Friends of the Desert Mountains

2020 Annual Report

The Connections That Sustain Us
Yes, 2020 was a memorable, roller coaster of a year for Friends of the Desert Mountains.

In January, our staff, volunteers and supporters were all actively engaged in leading hikes, maintaining trails, providing educational opportunities for adults and kids, and preparing for our annual Wildflower Festival on March 7. Little did we know that our Festival raising awareness about the importance of connecting to the land would be the last major 2020 event in the Coachella Valley. As an organization, we quickly pivoted to ways we could help everyone be safe while taking comfort in the one form of recreation that was never shut down – enjoying the beautiful, natural space that surrounds us.

The outdoors provides a rare and safe refuge especially to those struggling with anxiety or depression due to the pandemic. We missed working alongside our volunteers and face-to-face interactions with staff and supporters. But we stuck to our core mission, keeping over 300 miles of trails safe and even completing a major land acquisition. Thank you to everyone who made it possible.

Friends of the Desert Mountains closed 2020 with an even stronger commitment to building a community of support, helping preserve the unique wildlife and scenic beauty of the Coachella Valley and our Desert Mountains. Now more than ever, we connect ALL people to the land!

Tammy Martin
Executive Director

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friends@DesertMountains.org

All content verified as of 12/31/2020
Cover Photo by Chris Miller
OUR MISSION
The Friends of the Desert Mountains preserves land, supports education, conservation and research in the Coachella Valley, and acts as the support organization for the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

OUR VISION
The Friends’ vision for the Coachella Valley is a thriving and productive community integrated with a healthy and sustainable natural environment.

OUR VALUES
Stewardship: We are dedicated to permanently protecting the critical natural resources in the Coachella Valley.

Collaboration: From our inception, our success relies on important partnerships that include tribal nations, government agencies at all levels, and other nonprofit groups.

Education: We engage all ages to reveal the wonders of the fragile desert and mountains we call home and instill an environmental awareness to last a lifetime.

Access for All: We strive to connect everyone to the land, so that all residents and visitors feel welcomed, respected, and supported.

DIVERSITY AS A WAY OF LIFE
Diversity is a core principle and overarching goal of the Friends of the Desert Mountains. Just as natural systems thrive on diversity, so does our organization. Friends seek to cultivate a social ecology that is inclusive, supportive, celebrates individuality and diversity, cultivates love and appreciation for our differences, and respects our freedom, commitment and experiences.
We must protect our biodiversity, scenic beauty, outdoor recreation, and our community’s sense of place or we risk losing these resources forever.

Beyond land acquisition, our conservation programs ensure the sustainable existence, use, and enjoyment of our natural and cultural heritage for current generations and those to come. With only six staff, these programs would not exist without our wonderful volunteers. You can help too! Contact us at friends@DesertMountains.org or call 760-568-9918.

**Land Acquisition & Monitoring**
Acquire critical habitat and visit parcels to monitor and report any issues.

**Weed Warriors**
Preserve the biodiversity of the desert by removing invasive plant species.

**Trail Stewardship & Ambassadors**
Build new trails and maintain old ones throughout the Coachella Valley. Promote positive trail use and monitor trails for maintenance and cleanup needs.

**Youth Education**
Inspire new generations to get outdoors and appreciate nature.

**Hikes**
Help visitors discover the desert on guided hikes as a leader or a “sweep”.

**Community Science**
Go outdoors and gather data to help answer questions about the natural world.

**Visitor Services & Gift Shop**
Support the Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center/Gift Shop.

**Outreach**
Introduce new people to Friends by communicating with the community.

**Events**
Raise awareness and financial support at our annual Coachella Valley Wildflower Festival and Friends & Champions event.
Since 1987, Friends of the Desert Mountains has acquired and protected 60,000 acres of our wonderful natural California desert in perpetuity for the benefit of all.

Over the years, acreage that is within National Monuments, Parks, Wildernesses and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern has been transferred to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and other local state and federal partners for consolidated management. At the end of 2020, 17,436 acres remain in Friends’ ownership and stewardship.

In spite of Covid-19, Friends continued its acquisition and management of special places in and around the Coachella Valley. Our most exciting acquisition this past year was a 481-acre parcel straddling the junction of Hwy 62 and Mission Creek Road. This site had been approved for an intense multistory commercial and residential development along the scenic undeveloped stretch of highway from the Coachella Valley to Morongo Valley.

