

Promoting Community Conservation and Partnership

By Lynn Davison

In February 1966 The Nature Conservancy (TNC) purchased its first property in the state of Arizona - our own Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve. The deal included 312 acres of the former San Jose del Sonoita land grant along Sonoita Creek. Year round water on the property still supports an increasingly rare riparian cottonwood-willow forest and numerous fish, plant, and bird species. Since the initial purchase, TNC has purchased other properties locally and today has protected over 800 acres around Patagonia (see map).

Holly Richter, Director of Conservation for the Arizona Chapter of TNC, says plans are beginning now for the 50th birthday party in February 2016. The statewide celebration will look back at past successes/lessons learned and project forward to future opportunities. Richter confirmed that, fifty years later, the Chapter's most challenging priority continues to be protecting and restoring Arizona's precious flowing waters. In 1966, TNC pursued its conservation goals independently and focused its resources primarily on water and wildlife protection. Today, TNC uses a community-based conservation approach that leverages the resources of many public and private partners and attempts to balance environ-

mental, social, and economic needs. For example, TNC has partnered with Cochise County on an innovative project to create aquifer recharge sites in the San Pedro River watershed.

Historically, there have been some rough patches in the relationship between TNC and Patagonia residents. The original land purchase removed public access to a popular swimming hole and picnic area along Sonoita Creek. In 2002, there was a contentious public vote that attempted to block a water use agreement between the Town and TNC. In 2006, TNC substantially reduced paid staff at the Preserve, which reduced both maintenance activities and programming efforts. However, there is a fresh breeze blowing now.

In June of 2014, Luke Reese was hired by TNC as a full time Manager of the Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve. You may have noticed the impact of Reese's initial focus on deferred maintenance and signage on the Preserve.



