

# DESERT PEOPLE AND THE SAGUARO

*Through stories and examination of a Tohono O'odham calendar, students explore the importance of the saguaro in the lives of native people in the Sonoran Desert.*



## OBJECTIVES

Students should:

- Describe the importance of the saguaro to the lives of native people in the Sonoran Desert.

## MATERIALS

- Teacher copy of *Desert People and the Saguaro*
- Teacher copy of the *Calendar of Tohono O'odham Seasons*

## VOCABULARY

**Ha:sañ**

## BACKGROUND

The saguaro cactus is an important source of food and shelter for many indigenous people in the Sonoran Desert. Sonoran Desert tribes including the Tohono O'odham (Papago), Akimel O'odham (Pima), Hia c-ed O'odham (Sand Papago), and Seri use saguaro ribs for constructing shade ramadas, fences, animal traps, and other implements. Many still gather saguaro fruits as their ancestors have for hundreds of years. For generations, the Tohono O'odham people have harvested saguaro fruits with long poles made of saguaro ribs. They eat the juicy fruit raw or cook it down into sweet, nutritious syrup. The dried seeds, rich in proteins and fats, can be ground into flour. The saguaro provides an abundant and important source of nutrients at a time otherwise scarce in desert food resources. For the O'odham, the New Year begins with the saguaro harvest. Part of harvest tradition includes the fermentation of saguaro syrup to make a ceremonial wine used to herald in the monsoon rains. To the O'odham, the saguaro is such an integral part of their world, it is regarded with the same respect given to people.

## DOING THE ACTIVITY

### SETTING THE STAGE

- 1) Ask your students from where they get most of their food. Do they always buy their food at a store or restaurant? Do any of them have a garden or fruit trees in their yard? How many of them have family members who hunt? The responses should reveal that many of the children depend almost exclusively on grocery stores for their food needs.
- 2) Ask the students, "Do you think most of the food you get at the store is grown or made right around here?" Point out that

much of our food comes from other places, sometimes very far away.

- 3) Now ask, "Can you think of any people who get their food from right where they live?" (farmers, native people) Explain that, especially in the past, farmers grew most of what they needed right on their farms. But another group of people, Native People or Indians, also got everything they needed right from the land around them. Today, there are still people who hunt game, gather wild plants, and grow crops right where they live to provide for their basic needs. Even in dry places like the desert!
- 4) Ask the students, "Can you think of one wild food mentioned in the *Saguaro Tales Discovery Class* that is important to native people today?" (saguaro fruits)
- 5) Explain that the Tohono O'odham and other desert people have relied on the saguaro fruit for hundreds of years. The saguaro is so important to them that they feel like the saguaro is another person. Tell them you are going to read a story about the saguaro and its importance to desert people. Read the story *Desert People and the Saguaro* (page 18.) Discuss the story as a group.

### DISCUSSION

- 1) Ask the students, "Why is the saguaro important to native people in the desert?" (They should remember from previous activities that it is the only reliable source of food in the hottest, driest time of year.) Ask the students if they can remember what month the saguaro fruits are ripe. (June) Can they remember from the story what the Tohono O'odham call this time? (Ha:sañ Bak Masad, the month to gather saguaro fruit. Ha:sañ is one word composed of two syllables pronounced

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CONTACT THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS FOR INFORMATION ON NATIVE PEOPLE OF THE SONORAN DESERT:

Tohono O'odham Basketweavers Organization (TOCA)  
P.O. Box 1790  
Sells, AZ 85634  
520-383-4966

Native Seeds/SEARCH  
526 N. 4th Avenue  
Tucson, AZ 85705  
520-622-5561  
[www.azstarnet.com/~nss](http://www.azstarnet.com/~nss)

Arizona State Museum  
520-621-6302  
(on the University of Arizona campus)

“ha-shawn,” and it means “saguaro.”)

