

Why is Observatory Mesa special?

Protected Open Space/Unique Scenic Beauty

- Observatory Mesa exhibits one of the most desired qualities of open space, natural conditions with little evidence of current human activities.
- Observatory Mesa overlooks Flagstaff and much of the surrounding countryside, with unobstructed views extending north to the San Francisco Peaks and south to the Mogollon Rim.
- The Mesa provides a scenic gateway into Flagstaff from I-40 and historic Route 66.

Geologic and Topographic Features

Observatory Mesa is an elongated, flat topped, volcanic feature lying west of Flagstaff and south of the San Francisco Peaks. It is generally 200 to 400 feet higher than the adjacent land with a slope to the south. A-1 Mountain is at the higher, northwest end of the Mesa. This 8,300 foot cinder cone was the source of a 300,000-year-old volcanic flow that formed Observatory Mesa. The Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad grade follows the contour at the base of the steep, southerly edge of the Mesa.

Plants/Wildlife

- The vegetation throughout is primarily Ponderosa Pine and Gambel Oak forest, with open sections atop the Mesa supporting extensive grassland tracts and shrub steppe. There are woody species that provide important wildlife forage including New Mexico locust, mountain mahogany, juniper, smooth sumac, Apache plume, wild rose and wax currant.
- The Mesa top provides seasonal grazing for elk, deer, mountain lion, and antelope. Fox, black bear, porcupines, skunks, Abert squirrels, song birds of the open grasslands, pine forest and oaks, and birds of prey like the northern goshawk and great horned owl call the Mesa home. This diversity is due to the mixture of grassland, forests, canyons and slopes, and the location of the Mesa between the San Francisco Peaks and the lower lands to the south.
- Some of the most important habitat features in these parcels are the drainages, tanks, and seeps, which support a higher vegetative diversity for wildlife than surrounding areas. These water sources support wetland vegetation that attracts wildlife species such as great blue heron, several duck species, chorus frog, and tiger salamander.



Watershed Integrity

Observatory Mesa contains several intermittent streams including two tributaries of the Rio de Flag. There are several water tanks in this area including Matson, Truck, and Lang. Tunnel Springs and Old Town Springs are part of the Mesa's system of springs. The conservation designation of these lands would lend to the overall integrity of the Rio de Flag watershed.



Cultural Resources

- Observatory Mesa played an important part in pioneer history and Native American history. There are several old roadbeds supported by hand-built rock walls. A-1 Mountain took the name from the A-1 Bar brand of the Arizona Cattle Company. Established in the early 1880s, a system of water holes on Observatory Mesa called the A-1 tanks is a remnant of the ranch operations. Between 1870 and 1890, Observatory Mesa was the primary sheepherder route to the Peaks for summer grazing. Historic carvings on the trunks of aspen trees by the Basque sheepherders commemorate that time.



- The old sandstone railroad bridge abutments found just south of the current tracks are the oldest in Flagstaff. These are remnants of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad line, which came to Flagstaff in 1881, providing the economic stimulation that turned Flagstaff from a settlement to a town.

Recreation and Accessibility

- Observatory Mesa is attractive as a recreational area for both residents and visitors. Biking, hiking, running, snowshoeing, bird watching, and cross country skiing are just a few of the uses. The existing Observatory Mesa Urban Trail extends west from Thorpe Park through Section 17 of the astronomical preserve, is adjacent to Section 8 and ends near the northeast corner of Section 18. According to the 2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, 1.3 million wildlife viewing participants spend \$838 million in Arizona annually. Sites like Observatory Mesa significantly contribute to the local tourism economy.

Scientific/Economic Value

The expansive viewshed of Observatory Mesa enticed the founders of Lowell Observatory to locate here near the turn of the century. Lowell Observatory has been a significant and stalwart Flagstaff economic factor for over 100 years. In particular, its reputation attracted the Flagstaff Station of the U.S. Naval Observatory and the U.S. Geological Survey Astrogeological branch to locate here. Protecting Observatory Mesa positively impacts the observatories, provides protection from further light pollution, and strengthens the astrogeological sector of our economy.



Share your thoughts on preserving Observatory Mesa at the Arizona State Land Public Comment Hearing on February 12, 10 am at City Hall, 211 W. Aspen Ave.