



Pinal County Parks, Trails and Open Space: Where Are We, and Where Are We Going?



By Becky Goff, SALT Board of Directors and Pinal Partnership Open Space & Trails Committee

As the Director of Pinal County's Open Space & Trails Department, Kent Taylor is focused on managing and maintaining the county's current inventory of parks and trails, and on implementing the Open Space & Trails Master Plan adopted by the Board of Supervisors in 2007. He explained what those duties entail in the most recent presentation in the Speakers Series, "The Superstitions: The Nature of Place", sponsored by the Superstition Land Trust and the Apache Junction Parks & Recreation Department.

While the Open Space & Trails Department was officially established in 2013-14, its roots go back to the 1950's-60's, when oversight of the Pinal County Fair and Fairgrounds was the priority. The present-day Department's obligations have expanded to include management of five community parks, two regional trails, and agreements with non-profits to operate both the Fairgrounds and Thunderbird Equestrian Arena, west of Maricopa.

Of the five local parks, the town of Oracle boasts two: Oracle County Park and the historic property of Liberty Park. Dudleyville Park offers facilities for outdoor family recreation and a multi-use community building. Randolph Park, near Coolidge, will soon become the site of a production garden for a non-profit dedicated to feeding the hungry. Acquired from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), West Pinal (Jim Kortsen) Park west of Casa Grande is 160 acres of open desert habitat, with picnic ramadas, grills, and overnight camping with a volunteer park host.

The two regional trails are the Lost Goldmine, and the Pinal County passages (#12-15) of the Arizona National Scenic Trail (Arizona Trail). Stretching for over 11 miles across the rolling bajadas at the southwest foot of the Superstition Wilderness, Lost Goldmine is relatively flat, with easy access from three trailheads and great views of the mountains. A trail crew from the Superstition Land Trust (SALT), which partnered with the county to acquire the trail easement from the State Land Department through a federal grant in 1993, completed 2 miles of new trail on the west side last season. Pinal County owns and manages over 50 miles of the Arizona Trail, the only one of 11 Scenic Trails across the nation that was virtually complete before its designation. Maintenance is a joint effort between the county, the Arizona Trail Association, and several users groups (equestrian, hiking and biking). Volunteer hours for regional trails and community parks are crucial to maintaining access, and translate to a whopping \$50,000 contribution yearly!

The Open Space & Trails Master Plan represents the county's future vision for regional parks, regional trails, and regional open space. Regional parks differ from those named above in that they are large and nature-based. Open space is heavily weighted toward the east side of the county, where most of the habitat is. Departmental priorities for the next 2-5 years include the San Tan Mountain Regional Park, Central Arizona Project (CAP) Canal Recreational Trail and Tortolita Mountain Park (short-term), and Peralta and Palo Verde Regional Parks and the San Pedro River (intermediate term).

Two of these are of particular interest to residents of surrounding communities. The 480-acre BLM parcel that will become Peralta Regional Park lies off Peralta Road, 5 miles from US 60 and south of the wilderness boundary. This represents the first time the county has undertaken site-specific master planning, involving formation of a working group, public meetings, and development of a draft Master Plan that has already been presented to the citizens' Open Space & Trails Advisory Commission that makes recommendations to the Board of Supervisors. Outlined within the Plan is the potential for multi-

use non-motorized trails, camping, picnicking, rock climbing and star-gazing, to be initiated in phases. These will help to serve the needs of increasing population as development moves east in the Valley, and provide connectivity with a regional network of trails: nearby Lost Goldmine and Peralta access Hieroglyphic and Jacobs Crosscut, as well as trails in Lost Dutchman State Park and the Superstition Wilderness.

When legislation establishing the 336-mile CAP Canal was passed in the 1960's-70's, it contained a stipulation for a recreational trail. A consultant has been hired to help develop the Master Plan that must be in place before the 90 miles in Pinal County can be developed. Planning is complicated by jurisdictions of flood control and irrigation districts, the Arizona Army National Guard and ADOT, as well as a Gila River crossing. The multi-use non-motorized trail will link with ongoing projects in Pima and Maricopa Counties, and potentially link to cities, State Parks, and Regional Parks in Pinal County.

Palo Verde Regional Park, a 21,000-acre BLM parcel, is in the infancy stages of master planning. It will offer outdoor recreation in the Palo Verde Mountains and the area of Vekol Wash, as well as opportunities for partnership between the county, the City of Maricopa, and the Ak-Chin Indian Community. Similar possibilities exist for the regional park planned in the Tortolita Mountains, which span Pinal and Pima Counties near the City of Tucson. It includes phasing for 45 miles of multi-use trails, linking already-existing sections accessed from the Towns of Marana and Oro Valley Pima County to those being planned in Pinal County. These partnerships will also make it easier to protect significant pre-historic and historic resources.

Such collaboration makes it easier for Kent and his department to manage the existing inventory of parks, trails and open space, and plan for a future set out in the Open Space & Trails Master Plan. And this in turn will allow our far-flung county - equivalent in size to the State of Connecticut - to live up to its motto as the land of "Wide Open Opportunity."

If you enjoyed this article, be sure to catch the next talk in our Speakers Series. Since the 2nd Wednesday is Veterans Day, it will take place on Thursday, Nov. 12 at 6:30 PM in Apache Junction's Multigenerational Center. Gail Morris, Coordinator of the Southwest Monarch Study, will present "Monarch Butterflies Locally and In the Southwest."