through

the springs for over eight thousand years. The site was an essential stop for prehistoric and historic Indians travelling between the Gulf of California and the interior U.S., carrying trade items such as shells and salt. In recent years, O'odham tribal members have revived the traditional coming-of-age salt pilgrimage through Quitobaquito. The Hia-Ced O'odham had a settlement and burial ground at the site until the 1950s and continue to view the area as culturally important. Tribes continue to use Quitobaquito for ceremonies and use its plants for ceremonial and medicinal purposes. Digging trenches to build the border wall would disturb or destroy artifacts and features, and nearby active shrines might be affected by construction.

Quitobaquito played an important role in the history of the United States frontier. The site was a critical stop along the Camino del Diablo that connected Sonoyta, Sonora, with Yuma, Arizona. Thousands of U.S. migrants used the trail during the California Gold Rush, and many died along it. The border wall would bisect this cultural landscape.

This water-dependent system is fed by both an underground aquifer located in central Organ Pipe as well as

the headwaters of the Sonoyta River. The role of Aguajita Wash in maintaining the spring system of the Quitobaquito Hills is critical. Within Organ Pipe, water flows southward under the surface of Aguajita Wash and pools against the Quitobaquito Hills. Some of this water filters through the Quitobaquito granite hills to express itself as salt-laden springs. Aguajita Wash is a flowing stream a few feet below the surface where it crosses the international boundary. The other source of spring water is water from the Sonoyta River in Mexico. Reducing the amount of water that flows through this system or modifying its flow would have significant implications for the flora and fauna that depend on these rare habitats.

Construction and operation of the border wall in this area could have grave effects. Adverse impacts of the border wall would include anything that would reduce surface and groundwater amount (by pumping) or would disrupt the natural flow of groundwater in the area, such as deep concrete footers for a border wall. In addition, planned lighting would deter wildlife from nighttime use of these critical water sources. For these reasons, a wide buffer around Aguajita and Quitobaquito Springs is needed to protect the entire spring complex.

### Las Playas, Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge

In the middle of the hot, dry desert lies Las Playas, a group of dry lake beds with no drainage outlets. When the rare rain falls in the central part of Cabeza Prieta, it flows into the ephemeral lakes, located next to the international boundary. When the playas are wet, the flora and fauna come to life and the playas become islands of emerald green. They host a number of plant and animal species that are rare in the U.S. or Sonoran Desert, including the federally endangered Sonoran pronghorn. Forage areas such as the playas will become increasingly important as the climate becomes hotter and drier. For this reason, Las Playas is a unique biological resource.



*Quitobaquito Springs*, © Michael Bogan

For thousands of years, people have been drawn to Las Playas as one of the few water sources in the region. Archaeologists have discovered 159 prehistoric sites in the area and discovered that the people of Las Playas produced jewelry from shells obtained from the shores of the Gulf of California. Residents obtained their food from the playas and nearby areas and might have been farming there. They left behind artifacts and features and even some intaglios (large figures outlined on the ground with rocks).

The Las Playas system depends on uninterrupted water flow from a large watershed. Construction of the border wall would adversely impact Las Playas through modifying surface and groundwater flows and, if drilled, water wells that dry up the groundwater.

### The Gray Ranch at Dos Lomitas, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument

During a time when there were few settlers in western Pima County, the Blankenship family set up a cattle ranch a few hundred yards north of the international boundary and a few miles east of the border town of Lukeville. A few years later, Bob and Sallie Gray purchased the ranch and raised cattle on Organ Pipe until the 1970s. Through the ranch site and oral histories, their



*Sonoyta mud turtle*, © Michael Bogan

lives serve as reminders of frontier lifeways. The Grays left behind a ranch house, outbuildings, corrals, and a farm field that are part of a cultural landscape listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These historic features overlay important prehistoric sites.

The Gray Ranch cultural landscape will be detrimentally affected by a 30-foot border wall, and native vegetation would be affected by groundwater pumping if wells are constructed nearby. During construction, heavy equipment would need to pass within feet of the historic adobe ranch house because the road along the border in this area is too steep for large vehicles.

### [Pinta Sands, Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge](#)

El Gran Desierto de Altar is the largest active dune system in North America and is known for its magnificent star and crescent dunes. Most of the Gran Desierto is in Mexico but part of this system extends into the U.S. and is known as the Pinta Sands. Many species of plants and animals are found only in the Gran Desierto, such as the fringe toed lizard, flat-tailed horned lizard, giant Spanish

