

ASDM NEWS

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A newsletter for friends of the
Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum



Blacklight poem installation at the entrance of the butterfly exhibit. ©2014 Rhonda Spencer

SCORPIONS, black lights, & POETRY

Enriching the Desert Museum Experience

*By Tyler J. Meier, Executive Director, University of Arizona Poetry Center
and Craig Ivanyi, Executive Director, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum*

Since the early 1960s, the Desert Museum has had a secret history filled with poetry. It's a history that you may not know unless you also know the history of the University of Arizona Poetry Center.

For the last half century, many of the one thousand poets who have been brought to Tucson to take part in the Poetry Center's annual Reading and Lecture series have trekked to the Desert Museum to explore and learn about the Sonoran Desert, the distinct and beautiful landscape that we call home.

The poet Lucille Clifton famously fell in love with southern Arizona through her friendship with former Poetry Center director Lois Shelton and her husband, the poet Richard Shelton—and

through her frequent trips to the Desert Museum. Recently the Poetry Center brought Mary Szybist (winner of the 2013 National Book Award for poetry) to the Desert Museum for a perfect morning of hummingbirds, raptors, and cactus gardens, before Szybist's mesmerizing poetry reading that evening at the Poetry Center.

Infusing Poetry & Exhibit Spaces

Out of this little-known history comes an exciting public future.

We are thrilled to announce a series of new poetry installations on the grounds of the Desert Museum that will further link our two institutions. These new installations (slated to open in Fall 2015) will feature poetry displayed throughout the Museum's collections and exhibit spaces. Conceived as an extension of the successful Language of Conservation project that featured poetry installations at five national zoos, we'll be implementing a plan created in partnership with current Desert Museum poet-in-residence Eric Magrane. Initially funded by a Tucson Pima Arts Council PLACE Initiative grant, Magrane's unique plan for these installations was created over a series of months, and time was invested in researching appropriate poems and brainstorming creative implementation ideas and locations. Input from Desert Museum and Poetry Center leadership, staff, and docents shaped the decision making process that led to a final proposal for the project.

Why Poetry

What do line breaks, evocative language, and off-rhyme have to do with Gila monsters, barrel cacti, and desert water? Perhaps more than you might think. One of the key tenets of the Desert Museum's mission is to foster love, appreciation, and understanding of the Sonoran Desert. Embedded within this language is an ethos of conservation and stewardship. Part of the work of the Museum—through the collections, educational outreach, the galleries, classes, and special programming—is the constant consideration for how museum exhibits and programs can best tell the story of the desert in the most meaningful way. And ultimately, what do these stories teach us about ourselves?

One of the great features of this project is not just what stories we choose to tell but how we tell those stories. And this is where

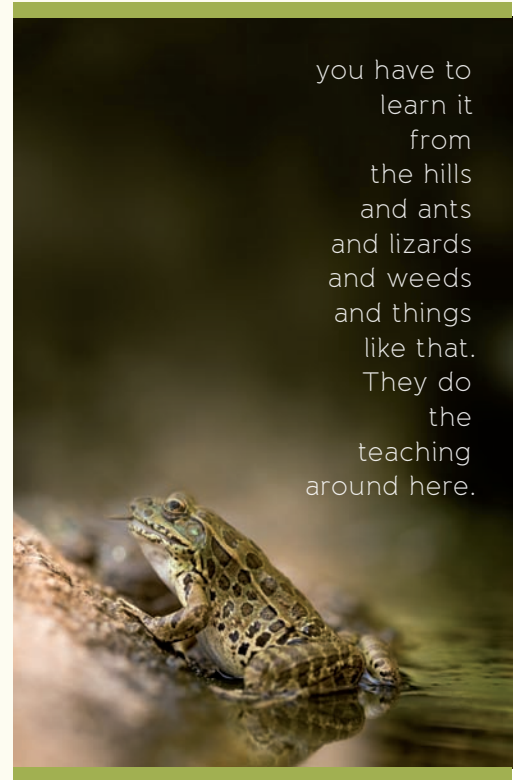
poetry can play an exciting role. Arizona's inaugural state poet laureate is ASU Regent's Professor and Nogales native Alberto Álvaro Ríos. Ríos is also one of the key featured poets in our planned installations. In a recent interview Ríos described poetry as "things well said about things that matter." It is a simple definition, but one that rings true and that inspires the Poetry Center and Desert Museum collaboration. In the grandest sense, the Museum is full of exhibits and collections that tell critical stories of how we have lived in the Sonoran Desert and what the future of this landscape holds. Featuring poetry throughout museum spaces is a way to pair the best possible language with things that matter greatly: the message of love, appreciation, and understanding that is at the heart of the Museum's work.

