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Sonorensis is published as a benefit to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum membership. It is intended to further our members' understanding of the Sonoran Desert Region and shape their sense of stewardship.

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Cover: ???

Back cover: ???

Thanks to all the photographers and organizations who contributed photos for this issue of *Sonorensis* at no cost to further the cause of bat conservation, especially to the authors, their colleagues, and Bat Conservation International.



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A Retrospective

Introduction

Richard C. Brusca, Ph.D.
ASDM Director Emeritus

Since the Desert Museum first opened its doors 60 years ago, it has worked to understand and protect the Sonoran Desert Region. In fact, the Museum's exhibits and programs largely derive from the research of its staff. Although a formal "Conservation and Science" department wasn't named until 1995, curators, educators, and administrators had undertaken conservation work for many decades. From the outset, the Sea of Cortez was recognized as a fundamental component of the Sonoran Desert Ecoregion, and one of the Museum's first big conservation achievements was the establishment of Isla Rasa Protected Area in 1964, the first conservation reserve ever established in Mexico. This and other notable stories are told in this 60th Anniversary retrospective issue of *Sonorensis*.

The Museum also played a key role in its support of Pima County's award-winning Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. The science-based public television series that the Museum launched more than 20 years ago is still on air—The Desert Speaks. The Desert Museum's many books and magazines on Sonoran Desert natural history have enriched the lives of millions of readers, and its technical book series, ASDM Studies in Natural History, has produced an on-going baseline of science for the region, focusing on topics as varied as invasive species, migratory pollinators, the desert tortoise, and the Sea of Cortez. And, the Desert Museum's work with Nature and Culture International (a California non-profit) and Mexico's National Park Service (CONANP) led to the establishment

of a reserve near the colonial town of Alamos, Sonora, protecting one of the last intact Tropical Deciduous Forests left in Mexico.

In this special issue of *Sonorensis*, the Museum looks back at some of the conservation themes it has embraced in past decades, along with updates to those themes from current science staff. Peggy Larson—the Museum's librarian and archivist, and wife of former Executive Director Merv Larson—tells the Isla Rasa story. An introduction to packrat middens is provided by one of the pioneers of Southwestern paleoecology, former ASDM researcher Tom Van Devender. Former Chief Curator Peter Siminski describes some of the Museum's signature endangered species recovery programs in the 1980s, including the Mexican gray wolf initiative. The gray wolf recovery program was launched by the Museum in the 1950s, and by the time the wolf was listed as Endangered, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was able to use the Museum's wolf gene pool to launch their own recovery program throughout the Southwest.

Former Director of Natural History, Mark Dimmitt, reminds us that endangered plants have been part of the Museum's research as well. Former Museum Science Director Gary Nabhan describes the special mutualism between the famous "Desert Queen-of-the-Night" cacti and their pollinating

hawk moths. Around the time this article first appeared, the Museum launched a migratory pollinator project that has continued to this day. And Dr. Nabhan's article on exotic invasive plants reads like a harbinger—today the Sonoran Desert is literally being overrun by African buffelgrass and other invasives. Nowadays, it is widely recognized that invasive species are second only to outright habitat destruction in their ability to destroy natural biological communities. Tucsonans need only look to the north, at the slopes of the Santa Catalina Mountains, to see the spreading yellow patches of buffelgrass that threaten to destroy our beautiful saguaro-palo verde forests. The Museum was instrumental in establishing the Southern Arizona Buffelgrass Coordination Center to address this ongoing threat.

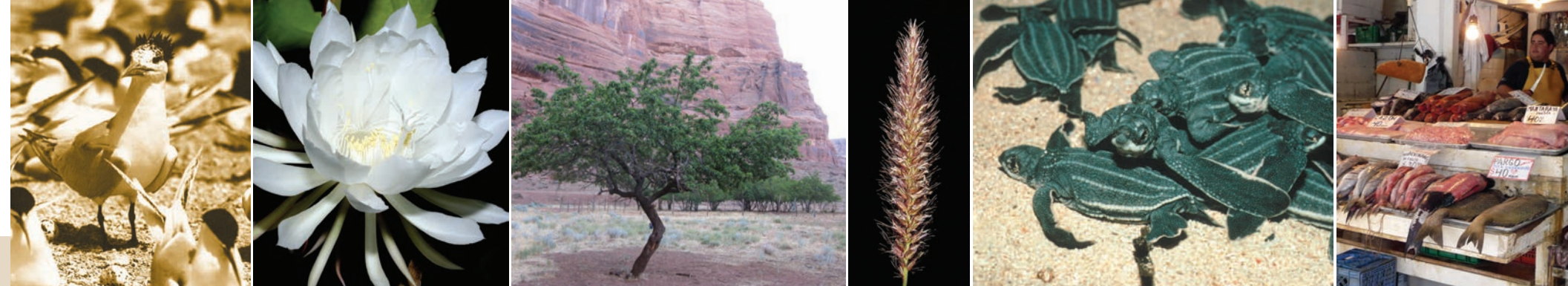
In 2007, the Museum launched its "Kino Heritage Fruit Trees" project. The project, founded by Rick Brusca and Robert Emmanuel, and later spearheaded by Education Specialist Jesús Garcia, partners with the National Park Service and Desert Survivors Nursery (in Tucson) to track down original colonial era fruit tree stock brought to the Pimería Alta region by Padre Kino and his colleagues to propagate and revive the varieties.

Two articles near the end of this commemorative issue return to the Sea of Cortez. The "long arm" of the Sea of Cortez even reaches Tucson, and

much of the Southwest, in the form of summer monsoons. Once thought to originate in the Gulf of Mexico, we now know that almost all of the summer monsoon rain comes from the Gulf of California/Tropical Eastern Pacific, often in masses of water-laden air called "Gulf Surges" that rush right up the middle of the Sea of Cortez to dump their harvested moisture in southeastern Arizona and adjacent areas.

Sea turtles have long been threatened, although all six species are now protected in both the U.S. and Mexico. Executive Director Craig Ivanyi's 2002 article on these "desert ocean jewels" recaps struggles to save these beautiful creatures. The final article, on seafoods and marine fishing in the Sea of Cortez, helped launch the Museum's partnership with Monterey Bay Aquarium to publish a Seafood Watch Pocket Guide for the Southwest (where much of the market and restaurant seafood comes from the Gulf of California).

Taken together, the articles in this issue of *Sonorensis* give the reader a broad peek into the scope and depth of the Desert Museum's conservation work over the past 60 years. An important and valued component of the Museum's overall mission, science and conservation efforts at ASDM will no doubt continue to provide important contributions to our beloved Sonoran Desert. ■



Left to right: Waterfowl of Isla Rasa Island. Night blooming cactus. Peach tree in Canyon de Chelly. Buffelgrass. Leatherback hatchlings. Seafood market in Mexico.