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Review: The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in O'Odham Country

By Gary Paul Nabhan

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Gary Paul Nabhan. *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in O'Odham Country*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2002. 148 pp. ISBN 0-8165-2249-9 (paper). US\$16.95

Aside from updating the name of the Papago Indians to Tohono O'odham (officially changed in 1986), this is a reprint of the 1982 publication. If you missed it the first time, or if your old copy needs replacing, now is your chance. Gary Nabhan, Director of the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, adeptly tells the story of the Tohono O'odham (Desert People) and their centuries-long co-existence with the Sonoran Desert.

From his close contact with the O'odhams and his experience of their life and ceremonies, Nabhan has written eleven vignettes which run the gamut from visiting a sacred cave in the Baboquivari Mountains to attending a saguaro wine-drinking ceremony. These insightful stories include aspects of conservation, linguistics, traditional agriculture, culture and myths of the O'odham. They show how the O'odham have adapted to the desert and its unpredictable rainfall.

Nabhan describes how they make use of the little rain and the floodwaters to grow their crops. They place their fields at the mouths of washes and construct low water-spreading fences of woven brush to encourage the water and debris to flood the field, bringing essential nutrients to replenish the soil. This field management has allowed the O'odham to sustain healthy food production for centuries. With the advent of modern life came a higher incidence of nutrition-related diseases such as diabetes and gall bladder diseases, nearly unknown prior to 1940 (p. 101). In one of the stories Nabhan discusses two oases: one in the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, where the human element has been removed, and the other, Ki:towak, in Mexico, where people are present. In Organ Pipe the water level is lower and the plant and animal species are fewer than they were when there were people to take care of the oasis. Ki:towak is currently thriving, with good water and a number of different species living in the area, and has a richer environment than the one in the Organ Pipes area.

The Desert Smell Like Rain is solidly researched and is written in a manner that is easy for the layman to read and understand. It helps the reader gain

an appreciation of the resourcefulness of the O'odham people and the way they have made the desert work for them. Nabhan has included 16 pages of extensive notes and references at the end of the book, so the text flows smoothly. 11 black-and-white photos and a map that shows the Tohono Indian Country enhance the text.

After finished reading this book, I wanted to know more about the Tohono O'odham People and find out what is happening to them now. Are they farming more acreage or less today than they were when the book was originally published? Has the incidence of diabetes gone down in the last 20 years? What is the current health of the Aál waipia oasis? Has the National Park Service done anything to bring the oasis back or is it worse off today than it was twenty years ago? Perhaps an added chapter with answers to these questions would make this excellent book even better. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in ethnobiology, cultural anthropology, or the world of the Southwest Indians.

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