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Review of *The Organ Pipe Cactus* by David Yetman

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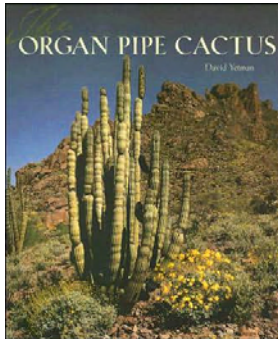
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Reviews

The Organ Pipe Cactus



David Yetman
The University of Arizona Press
ISBN: 0816525412
Year: 2006

The Organ Pipe Cactus combines historical, interview, and field observation data to plea for greater awareness, appreciation, and conservation of the organ pipe cactus (*Stenocereus thurberi*) – *pitaya* as it is commonly known in the Sonoran Desert, Mexico. This short book (70 pages including excellent illustrations, glossary, references, and index) seeks to emphasize how (mostly impoverished) human communities have utilized and maintained the plant for centuries.

Yetman's coverage of *pitaya* ecology is thorough and recognizes the roles humans have played in the plant's distribution. Adaptations from cellular to landscape levels are explained with great clarity. Micro and macro habitat requirements are presented in such a way that is informative to both the ecological anthropologist and the casual lay reader. Yetman goes to great lengths to differentiate plant/population characteristics throughout its range, noting how changes in latitude, climate, soils, elevation, and community characteristics each influence *pitaya* distribution, morphology, life cycle, and fruit production. The symbiotic relationship between organ pipes and the bird and insect pollinators crucial to their survival is noted. Yetman details thoroughly how to distinguish the organ pipe from other columnar cacti that share its range.

For centuries, the multiple uses of organ pipes have been culturally significant to “Cáhitas, Guarijíos, Hia Ced O'odham, Pimas, Lower Pimas, Seris, Tohono O'odham, Rarámuri (Tarahumara), and the now-extinct Ópatas (Tegüimas and Eudeves)” and especially the Mayos and Yaquis. *Pitaya* has been used for fuel, fences, and building materials. The plant has medicinal value and its fruits are harvested for consumption and sale as a reportedly delicious and nutritious staple. Yetman documents many cultural uses of *pitaya*, such as how its fruits are harvested, preserved, prepared, consumed, and sold. He is careful to note how different indigenous cultural groups have and continue to use the plant throughout its range and makes reference to linguistic commonalities relevant to the cactus between at least two of these distinct groups. Yetman combines local Mayo ecological knowledge and an experiment of his own to test ecological theories of poor recruitment, or plant regeneration at some sites. The greatest threat to the organ pipe cactus is not grazing, as conventionally thought, or harvesting for fruits and building materials, but rather habitat conversion for extensive agriculture and shrimp aquaculture.

Overall, this book should appeal to undergraduate students and casual readers interested in the organ pipe cactus and its conservation. Yetman's methods are not presented in detail. Nonetheless, this book provides an introduction to human-environment interactions across spatial and temporal scales, arid-lands ecology, ethnobotany, historical ecology, and local ecological knowledge in the Sonoran Desert, Mexico.

Review by Geoff Kelley, Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia