Section 5: Important Resources

The Middle Gila Watershed contains extensive and important natural resources, with national, regional and local significance. The watershed contains critical riparian habitat for the Mexican Spotted Owl, the Gila Chub, the Spike Dace, and the Southwest Willow Flycatcher (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2004). The watershed also contains important recreational resources including extensive wilderness areas with hiking, bird watching and fishing.

As a result of our analysis, two Natural Resource Areas (NRAs) have been identified for protection based on the combination of natural resource values. Factors that were considered in delineating these areas include: legal status (outstanding waters, critical habitat for threatened and endangered species, national monument areas and wilderness), the presence of perennial waters and riparian areas, the presence of state parks and forests, recreational resources and local values.

The NRAs have been categorized within the 10-digit HUC subwatershed area where they are located. Several 10-digit contiguous HUCs have been combined to form unique NRAs. The significance of each area is discussed in the following paragraphs. The two identified Natural Resource Areas consist of the following groupings of 10-digit HUCs:

1. Northern Middle Gila River NRA: Lower Salt River, Agua Fria River, Hassayampa River, and Centennial Wash.

2. Southern Middle Gila River NRA: Lower Gila River and the Middle Gila River.

Northern Middle Gila River NRA

The Northern Middle Gila River NRA contains extensive riparian vegetation along the Salt River and its tributaries, important perennial streams, three Arizona Preserve Initiative areas, critical wildlife habitat, a national forest, parts of three Indian reservations, and eight wilderness areas.

The Northern NRA has Arizona Preserve Initiative land in the Agua Fria River Subwatershed, the Centennial Wash Subwatershed, the Hassayampa River Subwatershed, and in the Lower Salt River Subwatershed (Figure 4-14 and Table 4-15). Critical habitat exists in the Northern NRA for the Gila Chub and the Mexican Spotted Owl (Figure 3-7). Prescott National Forest occupies the northwest section of the NRA. The Salt River Indian Reservation lies just north of the Salt River in Phoenix eastern Phoenix.

The Wilderness Areas for the Northern NRA are:

Big Horn Mountains (http://www.blm.gov/az/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/wildareas/bighorn.html)

This 21,000-acre wilderness lies 60 miles west of Phoenix in western Maricopa County. The precipitous 1,800-foot-high Big Horn Peak and neighboring desert plain escarpments give the wilderness exceptional scenic value, especially noticeable along Interstate Highway 10 south of the
area. The Hummingbird Spring Wilderness, northeast of this area, is separated from the Big Horn Wilderness by a jeep trail.

Nine miles of the jumbled Big Horn Mountains ridgeline cross the wilderness. The central mountainous core is surrounded by smaller hills, fissures, chimneys, narrow canyons, and desert plains. This wilderness offers many recreation opportunities such as hiking, backpacking, rock climbing, photography and nature study. Rugged ridges challenge expert climbers, while side canyons and plains offer easier hiking.

This wilderness contains many desert species, such as the desert bighorn sheep, Gila monster, kit fox and desert tortoise. Golden eagles, prairie falcons, barn owls and great horned owls nest in the cliffs.

Castle Creek
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&WID=104

On the stark eastern slopes of the Bradshaw Mountains, with a total of 25,215 acres, Castle Creek Wilderness stands between Phoenix and Flagstaff, easily accessible from both. Extremely rugged topography rises to granite peaks that top off at 7,000 feet on Juniper Ridge, offering overlooks of the Agua Fria River. In the Wilderness' southeastern corner the elevation drops to 2,800 feet. Saguaro cactus, paloverde, mesquite, jojoba, catclaw, and grasslands dominate the lower elevations. Up higher you'll find chaparral communities of scrubby live oak, mountain mahogany, and manzanita with pinyon and juniper on southern slopes. Dense populations of mule deer and javelina inhabit this area, along with a few mountain lions, bobcats, black bears, elk, coyotes, rabbits, foxes, skunks, and badgers. Snakes and lizards live here, and numerous birds soar overhead, including doves, quail, hawks, owls, ravens, jays, and many smaller species.

