

## Chapter 4

# INTERPRETIVE THEMES AND RELATED RESOURCES

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### THE HERITAGE OF A DESERT FRONTIER

The Santa Cruz Valley, with its long and complex cultural past, is blessed with a rich historic legacy in a unique natural environment – important historic and cultural places located along a desert river that flows through a culturally and environmentally diverse region. Here, Native American, Spanish Colonial, Mexican, and American Territorial heritages and traditions intersect with the natural landscape in ways unique to the American story. These remain very much a source of the identity and vitality of the region.

The predominant characteristics of the landscape, the underlying threads of both the natural history and human experience, and the distinctive stories this region has to tell are those of a desert frontier. For the last 8,500 years – after the climate changes that occurred during the time of its first inhabitants, the Paleoindian big-game hunters – this has been essentially a desert region. Here, the Sonoran cactus desertscrub meets the Chihuahuan desert grasslands, creating a strong contrast with remnants of Ice Age forests on the “Sky Island” mountain ranges that rise steeply above the desert floor.

This desert valley was a cultural frontier during much of prehistory. After being largely abandoned during a long interval of hotter and drier climate between 8,500 and 5,500 years ago, it was reoccupied by Archaic hunter-gatherers arriving from the north and the south as the climate became more like that of today. Between 4,000 and 2,000 years ago, this region was the northern frontier of Mesoamerican agriculture and early village culture. The local lifeway was transformed by the introduction of tropical crop plants, new food storage and processing technologies, and the social changes that came with living in larger groups in settled communities. Water control and pottery may have been local innovations, and native plants were domesticated and added to the mix of crops. From this frontier, farmers migrated to other parts of the Southwest, spreading the new way of life. Between 1,500 and 500 years ago, this valley was the boundary between the Hohokam culture that developed in the heart of the Sonoran Desert to the north, and the Trincheras culture that developed to the south. Seashells, obsidian, pottery, cultural practices, and ideas were exchanged along this valley corridor.

During the late seventeenth century, the Santa Cruz Valley became the northern frontier of the Spanish empire and the edge of European civilization in western North America. Spaniards established ranches on the upper Santa Cruz River by 1680, and during the 1690s, the Jesuit missionary Eusebio Francisco Kino explored the rest of the valley and single-handedly established a chain of missions and introduced European crops, livestock, architecture, and religion. Following Kino’s large footsteps were Spanish miners, soldiers, and colonists who built ranches, towns, and forts, and survived both native Piman revolts and Apache raids on this remote region of New Spain. After independence was won from Spain in 1821, this remained the northern frontier of Mexico. The missions were secularized or abandoned, and constant Apache attacks made it a dangerous place to live.

American trappers explored the area during the early eighteenth century, and the Santa Cruz Valley became the southwestern frontier of United States expansion after the region was purchased from Mexico in 1854. Gold and silver miners came first, followed by the United States Army and ranchers who built large cattle operations under its protection. This region was the westernmost front of the Civil War, as well as the front of the Apache campaigns of the 1870s and 1880s. This part of the Western frontier was not finally closed until the arrival of the railroad and subjugation of the Apaches in the early 1880s. During the early twentieth century, the Santa Cruz Valley was at the northern edge of the Mexican Revolution, with battles spilling across the border and requiring a buildup of United States troops to protect valley residents.

The present-day landscape of the Santa Cruz Valley has been shaped by long continuities in frontier livelihoods and institutions. It may be the longest continuously cultivated region in the United States, with an agricultural history extending back more than 4,000 years. Cattle ranching continues in a 300-year, unbroken link with Spanish, Mexican, and American pioneers. Active copper mines are surrounded by ghost towns left by earlier gold and silver mining booms. Prehistoric ruins, Spanish missions, Mexican streetscapes, and American forts are preserved, visited, studied, and celebrated. A vibrant United States-Mexico border culture interacts with contemporary American society and ancient Native American traditions.

The continuities of cultural traditions and land uses in this desert frontier region define the sense of place and contribute in a unique way to the fabric of America. This is still very much a working and a living landscape – home to Native Americans who view and use the land in traditional ways, home to descendants of Spanish settlers whose religious faith shaped the land and defined the cities, home to descendants of American pioneers whose courage brought them westward seeking new opportunities, and home to rural ranchers whose stewardship of the land serves to preserve this unique landscape for everyone.

This vast desert, shaped by generations of founding groups with diverse cultural origins, has also shaped its people and their relationship to the land. The ways in which successive cultures adjusted to the limiting conditions of this desert are significant chapters of the national biography, and have helped form the character of our country. Long a desert borderland, where cultures converged and emerged anew, the Santa Cruz Valley of southern Arizona has a heritage and a sense of place like no other, and it contributes uniquely to our nation's story. The themes presented here highlight some of the most important natural features and cultural continuities in the Santa Cruz Valley, this desert frontier of our American heritage.

#### **THEME CENTERPIECES: DESIGNATED NATIONAL TREASURES**

Among the natural and cultural wealth of the Santa Cruz Valley are several places that have been designated as nationally significant resources. **Saguaro National Park** and the **Desert Laboratory National Historic Landmark** preserve and study the plants and wildlife of the Sonoran Desert, and the **Sky Island Scenic Byway** in Coronado National Forest provides spectacular views of one of the globally unique mountain ranges of the United States-Mexico borderlands. The rarity and biological importance of flowing water in the desert have been recognized by the designations of **Las Cienegas National Conservation Area** and the **Patagonia-Sonoita Creek** and **Canelo Hills Cienega National Natural Landmarks**. The legacy of the Spanish Colonial and Mexican periods in the history and cultural development of the

Southwest are exemplified by **Tumacácori National Historical Park**, and the **San Xavier del Bac, Guevavi, and Calabazas National Historic Landmarks**. As one of the earliest missions established in the Southwest, San Xavier also represents an important part of the cultural history of Native Americans of this region.

The **Pennington** and **Binghampton National Rural Historic Landscapes** were designated to recognize the historical roots of American ranching and farming in the desert Southwest. The crucial defensive role served by this region during the Cold War is represented by the **Titan Missile Silo National Historic Landmark**. These nationally significant resources are centerpieces of the themes of the proposed Santa Cruz Valley National Heritage Area, and they are linked by those themes to related resources in the region that have national or local significance.

The 10 interpretive themes of the proposed Santa Cruz Valley National Heritage Area highlight significant aspects of the natural and cultural history of the region. These are the special stories of the region, and they are unique among existing National Heritage Areas. A criterion for selecting each theme is that, within the boundaries of the proposed National Heritage Area, there is an assemblage of related and publicly accessible resources with sufficient integrities to convey the theme. Each identified theme is described here, and its distinctiveness among the themes of existing National Heritage Areas is discussed, examples of related resources are listed, its suitability as a National Heritage Area theme is assessed, and suggestions for further reading are provided.