The Power of a Conservation Vision

Dale Turner, President, Board of Directors, Sky Island Alliance

When Sky Island Alliance began in 1991, we were a small group of volunteers with a big vision – that we could show this region to be a world-class treasure and gain the protection it deserves.

As that group evolved and grew, with board and staff, members and supporters, we’ve turned that vision into reality in many ways and many places. Some are powerful social changes, like gaining widespread conceptual understanding of mountain islands in a sea of grasslands and deserts, or recognition that this is a single unique region, despite being spread across four states and two countries. And some are tangible changes on the ground, like the illegal road up Slavin Gulch that disappeared in 1999 after an SIA work weekend and that remains closed today, or the degraded wetland in Scotia Canyon that was transformed last year into a haven for native frogs.

Along the way, there’s also been the steady accumulation of little victories and step-by-step progress – thousands of forest roads surveyed, hundreds of track surveys recorded, and a steady stream of misguided development projects stopped or redirected. We’ve built momentum for a Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness that seems unstoppable, and laid the groundwork for a new Coronado National Forest Plan that should be a model of conservation management and citizen involvement.

But one piece of the vision had largely escaped us before this year. While looking at the sky island region as a whole, we’ve seen most of our progress in its northern half. And despite our efforts, in 2008 we watched a border between north and south get transformed from a social construct into a steel wall.

Despite that, last year brought exciting changes to our work in Mexico. As you’ll read in these pages, we found an important niche in working with some outstanding Sonoran ranchers, giving them new views of the wildlife they manage and recognition for their conservation efforts.

The final months of 2008 also marked the beginning of the Madrean Archipelago Biodiversity Assessment, an ambitious new project for SIA. Our outgoing Executive Director, Matt Skroch, hatched the idea to get it started, and our new Director, Melanie Emerson, hit the ground running to bring that project to life.

As a result, we ended the year thinking bigger and doing more than ever, despite the global economic conditions. The need is huge, the opportunities are great, and Sky Island Alliance is the right organization to make a difference. Thanks for your part in its success.

Eighteen years ago...

Melanie Emerson, Executive Director, Sky Island Alliance

…Sky Island Alliance was launched from the passion and determination of a few dedicated individuals focused on protection of Mt. Graham and propelled forward by a staff comprised of volunteers. Steadily the organization evolved and grew. By the end of 2008, with a professional staff of 13, Sky Island Alliance continues to be a locally-driven, hands-on conservation organization like no other. Working on-the-ground, in the community, or at the table, in English and Spanish, in the United States and in Mexico, we continue to focus exclusively on protecting and restoring the magnificent mountain islands and desert seas of the Sky Island region. It is because of this unique geographic focus coupled with an extraordinary host of support from volunteers, partners, and contributors that we continue to achieve substantial gains in land protection, ecological restoration, policy advocacy, and public education. I have felt so warmly welcomed by the entire SIA community and consider it an honor and privilege to serve as the new Executive Director.
Our Mission

Sky Island Alliance is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of the rich natural heritage of native species and habitats in the Sky Island region of the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico.

Our Approach

Sky Island Alliance works with volunteers, scientists, land owners, public officials and government agencies to establish protected areas, restore healthy landscapes and promote public appreciation of the region’s unique biological diversity.
Connecting People to Place

Sky Island Alliance is committed to connecting people to place. We believe that the education, understanding, and care of those who live, work, and play throughout the region is the key to protection of the Sky Islands’ rich natural heritage.

Each of Sky Island Alliance’s programs is designed to engage and educate people in a sincere and long-lasting way. In 2008, 360 volunteers engaged directly in land and wildlife conservation, totalling 5,527 hours of on-the-ground work.

Some highlights of our commitment to reach, educate, and activate the Sky Islands’ community include:

- **Landscape Restoration Program**: More than 300 volunteers visit far-flung Sky Island locations to restore and monitor native wildlife and their habitat.

- **Wildlife Linkages**: Our tracking volunteers are always eager to get out in the field. With the help of these “citizen scientists,” Sky Island Alliance effectively advocates for the preservation and restoration of wildlife linkages.

- **Tumacacori Highlands**: More than 30 public presentations, field tours, and guided hikes to connect friends and neighbors with this special and deserving place.

