

The Nature of Desert Nature

Gary Paul Nabhan, Editor

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Some consider deserts vast expanses of barren wasteland; a politician once called them “kitty litter.” If anything can transform such opinions toward respect and appreciation, this multicultural collection of essays by desert-loving artists, Indigenous people, environmentalists, and contemplatives may.

Generally thought of in terms of what they lack rather than what marvels they hold, deserts have long drawn seekers to explore and be transformed by their harsh, spare beauty. Dangerous for the uninformed and ill prepared, desert environments host all manner of discomforts: spiny plants, stinging creatures, and temperatures that can bake or freeze. But for those who know their ways, deserts can aid, nurture, and inspire.

In the book’s opening essay, editor Gary Paul Nabhan shares that “The Comcáac, Pima, Tohono O’odham, and Yaqui people who first introduced me to desert living left me with a sense that a desert is an enchanted place.” In “Indigenous Ways of Envisioning Deserts,” Ofelia Zepeda writes that in the language of the Tohono O’odham, the term most akin to “desert” is “a bright and shining place.” For them, deserts are places of power and dreams “for those who must dream those kinds of dreams,” as well as places of nightmares.

Desert dwellers find that their need for food, drink, and shelter can be met, sometimes in abundance; but the desert is a strict, unrelenting teacher, demanding self-reliance, cooperation, compassion, patience, and respect in order to survive. Deserts have taught contemplatives about love that’s “born of solitude, silence, and darkness;” artists, to see the world anew in bright, clear light; and visionaries, to reach for a limitless horizon.

The writings in this collection echo, each in their own ways, the surprising declaration made by contributor Paul Mirocha in “Staring at the Walls,” an essay on Southern Arizona public art: “The desert is succulent—it’s downright juicy out there.”

KRISTINE MORRIS (November / December 2020)

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