

U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE**ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT FOR CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION**

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and determined that the following proposed action is categorically excluded from NEPA documentation requirements consistent with 40 CFR 1508.4, 43 CFR 46.210 and 516 DM 8.5.

Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) proposes to provide additional recreational opportunities at the Childs Mountain Watchable Wildlife (CMWW) site by adding an interpretive walking trail on the east side of the access road, adding an outdoor education/walking trail around an extensive grove of saguaro cacti, expanding the existing walking trail and installing a spotting scope platform on the west side of the access road, and expanding the parking area to accommodate additional vehicles (See Map 1) at the Childs Mountain Watchable Wildlife site.

Purpose and Need:

The purpose and need for adding two nature trails, installation of a designated spotting scope site, and extension of the parking area is to provide additional opportunities for Refuge visitors to experience and educate themselves about Refuge resources.

The CMWW is located at the top of Childs Mountain in the northeast corner of the Refuge (See Map 2). The CMWW is a popular place for visitors because its height is approximately 2800 feet and the presence of an accessible road to the mountain top; provides the rare opportunity to view much of the refuge at one time. This includes seven mountain ranges and the large and expansive Childs Valley to the west and the town site of Ajo and Batamote Mountains to the east. Also, depending on the day, visitors to the top of the mountain may see pilots from Luke Air Force Base and Davis Monthan Air Force Base flying the A-10, F-16 and the latest F-35A Lightning II fighter jets. They use the air space surrounding the mountain top for training maneuvers. Visitors to the CMWW can also experience and view some of the most iconic plant and animal species of the Sonoran Desert, including saguaros, barrel cactus, ironwood and palo verde trees, Sonoran pronghorn, Sonoran desert tortoise, and desert bighorn sheep.

For public safety, visitors currently access the CMWW during one of the Refuge's guided tours and are not allowed to drive to the CMWW alone. However, public visitation to this site has increased steadily since the CMWW was first established in 2000 and on any given evening tour there can be upwards of 8-10 vehicles carpooling to the top of the mountain. Additional parking space is needed so that vehicles can pull off the access road.

A designated spotting scope site is necessary to allow visitors to look down into the Childs Valley which is directly south of the CMWW, try to view the Sonoran pronghorn and semi-captive breeding pen in the far distance, or Charlie Bell pass and also provide enough room and stable ground so that the spotting scope does not get knocked over or visitors trip and fall; especially in the evening hours when the Refuge is conducting sunset watching tours. A spotting scope is an excellent interpretive tool for teaching visitors about the Refuge and work the USFWS is doing to preserve and protect the natural resources in the Childs Valley and beyond. In the current location, there is no room to set up the spotting scope and allow numerous visitors without someone tripping on rocks and debris.

The two nature trails are intended to continue the visitor's environmental understanding of the history, plant life and landscape of Child's Mountain as well as the skyline of the eastern mountains and the town of Ajo. It will also provide an additional and needed excursion for those desiring more of a look at the area than what is

presently provided. The longer nature trail will meander around the east side of the CMWW where visitors may discover unique and interesting plants and historic relics from when the area was used by the United States Air Force and a view of the valley and mountain ranges to the east. Interpretive signs will be posted along the trails to help visitors understand the natural and historic resources in the area. The shorter nature trail will lead to and circle a large grove of saguaros which have become established beneath a palo verde tree. This nature trail will be used to educate visitors about the importance of 'nurse trees and relationship between them and saguaros.

Proposed Action and Alternatives: *Describe the proposed action and any alternatives explored. Discuss briefly why proposed action was selected over other alternatives.*

I. NO ACTION:

The no action alternative is to not provide additional interpretive and outdoor education trails, a spotting scope platform, or expand the existing parking area.

II. PROPOSED ACTION:

- A. We are proposing a new nature trail, a separate spotting scope setup site and an enlarged parking area at the top of Child's Mountain at the Watchable Wildlife Overlook. The new parking area (40 X 30 Ft.) would be located adjacent to and just north of the existing parking area making the total parking area 60 feet X 30 feet (See Map 1). The additional parking will allow space for up to 9 vehicles and plenty of walk-around space for the driver and occupants in the parking area. Above ground rocks and small boulders would be removed using heavy equipment and hand tools and used to line the perimeter of the parking area. The vehicle parking area will be leveled using heavy equipment and hand tools. This will allow a smoother and safer surface for parked vehicles and pedestrians. A parking sign which instructs visitors and staff where to park will also be installed.
- B. The proposed spotting scope setup site will be south and adjacent of the present overlook site (See Map1). The spotting scope location will be approximately 36 sq. ft.; with enough room cleared to accommodate one spotting scope and 2-3 visitors at one time. This area will be cleared and smoothed using hand tools. The cleared area will avoid all cacti, agave, creosote, and mesquite and palo verde trees. The spotting scope area will be inlaid with square cement pavers that can be relocated or removed if needed. This will serve to keep the scope upright and level as well as to insure solid footing for visitors. There will be a low 18" wall built on the edge of the overlook to protect the visitor from getting too close to the edge while viewing. This short wall will be built using rocks found in the local area.
- C. A trail leading to this area from the existing overlook will be approximately 35 feet long and travel in a southwest direction. The trail will be cleared and smoothed using hand tools to a width of 24 inches. Surface rocks will be moved to the side to form a trail border; the trail will avoid all cacti, agave, creosote, and mesquite and palo verde trees.

