



MCDOWELL
SONORAN
CONSERVANCY

science is in our nature

Annual Report

FY 2022

July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022



Justin Owen, CNAP
Chief Executive Officer

Dear Community Partner,

As another incredible year comes to a close, allow me to thank you for your continued support of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy. This past year, we saw COVID-19 begin to appear in the rear-view mirror, and we finally returned to full and expanding operations. Our stewards were back out in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve in full force educating and engaging the over 1 million annual visitors to ensure they enjoyed the Preserve safely.

The Conservancy team—which has grown to 16 full-time staff and 700+ volunteer stewards—could not accomplish its critical work without support from generous donors like you. You make it possible for us to expand awareness of the importance of natural open spaces like the Preserve, and to educate our community so they will continue to protect it.

I hope you enjoy learning about some of the advancements the Conservancy has made this year. For example, the Sonoran Education Center reorganized to more effectively teach with new programs like Expedition Days On The Road, which reached over 5,500 students—many from Title 1 schools—in its first year.

The Parsons Field Institute has continued its critical research, developing insights into the current health of our unique Sonoran Desert, while learning what is needed to ensure that its delicate ecosystem will thrive long into the future. We've engaged partners like Intel, Northern Arizona University (NAU), and even local high school environmental clubs, to help us increase our impact without increasing our cost.

Excitingly, we've added four new butterflies to our species list, are tracking 22 Sonoran desert tortoises, and are planning wildlife

camera projects to better understand how human factors affect wildlife's use of the Preserve.

We are excited to continue pushing forward, expanding our reach to impact more local and global communities. Donors like yourself empower every facet of the Conservancy, and we are deeply appreciative of your commitment to our mission, and to natural open spaces.

It remains my honor and privilege to lead this organization. Please enjoy reading about the great strides we have made in the past year thanks to your dedicated support of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, *where science is in our nature.*



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PARSONS
FIELD
INSTITUTE

Science



Science Goal: Conduct ecological research through partnerships and Citizen Science to inform long-term natural resource management of the Sonoran Desert.

Parsons Field Institute Approach to Ecological Health

In order to preserve and protect a space, we need to understand what is there and whether it is healthy. But how do you assess the health of an ecosystem? Like the human body, there are things we can measure, such as the temperature or heart rate, that can give us indicators of health. In the same way, measuring biodiversity and monitoring sensitive species can provide us with critical information about the health of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and Sonoran Desert ecosystems. Just as a doctor would not rely on one indicator alone to assess the health of a patient, we measure multiple indicators over periods of years to tell us about the overall health of the ecosystem, and whether it is changing.

What happens when we find that something is out of balance, or is not in a state of health? Two excellent examples of this on the Preserve are degraded areas and invasive species. Degraded areas are pieces of land that have been damaged by human use, such as camping, vehicle use, or



unauthorized trailblazing. Invasive species, in our case buffelgrass and fountain grass, have negative effects on the native plants and animals and result in devastating wildfires. Our restoration and invasive species projects directly address both of these to help create a healthier Preserve and benefit all open spaces in the Sonoran Desert. Open desert spaces do not exist in isolation, they affect each other through movement of plants, animals, and people. Therefore, our solutions cannot be carried out in isolation. All of our work reaches beyond the

science is in our nature

boundaries of the Preserve by sharing data with national and international organizations and bringing our results to other organizations through presentations and scientific publications.

Ongoing Projects

Bats

Bats are highly sensitive to ecological changes, making them an excellent indicator of health. Not only that, but they provide excellent mosquito control. This year we completed three-years of data collection on bat emergence counts, acoustic monitoring, and captures. We made the



discovery that a regionally sensitive bat species, the Townsend's big-eared bats, were using a decommissioned mine as a maternity roost, where they birth and care for their babies. The Townsend's big-eared bat is easily disturbed by humans, and has special roost requirements. It is very rare to find their roosts, so it is an incredible opportunity to study and protect the species. In May 2022, we captured, assessed, and released 41 lactating or pregnant female Townsend's big-eared bats. Based on the three years of data, we have confirmed that they return to the mine year after year. Now that the maternity roost is confirmed, we will focus on long-term monitoring and maintaining a healthy Townsend's big-eared bat population, which will be important for us, our neighboring parks and Preserves, and the neighboring communities.

