



## Prized possession

Groups say land 'critical link' despite aesthetic setbacks

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By DAVID HERMANN / The Press-Enterprise

It doesn't look like much at first glance -- 731 acres of desert brush, rocks and sand about halfway between Whitewater and Cabazon in the San Gorgonio Pass.

A stand of white, power-generating windmills and the San Jacinto foothills flank its southern end. To the north, the oddly shaped parcel is bordered by scattered development, mostly mobile and pre-fabricated homes in tiny unlandscaped yards beneath the shadow of San Gorgonio peak.

Running through the center of everything like an eight-lane river of asphalt, concrete and 80 mph traffic is Interstate 10.

Despite its aesthetic drawbacks, conservation groups recently paid \$6 million to acquire the property.

The main reason can be found beneath the busy freeway -- two large, sand-bottomed underpasses that conservationists and biologists say provide the only remaining undeveloped routes for mountain lions and other wildlife to move between the San Jacinto Mountains and the San Bernardino Mountains.

"This is a critical link right here," said Bill Havert, executive director of the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy. "Think about Interstate 10. It runs from here west to the ocean and it's virtually all city on both sides. For mountain-loving species this was really the only area left."

### WILDLIFE CORRIDOR

**Size:** 731 acres

**Price:** \$6 million

**Location:** On both sides of Interstate 10 between Cabazon and Whitewater, just west of Verbenia Ave./Haugen Lehmann Way

**Significance:** One of 15 remaining wildlife corridors in Southern California identified as threatened by development, the land was purchased by three conservation groups and will now remain open space.



DeeAnn Bradley / The Press-Enterprise

Bill Havert, executive director of the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, works to preserve open land. Conservation groups recently paid \$6 million to acquire a large parcel of desert brush.

Although development had not yet been proposed for the property, Havert said more and more houses had popped up near the parcel's northern edge in recent years.

The conservancy, a state agency charged with acquiring and holding mountain and desert lands as open space, provided \$4.2 million of the \$6 million used to buy the land. An additional \$1.5 million came from the Resources Legacy Fund, a Sacramento-based foundation that provides grants for conservation.

The balance of the purchase price and closing costs, more than \$300,000, came from Friends of the Desert Mountains, a Palm Desert-based nonprofit that conserves lands in the Coachella Valley and provides support for the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains National Monument.

Stuart Bremner, the Friends' executive director, said besides saving a much-needed open-space corridor between the San Jacinto and San Bernardino mountain ranges for mountain lions, bobcats, badgers, deer and coyotes, the purchase preserves large undeveloped areas on either side of I-10 that provide habitat for smaller animals.



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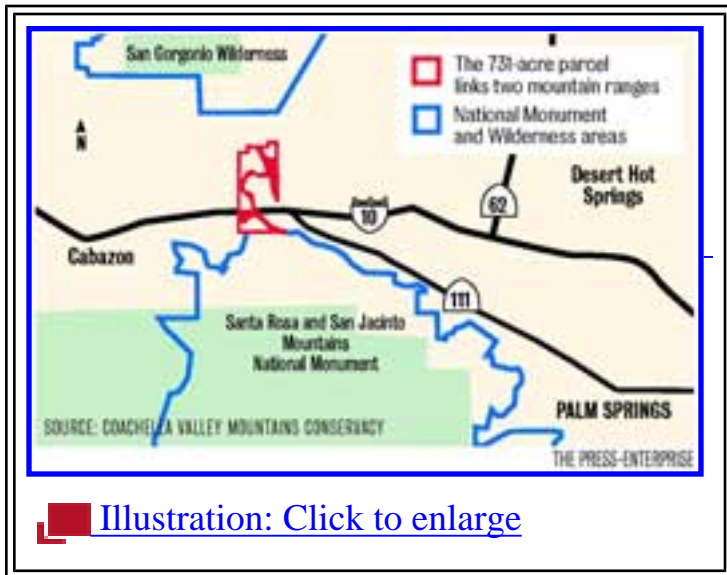
Looking toward the Snow Creek area, Bill Havert, executive director of the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, surveys a region of open desert land.

The property is one of many that area conservation groups are working to preserve, Bremner said.

"It's kind of like putting a jigsaw puzzle together," he said.

Havert said the land will also link a broader network of wildlife habitat that range from the mountains of Baja California in Mexico all the way to the Sierra Nevada.

"At one time, California was one big habitat. But over the years it has been sliced up by freeways, cities and aqueducts and the pieces are getting smaller and smaller," Havert said. "Our goal is to keep the remaining reasonably large pieces from getting any smaller."



The land acquired by the conservation groups has been identified as one of 15 critical open-space linkages in Southern California by the South Coast Wildlands Project, an Idyllwild-based nonprofit organization working to preserve a system of connected wildlands in the region.

Biologist Kristeen Penrod, the project's director, said the recent acquisition was very important, especially because it captured large chunks of undeveloped land on both sides of the freeway.

That undeveloped land and the underpasses will continue to allow mountain lions, each of which requires up to 200 square miles of open space, to move between the San Jacinto and San Geronimo ranges to find mates.

If the linkages were severed, the remaining mountain lions in each area would be cut off and forced to inbreed. As a result, the animals would suffer genetic deterioration, becoming more susceptible to disease and birth defects and would eventually die out altogether, Penrod said.

Penrod said all 15 Southern California open space corridors identified by the project are threatened by development.

"We probably have about 10 years to protect these linkages," she said. "Certainly, this property was a critical piece of the puzzle."

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