

LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

The CALIFORNIA — DESERT — An Arid Wonderland

There aren't very many truly dark spots on the night map of the continental United States, but California's Mojave and Colorado Deserts are an epicenter. Stretching across much of southern California, they harbor an astounding nine million acres of federally protected land. The landscape spans 11,000-foot peaks, Joshua tree woodlands, extinct volcanoes, massive dune fields, and intricate cave systems. Some of the most spectacular acres lie in the three National Park Service sites: Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks and Mojave National Preserve.

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The desert may seem a poignantly lonely landscape, but its rocky peaks and sharp edges belie an extraordinary amount of wildlife. Research suggests that the diversity of flora and fauna in the California desert rivals that of redwood forests. Large, charismatic animals roam unimpeded on these lands, including bighorn sheep, desert mule deer, bobcat, black bear, ringtail, and mountain lion. Unique, desert-adapted species like the endangered desert

tortoise and the fairy shrimp also find refuge here. So, too, do a few intrepid humans.

“People can come here to turn back the clock,” says David Lamfrom, California Desert senior program manager for NPCA. There’s a lot to experience: “profound quiet, the ability to see 50 miles in every direction, and an unbelievable night sky—so bright that it moved me when I saw it for the first time.”

A Host of Threats

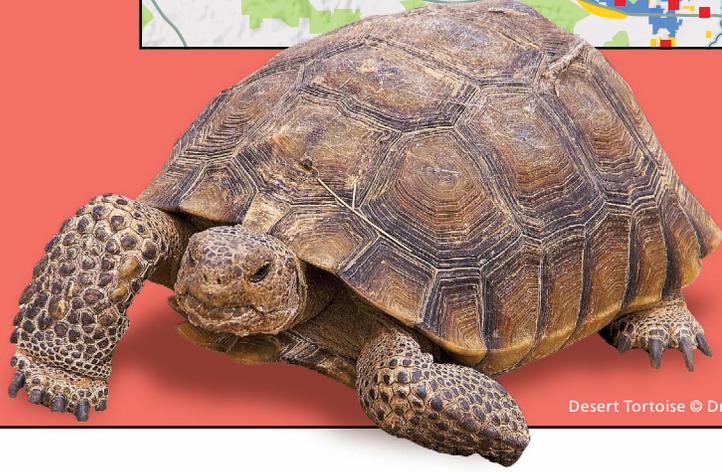
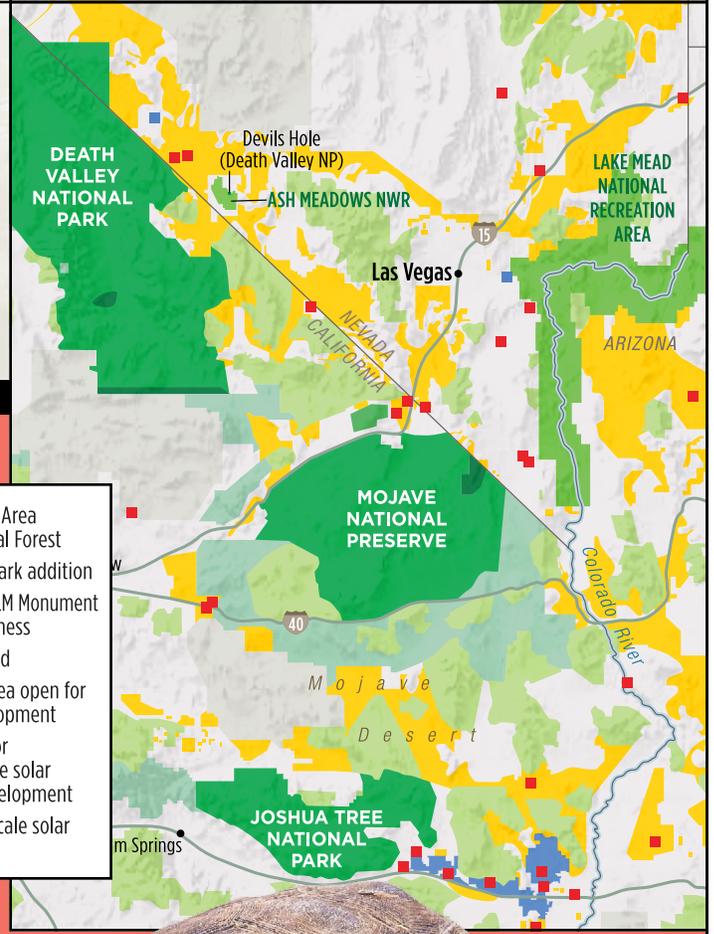
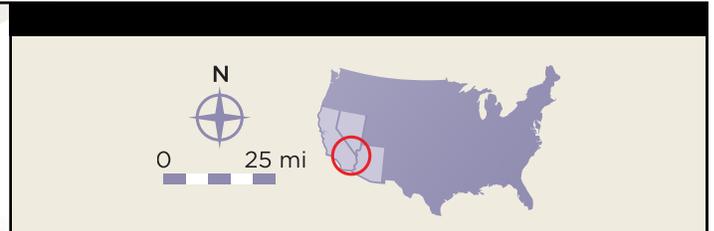
Unlike other landscapes across the West, the California desert is still largely intact, which means we have a tremendous opportunity to preserve a pristine landscape. But because of a host of imminent threats, we have little time to waste.