Butterflies

Butterflies are also highly sensitive to changes

in climate and human activity, making them an excellent indicator. We completed another



successful year of butterfly surveys, adding four new species to our list. In the fall survey we added the Mexican yellow, the tailed orange, and the violet-clouded skipper. In the spring, we added the golden-headed scallopwing, for a total of 59 butterfly species detected in the Preserve so far. We continue to add our data to the regional butterfly database, NABA, and work with our research partner to analyze and compare our data with other surveys in the region. Preliminary results suggest that the number of butterflies counted is related to previous monsoon precipitation.

Birds

One of the longer running biodiversity projects, the bird survey, celebrated 8 years of data collection, learning, and documentation. In the Spring of 2022, we added the 188th bird species to our list: the Calliope hummingbird. Monitoring efforts for the threatened Gilded Flicker continue, with 38 individuals being sighted across surveys. As a qualifying species for Important Bird Area



designation, the Preserve is continuing to vigilantly document sightings of this species, particularly during breeding season if they are

spotted in pairs. By reporting sightings to the Arizona Important Birds Area Program, we hope to see the Preserve awarded this designation.

Amphibians

Amphibian surveys wrapped up in Summer 2022, after eight years of data collection and the confirmation of the five target desert anuran species on the Preserve: Couch's spadefoot toad, red-spotted toad, Great Plains toad, Sonoran desert toad, and Woodhouse's toad.



Our next step is to determine what kind of drought conditions would negatively impact these populations, and what could be done to ameliorate those conditions. Very little is known about the conservation of these species, and a better understanding will help the Preserve and partner organizations adapt their management practices to conserve these species.

Wildlife Corridors

The goal of the project is to monitor wildlife populations over time, detect any changes in wildlife populations (particularly declines), and understand the natural and human-caused stressors that cause these changes over time. Human-caused factors include urban development, urban noise, human recreation and climate change. This year we launched a new and



expanded project to monitor wildlife corridors with new trail cameras and updated protocols. We now have



60 camera sites distributed across the entire Preserve, which will be monitored twice per year. This will greatly expand the information we are able to get while pinpointing the most critical times per year. Having this large a sample size will allow other organizations to use the data to better understand their own wildlife populations and how they are impacted by these factors.

Sonoran Desert Tortoise

Sonoran Desert Tortoises are a sensitive species, and our radio telemetry project is helping us better understand their barriers to movement, habitat needs, and health. Since the beginning of the project, we have attached radio transmitters to 22 Sonoran desert tortoises and are monitoring their movements from spring until fall. We have tagged a total of 45 tortoises with identifying labels, including those that are outfitted with transmitters. This allows us

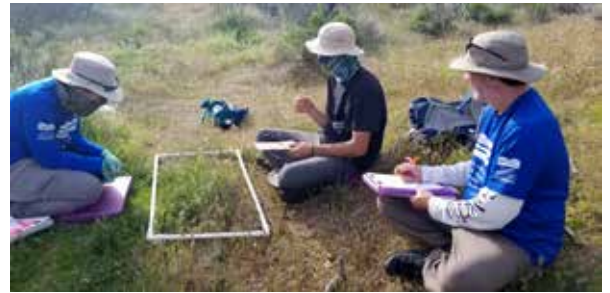


to identify individual tortoises so we can track their health. The tortoise team has had ongoing training to ensure best practices when handling tortoises, reducing risk of cross-contamination between tortoises therefore mitigating the spread of disease. All marked tortoises have been healthy and well.

Desert Restoration

In past years, the Conservancy worked hard to identify areas of the Preserve that had been degraded and in need of restoration. Additionally, we have been working with partner scientists to test different restoration methods in the field, such as different seed treatments, soil treatments, and biocrust. This past year we built upon this foundation by continuing our work on biocrust with our partners from Northern Arizona University, and continuing our restoration experiments with the United States Geological

Service. With our NAU partners, we collected approximately 80 gallons of soil and soil crust and transferred it to Scottsdale Community College to be “grown out” in their greenhouse. This soil crust, once it is grown out, can then be



re-distributed on restoration sites in the Preserve and in other areas that require restoration. We also took part in another NAU biocrust experiment to see if placing bio crust in “pellet”



form would help it grow under natural conditions. With the USGS RestoreNet experiments, we are testing different ways of seeding and creating structures that protect seeds and create



microclimates. Everything we learn will be used to restore the degraded areas on the Preserve, other areas in the valley, and will have worldwide implications for restoration of arid lands and human health.

Invasive Species

The Preserve has an estimated 1,500 acres of invasive buffelgrass and fountain grass,

both of which contribute to wildfire and decrease biodiversity. However, ongoing efforts to map and remove these grasses, with strong partnerships between the Conservancy, the City of Scottsdale, and the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management, has given us the tools to fight it. This year, a small but dedicated team of stewards committed approximately 1,200 hours to removing over 100 acres of invasive grasses. In addition, we partnered with the City of Scottsdale to create a



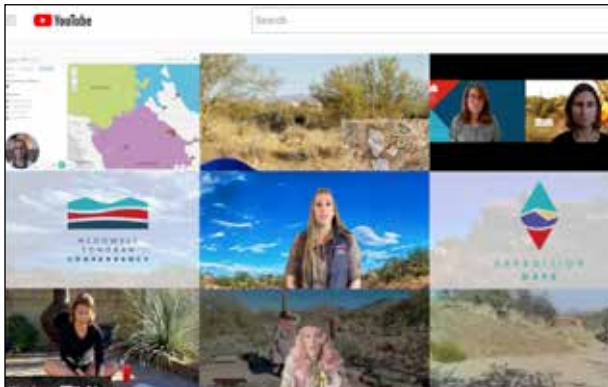
joint five-year, strategic plan to build our resources and drastically increase the treatment of these invasive grasses. The combination of the previous work and this strategic plan allowed us to apply to the Arizona Forestry and Fire Management Invasive Species grant program, which awarded \$192,000 to the City of Scottsdale to hire professional crews that can magnify our efforts. With the Conservancy and the crews combined, we plan to remove 485 acres in the coming year.

In the past year we wrapped up one of our experimental studies that tested and determined best practices for removing fountain grass. We published a peer-reviewed paper in an open access format so that it would be a free resource for land managers. You can find the publication here: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10530-022-02879-3>.

We continued our collaboration with Intel to develop artificial intelligence (AI) software capable of identifying invasive species from photo images taken from a drone. The results are promising and Intel will pilot more drone flights this spring. Once the AI software is fully trained, it will be able to detect buffleggrass and fountain grass from drone imagery of very difficult to traverse locations, saving hundreds of hours of human labor in finding these species. This technology has worldwide implications for detecting and managing fountain grass and buffleggrass.



Education



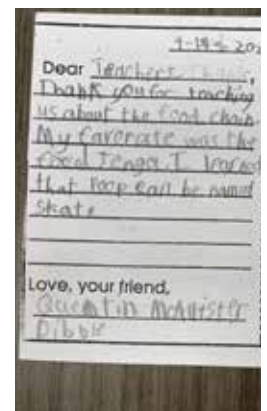
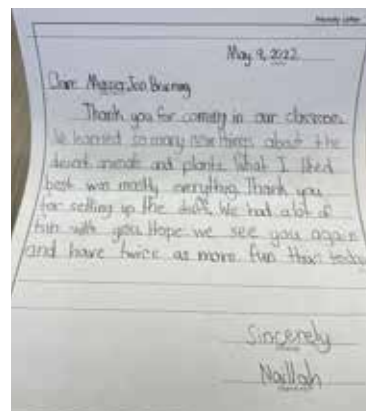
Education Goal: Inspire, develop, and support environmental stewardship of the Sonoran Desert and natural open space through impactful education.

