What Is the Great Bend of the Gila?

The Great Bend of the Gila is a fragile stretch of river valley and surrounding lands in the Sonoran Desert of southwestern Arizona. This rural landscape is nestled between the cities of Phoenix and Yuma. The Gila River flows through a series of pronounced “bends” here, past jagged mountains and extinct lava flows. It joins the Colorado River just north of the Sea of Cortez.

For millennia, communities flourished along the Great Bend. People from many different walks of life wove together a cultural landscape that fuses archaeological and historical wonders with a remarkable natural setting.

What Is Special about the Great Bend of the Gila?

The Great Bend has long been a crossroads where people of different backgrounds came together in interesting and inspiring ways. This legacy of cultural diversity is literally written on the landscape in the form of tens of thousands of petroglyphs authored by Native Americans, with later additions by Spaniards, Mexicans, and Euro-Americans.

Families lived in villages along the lower Gila River, cultivating ancestral lands for more than 1,000 years. They left a variety of architectural signatures, including pithouses, adobe and stone buildings, ballcourts, and irrigation canals.

The valley later served as an overland route between Spanish settlements in Sonora and their missions along the California coast. Father Eusebio Kino blazed this trail in 1699, and Juan Bautista de Anza formalized it in 1775. It served as the foundation for many subsequent transcontinental trails and roads, including Kearny’s trail for the Army of the West, Cooke’s Wagon Road for the Mormon Battalion, and the Butterfield Overland Stage Line. Stage stations and pioneer communities sprang up along these routes. One of these, Stanwix Ranch, was the site of the westernmost skirmish of the Civil War.

Whose Ancestors Lived along the Great Bend of the Gila?

Most of the region’s archaeology attests to agricultural Patayan and Hohokam cultural traditions. These were contemporaneous yet contrasting ways of life that overlapped in the Great Bend area. Over time, those customs merged and diversified, ultimately becoming the Native American traditions that continue today. At least 13 federally recognized tribes (see map on reverse) have cultural, historical, and ancestral ties to the Great Bend of the Gila.
In the 1870s, pioneers began to settle along the lower Gila River, bringing ranching, farming, and mining. Many families in the towns of Buckeye, Arlington, and Gila Bend are their descendants. These communities also have ancestral connections to the Great Bend of the Gila.

The proposed Great Bend of the Gila National Monument comprises approximately 84,296 acres of federal public lands administered through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The area contains some of the BLM’s most significant and threatened archaeological sites. Petroglyphs and geoglyphs are particularly prone to theft and destruction. National monument designation would empower the BLM to better protect these irreplaceable echoes of those who came before.

Designation would also celebrate the histories of many different Native American communities and honor their contributions to our nation’s culture. Associated tribes contend that stewardship of their ancestral lands, including those of the Great Bend, is critical for carrying their cultural identities forward. A national monument designation would open the door for the tribes’ greater involvement in managing and interpreting the Great Bend of the Gila.

National monuments serve many communities—outdoor recreationalists, scientists, conservationists, local businesses, and descendant Native American communities, among others. All of us would benefit from a Great Bend of the Gila National Monument.

**Why a National Monument?**

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