
Concept Overview



The Desert Discovery Center “will be inspiring and engaging... an ‘only here’ immersion in our beautiful McDowell Mountains and Sonoran Desert.”

Many people seek experiences that connect them with the “real place”; they want to know what is unique and special about a place, and often seek out the one or two experiences that will fulfill an accurate understanding of the environment and history. The Desert Discovery Center is one of those authentic experiences, owing to both its unique location at the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and its dedicated community of desert scientists, artists, environmentalists, educators, life-long learners, and cultural stakeholders.



Christine Kovach releases a red-tailed hawk at the grand opening of the Bajada Nature Trail in September 2009. Scottsdale Public Library.

A Collaborative Model

An Open Door “Field Station”

The Desert Discovery Center’s academic partnership with Arizona State University will create an international repository of ideas for arid environments—a place for sharing and communicating what leading experts in the field are learning about the desert. As such, ASU will also be positioned to attract experts from other research institutes to participate in these programs. For the public, this means a one-of-a-kind guest experience—an inside look at what makes the Sonoran Desert unique and important. The Center “Field Station” experience gives people an opportunity to directly engage with ASU scientists in “open door” labs, or even participate in research projects in the Preserve.

ASU brings a multi-disciplinary strategy to the Center’s concept of “living in the desert,” with faculty often working across the boundaries of

their respective fields. At the Center, people can see the desert through many lenses: the humanities, life sciences, earth sciences, human ecology, and sustainability; and make a personal connection with the environment in a myriad of ways—as a citizen scientist in the field, in a hands-on workshop, at an international TED Talk on arid lands, or in conversation with a trained docent. In this way, the Desert Discovery Center is a unique public-facing, communication channel for the projects in-progress and the outcomes.

The future of the region is in the hands of the next generation, and there is potential to create a model for transdisciplinary study at the Center that strengthens this investment in the future. Through ASU and its global community of faculty and students, and meaningful partnerships with The Nature Conservancy, the McDowell

Sonoran Conservancy and Field Institute, The Phoenix Zoo, the Desert Botanical Garden and others, a robust community of scientists, conservationists, environmentalists and stewards will contribute to a process focused on creative content-making, fluid leadership committees, and a democratic and inclusive approach to interdisciplinary engagement. These collaborative activities can create an environment that promotes next-generation engagement and multi-pronged thinking. A graduate-level corps of student scientists can work with expert advisors to develop on-site research projects that can benefit, and benefit from, a public component, whether through public programming and/or citizen science projects. In addition, opportunities to work with ASU’s technical expertise in digital media and earth observation technology will contribute to the ongoing development of digital exhibits that highlight cutting-edge work.

A Collaborative Model

The Desert Discovery Center's vitality is drawn from the collective expertise of this community, and a reciprocal relationship that shares knowledge of the Preserve's ecosystem, drylands research, and educational best practices. To provide a strong foundation for docent training and public programming. A collaborative field station approach at the Center creates a dynamic relationship between new research, our experiences of the Preserve, and our vision for a sustainable future in the desert.

Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community

The Desert Discovery Center is positioned to inspire generations of local residents and tourists to see the desert with a fresh perspective: not as a separate, uninhabited landscape, but as the ground beneath our feet. As an environment that people live in, everyday, with many fellow species, and with whom they share the supply of water and air. A place that inspires us to meet the challenges of the environment with both research and creativity.

Native American worldviews on the species, ecological systems and cycles of the desert are an integral part of the content, and inform the design. Indigenous concepts also inform the strategic framework for the Center: our responsibility for seven generations into the future, a deep respect for the landscape and models for resilient resource use—all highly

relevant for local sustainability. An ongoing partnership with the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community is one way to open hearts and minds to the desert, to a deeper understanding of our (human) place within the ecological system, and to other generations—past and future.

For thousands of years the O'odham people and their ancestors have made this desert home. The story of the Huhugam canal system is told within the context of an unbroken lineage from the Huhugam to the O'odham. This accurate retelling of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community's ancestry broadens the desert story. The Huhugam scaled up their irrigation system to accommodate a large and growing population that absorbed migrants from drought stricken areas. But was this way of life sustainable? Subsequent generations returned

A Collaborative Model

to a way of life more in tune with the desert environment and its natural cycles. The larger question is not the mystery of the Huhugam's "disappearance," but how have people met the challenges of the desert and adapted to changes? Is a similar story unfolding before us, or can we tap into our deep knowledge of living in the desert to sustain ourselves and future generations?