Think for a minute about where you are most likely to encounter poetry in your daily life. Some of us might read and think about poetry more regularly (we hope many of you do!), but almost all of us have encountered poetry at one time or another in our most important life moments: at graduations, inaugurations, weddings, and funerals. We often use poetry when we want to signify instances of importance, distinction, and consequence. We hope that in featuring poetry throughout the Museum, we can create an elevated experience of Museum spaces for new and returning visitors alike.

Fostering Reflection

Of course, we also hope that pairing poetry with individual exhibits will be meaningful in more specific ways. Here are some sample installation ideas from the final proposal: an excerpt from Gary Snyder's poem "The Canyon Wren" will be sandblasted into amphitheater seating that overlooks King Canyon, and will echo with the birdsong there. An excerpt from Alison Hawthorne Deming's "Questions for a Saguaro" will be included

by the Saguaro Ramada and viewers will be encouraged to extend the poem with their own questions for a saguaro. What would you ask a saguaro if you could? The following Bryd Baylor lines from her poem "The Other Way to Listen" will be installed on the underside of sunshade panels in the Coati Kids Clubhouse:



you have to
learn it
from
the hills
and ants
and lizards
and weeds
and things
like that.
They do
the
teaching
around here.

Next to a creosote, near the tortoise exhibit, a line from the poem "Creosote" by language activist and MacArthur Fellow Ofelia Zepeda will be featured: "With the slightest sign of moisture, you will be moved to tell a story." As any who have had the good fortune of being near creosote during desert rains can attest, after rain creosote does tell the most amazing, aromatic story. Former United States Poet Laureate Robert Hass' translation of a haiku from the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa will be placed in the hummingbird aviary:

Don't worry, spiders,
I keep house
casually

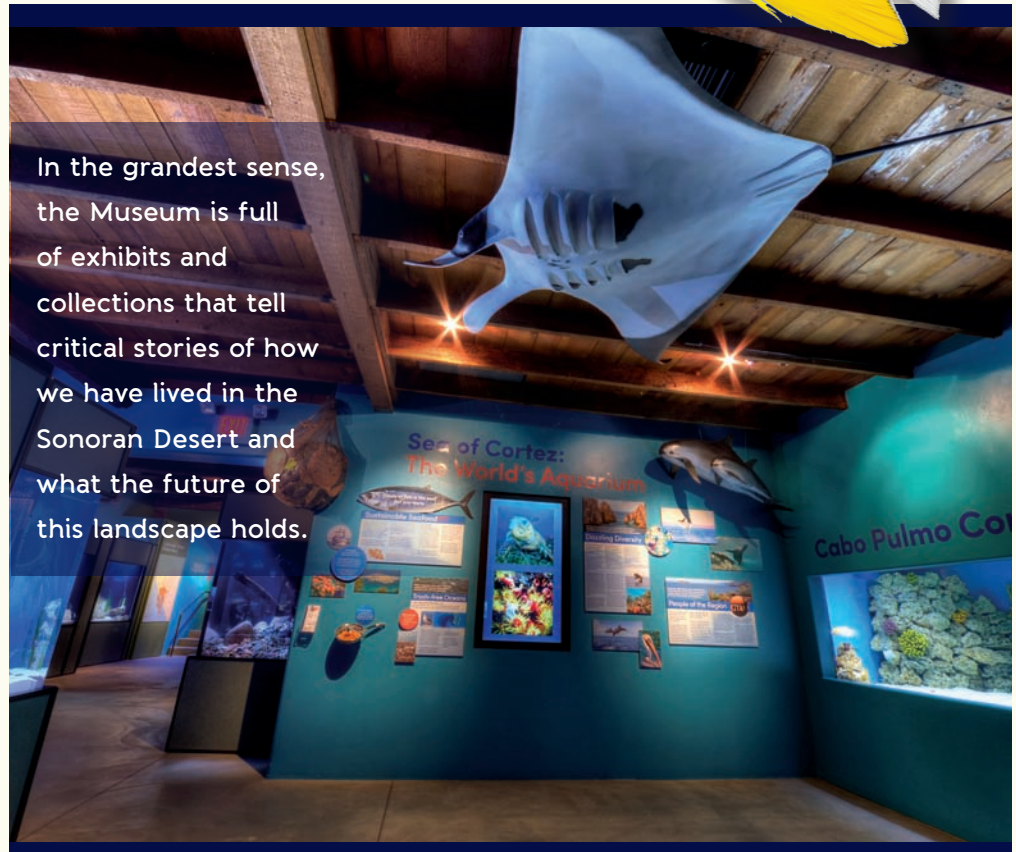
In fact, that poem specifically and most directly speaks to the way poetry can play a role to help tell the stories housed within the Desert Museum. During the renovation of the hummingbird aviary, when the hummingbirds were first reintroduced into the new space they did not initially thrive. In looking for answers, Museum staff discovered that in renovating the aviary, most of the spiders and their webs had been removed. Spider webs are an essential binding material in hummingbird nests. Only after more spiders were reintroduced into the renovated aviary did the hummingbirds start to thrive again.

A central idea behind this collaboration is that if you look closer, you'll see more. In pairing poetry with exhibit spaces we invite Desert Museum audiences to linger at an exhibit or vista, to mull an idea, and to think about what they are reading in the context of what they are seeing. We hope for two parallel outcomes: that the poetry will deepen the experience of an exhibit and that the exhibit will deepen a reader's experience of the featured poems. We are excited that this collaboration with the Poetry Center will strengthen the Museum's existing commitment to the arts through the many courses and exhibits the Museum already features, and we are excited that this installation will offer many new educational and visiting opportunities for students, members, and visitors. Most of all, this partnership underscores our mutual belief in how the relationship between knowledge and the imagination can best tell the story of the Sonoran Desert. In the foreword to *The Language of Conversation* report, the poet W.S. Merwin underscores this point:

"The great thing that really distinguishes our species, that we can love and respect about humankind, is not how much smarter than the whales we are (because we may not be smarter than the whales), or how wonderful

our language is, because even language is not something unique to us. It is the primacy of the imagination, and our ability to recognize that in the suffering...of any of the species that are being snuffed out, we are not exempt. We are a part of it. That suffering is our suffering. That is our world that they are leaving. Out of that imagination comes, on the one hand, compassion; on the other hand, the arts, and they're connected to each other. The arts somehow remind us of our kinship with all other life."

If you would like to support the collaboration between the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and the University of Arizona Poetry Center, contact the Desert Museum's Philanthropy Director, Cree Zischke at (520) 883-3039.



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We hope that this collaboration will demonstrate the power of poetry to tell the important stories of our desert ecosystem, and spark our imaginations in new and compassionate ways. After all, poetry and museums often endeavor to do similar things: to help us see the world in which we live in new ways, and to understand more fully our complex relationship to that world and each other. We hope you will enjoy these new installations and that inclusion of poetry will further enrich your museum experience.

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