- **Getting the word out**: In 2008 we were committed to increasing the awareness of Sky Island conservation issues on a regional, national, and international scale. Connecting our programmatic work with media opportunities, Sky Island Alliance reached more people than ever. Stories highlighting our program work appeared in the following:

  - Herpetological Review
  - Men’s Journal
  - Arizona Highways
  - Arizona Wildlife Views
  - Arizona Daily Star
  - Tucson Citizen
  - Sierra Club, Rincon Group and Grand Canyon Chapter newsletters
  - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ocelot newsletter update
  - Campaign for America’s Wilderness “Troubled Treasures” radio reports
  - 92.9FM The Mountain’s “Green Tuesday” in-studio guest, as well as guest on a variety of regional early-morning AM news and talk-radio programs
Restoring the Landscape

At the core of Sky Island Alliance’s land and wildlife conservation approach is hands-on problem solving. The Landscape Restoration Program is focused on restoring wildlife habitat “one rock at a time” on public and private lands throughout the region.

Restoring Riparian Areas
On the western flank of the Huachuca Mountains, Sky Island Alliance helped lead efforts to restore the lush riparian area and endangered species habitat found in Scotia Canyon. Working with our partners at The Nature Conservancy and the Coronado National Forest, and after extensive earthwork, land re-contouring and bullfrog control, Scotia Canyon will enjoy a naturally functioning riparian area for the first time in decades.

In the southern Peloncillo Mountains, Sky Island Alliance has initiated another large-scale restoration project on one of the largest ciénegas in the region. With the support of the State of New Mexico and local landowners, we are in year two of a three-year restoration project that entails the removal of several large water impoundments that impact the ciénega.

In the Tumacacori Highlands, Sky Island Alliance was the lead organization in the development of a native Ranid frog conservation project that has identified over twenty new native leopard frog population sites and has protected these populations against the non-native bullfrog which preys upon our native aquatic critters and spread the deadly amphibian disease Chytridiomycosis.

Road Decommissioning Projects on Public Land
Roads are the ultimate habitat fragmentation driver throughout the Sky Islands. With more than 1,000 miles of unauthorized roads on the Coronado National Forest alone, we must act to prevent further fragmentation and heal the landscape. With hundreds of volunteers and the cooperation of land management agencies, Sky Island Alliance has continued to be a regional and national leader for the removal of unauthorized roads on public lands. In 2008, we hosted ten weekend field trips to places such as the Santa Rita mountains, and Las Ciénegas National Conservation Area.
Wildlife Linkages

The Wildlife Linkages Program is focused on identifying and protecting vital landscape linkages between isolated mountain ranges within the Sky Islands. The program’s approach is unique — training community volunteers as citizen scientists to record wildlife presence data within landscape linkages, building grassroots support for protection, and advocating for improved regional and international management decisions. In 2008, the Wildlife Linkages program logged 1,117 volunteer hours on the ground, documenting wildlife tracks along 14 priority transects.

Other 2008 highlights:

★ Oracle Road Expansion: Roadways are a serious impediment for wildlife movement. Between the Catalina and Tortolita Mountains, to the north of Tucson, that obstacle is Oracle Road. Sky Island Alliance is working with the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, Arizona Game and Fish Department and the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) on a proposal to utilize a portion of the $45 million Regional Transportation Authority allocated funds to identify and protect wildlife linkages. Look for exciting developments on this project in 2009 as ADOT has declared its commitment to construction of a land bridge over the highway strictly for wildlife travel.

★ Critters®: In 2008 we launched critters® to collect information on wildlife movement within the Tortolita linkage. Residents can report wildlife sightings — dead or alive — expanding greatly our information on where wildlife it moving. This information, combined with monitoring data collected through Sky Island Alliance’s volunteer tracking program, will be used to help determine ecologically appropriate locations for the eco-bridge and culverts. In 2009 we will improve the accuracy and scope of critters® by transforming it into a website-based outreach and information gathering tool.

★ Mexican Gray Wolf: In the spring of 2008 an opinion poll co-sponsored by Sky Island Alliance showed Voters in Arizona and New Mexico strongly support the Mexican wolf recovery program. The release of poll results generated positive press coverage in both states.

★ Black-tailed prairie dog: Sky Island Alliance supports the re-establishment of black-tailed prairie dogs throughout their former range in southeastern Arizona and we’re very pleased that Las Cienegas National Conservation Area was chosen as the first site for release. In October 2008 seventy-four black-tailed prairie dogs from a ranch in New Mexico were successfully relocated and released by Arizona Game and Fish Department on LCNCA. Sky Island Alliance volunteers engaged in site preparation, along with those from the Animal Defense League and the Sierra Club.

