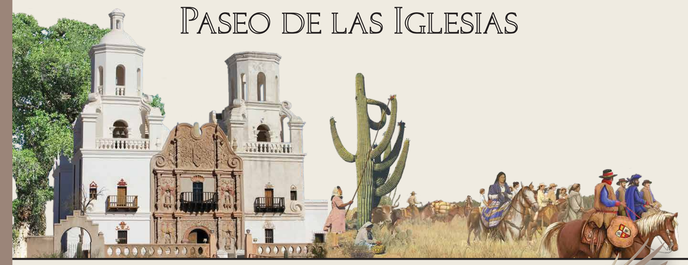


Wildlife Habitat Restoration

Some of the largest and highest quality urban open space habitat in Pima County is found here in the Paseo de las Iglesias ("Walk of the Churches") project area. This river park project includes a unique urban ecology restoration program, undertaken by Pima County and its partners.

Due to extreme groundwater decline, earlier conditions supporting cottonwood and willow trees cannot be restored. Instead, the project aim was to restore locally sustainable ecosystem functions that support the native plant and animal species still present in the area and nearby.

These native species form a system of interlocking and interdependent relationships creating what is called a "food web." Enhancing the habitat of these species will aid the prey-predator relationships, therefore strengthening the food web. Multiple food webs are found within each of the Paseo project's habitat zones.

Restored Desert, Desert Grassland, and Desert Woodland Habitat Zones,

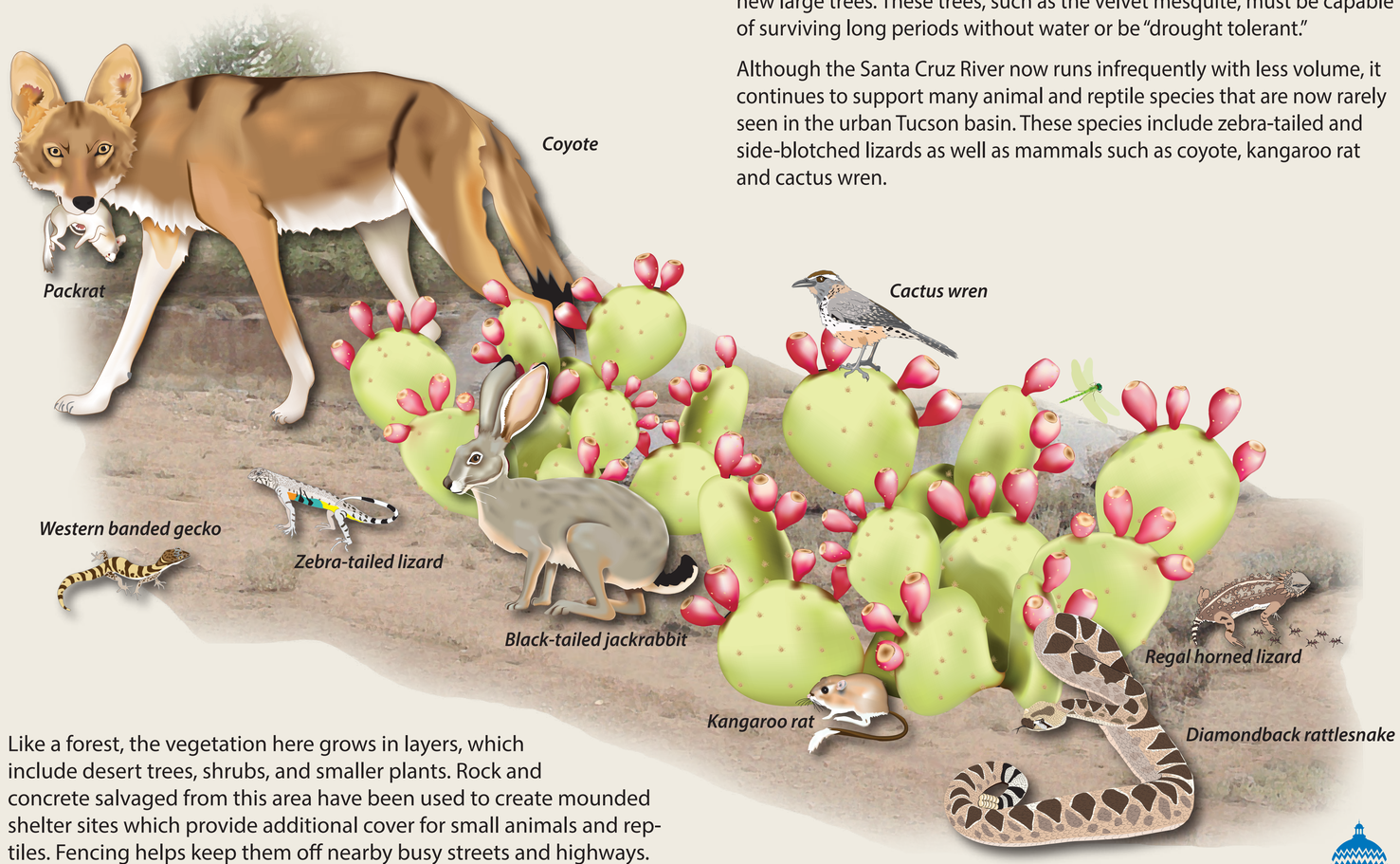
located along the river park trails on both banks of the Santa Cruz River lie on the original floodplain of the river. This floodplain once hosted many desert species, a great mesquite forest, a rich orchard, and field crops. When increased development along the river caused the flow area to erode into the deep channel seen today, the floodplain became disconnected from the main water channel and dried out. This resulted in great losses of both habitat and agriculture. For many decades before this restoration project, most of this area was relatively barren.

As part of the Paseo de las Iglesias project, this habitat zone has been planted with drought-tolerant native vegetation that provides food and cover for wildlife. The plants were selected to produce rich crops of seeds and forage for the animals, as well as safe cover for nesting and protection from predators.

Desert Riparian or "Xeroriparian" Habitat Zone,

found in the Santa Cruz River bottomland, now hosts a desert environment along the floodplain of the river. The bottomlands ecology of the river channel became highly degraded after the river dried. Although the aquifer, or "groundwater table," is now too deep to support a great mesquite bosque, when the river floods the soil moisture nourishes new large trees. These trees, such as the velvet mesquite, must be capable of surviving long periods without water or be "drought tolerant."

Although the Santa Cruz River now runs infrequently with less volume, it continues to support many animal and reptile species that are now rarely seen in the urban Tucson basin. These species include zebra-tailed and side-blotched lizards as well as mammals such as coyote, kangaroo rat and cactus wren.



Like a forest, the vegetation here grows in layers, which include desert trees, shrubs, and smaller plants. Rock and concrete salvaged from this area have been used to create mounded shelter sites which provide additional cover for small animals and reptiles. Fencing helps keep them off nearby busy streets and highways.

PIMA COUNTY