

Cop Guards High-and-Dry Cacti

BY LUNA I. SHYR
The Associated Press

NEW RIVER, Ariz. — Jim McGinnis flips on his siren when he spots the prickly passengers in the back of a truck rattling through the desert.

As a cactus cop, he's the thin green line between pilferers and spiny symbols of the Southwest, such as the towering saguaro.

"The job is like fishing," he said. "You have to sit there and be patient and, hopefully, you'll catch someone out there doing something illegal."

Fortunately for the driver on this day, his haul of saguaro and barrel cacti is legitimate, and he has permits to prove it.

McGinnis, a cowboy-hatted state Agriculture Department worker, prefers the title "native plant policeman." He prowls dirt tracks in his four-wheel drive, looking for rustlers who dig up commercially valuable desert plants.

As part of an effort to bolster the department's native plant program, he will be joined by five other officers this year. All have the authority to carry guns and arrest

cactus rustlers.

"People are questioning why the native plant program needs armed officers," McGinnis said. "The reason is we're often alone, in the middle of nowhere, we usually work at night and 90 percent of the people we encounter are armed."

The main spoil of this war is the white-flowered saguaro (pronounced sah-WHA-ro), which can live 175 years and grow 30 to 40 feet tall, with several arms sprouting skyward from the main column.

It is found only in southern Arizona and a slice of Mexico and, as the cactus most people associate with the desert, is prized for home and commercial landscaping. At Phoenix-area nurseries, saguaros with arms sell for \$600 to more than \$1,000.

"They're majestic and somewhat mystical and magical," said Suzanne Brian, who has bought 15 saguaros from nurseries to adorn her home in the Phoenix suburb of Scottsdale. "When I see a saguaro, I think 'I have to have it.'"

The legal saguaro market rings up about \$1.5 million annually,



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Jim McGinnis shows damage to a saguaro from gunshots. McGinnis manages the state's native plant program, which protects the mammoth plants from theft and vandalism.

with the state exporting its emblem as far as Qatar, Switzerland and Japan.

McGinnis estimates that 50 are stolen every year, mostly from state-owned land. Only about a

third are reported because thieves often strike in remote places, and about six cases are prosecuted a year, he said.

Saguaros are protected under the state's native plant act.