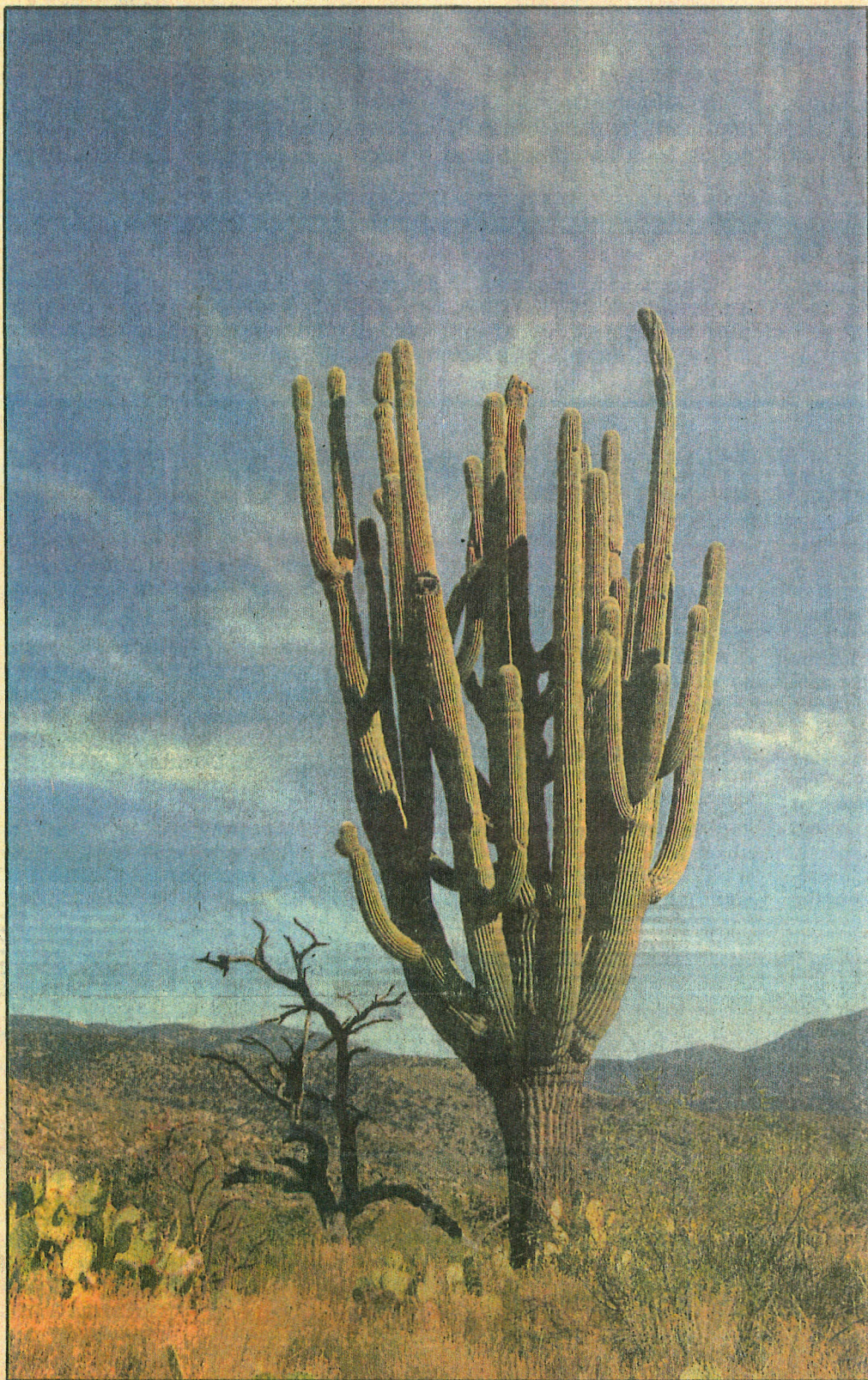




Ed Compean, The Arizona Daily Star

Bacterial growth is killing this 40-foot-tall saguaro, believed to be 300 years old

Saddened officials at Monument helplessly watching 'old friend' go

By Douglas Kreutz
The Arizona Daily Star

There's no way of stopping the bacterial growth that's killing what might be the largest saguaro in the world, Saguaro National Monument officials said yesterday.

"I wish there were something we could do, but the bacteria is so widespread" that it can't be controlled, said Meg Weesner, chief of science and resource management at the monument's east unit.

"People out here are sad about it," Weesner said. "It's sort of like watching an old friend go."

The saguaro, a 40-foot-tall giant with about 50 arms and an estimated age of nearly 300 years, is stricken with bacterial necrosis, a disease that is commonly fatal to aging saguaros.

"It's a bacterium that attacks the saguaro

and causes a deterioration and decay of the soft tissue," Weesner said. "It appears as a sort of brownish-black oozing fluid coming off the sides of the saguaro."

"This tends to be a secondary infection," she said. "There is often another main cause that allows this bacterial growth to begin. Freezing is a very common cause. It could be that a hard freeze in the past few years made it more susceptible to the infection."

Weesner said a monument volunteer first noticed signs of the non-contagious bacterial growth about a month ago while hiking past the saguaro, which is near the eastside monument's south boundary. Reaching the big cactus, nicknamed "Granddaddy," requires a 24-mile round-trip hike over monument trails because public access isn't allowed over pri-

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vate property near the monument boundary.

"About a week later, we sent a ranger into the area, and at that point the bacterial ooze had started to come out," Weesner said. "A couple of more trips out there confirmed the condition of the saguaro.

"I've talked with some people from the plant pathology department at the University of Arizona to see if there was something we could do," she said. "They've been studying these bacteria since they were first discovered in the 1940s. They said that once it becomes widespread throughout a plant, there's nothing we can do for it."

Weesner said the saguaro's age was estimated by its physical characteristics, growth rate and other botanical factors.

"Saguaros don't have tree rings, so we can't date it that way," she said. "But it's just got arms upon arms upon arms."

If the saguaro is 300 years old, it began growing just two centuries after Columbus landed in the New World, or at about the time Jesuit missionary Father Eusebio Kino first visited the small settlement of Tucson.

Weesner said previous estimates, which put the height of the saguaro at more than 50 feet, have been revised in light of recent measurements showing it to be about 40 feet tall.

Records indicate that a few other saguaros in Arizona are taller than the Granddaddy, but monument officials said the dying specimen is believed by many to be the largest of the species in terms of its mass and number of arms. Weesner said she couldn't estimate the plant's weight.

The saguaro has been featured in many newspaper and television reports, including "NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw."

Weesner said she doesn't know how long the saguaro will remain alive or standing.

"There's no way to really tell how long it's going to take to die and what the decline is going to look like," she said. "It could take just a few weeks, or it could take several months. We plan to document it by having someone take photos of it every week so we'll have a record of what happened."

"It's possible that the soft tissue could slough off and leave the skeleton standing," Weesner said. "Or it's possible that the base could become weak and the whole thing could fall over. . . . My hope is that it becomes a magnificent skeleton and remains standing."