Ironwood Forest

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ONE OF THE RICHEST STANDS of ironwood trees in the Sonoran Desert has become Ironwood Forest National Monument. It lies along the northwest edge of Marana and Tucson in southern Arizona. Working with county officials and community members, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt initially defined the monument as 129,000 acres in north-central Pima County. Over 5,000 acres in neighboring Pinal County were added shortly thereafter, specifically with archaeological preservation in mind.

Although only a small portion of the new monument has been surveyed, numerous sites with preceramic, Hohokam, protohistoric, and historic occupations over a 5,000-year timespan are known within its boundaries. Two areas are listed on the National Register of Historic Places: Los Robles Archaeological District and Cocoraque Butte Archaeological District. Along with some of the most impressive displays of Hohokam rock art, these National Register districts contain some of southern Arizona's most visible archaeological sites.

The Cocoraque Butte Archaeological District is adjacent to the Tohono O'odham Reservation on the westernmost edge of Avra Valley. Artesian springs at the base of the butte have attracted people during both prehistoric and historic times. The Cocoraque Ranch, owned by Oscar Robles, is one of Arizona's oldest established ranches. It has been a working cattle operation since the late 1800s. The 300-acre National Register District and adjacent properties contain several long-term Hohokam residential sites which were occupied from Colonial (A.D. 700 or 800) to Classic times (ca. A.D. 1400). Cocoraque Butte stands out however, because of the hundreds of Archaic and Hohokam petroglyph panels. These have made it a well-known destination for rock art enthusiasts. In addition to diverse human, animal, and geometric elements, a number of boulders show indications of continuous tapping by prehistoric hammerstones. When tapped, each produces a distinctly different ringing tone that, in combination, create an almost surreal musical atmosphere. These sounds have even been incorporated into commercial "New Age" recordings.

The other national register district encompasses the early Classic period (A.D. 1150 to 1300) Los Robles Platform Mound Community and includes over 100 historic and prehistoric archaeological sites within an area of nearly 13,000 acres. Most of these sites were organized into an extensive Hohokam community along the west bank of Los Robles Wash and west into the Samaniego Hills. The Los Robles Community included a series of dispersed small villages, a larger village with a platform mound for ceremonial and other public events, and the large, well-preserved trincheras, or terraced hillside village of Cerro Prieto.

The Los Robles Community was defined as part of the Arizona State Museum's Northern Tucson Basin Survey. This full-coverage survey, with a study area of more than 900 square miles north of Tucson, was designed to increase understanding about the settlement structure of Hohokam desert farmers who lived away from the large irrigation systems of the Salt and Gila rivers. The resulting site distributions, including those of the Los Robles Community, have provided insights into organizational trends in the Tucson area paralleling those of the densely populated irrigation communities in the Phoenix Basin, thus blurring earlier distinctions by archaeologists between the Desert and River Hohokam.

Detailed studies at Cerro Prieto have also played an important role in changing traditional interpretations of cerros de trincheras as defensive refuges. Evidence from Cerro Prieto demonstrates that rather than a fortification,
it was a large habitation site. The stone terraces and other cobble features may have had residential, ritual, and agricultural functions.

Christian Downum, in *Between Desert and River: Hohokam Settlement and Land Use in the Los Robles Community*, reports on investigations both within the Los Robles Community as a whole, and at its most impressive site of Cerro Prieto. Downum suggests that some of the masonry features at Cerro Prieto, such as massive compounds and dividing walls, were constructed for ceremonial and symbolic purposes.

Preservation of the Los Robles Community has been an important archaeological objective in southern Arizona over the past two decades. In 1986, the Arizona State Parks Board designated it a state park. It was recognized as a National Register District in 1988, as the result of a joint effort by Arizona State Parks, Arizona State Museum, and Arizona State Land Department. Unfortunately, funds were never appropriated to manage these cultural resources. For a time, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) considered acquisition of the Los Robles National Register District and pursued public hearings regarding land exchange with the Arizona State Land Department. However, the Land Department has never received a legal mandate to pursue such exchanges. Despite continuous monitoring by Arizona Site Stewards and aerial surveillance by the Army Reserve National Guard during the 1990s, vandalism has been an ongoing problem within the National Register District, as well as elsewhere within the monument boundaries.

The newly formed Ironwood Forest National Monument provides an unprecedented opportunity in southern Arizona to preserve a related set of highly significant cultural resources in a diverse natural environmental setting over a broad area. The monument will be managed by the BLM for the primary purpose of preserving environmental and cultural resources under most conditions of current use. Livestock grazing will continue and private property (approximately 5 percent of the total monument area) will not be affected. Land disturbing activities such as mining and geothermal exploration will be prohibited. Such an approach fits well with the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, Pima County’s emerging regional comprehensive land use plan, with a philosophy of preserving habitat, historic, archaeological, and ranching landscapes in an integrated fashion. Because only a small fraction of the monument has been surveyed, an important first step in managing the cultural resources should be a comprehensive inventory of archaeological remains.