

SABINO CANYON

Geological Past: About twelve million years ago, the earth's crust began to rise to form the mountain range we now call the Catalina Mountains. As the young mountains rose, the erosion forces of wind, ice and water started to wear them down. The uplift continued for about 6 million years and after it ended, the forces of erosion continued. Even today, the creeks are deepening their canyons, grinding the ancient rocks into sand and washing it out into the surrounding valleys. Tucson sits atop thousands of feet of sediments already eroded from the Santa Catalina and other nearby mountains. The last major geological event took place on 3 May 1887 when a major earthquake struck the area. Many people believe that some of the large boulders resting in the bottom of the canyons were knocked loose during that earthquake.

Human Activity: The first sign of human activity in the Sabino and Bear Canyon areas was left by the Clovis culture, a big-game hunting people who lived throughout southern Arizona 12,000 to 15,000 years ago. They subsisted on the mammoth, bison, camel and other large hoofed animals that roamed here when a cooler, moister climate produced grasslands. The oldest actual evidence of human culture that has been found in the Sabino area is a spear point which has been dated to about 7500 B.C. About 10,000 years ago, these animals became extinct and the Cochise culture replaced the Clovis hunters. The Cochise were a hunting and gathering society, utilizing small game and edible plants. Gradually the Cochise were displaced by farming people called the Hohokam who were known for their intensive irrigation systems. Their culture peaked about 900 years ago. By the time the Europeans arrived in 1539, the Hohokam had already been replaced by the Pimas and Papagos (now called the Tohono O'odham). By the late 1500s, the Apaches were also visiting the area.

Recent Past: During the late 19th and early 20th century, Sabino remained an access route to the higher country. Many of the trails in use today were originally used by pack animals carrying tools and supplies to the higher areas of the mountains. In 1901, UA Professor Sherman Woodward presented a plan that would have significantly changed the area. He proposed the construction of a dam that would have created lakes in Sabino and Bear Canyons with the purpose of providing water and electrical power to Tucson. He sold his interest in the project in 1904 to others who formed the Great Western Power Company. The company dug a 125 foot tunnel in Rattlesnake Canyon and built the Phone Line Trail on the East side of the canyon. The project was halted when Sabino Creek water flow records indicated insufficient flow to maintain the reservoir. On July 2, 1902, President Roosevelt signed the proclamation that created the Catalina Forest Preserve that included the Sabino Canyon Area. In 1933, the idea of a dam surfaced again, this time as a tourist attraction to stimulate Tucson's depression area economy. The Tucson Chamber of Commerce lobbied for a federal dam and construction began on bridges crossing the creek to the dam site. The Civilian Conservation Corps and other agencies worked in the canyon constructing a recreation site with picnic tables, toilets, grills and the access road to the upper Sabino Canyon Area. These facilities were completed by 1940 but the dam wasn't built because the supplemental money (\$500,000) required by the US Army Corps of Engineers was never raised. The road and facilities in

Bear Canyon were constructed in 1961. A tram system was started in October 1978 and the entire Sabino Canyon area was subsequently closed to private motor vehicles in 1981.

During July 2006, the canyon experienced torrential monsoon rains and subsequent flooding that loosened many of the rocks and boulders on the hillsides and sent them crashing down to the canyon floor. The subsequent debris blocked the road and caused cancellation of the tram service until the road could be cleared and reopened. The following pictures show the extent of some of the damage. All of the pictures are of the road/tram route. The bottom right hand picture is of Tram Stop #9 at the very end of the Sabino Canyon Road.



References: Visitor's Guide to Sabino Canyon US Department of Agriculture, CatalinaRanger District and Sabino: Our Durable Canyon Arizona Daily Star, 27 Sep 2002 All pictures were taken by Richard Shimanek.