Eagletail Mountains
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&wname=Eagletail%20Mountains%20Wilderness

Fifteen miles of the Eagletail Mountains' rough ridgeline run through the northern section of this 97,880 acres Wilderness, including 3,300-foot Eagletail Peak. Cemetery Ridge lies along the southern border. Geology buffs can examine several distinct rock strata throughout these mountains, and everyone can marvel at such geologic wonders as natural arches, high spires and monoliths, jagged sawtooth ridges, and numerous washes between six and eight miles long. Courthouse Rock, a huge granite monolith, stands over 1,000 feet above the desert floor near the northern border and attracts technical rock climbers. Between the two main ridges stretches a vast desert plain of ocotillo, cholla, creosote, ironwood, saguaro cactus, barrel cactus, Mormon tea, mesquite, and sand. Summer temperatures rage and send up thermals upon which raptors ride as they scan the landscape for a desert rodent snack. The great horned owl and the coyote live here, but they keep themselves well hidden from backpackers, campers, and horseback riders.

Harcuvar Mountains
This desert encompasses over 10 miles of the Harcuvar Mountains' ridgeline, from an elevation of 2,400 feet on the bajadas to more than 5,100 feet on the mountainous crest. Plant and animal communities thrive on diverse landforms, including a 3,500-acre "island" of interior chaparral habitat on the northern ridgeline that hides a few species of wildlife cut off from their parent populations: rosy boas, Gilbert's skinks, and desert night lizards. Desert bighorn sheep live alongside mountain lions, desert tortoises, golden eagles, and several species of hawks. Isolated from the rest of the world, the 20,050 Harcuvar Mountains Wilderness offer splendid and lonely backpacking in the canyons and on the ridges.

Harquahala Mountain

Harquahala means "running water high up" in the language of one early native tribe. This 22,880 acre elevated region, set on one of western Arizona's largest desert ranges, was so named for its numerous perennial seeps and springs. The Harquahalas reach a high point on the western side on Harquahala Peak at 5,691 feet, the uppermost elevation in the southwestern part of the state. From the summit of the peak the panorama includes surrounding desert and mountains up to 100 miles away. Natural mountain springs support a rare habitat among Sonoran Desert mountains, a screened interior canyon system with exceptional natural diversity. Rare cacti live here among relict "islands" of chaparral and desert grasslands. Here you'll find high peaks and foothills, deep rocky canyons and valleys, and ridges dropping to bajadas. Sunset Canyon falls 1,600 feet from the steep east rim of the mountains. Brown's Canyon, which stretches for nine miles across the northeastern portion, houses the endangered desert tortoise and is seldom visited. This area also sustains the largest mule deer herd in western Arizona, a sizable raptor population, and one of the few increasing desert bighorn sheep herds.

Hassayampa River Canyon

The Hassayampa River flows freely for several miles along the southern and eastern portions of this 12,300 acre Wilderness, supporting a riparian habitat. The area reaches a high point on Sam Powell Peak at 4,015 feet in the western portion, where you'll also discover a striking geological monolith called The Needle. Side canyons and uplands are covered in chaparral, paloverde, and saguaro.

Hells Canyon

A 9,311 acre scenic portion of the Hieroglyphic Mountain Range, this area is home to numerous peaks, mostly over 3,000 feet, encircling and isolating Burro Flats from the rest of the world. Hells Canyon is further away.
isolated by private land on its southern, eastern, and northern sides. The most prominent of the peaks are Garfias Mountain at 3,381 feet and Hellgate Mountain at 3,339 feet. Several cliffs on the mountains attract climbers, and the canyons make for relatively easy hiking. Most of this Wilderness is covered by Sonoran Desert vegetation: saguaro, paloverde, barrel cactus, ocotillo, and desert grasses.

**Hummingbird Springs**
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&WID=251&tab=General

Northeast of Hummingbird Springs, which sits near the middle of this 31,200 acre Wilderness, a colorful escarpment, Sugarloaf Mountain, climbs steeply from the Tonopah Desert to 3,418 feet and lends this area remarkable scenic value. Over eight miles of the Big Horn Mountains are included in this Wilderness. Here one finds hills and washes and bajadas abounding with saguaro, ocotillo, cholla, paloverde, and mesquite, habitat for desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, and desert tortoise. Kit foxes and Gila monsters race along the ground while Cooper's hawks, prairie falcons, and golden eagles rule the skies.