The Salt River Pima-Maricopa people express their sense of place with sacred songs, each representing a mountain that marks the boundary of visible lands. These songs connect them with their ancestors who also saw and sang about the same ancient landforms, and singing the songs brings the landscape to life when they are far away from the region. The songs are passed from generation to generation. At the Center, people are encouraged to consider what makes a place sacred or important to them. What do we do when we no longer recognize the places that spiritually sustain us?

What are today's stories that convey our connections to place, to our home in the desert? There are lessons to be gained from the traditional stories as well as the ones being composed today. The very words, "It's not time...." (eg. for these flowers to bloom) capture what we know about how things used to be, how they are changing, and our concerns for the future. Community narratives are not solely oriented in the past. Traditional ecological knowledge, along with core stories of the past, present and future, are woven throughout the Center's interpretative experiences and are designed in close working collaboration with the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

Respecting the sacred role and storytelling in the Community, these narratives will not be retold, but interpreted to highlight key ideas and lessons that will help people grasp ideas such as biodiversity, adaptation, connectivity and sustainability. With all aspects of the Center's work it is the spirit

of learning and collaboration that ensures its vitality. Community members may be involved with the Center's docent program, develop live programming and guided desert hikes with a focus on indigenous knowledge of the desert, or even advise on the café's menu offerings to feature local Native American dishes made with desert plants.

A Sense of Place

“Living in the Desert”

The City of Scottsdale and the greater Phoenix area are positioned to be models for life on earth in the 21st century. In making this desert home, people have always dealt with issues of sustainability. As the world becomes warmer and drier, many more parts of the world will come to resemble the Sonoran Desert; and more and more cities will look to the Sun Corridor to learn how to adapt to new conditions. The Center’s location within the Preserve, looking onto both the undeveloped desert and the urban skyline, is perfectly situated to inspire and educate people everywhere about desert ecosystems and how to live in them. Which view holds our future? While the word “preserve” evokes a past—it might, in fact, hold our future.

The design concept for the Desert Discovery Center interweaves six distinctive vistas out to the land with impactful experiences and transitional spaces that link indoors and out. This is envisaged as a fluid journey that may or may not have a linear pathway. Its

signature move is a consistent but varied flow of three types of experiences: looking in (exploring exhibits and experiences), transitioning (experiencing spaces that cross from inside to outside) and looking out (carefully framed views to the landscape). The Desert Discovery Center will also be a site for quality rotating exhibitions that connect audiences to the Sonoran Desert, the city, and the world. Positioning the experience within the boundary of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve demonstrates the Center’s mandate: to reflect and develop the commitment that started the Preserve in the first place, and grow it into a 21st-century version for responsible investment in future generations: from preservation to sustainability.

The greater Phoenix metropolitan area is a large urban expanse; and while it is in the desert, for many, “going to the desert” is a day trip requiring planning and preparation. Area educators have observed that many of their students do not have a personal relationship with the desert. Their experience with desert

plants are often apart from their natural context as curated gardens or classroom specimens. The immediacy of the Preserve at the Desert Discover Center provides an authentic experience that conveys, “This is our home. We live in the desert.”

The Desert Discovery Center will be a portal to the desert for many city dwellers who might never think of going out for a hike. It will open people’s eyes to the absolute beauty and wonder of their own backyards; and perhaps in broadening their minds to it, make the desert more accessible and important to their lives. Like dipping one’s toes in the ocean waters, next time one might dive in and go exploring in the bajada.

The Four Questions

“The Four Questions” Approach

The Desert Discovery Center experience is grounded in a “sense of place” that starts with a surprising lens on the location itself, which offers views in all directions to the spectrum of “living in the desert”: the natural environment, the suburban streets, and visible in the southwest distance, the city. Views into the Preserve are further delineated by the variety of biomes: rocky mountainous outcrops, lush riparian washes and shrub-filled valleys. The breadth of desert life—not limited to wildlife but encompassing the local urban and natural environments—is the beginning of the story and the opening for exploring potential futures of coexistence and wellbeing.

The storyline is defined as “living in the desert” rather than “life in the desert,” which suggests species and ecosystems adaptation and a passive narrative. The inflection here is on how we—humans and our fellow species—have actively developed relationships with the desert, with a focus on local Sonoran Desert topics and how they demonstrate

some universal characteristics of desert life. The emphasis is on the present-day; the spectacular environment around us, and what we are learning and doing to take us forward into a sustainable future.

As a portal to the desert, the Center concept of “living in the desert” peels back the layers of the local environment, including our own history, myths and assumptions about the desert to reveal its unique dynamism and potential. We identified four questions to define our concept:

1. What is this place?
2. What don't we see?
3. What can we learn from living in the desert?
4. What future do we want to create?

The Four Questions

What is this place?

What don't we see?

What can we learn from living in the desert?

What future do we want to create?