



Saguaro Fruit: A Traditional Harvest*

Introduction

The Tohono O'odham have lived in the Sonoran Desert for thousands of years (in fact their name translates to Desert People), and harvested the Saguaro fruit during much of that time. The harvesting of saguaro fruit by the Tohono O'odham is a centuries-old practice of subsistence, religion, and reaffirmation of their relationship with their traditional environment.

When the Tucson Mountain District (TMD) of Saguaro National Monument (SNP) (Saguaro was designated a National Park in 1994) was established in November 1961, no mention was made of the traditional harvesting by Native Americans that occurred there. When the harvesters showed up June of 1962, park staff allowed them to harvest Saguaro fruit but was looking for a way to end the activity. When made aware of the situation, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall was glad the park had not stopped the harvest, and went so far as to amend the regulations concerning resource protection to allow the Tohono O'odham to harvest the fruits of the Saguaro and other cacti.



Saguaro fruit, some of which have split showing the ripe red flesh and the black seeds

When the regulations were next amended, Udall's amendment was left out inadvertently. An opinion provided later by a solicitor indicated that the regulations were worded such that the harvest could continue. Annual permits signed by SNP and the Tohono O'odham Nation have since guided the annual event. When possible, harvesters have welcomed visitors and given demonstrations on harvesting and processing the fruit and seeds.

Beginning with the first harvest following establishment, SAGU officials have worked with the tribe to allow tribal members to continue this traditional practice. In 2006 SNP initiated a traditional use study to gather ethnohistoric and ethnobotanic information with existing scientific data to provide a better understanding of any impacts that traditional harvesting might have on the saguaro plant community.



Saguaro cactus flower.

Objectives of the research included the development of a scientific basis for the park's decisions regarding the traditional harvest, and additional information for park cultural and natural resource programs, and public education programs.

The Tohono O'odham

The Tohono O'odham people have a complex, interdependent relationship with the Saguaro. It has a cosmological foundation that includes the saguaro once being human, a feature which the Tohono O'odham still recognize today. The fundamental importance of the Saguaro and its fruit in O'odham life is reflected in the O'odham calendar.

The O'odham divide the year into 13 lunar "months," starting with *Hasha'ni Mashad*, or Saguaro [harvest] month.¹ The Saguaro fruit wine imbibing ceremony to bring the summer monsoon doubled as the O'odham New Year's celebration. The temporal regularity of the saguaro fruit harvest made syrup for Saguaro fruit wine making available during the latter half of June. Because the O'odham processed ripe fruits into thickened syrup which could be stored for a while before fermentation, the actual date of the New Year could vary during the first half of July, depending on the end of

the harvest and the beginning of the monsoon.

The Tohono O'odham people use the flowers, fruit, seeds, thorns, burls or boots, and ribs of the saguaro for food, ceremonies, fiber, manufacture, trade, and unspecified needs. The Tohono O'odham people use the fruit and seeds to make a variety of food products including ceremonial wine that is used in the *Navai't*, and the *Vikita*, or harvest ceremony. After a saguaro died, the Tohono O'odham people used the ribs and 'boots' that were once nest holes for a variety of structures, tools, instruments, and other useful objects. They also used the fruit and seed products as trade items with the neighboring Pima tribes.

Other people and tribes have been documented using the saguaro including the Western Apache bands, the Hualapai, Yavapai, Maricopa, Pima, Seri, and Yuman speakers and southwest tribes in general. These groups used the fruit, seeds, thorns, burls or boots, and ribs of the saguaro for food, medicine, ceremony, fiber, manufacture, trade, and unspecified needs.

Saguaro Fruit Harvest

Traditionally the saguaro harvest was a village-oriented activity conducted by women but as cultural changes occurred over the last 500 years, it became family-based. Where villages once had saguaro groves recognized as theirs, families came to be associated with specific groves. Trespass was frowned upon but 'ownership' was not enforced. On the Tohono O'odham Reservation, the family-based groves and camps are veiled in privacy.

For harvesting the saguaro fruit, a pole is constructed from 2 or 3 long ribs from a dead saguaro lashed together, with cross-pieces of catclaw (*Acacia greggii*), creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*), or saguaro rib¹ fixed on the end. The pole is called *kuipaD*, and is a strong, light pole perfect for reaching to the top of the taller saguaros. The pole, which may be from 15 to 30 feet long, can be used to hook the fruits or nudge them off the plant. The fruit is then collected off the ground.

Pulp is scraped from the fruit pods into buckets for carrying back to camp. An experienced harvester may collect 12 to 20 pounds of pulp in two to three hours. It takes 20 to 30 pounds of fruit to produce a gallon of syrup. The fruit is mixed with water and boiled over an open wood fire. It may boil for an hour or more. The boiled mixture is strained to separate the juice from the pulp and seeds and the pulp mixture is spread on a tarp or board to dry. The dry pulp is then pounded to remove the seeds. The dry pulp is added to boiling syrup to make jam; the seeds are used for meal, chicken feed, and candy.

An average whole fruit contains 34 calories and 2 tablespoons of dried saguaro seed have 74 calories. A serving

of five fruits has 4 grams of protein and 5 grams of fat and is high in soluble fiber and Vitamin C.²

Historical Documentation

The earliest documented use of the saguaro was in 1540 when Pedro de Castañeda, who traveled with the Coronado expedition, witnessed an O'odham group involved in the *Navai't*, known as the wine or rain ceremony, in Mexico. He wrote briefly about the giant cactus fruit harvest and subsequent New Year ritual imbibing of fermented juice of the giant cactus fruit.

A Final Quotation

One fruit harvest participant wrote of good camp manners and of sensuous pleasure: "You eat the perfect ones [saguaro fruit] on the spot, turning your back to the other harvesters. You chew the oily seeds into thick syrup before you swallow. It feels luscious and wicked, but no one says anything back in camp. Everyone's mouth is pink and sticky."³

*The information used in this Resource Brief is from: *Traditional Saguaro Harvest in the Tucson Mountain District, Saguaro National Park, Final Report*. Prepared for the National Park Service by Rebecca S. Toupal, Henry F. Dobyns, Richard W. Stoffle, Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, University of Arizona, December 15, 2006.

¹ Crosswhite, Frank S.

1980 The Annual Saguaro Harvest and Crop Cycle of the Papago, with Reference to Ecology and Symbolism. *Desert Plants* 2(1):3-61.

² *edible* Baja Arizona.

<https://www.ediblebajaarizona.com/a-summers-gathering#/>

³ Crosswhite 1980:19-20, *Journal Desert Plants* 1980 Vol. 2 No. 1 pp. 2-61 ISSN0734-3434

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For more information contact:

Ronald Beckwith
Archeologist
Saguaro National Park
3693 S. Old Spanish Trail
Tucson, AZ 85730

ph: (520) 733-5160
email: ronald_beckwith@nps.gov