**Pine Mountain**
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&wname=Pine%20Mountain%20Wilderness

At 6,814 feet, Pine Mountain is the highest point on the Verde River Rim, which slashes across this 20,061 acre area from northeast to southwest. Steep and rocky southeastern slopes fall toward the Verde, Arizona's only Wild & Scenic River Area. On the rim you'll find an "island" of tall ponderosa pine and Douglas fir surrounded by desert mountains and hot dry mesas covered in pinyon and juniper, cut by rugged canyons. The rim overlooks the Verde River with fine views out across the desert. Despite scant water, wildlife abounds here on forested slopes and in the canyons, especially game animals. Pine Mountain Wilderness straddles the boundary between Prescott and Tonto National Forests. Not far to the north lies Cedar Bench Wilderness.

**Southern Middle Gila River NRA**

The Southern Middle Gila River NRA contains one national historical park, seven wilderness areas, extensive riparian vegetation along the Salt River and its tributaries, important perennial streams, six Arizona Preserve Initiative areas, critical wildlife habitat, a national forest, Barry Goldwater Air Force Range, and three Indian Reservations.

The Southern NRA has Arizona Preserve Initiative land in both the Lower Gila River Subwatershed, and in the Middle Gila River Subwatershed (Figure 4-14 and Table 4-15). Critical habitat exists in the Southern NRA for the Southwest Willow Flycatcher, Spike Dace and the Mexican Spotted Owl (Figure 3-7). Tonto National Forest occupies the eastern section of the NRA. The Salt River Indian Reservation lies just north of the Salt River in Phoenix eastern Phoenix. The San Carlos Indian Reservation lies in the southeastern tip of the watershed. The Gila River Indian Reservation lies located along the Gila River in the southern part of the watershed, and the Tohono Indian Reservation is
south of the Barry Goldwater Air Force Range.

The Southern NRA parks and wilderness areas are:

**Casa Grande Ruins National Historical Park**  

For more than a thousand years, prehistoric farmers inhabited much of present-day southern Arizona. When the first Europeans arrived, all that remained of the ancient cultures were the ruins of villages, irrigation canals and various artifacts.

In 1694, Father Eusebio Francisco Kino described his visit to Casa Grande, or "Big House," as a 4-story structure built by the Hohokam in the mid-1300s. Constructed with layers of caliche mud, the walls of the tower are 4 1/2 feet thick at the base. This mysterious structure, with holes in 3 walls, is believed to have been used for astronomical observation. Casa Grande is the largest structure built by the Hohokam and represents the height of their architecture.

Casa Grande Ruins, the nation's first archaeological preserve, protects the Casa Grande and other archeological sites within its boundaries, including remains of a walled village near the Big House and vestiges of other villages nearby.

**Needle's Eye**  

The Mescal Mountains cut across the middle of this 8,760 acre Wilderness, their southwestern flank forming a spectacular striped slope of Paleozoic limestone that looms more than 2,500 feet high. The Gila River flows through this country and forms the Wilderness's southern border. The river threads through a marvelous section of steep-walled canyon so narrow it's earned the name Needle's Eye. Several small slickrock side canyons wind down to the Gila, bisecting the area. The narrow river channel lies tangled in dense riparian growth, often making travel difficult. The San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation occupies the territory to the north and south, and private land surrounds the rest of this Wilderness, eliminating open public access; one must obtain permission to enter here.

**North Maricopa Mountains**  

Ranging from about 1,000 feet to 2,813 feet, the North Maricopa Mountains are a jumble of isolated summits and long ridges separated by washes and bajadas (desert slopes). As one would expect, they're not far north of South Maricopa Mountains Wilderness. About 10 miles of the North Maricopas stand in the 63,200 acre Wilderness surrounded by vast desert plains that support saguaro, cholla, ocotillo, and other typical Sonoran plant species. One may sight a desert bighorn sheep, desert tortoise, coyote, bobcat, fox, and deer here, or see a Gambel's quail dart away at your approach while a raptor soars overhead. The old Butterfield Stage Road forms a portion of the
southern boundary, and beyond the road backpackers and horsepackers find an ample supply of solitude.

