



Foundation Document Overview

Tonto National Monument

Arizona



Contact Information

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Purpose

The purpose of TONTO NATIONAL MONUMENT is to preserve, protect, interpret, research, and manage 700-year-old Salado cliff dwellings, other archeological sites, artifacts, and the associated Sonoran Desert environment.



Significance

Significance statements express why Tonto National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The distinctive Salado architecture at Tonto National Monument represents some of the best-preserved cliff dwellings in the American Southwest.
- The complex Upland Sonoran Desert environment at Tonto National Monument has led to diverse types of archeological resources and a high site density, representing a broad range of cultural groups extending for more than 10,000 years.
- Natural and cultural resources within Tonto National Monument are significant to a number of contemporary American Indian tribes, as evidenced by oral history and continuing traditional practices.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Cliff Dwellings**
- **Museum Collection**
- **Tonto National Monument Archeological District**
- **Upper Sonoran Desert Setting**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Tonto National Monument's well-preserved Salado cliff dwellings and diverse artifacts in the upper Sonoran Desert provide opportunities to experience a thriving culture deeply rooted in its natural setting, provoking contemplation of our own connections to nature.
- The beautiful and complex craftsmanship evidenced by Salado architecture, pottery, textiles, and other artifacts—influenced by the continuous movement of people and ideas—boldly exemplifies how cultural identity and the value of aesthetic expression were and continue to be essential to society.
- For at least 10,000 years, the Tonto Basin area has provided, and continues to provide, a home to many diverse people, emphasizing past and present ties to home and heritage.



Description

Tonto National Monument was set aside in 1907 by President Theodore Roosevelt to preserve and protect critical archeological evidence of the prehistoric Salado culture of central Arizona's Tonto Basin. Most notable are two large cliff dwellings constructed during the 14th century. The monument also protects the areas within the Tonto National Monument Archeological District along with the arid habitat of the northeastern edge of the Sonoran Desert.

The Tonto Basin extends for more than 300 square miles and supports a wide diversity of animals and plants. Both Tonto Creek and the Salt River provide year-round water as well as depositing rich soils along the valley floor. People have been drawn to this area for thousands of years, taking advantage of the abundance of food and materials. Permanent settlements started around AD 100–AD 600. Gradually, more people moved into the basin, bringing with them new ideas, technologies, and philosophies, resulting in changes to Tonto Basin's cultural identity. By 1250, most of the prime land on the valley floor was occupied and new arrivals began settling in the higher elevations. By 1275, thousands of people lived in the Tonto Basin. Archeologists refer to this mixed-cultural phenomenon as the Salado culture.

In the 1300s, changes were occurring throughout the Tonto Basin. During the early years of the century the populations flourished and were relatively stable. Over time, however, a drought settled in and the basin became more arid. Resources became scarce. Adding to already stressed populations, evidence indicates that periodic flooding of the Salt River impacted much of the agricultural land. It was during this period that people began to aggregate to the higher elevations in the Tonto cliff dwellings.

The cliff dwellings of Tonto National Monument were constructed in natural recesses in siltstone hills surrounding Tonto Basin. Protected by the arid environment and from direct contact by the elements, the dwellings are remarkably well preserved. The Salado people used mud, rocks, and wood to construct multistory dwellings, or pueblos. The Lower Cliff Dwelling consisted of 16 rooms on the ground floor—three having a second story. Adjacent to the primary structure was a 12-room annex. The Upper Cliff Dwelling consisted of 32 rooms on the ground floor, eight of which had second stories. By about AD 1450, the Salado people had abandoned Tonto Basin.

