

## BOOKS

*Gathering the Desert*, by Gary Paul Nabhan. Illustrated by Paul Mirocha. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985. ix + 209 pages. \$19.95.

DAVID C. MICHENER

*Gathering the Desert* is delightful and sly, sly in a roguish way:

Juan Espinosa . . . posed there for a moment, dwarfed by the tall rock walls of Canyon de Guadalupe, the stone image of the Virgin looking down upon him.

"Do you know why they call these fruits *chichicoyotas*?" he asked in Spanish, a quizzical look on his face.

"No, why?," I replied, sensing that his answer might be one of numerous folk variants. The name *chichicoyota* is used for several species of wild gourds belonging to the genus *Cucurbita*. . . .

"*Pués*," he whispered, tipping his hat back, looking around to see if anyone else was within eye- or earshot. . . .

Thus is the reader introduced to the book's humorously titled final chapter, "Good to the Bitter End: Wild Desert Gourds."

*Gathering the Desert* is more than just an ethnobotanical study of twelve native Sonoran Desert plants; it is a piece of literature punctuated with scientific notes, social commentary, and folklore. Nabhan repeatedly evokes an indelible sense of place, be it physical or cultural. As only one example, he closes his essay-chapter "Sandfood and Sand Pago: A Wild Kind of Mutualism" with subtle yet pellucid imagery:

During a full moon, go south of the border, between the Colorado River delta and the Pinacate lava fields. Stop your vehicle, take your shoes off, and walk. Walk toward the soft shape on the horizon, dunes like hips of women sleeping on their sides. Wander through the tracks of sidewinders, lizards, windswept bushes, and beetles. Look down at your toes. There it is, like another moon coming up through the sand: sandfood, reflecting back at you.

Each of the book's twelve chapters considers but one plant and its anthropological setting. Nabhan's style, as evidenced in such chapter headings as "Mescal Bancanora: Drinking away the Centuries" and "For the Birds: The Red-Hot Mother of Chiles," is to mix humor with observations on the cultural and natural history of the plant. In "Mescal Bancanora" one learns how *Agave* is fermented to produce an alcoholic beverage and then how overharvesting of the plants is endangering the nectar-feeding bats that pollinate them. "For the Birds" introduces Jesuit missionaries, mining claims, coevolutionary interactions of birds and chiles, and resistance to phytopathic viruses into a mix as spicy as any chile. Perhaps best of all is "Tepary Beans and Human Beings at Agriculture's Arid Limits." Here, twin themes of discovery and irony organize a botanical query into "the value of being ephemeral."

Can writing that is delightful, roguishly sly, and literary also be scientifically accurate? The basic answer is, "Yes," an answer buttressed by the twenty-two-page "Bibliographic Essay" that links the text to the realm of research literature. I have reservations



about some of the "coevolutionary scenarios," however, which are implicitly presented as facts. They are valid scenarios so long as they are represented as such: I much appreciate the tone of Nabhan's scenario for sandfood—"a wild kind of mutualism." Plausible, and "wild!"

In 1986, *Gathering the Desert* won the prestigious John Burroughs Medal, which is awarded to the outstanding piece of nature writing published during the preceding calendar year. Read *Gathering the Desert* and enjoy it—the illustrations, the text, and the images evoked.

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