So now, instead of blight and sprawl at the western gateway to the recently designated Sand to Snow National Monument, Friends hopes one day to partner with the BLM, Coachella Valley Conservation Commission, and perhaps the City of Desert Hot Springs to develop a visitor/interpretive center. It is the perfect site to serve all who want to understand and experience the unique resources of this stunning National Monument, including a major branch of the San Andreas Fault, two streams that flow year-round through the desert, and multiple life zones spanning from arid to alpine to the snow-clad peak of Mt. San Gorgonio.

During 2020, Friends continued to meet the challenges of managing land we hold in perpetuity across the Coachella Valley. This means addressing problems like dumping and illegal land alteration. Land stewardship is an ongoing challenge for all land managers, which we address through cooperative efforts among BLM, Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, and other partners. Good stewardship also involves Friends’ volunteers as well as our outreach programs to educate the public about the valuable and fragile resources of the desert that surrounds us.
Weed Warriors is a multi-faceted invasive species eradication project that involves Friends’ volunteers and staff, multiple agency partnerships, and a LOT of dedication.

Sheep Canyon is a model for demonstrating that no matter how difficult or overwhelming the project appears, when we work together, it can be done. 2020 was a banner year for the project. After 5 years of hard work, what was once a sea of invasive fountain grass and tamarisk finally turned the corner toward recovery.

Major funding from Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy through a multi-year grant allowed Friends to send in the Urban Conservation Corps to start the offensive in earnest in 2017. Volunteer mulepackers with Redshank Riders provided essential support for the crews.

This began a snowball effect, inspiring the Bureau of Land Management to send in crews. By 2020, the habitat was showing signs of renewal. The return of surface water in the Canyon gives endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep and other sensitive species access to the resources they need to survive, and native perennial plants are returning.

Though this is one large project, Friends’ volunteer Weed Warriors are doing similar work throughout the valley on a regular basis. Continuing and persistent efforts prove that native habitat can be restored.

Yes, we have much to celebrate, however there is still much to be done. In order for Sheep Canyon and others to continue to recover, they will need continued vigilance and re-treatment. Efforts are underway to build on the past 5 years’ work in Sheep Canyon, and many other canyons await. What we accomplish, and have yet to accomplish, is due to the dedication and support of our staff, our board, volunteers, our agency partners, and supporters like you!
In 2020, Friends began partnering with Palms to Pines Parasports and Desert Recreation District to create more accessible outdoor opportunities for persons with physical and cognitive disabilities.

Late in 2020 through March 2021, we completed six hikes with attendance varying from 15 to 30 individuals. A terrific collaboration benefiting all who participate, Friends is especially appreciative of our kind and patient Volunteer Hike Leaders who have been making these Saturday morning hikes possible for our friends with mobility issues.

From October through March, Hike Leaders recorded 430 hours of taking visitors on birding walks, full moon hikes, and hikes on Carrizo Canyon, Dead Indian Canyon, Randall Henderson, Art Smith, Chuckwalla, and Earl Henderson trails. Our hikes included 105 trails with 115 different groups, including 432 adults and 9 youths.

We would love to have you join us on our guided hikes. Check our Event Calendar at DesertMountains.org/calendar or email friends@desertmountains.org
Picks and shovels are the tools of the trade for Friends’ Trail Stewards.

Led by volunteer Gordon Fidler, the crew of Stewards help maintain over 310 miles of Coachella Valley trails, the majority of which are in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument. Fidler says, “We appreciate the support from our fellow outdoor enthusiasts in keeping trails and public lands safe and accessible!”

In 2020, Coachella Valley trails saw increased usage - and increased wear and tear. Friends’ trail stewards did some much needed repairs on a few of the local trails, logging 235 hours working on approximately 10 miles of trails. Gordon has been out scouting for trails needing repairs and potential new trails to be built beginning in the 2021-2022 season.

Friends’ Trail Ambassadors require only a friendly attitude and a desire to promote positive trail use and monitor trails for maintenance and cleanup needs. In 2020, our trail ambassadors reported working on trails to pick up trash, remove graffiti of all sorts, and eliminate some “art” designs including unauthorized rock cairns.
Youth Education

One of Friends’ most promising opportunities to connect people to the land is our Youth Education Program.