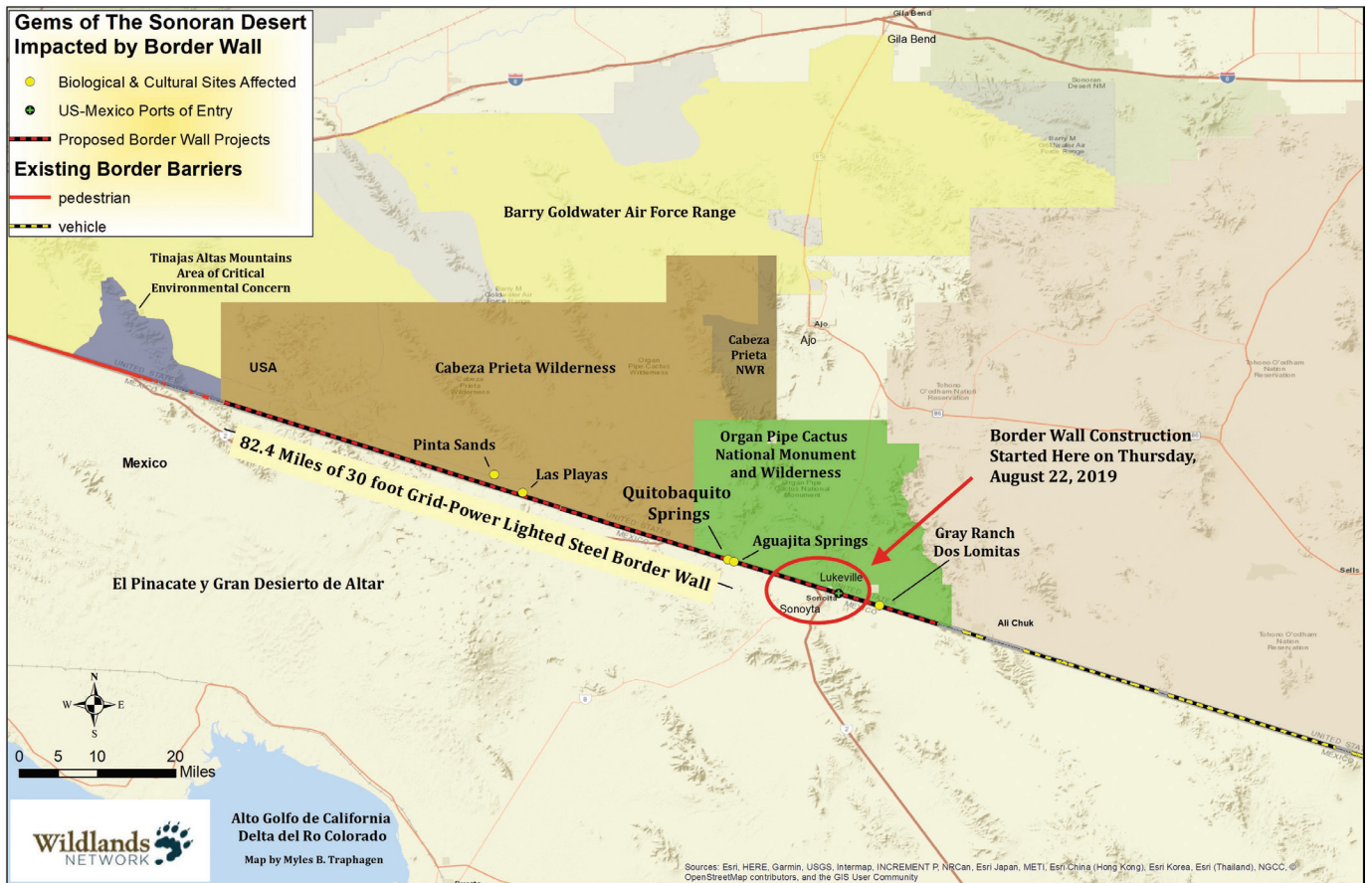


*Quitobaquito pupfish*, © Michael Bogan

needles, and blue sand lily. Spectacular and vast fields of wildflowers bloom on the dunes after sufficient winter rains, in contrast with the drier, surrounding desert area. Endangered Sonoran pronghorn thrive on the abundant forage.

As climate change brings hotter and drier conditions, access to productive forage areas such as the Pinta Sands will become increasingly important for Sonoran pronghorn and other animals that move across large areas of desert in search of food.

Unlike the current vehicle barrier along the international boundary, a wall would block cross-boundary exchange between the Sonoran pronghorn herd in Mexico and the herd in the U.S. and would undermine progress toward recovery. U.S. pronghorn would not be able to access forage on the larger dune system in Mexico.



**IN SUMMARY,** the undersigned call for planning and stewardship needed to protect and conserve these sites, and possibly others, on Organ Pipe and Cabeza Prieta. Based on decades of research, examples of adverse impacts would include modifying surface and groundwater flows; depleting groundwater; preventing wildlife from crossing the boundary to access water; interfering with nighttime activity of animals through lighting; inserting a 30-foot wall next to or within a property on the National Register; destroying prehistoric and historic artifacts and their context; and temporarily impacting a structure on the National Register. We ask that this information be recognized and actions that can irreparably harm the integrity of these sites and the binational borderlands be stopped. Future generations rely on the consideration of government agencies and the outcry of concerned citizens.

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