



## Tribal leaders, community members demonstrate the natural and cultural significance of the Great Bend of the Gila

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PHOENIX, Ariz. — Today, the Respect Great Bend Coalition released an [interactive Story Map](#) showcasing the Great Bend of the Gila, a stretch of river valley and surrounding desert between Phoenix and Yuma, as described by Arizonans who want to see it permanently protected. The story map, released in partnership with the Conservation Lands Foundation, contains interviews from 13 different individuals about the profound value of these public lands to diverse communities across Arizona.

Today, the Great Bend of the Gila faces ongoing and rapidly expanding threats as the growth of metropolitan Phoenix increases the risk of development and misuse, including irreparable damage to cultural and natural resources like petroglyphs, geoglyphs, cryptobiotic soils, plants, and animals. Planning for the protection of irreplaceable landscapes like the Great Bend helps ensure people will be able to experience these places for generations.

The [Story Map](#) follows Tribal leaders and elders with longstanding ties to the region, along with other community members who have come to love this special place, as they attest to the extraordinary natural and cultural significance of these public lands.

**Barnaby Lewis, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Gila River Indian Community, said,** “The only way that we can survive is to maintain these places [like the Great Bend of the Gila] with respect, not destroy them—a challenge because modern development has destroyed many places of religious and cultural significance to Tribes throughout this country.”

**Shane Anton, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, said,** “Being a part of the land, we have a responsibility to be good stewards of it. If you do that and you harmonize with [the Great Bend of the Gila] it stays the way it is, it stays how it is now. It is important for me to pass that on to

my family and those that are related to me, but also to protect this place for future generations... They can visit and gently come upon the landscape to see our history and that we have been here for many, many years. It confirms our place here since time immemorial.”

**Justin Brundin, Former Cultural Resources Manager, Cocopah Indian Tribe, said,** “When you see an artifact or a petroglyph that’s been vandalized or destroyed, it’s a gut punch. One of the things that vandalism makes extremely apparent is that establishing places like a national monument or a conservation area is a major step forward in protecting these sites. If we don’t do the same for a place like [the Great Bend of the Gila] then little by little, chip by chip, vandalism by vandalism, it will cease to exist.”

**Reverend Doug Bland, Executive Director, Arizona Interfaith Power and Light, said,** “One of the things that I would encourage people of faith to do is to get out in this natural beauty we’ve been given. People protect what they love. If they come to places like [the Great Bend of the Gila] and they find renewal....then they want to protect them as well.”

**Joel Hazelton, Landscape Photographer, said,** “As Phoenix continues to expand westward because it’s all flat and our population continues to grow, why wouldn’t they develop up to the edge of this mountain? That would be prime real estate. People would pay big bucks to live at the base of this mountain. Probably the best and most effective way to combat that is to apply some sort of permanent protection to keep that development from happening.”

The Respect Great Bend Coalition is united in efforts to permanently protect the Great Bend of the Gila. As these interviews demonstrate, these public lands must be better protected in a way that recognizes their importance to Tribes, preserves their cultural and natural values, and provides new opportunities for community members and visitors to respectfully access the outdoors.

B-Roll of the Great Bend of the Gila and interview footage from the Story Map project are available for editorial use on request. Please contact [skylar@archaeologysouthwest.org](mailto:skylar@archaeologysouthwest.org) for access.

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### **MORE INFORMATION**

<https://www.respectgreatbend.org/>

**13 federally-recognized Tribal nations** with cultural, historical, spiritual, and ancestral ties to the region include, in alphabetical order: Ak-Chin Indian Community, Cocopah Indian Tribe, Colorado River Indian Tribes, Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, Fort Yuma-Quechan Indian Tribe, Gila River Indian Community, Hopi Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Tohono O’odham Nation, Yavapai-Apache Nation, and Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe.