

New trail cut near endangered bat habitat, damaging food source

TUCSON, Ariz. -- A newly blazed trail through Colossal Cave Mountain Park passes close to roosting areas for an endangered species of bat and destroyed some of the animal's key food source plants.

The section of the Arizona Trail southeast of Tucson was completed by volunteers in late January and runs within feet of cave entrances used as roosting sites for the lesser long-nosed bat, which was placed on the endangered species list in 1988. The bat uses caves in the park during its migration from other parts of Arizona to Mexico, studies show.

The route was laid out by Pima County officials, apparently without the same safeguards developers are expected to follow, such as a survey by federal biologists.

In some places the new trail, designed for hikers, mountain bikers and horses, was carved out of desert hillside within sight of cave entrances and within arm's length of Palmer agave, a key food source for the bats.

Some Palmer agave plants were ripped out, according to the volunteer coordinator for the project. But he said the routing for the trail was chosen by Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department officials, and workers did not know they were intruding on habitat.

"I just kind of put it where they told me," said Mark Flint of Sonoran Desert Mountain Bicyclists. The club provided a significant portion of the labor.

Flint said he oversaw every volunteer work session during the two years it took to build the three- to four-mile section through the county park.

Flint said agaves were not marked as plants to protect, and said trail builders took numerous detours to avoid areas officials said were sensitive, such as archaeological sites or old mines.

The entire section of trail within the park is in an area labeled significant bat habitat on the county's own habitat map.

"That's a real good example of a problem that's really easy to avoid, because bats roost in specific places and they have specific food needs, and that area's really well-known," said **Kieran Suckling of the Center for Biological Diversity**. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to say, 'If we move the trail 200 yards up the road, it'll be fine.'"

Private or public developers usually confer with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before starting projects and have the work approved, **Suckling said**.

But Scott Richardson, the FWS biologist who does that work in Pima County, said no one from the county inquired about routing the Arizona Trail within the park.

"Historically, Colossal Cave itself was used as a maternity roost," Richardson said, making it reasonable for anyone building nearby to consider the possibility of seasonal use by the lesser long-nosed bat.

The head of the Pima County parks department said the trail's route was chosen to minimize impact.

"We developed (the Arizona Trail) in those areas where there were already campgrounds and some access to the trail," Director Rafael Payan said.

The manager of the natural resources division said he believed a consultant performed a formal biological impact survey several year ago. But Kerry Baldwin said he did not have a copy of the survey.