The proposed nature trail will be 371 meters or 1/4th mile long and located on the east side of the CMWW access road (See Map 1). The nature trail will lead off from an existing nature trail leading to an interpretive panel on the east side of the CMWW and loop back to the CMWW access road. The dirt trail will be cleared of rocks and smoothed to a width of 36" wide using hand tools. Rocks removed from the trail will be dispersed in the surrounding area and not used to line the pathway. The area cleared for the nature trail will avoid all cacti, agave, creosote, and mesquite and palo verde trees.

Approximately 8 – 10 interpretive points will also be installed at various locations along the trail. Each interpretive point will be indicated on a carsonite post or u-channels posts and small signs. Sign posts will be 16" high.

- D. Midway through the route the trail will deviate to an eastern most point overlooking the valley below, road leading to CMWW, village of Ajo, and surrounding area. An approximately 36 sq. ft. area will be cleared of rocks and smoothed at the end of the small extension trail using hand tools. The cleared area will avoid all cacti, agave, creosote, and mesquite and palo verde trees.
- E. In addition to the above, there will be a short interpretive trail developed around a volunteer host tree (palo verde) and 18 saguaros that have sprung up beneath it (See Map 1). The trail will be approximately 100 ft. in length and 24" in width. All work will be done using hand tools. To the extent possible all cacti, agave, and mesquite, ironwood, and palo verde trees will be avoided during construction of this trail. A 24" x 36" interpretive sign depicting the process from seed to animal droppings to the eventual symbiotic relationship of the cacti and host tree will be installed near the head of the trail.

III. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed action was selected over the no action alternative because it will provide an improved visitor experience and increase safety at the CMWW.

- IV. Categorical Exclusion(s). *Quote and provide the Departmental Manual citation(s) for the specific Categorical Exclusions you are using; if it appears necessary, discuss why you believe the action fits as this Categorical Exclusion; mention that the action does not trigger an Exception to the Categorical Exclusions at 40 CFR 46.215 (as shown on attached Checklist); and/or if it does trigger an Exception, discuss why it does not apply for this action.*

516 DM 8.5 B(3): The construction of new, or the addition of, small structures or improvements, including structures and improvements for the restoration of wetland, riparian, instream, or native habitats, which result in no or only minor changes in the use of the affected local area.

- V. Permits/Approvals. *Discuss any additional permits/approvals needed before the proposed action can be implemented, such as a Clean Water Act section 404 permit, Endangered Species Act section 7 consultation, and/or National Historic Preservation Act section 106 clearance.*

1. Wildlife observation and photography and environmental education and interpretation are determined to be appropriate uses on a National Wildlife Refuge as defined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.
2. The 2007 Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Wilderness Stewardship Plan outdoor recreation, wildlife observation, and wildlife photography were compatible with the original purposes of the Refuge and should be allowed.
3. Goal 3: Visitor Services Management, Objective 9 of the CPNWR Comprehensive Conservation and Wilderness Stewardship Plan instructs the Refuge staff to within eight years of the plan adoption increase opportunities for self-guided interpretive public activities in refuge non-wilderness (FWS 2007). The proposed action addresses this goal by providing additional walking/interpretive/outdoor education trails, a stable spotting scope platform to overlook the Childs Valley, and expanding the parking area to accommodate additional vehicles.
4. The proposed action will not have impacts on species listed, or proposed to be listed on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, nor impacts on designated Critical Habitat as there is none designated. The Sonoran pronghorn do not frequent the area where the proposed action will take place. The proposed action will also avoid all cacti and agaves which provide a food source for lesser long-nosed bats.
5. A cultural survey of the area which will be affected by the proposed action was completed on May 18, 2016 (See attached). The cultural survey found 2 areas with historic artifacts. To protect these historic resources, all ground disturbance activities will avoid these two areas. Based on this mitigation measure, a determination of no adverse effect of properties eligible for or on the National Register under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended in 1992, was made.

6. Should sub-surface cultural resources be located during the construction of the trails, spotting scope platform, or parking lot expanse; all ground disturbance will cease and the refuge manager will be notified.
7. Some vegetation may be disturbed when implementing the proposed action, but impacts to vegetation will be minimized by avoiding, to the extent possible; all cacti, agave, and mesquite, ironwood, and palo verde trees when constructing the trails, spotting scope platform, and expanding the parking area.

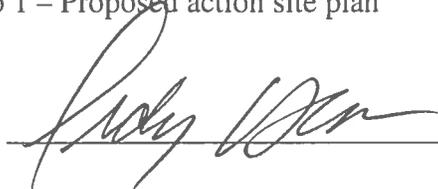
VI. Public Involvement/Interagency Coordination. *Discuss the opportunities provided to the public, other agencies, and/or Tribes to get involved with the proposed action, any significant comments they may have made, and our responses.*

Public input on the proposed action will be solicited by posting the Categorical Exclusion for this project on the refuge website at [http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Cabeza Prieta/](http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Cabeza_Prieta/) .

VII. Supporting Documents. Supporting documents for this determination include relevant office file material and the following key references: *(List document citations here.)*

1. NEPA Compliance Checklist
2. May 18, 2016 cultural clearance
3. Map 1 – Proposed action site plan

Project Leader: _____



Date: _____

7-7-2016