★ Tracking: Volunteers continued to collect presence data for six focal species on 14 transects in four major Sky Island wildlife linkages. The commitment of these

continued next page
Wildlife Linkages
continued

dedicated volunteers, who go out every six weeks to photograph, measure and record point data has empowered Sky Island Alliance with a wealth of verifiable information to advocate for our regions wildlife. *Thanks to these trained volunteers we are making a difference in helping to protect wildlife movement corridors.*

**New Transects:** With the influx of new volunteers we were able to reengage two important transects on Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (LCNA). Data from the initial surveys (mountain lion), along with data from other transects (mountain lion, coati, bobcat) on LCNA, continue to demonstrate the importance of the Cienega Creek watershed for many species, both as habitat and a movement corridor. Unfortunately we are also documenting resource damage from recreational overuse, especially unauthorized ORV travel through washes.

Sky Island Alliance continues our Wilderness public education and advocacy programs. We now count more than half of the Homeowner Association-represented households in Green Valley supporting the Tumacacori Highlands Wilderness. This builds on the increasing support of thousands of businesses, faith groups, organizations, and individuals throughout southern Arizona. We look forward to the Tumacacori Highlands receiving its deserved and needed Wilderness designation and protections.

Special Area Designations:
Focus on the Tumacacori Highlands

Sky Island Alliance has continued to advocate for Wilderness designation for the Tumacacori Highlands. In late 2007, Congressman Grijalva introduced federal legislation to make that happen. Through most of 2008, behind-the-scenes negotiations between Congressman Grijalva, House Natural Resources Committee staff, Sky Island Alliance staff, and state and federal agency stakeholders continued.

Significantly, and as a result of dedicated effort by Sky Island Alliance and Congressional staff, the Arizona Game and Fish Commission voted unanimously to support Congressman Grijalva’s legislation — a key milestone. Though progress was also made with other stakeholders, the legislation did not move forward, as towards the end of 2008 Washington attention was focused on the national economic situation and upcoming election. Congressman Grijalva, who has resolutely championed this effort since its inception, intends to reintroduce legislation in the 111th Congress.
Conservation and Outreach
In 2008 Sky Island Alliance signed conservation agreements with owners of ranches San Bernardino and Las Anitas, located in northeast Sonora — these agreements encompass over 25,000 acres of grassland and riparian habitat. In addition to El Aribabi’s 10,000-acre property, these agreements comprise 35,000 acres of predator-friendly ranches in northern Sonora.

Research: Cuatro Gatos Project
In December 2008 the NMCP placed ten new remote cameras in two newly cooperating ranches: San Bernardino and Las Anitas, both of which have the international boundary as their northern limit. In addition to species previously ‘captured’, new species
include: badger, mule deer, and house cats that cross the border from a ranch house located just north of the border. Sky Island Alliance continues to monitor remote cameras placed in El Aribabi, La Esmeralda and Las Avispas, in addition to these new cameras.

In 2008, Sergio Avila, Carlos Robles Elias and Jim Rorabaugh published a new record of the Neotropical Whipsnake at El Aribabi in *Herpetological Review*. Also, information was published on the NMCP in Sierra Club’s Rincon Group newsletter (June 2008) and Grand Canyon Chapter newsletter (November/December 2008), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service *Ocelot Newsletter* (October 2008). Additionally, results of the NMCP were used in the documentary “Wild Versus Wall,” a Sierra Club film that highlights the wildlands of the U.S./Mexico border and shows the impacts of border security activities and infrastructure.
Policy & Planning

Sky Island Alliance coordinates the partner groups that form the Coronado Planning Partnership to ensure that the 1.8-million acre Coronado National Forest is managed primarily for its conservation value over the next several decades. This collection of conservation organizations, ranchers, and quiet recreationists continued working together in 2008 to promote the protection of roadless areas, return of natural fire regimes, restriction of off-road vehicles, and decommissioning of unnecessary roads.

Public Lands Planning

*Highlights of Sky Island Alliance and the Coronado Planning Partnership include:*

**The release of State of the Coronado National Forest: An Assessment and Recommendations for the 21st Century**, which contains a wealth of site-specific information about the Coronado National Forest. This report examines history, natural history, current conditions, and threats on the Coronado National Forest and provides management recommendations. It is a tool for concerned citizens and conservation groups to promote conservation of the Coronado's ecosystems, and a tool for land managers to create a conservation-based Coronado National Forest Management Plan.