Education is in Everything We Do

At the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, education is interwoven into everything we do. We know that if we are going to keep the Preserve and our open spaces safe and sustainable in perpetuity, we need the continuing support of an engaged and informed public.

This year, stewards, staff, and partners worked together through the Sonoran Education Center to reorganize, update, and revamp the way we engage with and educate the public through our various programs. The new Steward Education program became the focal point of the steward-education journey—providing stewards with the tools they need to continue building their knowledge of the Preserve and the Sonoran Desert—and was shared with the public. The new Community Engagement program helped us reach new audiences and introduce the broader community to the Conservancy, and what we do, by participating in community events and festivals.

Another new program, Youth Education, combines science with curriculum-based, hands-on learning to engage K-12 students to love, and care for, the Sonoran Desert.



From Our Students:

"My favorite part was the food chain. I learned that if we don't have water, a lot of wildlife would be gone." ~ Faith, 3rd grade

"How do you make learning so fun!?" ~ Zoe, 4th grade

"Thank you for teaching us about the animals in the Sonoran Desert. I learned that if the Sonoran cactus dies, it hurts the ecosystem" ~ Arion, 3rd Grade





Expedition Days Suite

Over the past year, we added an important component to our Expedition Days offerings—Expedition Days on the Road. This program fills a critical gap and allows us to reach more underserved students by bringing Expedition Days to the schools that are too far away from the Preserve for students to visit. Although the Covid-19 spike in the winter and early spring meant we had to postpone our live event, this smaller, more mobile program allowed us to continue reaching students. In our first year alone, we reached 1,141 students—many of whom are from Title 1 schools. Combined with Expedition Days Online, we reached over 2,500 students in the spring and summer.

Bajada Explorers

This year we piloted our first middle-school program, Bajada Explorers. This program was created through a unique collaboration between a cohort of Scottsdale Unified School District middle



school science teachers and the Conservancy. The teachers received a grant from the school district to visit the Preserve, learn about our Parsons Field

Institute studies, and develop lesson plans for a field trip based on the studies. They then worked with the Conservancy to bring their 7th-grade classes to the Bajada Nature Trail to become scientists for a day, as they made observations and collected data along the nature trail. 643 students visited the Preserve through this program, many for the first time in their lives.

Living Labs

This past year we began plans for an immersive, science-based high school program we are calling the Living Labs program. The concept is for the students to gain experience with ecological



restoration through caring for a restoration plot—or “living lab”—on their high school campus, while also assisting in the restoration of spaces in the Preserve. This program will bring together science and education in the most tangible way, by allowing high school students to participate directly in restoration and research.



From Our Teachers:

"Thank you for providing engaging lessons! My students had a blast. I loved that you came to our school and provided great standard-based lessons." ~ Public School Teacher

"My students were 100% engaged. They loved every second of the presentation." ~ Public School Teacher

"Wonderful activities and presentations. All students were fully engaged and participating. We appreciate you coming to our school! Thank you." ~ Public School Teacher

Stewardship



Stewardship Goal:

Train and equip 700+ volunteer stewards with the knowledge, tools, and structure needed to discover, learn, and ultimately teach people to be stewards of the land.

Stewardship, Conservancy Style

This year we were excited to be back at full strength with all of our pre-Covid programs, while continuing with some of our innovative creations from the past two years.

We were able to welcome over 100 new stewards into the Conservancy who contributed thousands of hours. We also continued to engage our existing stewards as we focus on one of the foundations of our steward program: *educating ourselves so we can engage and educate others.*



One of our long-held ambitions is to impact more communities. Understanding different communities' needs and desires are key to designing and delivering programs that are impactful for them. With that in mind, we created a new Community Engagement program that will allow us to reach an expanding number of communities. Until now, the majority of our programming has been in the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, but with much of our programming going mobile, we hope

to bring it into additional communities.