One threat is **poorly planned renewable energy development**. While NPCA is a national leader in promoting clean air and global climate change solutions, needed renewable energy projects have been sited in locations that do harm to national parks and their dependent resources. Proposals for as many as 1.6 million acres of California desert have rolled into the Obama Administration's offices in a single year. Additionally, a new 'variance' policy would open more than 19 million acres of public lands to application for renewable energy development. Many potential development sites are adjacent to southwestern national parks. We continue to support renewable energy as a worthy goal, but thoughtless development could endanger the very landscapes we are trying to preserve. This is especially troubling since we have identified better locations for these projects. To date, 11 solar-energy projects are in construction in the California desert; three are in sensitive areas near national parks.

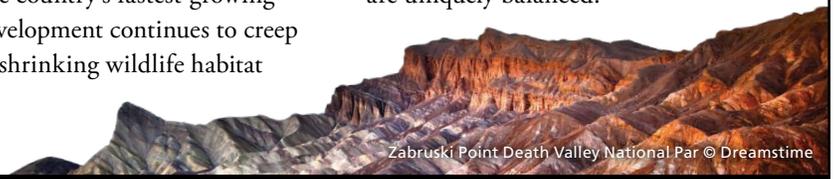
Another issue is **invasive species** like red brome and Sahara mustard, which spread like viruses and devastate native plants. **Wildfires, often fueled by these invasive grasses**, have increased in severity over the last few decades for many reasons, like drought and longer, hotter summers.

Industrialization and development are other big threats. Before the economy crashed, Phoenix and Las Vegas were among the country's fastest-growing cities. Development continues to creep outward, shrinking wildlife habitat

and slurping up water. "There's only so much water, so much carrying capacity to these systems," says Lamfrom. "They are uniquely balanced."

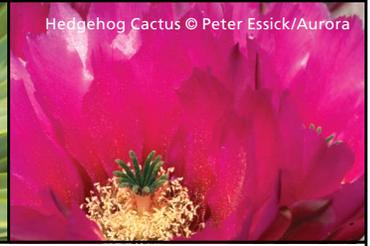


Desert Tortoise © Dreamstime



Zabruski Point Death Valley National Park © Dreamstime

Innovative Solutions



To ensure the long-term survival of these unique desert national parks, we must conserve the landscapes that link them together. That is the only way to guarantee that species can migrate freely and that the ecosystems remain diverse and resilient in the face of climate change. NPCA's strategy is to protect these swaths of desert through far-reaching land-protection bills. We do this by:



- Drafting language of major land-conservation legislation;
- Gathering research to build a persuasive case for the economic value of national parks;
- Building diverse coalitions of conservatives and liberals, showing lawmakers that there is bipartisan support for conservation;
- Educating and lobbying members of Congress to push and pass the bills.