**Coronado National Forest Road Analysis:** through the Travel Management planning process, Sky Island Alliance and the Coronado Planning Partnership submitted detailed analysis and management recommendations on the transportation systems of the Santa Catalina, Nogales, and Safford Ranger Districts. Sky Island Alliance utilized GIS analysis to determine the potential ecological effects of existing roads and to recommend the decommissioning of hundreds of miles of unnecessary and ecologically harmful roads. This information and the State of the Coronado are available at: [www.skyislandaction.org](http://www.skyislandaction.org).

**Sky Island Action Center Website:** this website was revamped and updated in 2008 to provide the most up-to-date tools, information, and strategies concerning protection of the Coronado National Forest and the Sky Island region, and to provide opportunities for community and individual involvement in the Coronado National Forest’s management plan revision process, and Travel Management Planning. Some components of this website include:

- Reports on the ecological, biological, cultural, and landscape values in the Sky Island Region
- Digital maps
- Presentation materials that local groups can use for their own conservation action
- News about conservation in the region
- Opportunities to get involved with Action Center contributors and other organizations

Ecosystem Defense

Though Sky Island Alliance is proactive in seeking long-term protection for the region’s natural heritage, we are also engaged with land and wildlife management agencies to prevent harmful policy and ill-conceived management. With mining exploration and motorized recreation at an all-time high, in addition to rural subdivision development...
fragmenting landscapes, Sky Island Alliance’s Policy & Planning Program has been busy organizing and advocating against these harmful threats.

2008 Highlights

Using the legal process: Partnering with the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and the Western Environmental Law Center, Sky Island Alliance continued its legal challenge to the Bureau of Land Management’s decision to allow oil and gas exploration on lands suitable for Wilderness Designation in New Mexico. These leases were withdrawn late in 2008.

Promoting good lands management: In 2008, Sky Island Alliance was a regional leader in the successful campaign to give permanence to the National Landscape Conservation System (NLCS), which provides enhanced protection to the Bureau of Land Management’s premier lands across the West. In this campaign, Las Cienegas National Conservation Area was highlighted as a chief example for why the BLM must provide necessary resources to the NLCS for conservation management and law enforcement.

The I-10 Bypass—A Bad Idea: Sky Island Alliance provided expert biological value and wildlife linkage information through interviews with consultants hired to study the bypass’ feasibility. The San Pedro River and Aravaipa Canyon routes were subsequently dropped after significant scientific and public opposition.

Restoring Natural Fire: Sky Island Alliance helped shape a large-scale fuels reduction and forest restoration project on Mt. Graham — the largest of its kind ever in the Sky Island region. While facilitating the return of natural fire and restoring the forest there, we worked to ensure that large trees were not removed and endangered squirrel and owl habitat remain protected.
**Acknowledgements… Thank you to all our supporters!**

**$10,000 and above**
- Campaign for America’s Wilderness
- Clark Family Foundation
- Earth Friends
- J.M. Kaplan Fund
- MET Foundation
- New Mexico Environment Department
- Tortuga Foundation
- Turner Foundation
- Wilburforce Foundation
- Wyss Foundation

**$5,000 or above**
- Summit Hut
- Dale Turner* & Julia Fonseca
- The Wilderness Society
- Thompson Becker
- Steve Carson, Rangeland Hands
- Mary Diaz-Przybyl
- Brooke Gebow**
- Sadie Hadley* & Sage Goodwin
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- Garry Hembree
- David Hodges* & Gita Bodner
- Mari Jensen & Karl Flessa
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- Angel Montoya & Jennifer Atchley Montoya

**Many, Many Thanks… to the following supporters for their in-kind contributions to Sky Island Alliance in 2008:**

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We would like to extend our deep appreciation to the hundreds more volunteers and regular dues-paying members who make Sky Island Alliance a high-powered grassroots organization!
2008 Annual Report

The Sky Island Alliance is Lean, Efficient & Effective
Making Every Dollar Count

Where Our Money Comes From...

- Foundation Grants 40%
- Government Contracts 7%
- Individual Donors & Membership 19%
- Contracts 10%
- In-Kind Volunteer Effort 20%
- Fiscal Sponsorship Fees 2%
- Miscellaneous Income 1%
- In-Kind Contributions 1%

And How Our Money is Spent...

- Special Areas Designation 24%
- Wildlife Linkages 7%
- Miscellaneous Program 1%
- Administration 11%
- Outreach 5%
- Fundraising 10%
- Northern Mexico Conservation Program 12%
- Policy/Defense 10%
- Restoration 20%