

*This photo is in color
in original but
post grad*



Ranger Frank Hayes examines damage done to saguaro cactuses from wildfires in the new Saguaro National Park.

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Arizona's Saguaro Preserve Elevated to National Park Status

By Arthur H. Rotstein

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SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK, Ariz. — The saguaro cactus, stately sentinel of the Old West, has won a new level of recognition and protection.

Its preserve in Tucson since early this century — Saguaro National Monument — has been elevated to national park status.

President Clinton signed legislation Oct. 14 redesignating it Saguaro National Park and setting aside money to buy land as a buffer against encroaching suburbs.

Environmentalists are less excited about the new name than about the authorization to add 3,460 acres to the park, which now consists of 114,659 acres in separate tracts on opposite sides of the city.

"This will provide protection of the wildlife

habitat and critical open spaces," Steve Anderson of the Pima Trails Association said. "Development has been going crazy in that immediate vicinity."

The saguaro (pronounced sa-HWAH-ro) is found only in the Sonoran Desert, which stretches from northern Mexico to central Arizona and includes the southeastern tip of California.

The cactuses can live 200 years or longer. They grow 50 feet tall, sprout their first arms after 50 to 70 years and sometimes grow as many as four dozen arms. The cacti, second largest in the world after Mexico's cardon, weigh at least a few tons, most of which is water.

The saguaro isn't endangered, but the species is afflicted with a mysterious disease

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About 2.4 million visitors a year drive or bike the park's scenic loop roads or hike its many trails. Tohono O'odham Indians set up camp here in July and August to harvest the saguaro fruit for making syrup, jam — and a wine used in ceremonies to call down the desert rains.

The park designation is a testament to the diversity of plant life in the area's six life zones. They range from the saguaros found along the desert floor to grasslands to pine, aspen and fir forest more than a vertical mile up in the mountains the park encompasses.

Saguaro is the nation's 52nd national park and Arizona's third, after the Grand Canyon and Petrified Forest.

There are few operational differences between a monument and a park; both are managed by the National Park Service. The park designation is reserved for areas of special significance, and must be created by act of Congress as opposed to executive order.

"It's a higher status symbol," said park spokesman Tom Danton.

Park Superintendent Doug Morris says he doubts the change will significantly increase the number of visitors, and some business leaders agree.

"People who go there will go whether it's a national monument or a national park," said Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce spokesman Tom Collier. "People will go there because they're interested in the uniqueness of the ecology and the flora and fauna."