

**MARK RUWEDEL**

American, born Bethlehem, PA, 1954

*Chocolate Mountains, Ancient Footpath toward Indian Pass*, 1996, printed 2000

Gelatin silver print, 14 15/16 x 18 15/16 inches

Gift of Gary B. Sokol, San Francisco, 2020.4.1

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This photograph takes a view just outside of the Indian Pass Wilderness area near the border between California and Arizona. The desert seems to be slowly retaking the trail, yet a thin line remains. The footpath's age and purpose are likely remembered by the ʔiviłuʔat (Cahuilla), the Native American tribe whose territory the trail crosses, with stories of this trail—who walked it and where they were going.

People often assess landscapes based on aesthetics or what they are perceived to offer humans. When I first saw this image, it reminded me of places where I have enjoyed working as an anthropologist conducting research on cultural resources in drop zones and impact zones. These are places where artillery and aerial bombardments take place, either in the act of war or for testing and training. In fact, there is an impact and drop zone near this trail (the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range). Trails and impact zones are similar in that both are often considered dead and degraded because of their intensive alterations by humans. But landscapes are dynamic and they change through the effects of wind, rain, plants, humans, or other animals. Humans change things in a moment, but landscapes readapt and reconfigure themselves over time. Impact zones, such as the one near this site, tend to contain tremendous amounts of wildlife and plants. Each one is rebuilding the landscape in its own way, taking advantage of up-turned soil and the recently laid down nutrients. The rocky landscape of the “Ancient Footpath” deceives the uninitiated: it appears to be barren and lifeless. However, the simple turning of a rock would reveal signs of water, signs of life: insects, spiders, lizards, snakes, rodents, cacti, moss. In the air, birds scan the ground looking for morsels to eat. The morsels themselves, rodents, busily gather and store seeds or dig deeper to bring up fresh soil—simple acts and cycles that restore and maintain the land.

—Eli Suzukovich III

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