



## Mission Programs

Center for Sustainable Destinations

### **Trans-Border Geotourism Project Takes off in Sonoran Desert Region**

By Divya Abhat

Joaquin Murrieta knows how to spark his rural audience's interest. He presents a slide of soft brown and white cooked Tepary Beans, a popular native food for centuries, accompanied with a dozen carefully harvested green Cholla Buds, and the questions come pouring out. "My grandmother used to make that," some will say. "Where can I get it today?" others will ask.

With each question, Murrieta, Director of People, Culture, and Conservation of the Sonoran Institute, leads his audience closer to the concept of geotourism, based on the geographical character of a place, including its traditional food and agriculture. The term developed by Jonathan Tourtellot, director of the National Geographic's Center for Sustainable Destinations, refers to tourism that focuses not only on the environment of a region, but also on the history and culture of its local people. The National Geographic Geotourism program involves the creation of a Geotourism MapGuide and Web site, paving the way for interactive Web maps that will display sites and attractions that best capture the essence of the Sonoran desert region.

The MapGuide project is a collaboration with the Sonora and Arizona Offices of Tourism, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Sonoran Institute, and National Geographic. The MapGuide will feature approximately 200 sites in the region, each distinct in its art, culture or history.

"The idea of this project is not only to create a great informational Geotourism MapGuide, which helps visitors on weekend trips, but the project also serves as a catalyst to bring together all the people with a stake in protecting the things that make this region different from any other," says Tourtellot.

In December 2005, the states of Arizona and Sonora signed the first bi-national Geotourism Charter, pledging to follow certain principles to protect and enhance the

regions' environment, culture, and heritage. The establishment of state geotourism stewardship councils was a first step.

“A big role of the councils is to integrate conservation and tourism, and add value to both regions,” says Murrieta.

The councils are made up of approximately 15 people who play an advisory role in the development, application, and coordination of the MapGuide and additional initiatives. Public agencies—park services and the Bureau of Land Management—also participate. Geotourism council members include representatives from nonprofit organizations, service providers, academics, and indigenous communities.

“The participation of the native people is very important to us,” says Murrieta.

The council provides a forum for the people to ensure representation of their locales. Representatives on the council raise awareness about sustainability and help promote the cultural and natural heritage of the Arizona-Sonora region.

Says Murrieta, “The aim of the council is to see beyond the MapGuide. The Geotourism Strategy has the power of changing people’s minds and attitudes without changing the landscape.”

The Sonoran Desert Geotourism MapGuide will be available early 2007. Additional information is available on the website: [www.sonorandesertgeotourism.org](http://www.sonorandesertgeotourism.org)

For more about the Sonoran Desert’s natural history, see the September 2006 *National Geographic*. <http://www.ngm.com/0609/feature5/>