These projects take years—sometimes decades—to achieve, but the payoff is priceless: hundreds of thousands of acres preserved for future generations. Lands weaving together protected spaces into a conservation framework that protects larger, intact landscapes.

How Your Gift Will Make a Difference

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ithout the foresight and generosity of our donors, we simply would not be able to keep up with the million little tasks it takes to effect large-scale landscape conservation. Your gift is essential to our work. Here's an example of what we will be able to accomplish with your support:



Pass the California Desert Protection Act of 2011

This bill would protect 1.6 million acres of public land, creating two new national monuments, 350,000 acres of wilderness, and 70,000 acres of new national park land. It would also designate 74 miles of river as Wild & Scenic. The result will be a robust network of preserved wildlife corridors connecting Joshua Tree and Death Valley National Parks and the Mojave National Preserve.

We led a coalition that gathered more than 150 legislators, businesses, counties, and organizations that support the bill, which is awaiting mark-up in the Senate. NPCA staffers are continually meeting with new supporters to add to the coalition, working with key officials to advance it, and fueling a media campaign, among many other tasks.

Expand Mojave National Preserve

NPCA has proposed adding more than 80,000 acres to Mojave National Preserve, which would encompass the northern part of the New York Mountains, migration corridors for bighorn sheep, habitat for mountain lions and golden eagles, and some of the densest Joshua tree forests on earth. If protected, pronghorn antelope will be restored to this unique high desert grassland. We are currently building a coalition of conservation groups and local business leaders, developing maps of species' migrations to identify key habitats, and working to gain the support of Senators Feinstein and Reid to develop legislation.

Expand Joshua Tree National Park

In the 1950s, part of the original Joshua Tree National Monument was transferred to

the Bureau of Land Management so that it could be mined, but the boom never came. Except for a few small mines, the landscape remains pristine. NPCA has proposed a 100,000-acre addition to the park, called the Saddle, which would encompass the Pinto Mountains and critical desert tortoise habitat. We commissioned a new study of the economic benefits this new area could provide to local communities and are now working with senators to draft legislation to expand the park.

Establish a Federal Renewable Energy Development Policy

Solar energy is a terrific alternative to fossil fuels—assuming that it is developed sustainably. NPCA is partnering with other environmental groups and local communities to identify areas such as fallow agricultural lands, where massive solar projects could be zoned with minimal ecological effect. We continue to build and connect voices overwhelmingly calling for a thoughtful national-level solar-energy development policy. We are working closely with the administration and lawmakers to facilitate this progress.



Zabruski Point Death Valley National Par © Dreamstime

Why Act Now

The health of these three desert parks—Death Valley, Joshua Tree, and Mojave—and the wildlife that resides within them depends on the health of the greater landscape. But humans also depend on these natural settings. Joshua Tree alone brought in 1.4 million visitors and more than \$37 million to the local economy. And during the recession, jobs and income from these national parks actually grew. Now is the time to strengthen these parks by protecting the land that connects them, before imminent development, climate change, and other threats chip away at their beauty and integrity. 🐾

The Joshua Tree

There is much about the Joshua Tree's existence that seems improbable. First, there's its wacky appearance. Then there is the fact that its blooms depend on a unique combination of cool winter temperatures and fortuitous rains, and its reproduction relies on pollination by the singular yucca moth, which lays its eggs in the flower's ovaries. Individual trees can grow as slowly as a half inch per year, top 40 feet high, and live for as long as 300 years. The only place in the world to see these unique plants is the Mojave Desert.