In early 2020, classes and field trips exploring the desert with Friends were in full swing—until March 12th—when in-person programs were shut down by Covid-19. Environmental Educator Venessa Becerra took on the challenge and worked hard to pivot the in-person watershed program she and Director of Education and Land Programs Jennifer Prado had been developing to a virtual format. Helping area youth understand and connect with the Coachella Valley’s Whitewater watershed is vital to maintaining a clean water supply, and a healthy environment for local flora and fauna [and humans]. Becerra and Prado created virtual yet tangible experiences to keep the students engaged.

We worked with Coachella Valley Unified School District, and Desert Mirage High School’s science classes. Then we adapted the curriculum for 3rd and 4th grade students in Oasis Elementary School’s After School Education and Safety (ASES) program. Becerra stated, “This information needed to be accessible to anyone and everyone interested in the local environment.”

With funding provided by Southern California Edison and the Anderson Children’s Foundation, Friends provided all participating students with kits to conduct chemical analyses of their water as well as a hands-on activity they could do at home. They then coordinated with teachers to present the lessons via Zoom.

Becerra and Prado demonstrated the tests in the Whitewater River, and encouraged the students to investigate the pH, nitrate/nitrite, and dissolved oxygen levels of their tap water with their kits. The kids also learned to virtually observe and monitor the biological diversity of macroinvertebrates in water samples, as indicators of watershed health.

“We all live downstream in a watershed,” said Becerra, “which is connected to a greater system that eventually drains to our lakes and oceans. What we do on land has an effect on our water resources. We want everyone to understand this connection.”

Student-gathered information can be sent to Clean Water Hub, an online database that collects the different chemical and biological survey results. The data can be tracked and searched based on your area of interest. Anyone can access the information and it is a user-friendly data source students to research and interpret. Friends’ Watershed program engages local youth in hands-on observations, but also shares that very useful data with scientist and others who are watching our water — and the Salton Sea — closely.

Said Becerra, “Having students show interest in environmental education content in a virtual setting was incredible.”
The Friends of the Desert Mountains (Friends) Board of Directors began 2020 by adopting a reorganization plan to help us engage more effectively with others and build individual support to advance our mission. In addition to creating a Marketing and Development position, Friends made a concerted effort to bring new viewpoints and voices to the Board of Directors. We welcome the four individuals who joined our board and are helping Friends pivot to become much more outward facing in our work.

**Anne Kane**, Attorney with Cosgrove, Cosgrove and Humphery served on Friends’ Marketing/Development Committee prior to joining the Board in March 2020. She became Board Secretary in November 2020. Anne’s legal area of expertise is estate planning and she has provided wonderful help encouraging others to follow their passion for our work by providing planned giving options to Friends’ supporters.

**Matthew Gonda**, CPA and CGMA, CEO of Gonda + Co. joined Friends’ Finance Committee in 2019 and was elected to the Board of Directors in September 2020. Matt currently also serves as Treasurer of Regional Access Project Foundation and brings important financial insights to help Friends continue to operate in a sustainable manner.

**Oscar Ortiz**, City Council Member, City of Indio was elected to Friends’ Board in September 2020 and currently serves as Chair of the Social Justice Committee as well as serving on Marketing/Development. Oscar's combined passion for the environment and natural gift of engaging community members brings an important voice as Friends focuses on connecting all people to the land.

**Sienna Thomas**, Enviromental Technician for Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians, joined the Friends’ Board in September 2020. Sienna serves on the Social Justice Committee as well as providing important cultural and environmental education advice as we redevelop Desert Lakeshore Ranch.

In addition to a new staff organization chart and new board members, the Friends’ Board created the Social Justice Committee to increase access and opportunities to outdoor recreation for historically underserved populations in our region including low income communities, communities of color, and community members with disabilities.
In this challenging year, many nonprofits ended up significantly reducing their payrolls and programs. Thanks to our generous donors and the success of our virtual Friends and Champions event, we were able to retain our staff count by utilizing our reserves. We held the line on other expenses to continue maintaining trails, stewardship and acquisition work in a safe, responsible manner. Please note that the majority of our assets reflect the restricted land we own plus reserves set aside for future stewardship.