South Maricopa Mountains
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&wname=South%20Maricopa%20Mountains%20Wilderness

A low-elevation Sonoran mountain range, the Maricopas stretch for 13 miles across this 60,100 acre Wilderness of extensive desert plains. The eastern portion of the area contains an isolated and screened interior formed by long ridges and lone peaks separated by washes and plains. The western portion is primarily flat desert. Vegetation consists of cholla, saguaro, ocotillo, paloverde, and mesquite. Desert bighorn sheep, coyotes, bobcats, foxes, deer, Gambel's quail, various raptors, desert tortoises, and numerous reptiles live here.

Superstition
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&WID=583

Although there is no guarantee that you'll find buried treasure, you are sure to discover miles and miles of desolate and barren mountains, seemingly endless and haunting canyons, raging summer temperatures that can surpass 115 degrees Fahrenheit, and a general dearth of water. Even the area's earliest known inhabitants, the hardy Hohokam and Salados peoples, established only very small villages and cliff dwellings in this harsh and fabulous country between 800 and 1400 A.D.

The Wilderness value of the Superstitions has long been recognized. Established as a Primitive Area in 1939, it was named a pre-Wilderness Act "wilderness" in 1940, and became an official 159,757 acre Wilderness in 1964. Elevations range from approximately 2,000 feet on the western boundary to 6,265 feet on Mound Mountain. In the western portion rolling land is surrounded by steep, even vertical terrain. Weaver's Needle, a dramatic volcanic plug, rises to 4,553 feet. The central and eastern portions are less topographically severe.

Vegetation is primarily that of the Sonoran Desert, with semidesert grassland and chaparral higher up. Dense brushland covers hundreds of acres. A few isolated pockets of ponderosa pine may be found at the highest elevations.

White Canyon
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&wname=White%20Canyon%20Wilderness

Intricately carved and scenically splendid White Canyon runs north-south through the middle of this 5,790 acre Wilderness. Narrow in places, this canyon's walls rise as much as 800 feet above the bottom. Throughout you'll find delicate, eroded formations and numerous side canyons. Sand, slickrock, and willows cover the canyon's bottom. The Rincon, an enormous, amphitheater-like escarpment, stands near the southern boundary. Set in the rugged southeast portion of the Mineral Mountains, this Wilderness features a perennial southeast stream that supports a variety of vegetation from saguaro cacti to chaparral. When rainstorms flood the area, especially during summer "monsoons," waterfalls
pour over the rim of White Canyon, or form quiet pools within sculpted terraces. Wildlife includes a myriad of birds, thanks to the steady presence of water, often scarce in other regions. Black bears and mountain lions are permanent residents.

Woolsey Peak
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=wildView&wnname=Woolsey%20Peak%20Wilderness

Woolsey Peak stands at 3,270 feet above sea level and approximately 2,500 feet above the Gila River (to the south). It is a geographical landmark visible from much of southwestern Arizona. The Painted Rock Dam blocks the Gila River not far from the southwestern corner of the 64,000 acre area. Encompassing a major portion of the Gila Bend Mountains, it is just barely separated from the smaller Signal Mountain Wilderness to the north. You'll find sloping lava flows, basalt mesas, ragged peaks, and broken ridges dotted with saguaro, cholla, paloverde, creosote, and bursage. Desert mesquite, paloverde, and ironwood grow in the washes throughout this rugged and expansive desert Wilderness. Desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, bobcats, mountain lions, hawks, and owls are inhabitants of the area.
References:

Casa Grande Ruins National Historical Park.
http://www.desertusa.com/cas/index.html

http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/Threatened.htm#CountyList

Wilderness Areas:
Big Horn Mountains
(Castle Creek
Eagletail Mountains
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec= wildView&wname=Eagletail%20Mountains%20Wilderness
Harquahala Mountains
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec= wildView&wname=Harquahala%20Mountains%20Wilderness
Hassayampa River Canyon
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Hells Canyon
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec= wildView&WID=239
Hummingbird Springs
http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec= wildView&WID=251&tab=General
Needle’s Eye
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North Maricopa Mountains
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Pine Mountain
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South Maricopa Mountains
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Superstition
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White Canyon
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Woolsey Peak
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