

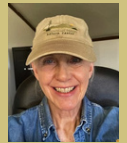
The Nature of Desert Nature
(Southwest Center Series),
Gary Paul Nabhan (ed.),
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2020, 192 pages



An Interview with Author Gary Paul Nabhan

Gary Paul Nabhan is an Agricultural Ecologist, Ethnobotanist, Ecumenical Franciscan Brother, and author whose work has focused primarily on the interaction of biodiversity and cultural diversity of the arid binational Southwest. He is considered a pioneer in the local food movement and the heirloom seed saving movement.

Recommended by Lisa Fargason Gordon,
Executive Director, Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center



How did you approach the development of *The Nature of Desert Nature*? I wanted to shake up our notion of what a desert is, what it can be in our hearts and minds. Through conversations with Lisa Gordon at the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center in West Texas, I've had a chance to compare how we educate and create a sense of wonder for inquiring minds who come to Sonoran or Chihuahuan Desert landscapes. So I invited voices familiar with both deserts to express their novel approaches to the question, "What is a desert, and what has it meant to you over your lifetime?"

***The Nature of Desert Nature* has an impressive list of contributors—scientists, artists, poets, writers—and is a beautiful blend of science and spirit. Have you discovered "new voices" who are contributing to the scholarship and appreciation of the desert? Voices that "shake us up to force us to lose our sure footing"?** One is Alberto Mellado Jr, now an elected leader of the Comcaac or Seri tribe in Mexico. He wrote his essay from the desert's point of view! He has five books out in Spanish, all award winners, but his essay in our book was his first in English.

We love your statement of "what the book is about: finding fresher ways to tilt our heads and silence our rants to experience a wider panoply of what the desert might be." How do you, after living in the desert so many years, "silence yourself not only to hear what the desert speaks, but to stay in conversation" with it? I just came back from a retreat on desert spirituality in the Mojave Desert near the Kelso Dunes where we did walking silent meditations at dawn and at other times during the day. It was a chance to listen deeply and see patterns I don't usually see. At home I've planted a contemplative desert garden with over 50 species of agaves and cacti where I meditate on the shapes—some of them golden spirals and mandalas—and where I do silent meditations most mornings. My point is that for millennia, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Indigenous wisdom-keepers have gone into sanctuary in the desert to change their minds and hearts. We need that now, more than ever before.

We note that you're from Gary, Indiana, and attended the first year or so of college in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. When did you first get the notion that you would become a resident of the desert and that it would inspire your career's work? Was it a trip, a book, or an individual that inspired you to make the move from the Midwest? My grandfather was a Lebanese-Syrian refugee from deserts in the Levant, and I regularly visit cousins there. Deserts are in my blood. Growing up in the Indiana Dunes, I dreamed of deserts. While going to school in Iowa, I took my first backpack trip in the Desert Southwest and was hooked for life!



You encourage the reader to "see, smell, hear, taste, and touch the desert as if you have been gifted with new eyes, noses, ears, mouths, and hands." Is there a particular place that still inspires you to do that? I love to be in creosote bush (or greasewood) flats when it rains, and twenty different plants emanate strong fragrances from the aromatic oils on their leaves. The desert is as good to smell as it is to see.

We were taken with Francisco Cantu's piece "Clearly Marked Ghosts" and his work involving maps, specifically a map showing the death of migrants. Cantu's experience as a former border patrol officer involved using maps to understand place. Reading Cantu's essay, did a special map of your own come to mind? None of the problems I've mentioned can be solved merely by attempting secular, materialistic solutions. Spiritual and ethical convictions of the heart must guide our work, otherwise the chances are slim of having lasting impact.

We were also moved by Thomas M. Antonio's "On the Edge: Listen to Your Plants." He ends his essay with, "Plants can be our mentors, for they have much to teach humankind. It is a pity we are not better pupils, and they are not louder speakers." How can readers be "better pupils" of the desert? By intimately knowing the plants by touch, taste, and smell.





You wrote *Coming Home to Eat* (2001) about a year-long mission to eat only foods grown, fished, or gathered around your Arizona home. Now more than 20 years later, what are the enduring lessons of that experience? Gratitude to the farmworkers of 42 ethnicities who toil in the fields in 100–115 degrees to bring us our daily bread and sacramental wine.

What advice would you give readers who want to advocate for desert ecosystems? Are there personal or political actions you'd recommend readers should consider? Work to reduce the ecological impacts of all mining, and all excessive water use by highly subsidized alfalfa and cotton farmers who are pumping our aquifers and rivers dry. Both are extractive industries that are robbing future generations of their food and water security. But change things not by confrontation but through dialogue.

What are the environmental losses—past, present, or future—that haunt you the most? The loss of desert springs that are often sacred places for Indigenous, Muslim, and Christian individuals and communities I know. Mining groundwater is often the cause.

What's the latest new thing you learned about the desert that was exciting to you? That many desert fragrances don't come from the plants alone but from their "collaborations" with endophytic fungi that live within them.

Tell us a story about your life as a reader. There is no me, because the human genome is not isolated or separate from the microbes in the gut, ears and eyes; since childhood in the dunes, I always felt a part of something bigger and more diverse. Preferred pronouns: We, Ours.

Do you have authors that are always on your "must buy" or "must read" list? Poets Sarah Lindsay, Jim Harrison, Tim Z. Hernandez, and Mary Oliver; short story masters Andrea Barrett, Andre Dubus, and Tom McGuane; spiritual guides Richard Rohr, Douglas Christie, and Rumi. Novelists Richard Powers, Kim Stanley Robinson, Ursula LeGuin, Gustav Sobin, and Jean Giono; non-fiction masters Alan Weisman, Gretel Ehrlich, and David Quammen.

How does your spirituality as a Franciscan come into your writing and conservation work? None of the problems I've mentioned can be solved merely by attempting secular, materialistic solutions. Spiritual and ethical convictions of the heart must guide our work, otherwise the chances are slim of having lasting impact.