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Fighting For Flowers: The crusade to save an essential desert wildflower

by Marie Mortera

Monday, May 13th 2019

LAS VEGAS (KSNV) — "We're in trouble."

Those words from scientists in a recent UN report, proclaiming humans are accelerating the extinction of other species.

In Clark County, environmentalists working to save one plant critical to our desert. We are taking you to the front lines of the fight to save a wildflower.

East of the 15 and Jean off a rugged path, we seek a Las Vegas native.

Its delicate flowers may go unnoticed to the untrained eye, so we sought out the help of Patrick Donnelly, Nevada state director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

He explains, the white-margined Beardtongue thrives in isolated patches, areas like Hidden Valley.

It's a survivor of thousands of years of the desert getting hotter and contracting so this is what we have left.

A population described as robust and essential. The ecosystem counts on it.

"So the Beardtongue helps stabilize the dune system and thus creates the habitat for all the creatures out here. Without the Beardtongue, these soils would have less to hold them down. More susceptible to be blown away by the wind", says Donnelly.

Donnelly fears, the winds aren't the only threat.

He traces a Clark County proposal he fears could transform tens of thousands of acres of sandy soil into suburbs.

The Beardtongue survives in windblown soils. If it's surrounded by pavement, the idea you can build a city around a species is flawed.

West of here, the old mining town of Goodsprings celebrates a 2.2-mile trail, a year's long county and community collaboration, says resident and business owner Tom Sheckells.

"You have to be respectful. It's an educational thing and having everyone have a seat at the table," says Sheckells.

At the table, Clark County Commissioner Justin Jones says thoughtful growth can be achieved and he says the county has done that.

"Over here you have the bird springs, an area of critical concern. It's part of the process," he says.

As of now, county plans show hundreds of thousands of acres set aside to protect the environment. Expect environmental impact studies as well.

Donnelly tells us his way forward is to seek federal endangered species protection for the Beardtongue wildflower and its home.

This is Hidden Valley -- a valley that may not be so hidden in the future.

Everything from there to the interstate would be a subdivision.

Unless the fight for the flower prevails.

The center's petition to list the wildflower as an endangered species is underway.

Off-roaders use the area for their own recreation -- one of the many weighing in as we consider the future of this habitat which is home to so many.