### 2020 Revenue

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<td>Grants &amp; Admin Fees</td>
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### 2020 Expenses

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<td><strong>TOTAL EXPENSES</strong></td>
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**NET CHANGE**

From 2019 to 2020

($100,001)
Volunteers are the heart of Friends of the Desert Mountains. Without them we would not have the programs and capabilities we have. Conservation in the Coachella Valley began as a volunteer-led movement, and continues to thrive thanks to the selfless dedication of many.

Our current Volunteer Lead Ada Nuckels, works countless hours to ensure activities are scheduled and staffed, in addition to maintaining statistics, providing reports and handling other administrative tasks. In fact, she does so much for us that in 2021 we are hiring a paid Volunteer and Administrative Coordinator who will take on some of her many tasks so she can have more discretionary time in the future. Of course, knowing Ada, this just means she will now be able to volunteer in other programs she enjoys.

Friends’ volunteers work tirelessly accomplishing many tasks, some helping in multiple roles. In season, Friends has anywhere from 100-150 volunteers providing a variety of essential services. Many Friends programs have a volunteer group leader coordinating and guiding the activity:

- Hikes - Ada Nuckels
- Trail Stewards & Ambassadors - Gordon Fidler and Rich Jarvinen
- Weed Warriors - Gary Ward
- Visitor Services & Gift Shop - Janice Heronema and Linda Blair

A BIG thank you to each and every volunteer for all the crucial work you do in helping others connect to the land.

A focus for 2021 will be recruiting leaders for two more of our burgeoning programs - COULD IT BE YOU?
Email us at friends@desertmountains.org or call (760) 568-9918
- Land Monitoring & Acquisition
- Youth Education
Lights! Camera! Action?
In 2019, Friends announced Rancho Mirage’s stunning Villa De Martini, originally built by silver screen star Marion Davies, would be the location for our annual Friends & Champions fundraiser on November 11, 2020. Then Covid-19 changed our world temporarily, and the in-person event had to be switched to a virtual experience. Villa De Martini manager Fatima Nordquist offered to honor Friends’ deposit for the following year. But that still left Friends wondering where to hold the “virtual” 2020 event so it could be broadcast with our co-emcees Friends’ Board President Rebecca Driscoll and professional auctioneer Lenny Broberg. Villa De Martini saved the day again by letting Friends set up a live studio on their expansive front lawn.

But Wait, There’s More!
A pre-event meeting and tour at Villa De Martini revealed how much the Friends’ team adored the property. Certain it would be equally popular among our supporters, we asked the owner Darin Martini if we could add an elegant evening at Villa De Martini to Friends’ auction. Mr. Martini not only agreed but also made a personal appearance at the auction winner’s dinner, expertly prepared by Chef Tony Ricco. Villa De Martini and Chef Tony have just made us the same offer for Friends & Champions 2021, so don’t miss your opportunity to join us and bid on this exclusive experience.

Friends & Champions
is Friends of the Desert Mountains’ annual fundraising event. Our “non-gala” celebrates Friends’ accomplishments and those who help us achieve our goals through their contributions. This one event provides more flexible funding than any other FODM revenue source.
The following Monumental Friends have helped build Friends of the Desert Mountains since our 1987 founding. Their gifts are acknowledged on a special stone monument at Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Visitor Center on Highway 74.

**Oak ($500,000)**
- Anonymous
- Ruth Applegarth
- The Breckner Family, Burnsville, MN
- Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy
- The Nature Conservancy
- Partners of Palm Canyon Ranch
- Southern California Edison

**Pine ($100,000)**
- Sue Adams
- Anderson Children’s Foundation
- City of Palm Desert
- Charles & Carol Ann Howell
- Loey
- Wells Fargo

**Palm ($50,000)**
- Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians
- Cameron & Katie Barrows
- Cabazon Band of Mission Indians
- Chino Cienega Foundation
- Supervisor John J. Benoît, County of Riverside
- Desert Healthcare District
- The Desert Sun - Gannett Foundation
- Draine Family Charitable Foundation
- Granite Construction Company
- Don Mosco

**Ocotillo ($25,000)**
- Buford Crites
- Burrtec Waste & Recycling Services, LLC
- Canyon Cougars
- Kathy & Sheldon Coleman
- Desert Radio Group
- First Foundation Bank
- The H.N. and Frances C. Berger Foundation
- Kay Hazen and Company
- Drew A. Leander
- Ted & Pam Lennon
- Lowe Enterprises
- Cheryl & Dick McKinley
- Pacific Western Bank
- Paul & Kay Selzer
- Shields Date Gardens
- Robert & Joan Taylor
- Peter & Joyce Teel Family
- The Trust for Public Land
- The Watling Company
- Paula Turner