- 3) Explain that the Tohono O'odham traditionally had different names for their months and seasons based on desert cycles and changes in weather, animals and plants throughout the year.
- 4) Ask the students, “What is it like in May in this part of the Sonoran Desert?” (hot and dry) “What happens in July?” (It starts to rain.) Ask them if they can think of names the Tohono O'odham might have for these months. Listen to their guesses, then tell them the English translations from the calendar.
- 5) Ask, “Why do you think the O'odham named their months after weather, plants, and animals at different seasons?” (because they depended on foods that were only available seasonally. Also, people spent a lot more time outside observing the beauty and changes in the desert.)
- 6) Pose the question, “Do you think you could find everything you need to survive out in the desert?” Enforce the idea that the desert is a challenging place in which to live, but native people have found ways to live here and get everything they need from the desert's plants and animals. They have had to learn a lot about the world they live in, and many of their stories, traditions, and religious beliefs are about the plants and animals around them.

## EXTENSIONS

- Read the children's book *Sing Down the Rain* by Judi Moreillon to your class. Discuss the importance of the saguaro harvest and wine-making ceremony to the Tohono O'odham people.
- Have your students draw or write a story about the saguaro harvest. If the majority of your students are O'odham,

ask them to write about a personal experience harvesting saguaros or one of an older relative or friend. (Note: avoid singling out O'odham students to share cultural information with a predominantly non-O'odham class, as this may make a student feel uncomfortable. Ask the student in private if he/she would like to share this with the class first.)

- If you have an O'odham student in your class, ask if he/she would invite an elder relative to your classroom to talk about the saguaro harvest.
- Although it is illegal for non-O'odham people to harvest saguaro fruits on public land (saguaros are a **protected** species,) anyone can harvest fruits from the cactus on their own land. If your school has a saguaro on the property, you can harvest the fruits with your students. Here's how:
  1. First you will need a long pole to knock down enough fruit (about 12) to make 2 cups of pulp.
  2. Cut the fruit in half and scoop out the pulp with a spoon. Throw away the outer rind.
  3. In a pan, half cover the 2 cups of pulp with water and soak for 1 hour, stirring occasionally.
  4. Cover the pan and boil over a low flame for ½ hour.
  5. Strain off the liquid and put the remaining pulp in a bowl. Put the liquid back into the pan and boil slowly to a syrup. Keep stirring because it burns easily.
  6. Crush the pulp and put it through a fine strainer to remove the seeds. Add it to the thickened syrup and cook until it becomes like jam.

You don't need sugar – the fruit is sweet enough. Use it on crackers, with peanut butter, or however you like.

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On a hot, dry day in mid-June, something bright red begins to appear on the tops of the saguaros. The fruits are splitting open! Birds enjoy this delicious treat of juicy pulp and crunchy seeds. On the ground, the javelinas and coyotes munch on the ripe fallen fruits, and ants carry away the leftover seeds.

But the animals are not the only ones keeping an eye on the ripening fruit! It is the month to gather the saguaro fruit for the Tohono O'odham (People of the Desert.) They use poles from saguaro ribs to knock off the fruit. They boil the moist red pulp into syrup, strain it, and made it into jam, jelly, or wine. They dry the seeds and grind them into flour. All of this good food eases the hunger from the hot, dry weeks before the harvest. This is the start of the New Year! It is also the time for the rain ceremony. At the end of the saguaro harvest, the Desert People make some saguaro syrup into wine to ask for the monsoon rains to come. For two nights they sing to bring the cooling waters that let them grow beans, squash, and corn.

With the rains, the saguaro harvest is over. The animals and the Tohono O'odham will wait for next spring's fruit to ripen, for the Ha:sañ Bak Masad, the month to gather saguaro fruit, to come again.

The O'odham have many sacred stories about the Ha:sañ (the saguaro.) This important cactus is treated with respect and never intentionally harmed. When a saguaro dies, its ribs are used for building fences and shade ramadas, and to make the long poles with which the O'odham gather saguaro fruit.