Cultural resources help us understand and appreciate those who lived here before us. The protection of those resources remains key for us. You will remember from last year's report that we had begun our Site Steward program with the first six sites. This year, we identified and started monitoring another six sites. We appreciate the support of both Arizona's State Historic Preservation Office and the City of Scottsdale and have more eager stewards ready to engage in this initiative once we are able to further expand.



After a successful pilot in the spring of 2021, we restarted our Trailhead Ambassador program at all major trailheads. We also changed the focus of our foot, bike and equestrian patrollers so that, along with checking trail conditions, they now serve as trail ambassadors, offering tips to ensure safe and enjoyable visits along with recommendations



Statistics



The McDowell Sonoran Conservancy currently has **700+ stewards**. In 2022, these stewards provided **61,000+ volunteer hours**, representing a value of over **\$1,700,000—the equivalent of almost 50 full-time staff**.

on hiking and biking routes. This provides a very visible and consistent presence in the Preserve for the growing number visitors. This year alone they engaged over 100,000 people.



If you ever wonder why the Preserve trails are in such great condition, look no further than our construction and maintenance stewards. Our trail ambassadors submit reports on trails in need of repair, and our trail crews then work closely with the City of Scottsdale to remedy any issues and plan for future needs. We continually receive compliments on the great conditions of the trails and thank our hard-working team for their efforts.

We believe our model of stewardship is unique. Without our amazing stewards, we would not be

able to deliver such a wide array of programs such as those that: engage youth and adults, provide visitor safety and support, maintain trails, engage non-scientists as citizen-scientists, offer guided walks, hikes, and bike rides, and much more. In addition to generously donating their time, our stewards are also financial supporters and donated over \$200,000 this year.



Without supporters like you, the Conservancy would not be able to deliver these important services that make such a profound impact on both visitors and our community.

What's New



Camino Campana

A brand new interpretative trail was installed at the Fraesfield Trailhead in October of 2021. The trail is named after Sam Katheryn Campana—Scottsdale's first female mayor, and a dedicated steward of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.



Jane Rau Interpretive Trail at Browns Ranch

We also partnered with the City of Scottsdale to redesign the signage on the Jane Rau Interpretive Trail at Browns Ranch in celebration of Jane's 100th birthday. The new theme for this trail is "a desert refuge" as a walk on this trail reveals a desert refuge that protects native plants and animals. Keep your eye out for new signage coming soon.



Free Public Walks

For many years, we have offered a wide array of free public hikes and bike rides, both educational and for fitness. This year, we introduced even more walks on the interpretive trails. Most are less than a mile and last only 90 minutes, and they are full of educational and fun facts! These have proved so successful that we are adapting more of our long-range offerings into walks so more people can join us to learn about this amazing ecosystem we call home.



Financials

Statement of Financial Position

FY 2022 - For the year ended June 30, 2022

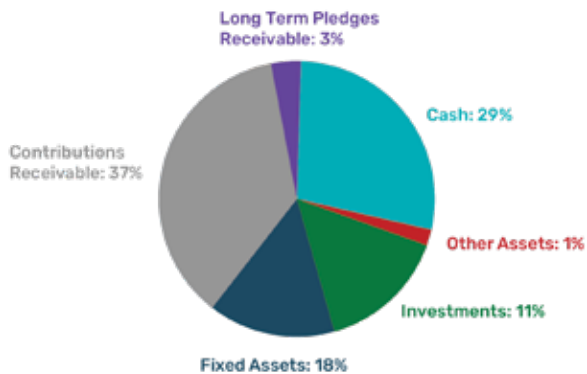
CURRENT ASSETS

Cash	\$ 853,755
Other Assets	\$ 43,992
Investments	\$ 334,235
Fixed Assets	\$ 534,891
Contributions Receivable	\$ 1,112,426
Long Term Pledges Receivable	\$ 98,672
Total Assets	\$ 2,977,971

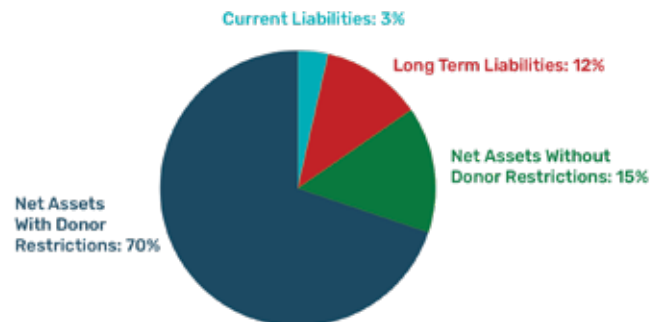
LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

Current Liabilities	\$ 98,289
Long Term Liabilities	\$ 368,127
Net Assets Without Donor Restrictions	\$ 437,405
Net Assets With Donor Restrictions	\$ 2,074,150
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$ 2,977,971

Current Assets
\$2,977,971



Liabilities & Net Assets
\$2,977,971



Statement of Activities

FY 2022 - For the year ended June 30, 2022

REVENUES

Contributed Volunteer Services	\$ 1,617,791
Individual Contributions	\$ 1,065,334
Corporate and Events	\$ 71,550
Foundations and Grants	\$ 476,214
Program Services	\$ 116,900
Other Income	\$ 4,298
Total Revenues	\$ 3,352,087

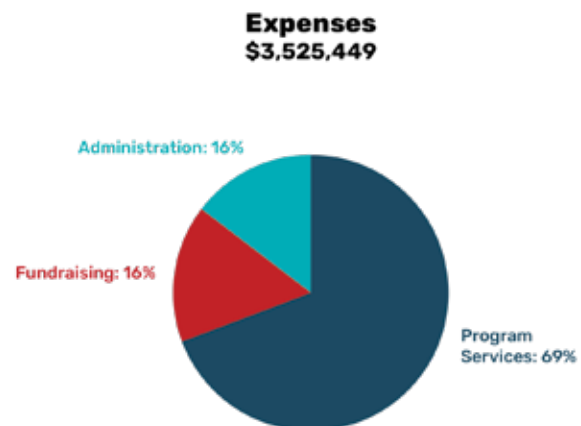
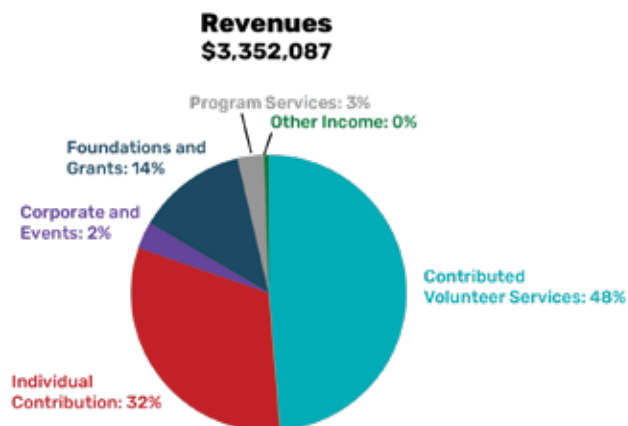
EXPENSES

Program Services	\$ 2,420,700
Fundraising	\$ 554,598
Administration	\$ 550,151
Total Expenses	\$ 3,525,449

CHANGE IN NET ASSETS \$ (173,362)

NET ASSETS

Beginning of the Year	\$ 2,684,917
End of the Year	\$ 2,511,555





Donors

For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2022

The Conservancy is grateful for the many people, companies, and organizations that supported our work through donations from July 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022. This list includes multi-year donations indicated at the full multi-year investment. Every effort has been made to ensure that this list is accurate, yet due to space constraints, we are only able to include those who contributed \$25 or more. Regardless of the amount, your contribution helps us preserve and advance natural open space through science, education and stewardship.

INDIVIDUAL DONORS

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