

Saguaro National Park

*Celebrating the Living Symbol
of the Southwest* BY RON BUTLER

Saguaro National Monument, two sprawling sections of the Sonoran Desert east and west of Tucson, has recently been designated the nation's 52nd national park.

The lofty saguaro—the famous columnar, candelabra-shaped cactus—can be seen almost everywhere in southern Arizona, but nowhere in such profusion as in Tucson, a city of 400,000 people. It now becomes the first major metropolitan center with a national park at its very doorstep.

The magnificent saguaro (pronounced suh-wahr-oh) has long been the symbol of the Southwestern desert. No Tucson travel ad is complete without one, nor is any Hollywood Western. They've even been transported to Spain and Italy to authenticate the scenery for filming "spaghetti Westerns." At least one bad writer has described them as "green stubble on the craggy face of a mountain."

Scenic loop drives at both areas of Saguaro National Park, as it is now called, offer a close-up look at these towering plants. On the evolutionary scale, saguaros are considered relative newcomers to the plant kingdom. The largest

journeys

of the 2000 known species of cacti, the saguaro grows so slowly that a ten-year-old plant is only about *one inch* tall. To survive in the desert, the plant is a veritable storage tank—the saguaro is capable of pumping up and holding enough water from one rainfall to last more than four *years*. Its shallow root system often extends more than 65 feet in all directions, giving balance to the weighty plant and enabling it to take advantage of the scant desert rains. (Because survival is the first commandment for all living things in the Sonoran Desert, plants—even blades of grass—stand far apart on the desert floor so that their roots

will not compete for water.)

Many saguaros have stood tall—some 50 and 60 feet high—since before the time of Cortez, their limbs raised to the heavens as though in prayer.

Arizona's Pima and Tohono O'odham Indians built their entire cultures around the saguaro. They still use the long, strong ribs of the plant's skeleton for building material



In southern Arizona, many saguaros have stood tall—some reaching 50 or 60 feet—since the time of Cortez. Photography by Terrence Moore.



and fuel, and jam is made from its rich, sugary fruit.

Indians, who believe that all earth forces are alive, forming the great circle of life, attribute special powers to the saguaro. When vandals with automatic weapons recently used a saguaro for target practice, the large "wounded" plant toppled over and killed one of the culprits. News reports said it was an accident. But the Indians nodded knowingly.

Within its dry sierras, canyons and mesas, Saguaro National Park contains 27 varieties of cactus and a wide assortment of flora, wildlife and birdlife, within a total of six different life zones.

Study the saguaro up close and you'll find that it's home to many small desert animals and birds. The red-capped, zebra-backed Gila woodpecker can make a nesting hole in the self-healing saguaro's pulpy interior in a matter of days. Many raise two or three broods a year, and often make a new hole for each brood. The woodpeckers' abandoned homes frequently house other birds that are unable



to peck holes of their own.

Sadly, experts are concerned about the saguaro's dwindling numbers in recent years. Old age may be the primary culprit — many saguaros are more than 300 years old. Other threats: Urban development has caused much of the great Sonoran Desert to yield to encroaching blacktop, and nighttime poachers steal many native cacti to sell them in nearby California, where a good-size saguaro may fetch several thousand dollars.

With the designation of Saguaro National Monument as a national park comes more assurance that these sacred plants will be protected. It also means massive expansion for the park, with both units — set apart by some 30 miles —



eventually covering about 100,000 acres. Congressional legislation has already approved \$6 million for expansion of the park's eastern unit. Estimates put expansion of the western unit at between \$5 and \$10 million. New signs and a new visitors center at the western unit are already in place. The park's annual

visitor count, now at 700,000 per year, is expected to double or even triple.

When Yellowstone became the country's first national park in 1872, the United States was the first country to designate national park areas. Today, more than 90 countries have adopted and embellished the idea.