**Yucca ($10,000)**
- Dr. Gina Boster & CDR. Jerry Boster
- Bright Event Rentals
- City of La Quinta
- City of Indian Wells
- Classic Party Rentals
- The Coeta and Donald Barker Foundation
- The Community Foundation
- Serving Inland Southern California
- John & Nicole Criste
- Desert Pacific Properties
- Desert Riders Trails Fund
- Keith & Maxine Driscoll
- Rebecca Driscoll
- Betsy Farver
- Gordon & Linda Fidler
- Lana S. Fuller
- The Gas Company
- Hargreaves Family
- Midge & Dick Hood
- Paula N. & William R. Kroonen
- Curt, Ann, Sharon & Carol Mattern
- National Conservation System Foundation
- The Reserve Realty
- Richard & Natalie Shoner
- Stone Eagle
- Vintage Nursery
- Westmount Asset Management
- Jean Wick
- William Dale Young & Sons and Grandsons
OUR SUPPORTERS

Smoketree ($5,000)
D.K. Adams
Patty Andersen – Spaan Family
Ed & Teri Andrews
Robert E. Armstrong
Barnes & Noble Palm Desert
Fred Bell
Kerry J. Berman
Best Best & Krieger, LLP
Vicki Fuller Cahill
Louise & Austin Casey
City of Rancho Mirage
Robin J. Corkery
Peter R. De Forest
Alfred K. Dempsey
Elizabeth Ogren Erickson
& Robert Erickson

Darlene Feser
Daniel Gray
Ken Guza & Diana Larsen-Mills
Bill Havert
Lisa & Gary Johnson
Dan & Arlene Kirby
Jack Kocak
Keene Larson
M. Connor Limont
Wellington Hsiao Tung Loh
James & Doreen McElvany
Joanne & John McKay
Mine Reclamation, LLC
MSA Consulting, Inc.
National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF)

Ada G. Nuckels
Valerie Quick
Maureen Pelton & Charlie Hartwell
Rabobank, N.A.
Rudolf Family Foundation
Stuart & Lee Rolfe
Jess & Susan Rosenberg
Sam's Club
Peter M. Scheer
Bob & Irma Smith
Mark V. Sofonio MD FACS Board Certified Plastic Surgeon
George & Angie Spanos
Billy Steinberg
USLandLink
Sue Walters

Every gift to Friends of the Desert Mountains is appreciated. Whether you write a check, leave a legacy gift, give a donation at the end of a hike, volunteer your time, or even share our story on social media, every bit counts!
Our mission is too big and too important to work alone. We partner with government agencies, private businesses, and other nonprofits to accomplish our goals.

Friends of the Desert Mountains is proud to recognize the support and assistance of the following organizations and entities. We work together with these partners and many others to conserve the desert for the benefit of the plants, animals, and people who live here.

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<th>Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians</th>
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60,000+ ACRES PROTECTED
Since 1987, we have acquired tens of thousands of acres of desert, mountain, canyon and woodland. These lands are conserved now and for future generations.

27+ THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES
Our work protects dozens of unique plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth and the habitat where they live and thrive.

310+ MILES OF TRAILS
We build, restore and improve access throughout the Coachella Valley to ensure the safety and enjoyment of hundreds of miles of recreational trails.

In 2020

105 GUIDED HIKES
Friends interacted with 115 different groups comprised of 441 adults and children.

80 ACRES OF WEEDS REMOVED
Invasive, non-native vegetation steals water from indigenous plants.

800+ VOLUNTEER HOURS
150 volunteers led hikes, pulled weeds, educated youth and maintained trails.
In the spirit of truth and reconciliation, Friends of the Desert Mountains acknowledges that we occupy the traditional territory of the Cahuilla people of the Coachella Valley. This land continues to be home to the Cahuilla people whom we recognize as stewards of the land and vital contributors of our society. We acknowledge the Cahuilla peoples’ connection to this land and appreciate the opportunity to live, learn, and recreate on their traditional homelands. We honor the Cahuilla caretakers of these lands and waters before us, the Cahuilla people today, and the generations to come.