



An abandoned van near a roadway created by unlawful border traffic. ©JACK DYKINGA



Saguaro cacti in Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. ©TOM BEAN

CABEZA PRIETA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE — ARIZONA

Located along the U.S.-Mexico border in southwestern Arizona, Cabeza Prieta is part of the largest remaining swath of undeveloped Sonoran Desert, one of the most biologically diverse deserts in the world. A lava-capped peak in Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge gives this 860,000-acre preserve its name – which is Spanish for “dark head.” The refuge is distinguished by its eight ragged mountain ranges and its vast stands of palo verde trees and saguaro cacti. More than 90 percent of the refuge is designated wilderness – the largest refuge wilderness in the lower 48 states. The refuge also shelters the fastest and one of the most endangered land mammals in the Americas – the Sonoran pronghorn.

THE THREAT

By clamping down on traditional points of entry in urban areas, United States border policies have funneled migrants from Mexico into the Arizona desert, with results that are both tragic and destructive. Two summers ago, 14 people died trying to cross Cabeza. High-speed off-road chases between smugglers and the U.S. Border Patrol in Cabeza’s fragile wilderness have left wide paths of destruction. In an attempt to curb ille-

gal border crossings and prevent further deaths, border officials have established permanent camps in the refuge, incongruous with this once-pristine and remote place, but reflecting the intensity of the problem.

These border activities could threaten the already slim chances of avoiding extinction for the endangered Sonoran pronghorn. Recent estimates have put the number of Sonoran pronghorn in southwestern Arizona – the only population left in the United States – at about 30 animals. This shadow of a population cannot withstand the stress and habitat damage caused by dramatic increases in border patrols, smugglers and migrants.

THE SOLUTION

Federal officials must construct a barrier along Cabeza’s border with Mexico, as they have done on adjacent public lands, to keep vehicles from damaging the fragile desert wilderness. Over the long-term, however, the only real solution is to reform the Border Patrol’s policy of funneling migrants into the desert, which has failed to reduce border crossings and has caused environmental degradation.

An endangered Sonoran pronghorn fawn. ©AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