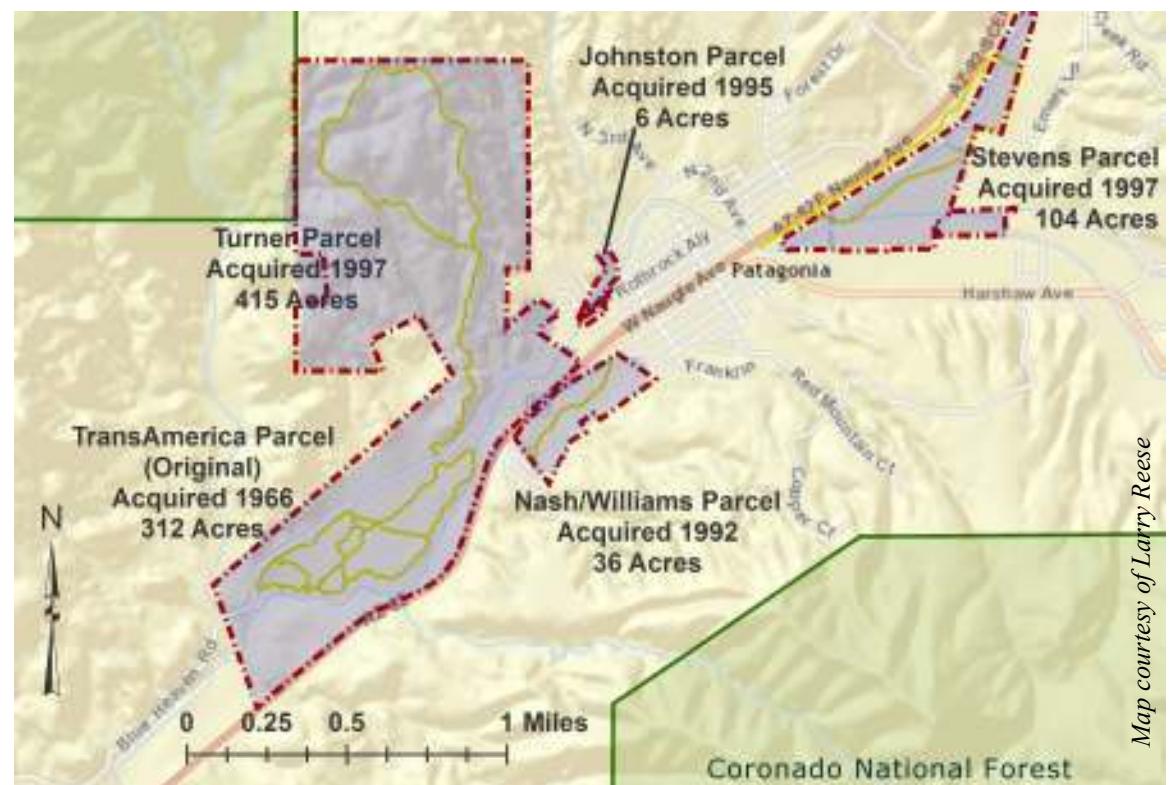
Photo by Ann Katzenbach

Larry Reese, Manager of The Patagonia/ Sonoita Creek Preserve

However, he has a much bigger vision. Reese believes the preserves owned by TNC serve three important functions. First, they are a laboratory to demonstrate and evaluate science-based conservation practices. Second, they provide a venue to show both visitors and local residents the value of TNC's stewardship. And third, he believes

preserves serve as a platform to promote a conservation ethic within their local communities. There are opportunities to do much more in each of these functional areas at the Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve.

On the science side, TNC has been collecting data on stream flows and (continued on page 5)



Map courtesy of Larry Reese

Blue areas indicate the 873 total acres of Nature Conservancy land surrounding Patagonia

local wells, with only a few short interruptions, since the early 1980's. Reese hopes to begin work soon in both Sonoita and Harshaw Creeks to restore more natural water movement and retain additional surface water below ground. He is also discussing a partnership with Borderlands to create a restoration and monitoring plan for the riparian area on the TNC land contiguous with the Native Seed Search farm. The Preserve often provides a field site for graduate studies, university research, and local research.

An example of TNC stewardship that Reese hopes to develop is a partnership between TNC, the Patagonia Firewise Community, and the Patagonia Fire Department to reduce fire fuel on TNC and other local properties that pose risk to the local community. Job one is reducing the tree density and ladder fuels on the Cemetery Trail property.

Reese is particularly interested in activities that promote a conservation ethic. A great example is the building of a new trail to link Audubon's Paton property with TNC's Geoffrey Platt Trail. A new entrance into the Preserve will be created directly across Blue Haven Road from the Platt Trail so that local residents and visitors can walk on trail from Patons to the Preserve. Chris Strohm, an experienced trail designer, is leading the volunteer effort to build the new trail. It will be completed before the February 2016 50th birthday celebration.

The Preserve has brought back guided bird walks every week. They are being led by several of our community's most experienced birders. Reese is also looking for opportunities to partner with schools and other nonprofits to expand conservation education programs for children and adults.

The 50th anniversary provides an impetus to fuel these and other ideas. TNC is looking to actively involve local residents in setting priorities for all their Patagonia properties as well as helping plan a birthday bash worthy of a 50 year old! Call Luke Reese at (520) 394-2400 to offer suggestions and/or sign on to help.

Forest Service Withdraws Approval Of Sunnyside's Drilling Project

PRT Staff

The Sunnyside Drilling Project, proposed by Regal Resources, a Canadian company, was given the go ahead by two federal agencies back in September. This astonished local environmentalists as the area is rich in wildlife and there are several endangered species who live or pass through the area.

Because of their concern, Patagonia Area Resource Alliance (PARA) and Defenders of Wildlife filed a lawsuit claiming the federal agencies' approvals violated environmental laws and posed a threat to endangered species and the safety of

drinking water for local residents.

Then came the unexpected news from District Ranger, Mark Ruggiero, that he was withdrawing his Decision Memorandum and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was withdrawing its letter of agreement. Ruggiero's official letter, addressed to "Interested Parties" did not indicate what had caused this change, but it did indicate that there would be consultation among the departments and that a new decision would be forthcoming.

According to Steve Spangle of U.S. Fish and Wildlife, under Section 7 of the Endangered Species

Act, a federal agency has to complete a review for each species. In this case, he said, "a new species came in." This meant that a review was required. Spangle seemed to think the matter would be cleared up quickly. He said the law suit by PARA and Defenders of Wildlife did not bear on the decision to withdraw the approval.


PARA's Wendy Russell said she is pretty sure that the Sunnyside Project will be given the green light again in which case the law suit will go forward.

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