Celebrating 100 Years of Pronghorn Conservation

By Glen Dickens, AWF President

Since 1922, the history of pronghorn antelope in Arizona is one of successful professional wildlife restoration and partnership efforts to achieve today’s estimated population of 10,000 animals. This story is told in extensive detail in the 2007 publication entitled “*Arizona’s Pronghorn Antelope - A Conservation Legacy*” co-authored by Arizona Game and Fish Biologists David E. Brown and Richard A. Ockenfels and available for purchase at; <https://www.azantelope.org/Sys/Store/Products/7507>

Arizona is unique among all the western states in that it is home to three of the nation’s five sub-species of *Antilocapra americana.* Those being the American pronghorn (*A.a. americana)* in the northern half of Arizona, the Mexican pronghorn (*A.a. mexicana)* in southeastern Arizona,and the Sonoran pronghorn (*A.a. sonoriensis)* in our southwestern deserts, which is listed as Threatened and Endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

In the summer of 2002, the U.S. population of Endangered Sonoran pronghorn was very nearly extirpated (dropping to just 19 known animals) due to the most severe drought on record in southwestern Arizona. For the previous 20 years, the U.S. population had averaged around 140 animals. In response to the near extirpation of the U.S. population, the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other cooperating agency partners began aggressive conservation actions in the U.S., including: 1) installation of water developments; 2) construction of forage enhancement plots; 3) supplemental feeding, and; 4) an extensive and very successful captive breeding program. Population monitoring continues on the ground and in the air. In the last week of November 2021,161 animals were observed from the air, resulting in a minimum population estimate of 232 Sonoran pronghorn in the wild. Some animals carry radio transmitters to aid in ground monitoring. Captive breeding continues as well, and as of December 8, 2021 there were 72 Sonoran pronghorn in the two captive rearing pens at Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and another 26 housed at Kofa NWR. The restoration future is a bright one going forward for this important pronghorn antelope subspecies.

Arizona is also unique in that it has the only pronghorn antelope not-for-profit conservation group in the nation, the *Arizona Antelope Foundation* (AAF), chartered in 1992 with founding members from both the AGFD and the Arizona Bighorn Sheep Society. The AAF is a 30-year affiliate of the Arizona Wildlife Federation. Their mission is to “*Increase pronghorn populations in Arizona through habitat improvements, habitat acquisition, the translocation of animals to historic range, and provide public comment on activities affecting pronghorn and their habitat.”* This group has been instrumental in working hand in glove for the past 30 years with the AGFD to fund and modify pronghorn habitat principally by replacing or modifying range fences to allow resident pronghorn to safely cross under fences as pronghorn never evolved to jump fences. To learn more about this group and/or to volunteer for a fence project please visit: <https://www.azantelope.org/>

Major AGFD/AAF “Pronghorn Habitat Connectivity” projects are presently ongoing across our state. The most recently completed in Southeastern AZ costing $1.74M of grant/donation/rancher/AGFD funds. Starting in 2010 and ongoing today, pronghorn numbers in Southeastern Arizona have increased from just 331 in 2010 to over 1,200 in 2022. Other major connectivity modification zones include the Big Lake Complex, the Complex North and South of I-40, and the West of Seligman Complex. To learn more about these efforts in detail, peruse some of the recent issues of AAF’s magazine at <https://www.azantelope.org/Magazine>. In brief there is much to celebrate about the past successes and continuing conservation efforts to keep this iconic, keystone grassland species of Arizona “home on the range.”