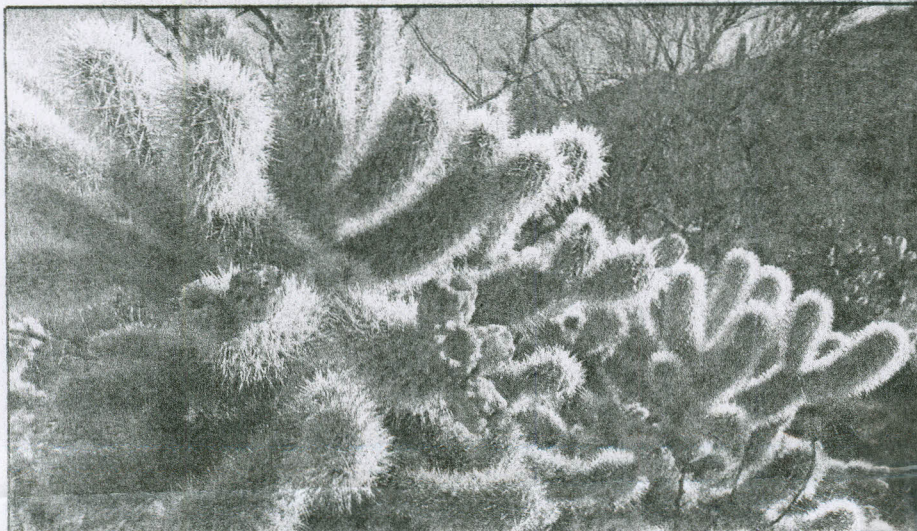




Photos by David Sanders, The Arizona Daily Star

Douglas Morris looks out over the east unit of the Saguaro National Monument



Cholla cacti and other Sonoran Desert plants populate the Saguaro Monument

New director heartened by young cacti

Changes come slowly at Saguaro Monument

By Douglas Kreutz
The Arizona Daily Star

Plenty of government officials talk about long-term planning, but Douglas Morris gives new meaning to the term.

Morris, who took over this month as superintendent of Saguaro National Monument, says he's expecting some pretty impressive changes there — in a century or so.

Not to blame Morris for taking a long view.

He's the chief steward of a preserve devoted to a giant plant species that grows barely a quarter-inch in its first year of life and is typically only a foot high by the age of 15.

Many saguaros are a half-century old before they surpass the height of a tall man, and they usually don't start sprouting arms until they're 75. By the time they're 100, they might be 25 feet tall and adorned with several arms. Some of the really magnificent giants — standing more than 40 feet high and weighing 8 tons — have been growing for 1½ centuries.

All of this might explain why Morris is excited, but in a cautious sort of way, about recent research that found an abundance of saguaro seedlings bristling out of the earth on the 87,000-acre monument.

The tiny plants are a sign that the severely declining cactus forests of the monument's east unit just might return to their former grandeur over the next 100 years.

"There's been a reduction in the number of mature saguaros, possibly as much as a 50 percent reduction, since the monument was established in 1933," said Morris, who replaced former superintendent William Paleck.

Paleck managed the monument from 1987 to 1992. He is now superintendent of North Cascades National Park in Washington.

"We don't believe the decline in the cactus forest was part of a natural process," Morris said in an interview last week. "One theory is that man-introduced cattle had a great impact on the cacti" by trampling young saguaros and destroying plants that shelter seedlings.

The encouraging news, Morris said, is that young saguaros appear to have begun flourishing after cattle were banned from the monument about two decades ago.

"Our research shows a healthy population of very young saguaros," he said. "We're seeing lots of plants just a few inches tall and maybe 5 or 10 years old. It's an indication that the next generation will have a healthy young forest to replace the forest that's losing its vigor now."

The hoped-for comeback of the monument's namesake plant is just one of the challenges facing Morris, who formerly was chief ranger of Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks in California.

Both photos in color.

Morris

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members, 25 seasonal employees and 125 volunteers.

Visitors centers, scenic drives, more than 125 miles of trails, picnic areas and interpretive programs are among the monument facilities and services available to visitors.

Morris, a tall, lanky man whose hobbies include backpacking and fishing, emphasized that Saguaro Monument differs from many other parks and monuments in its location on the outskirts of a metropolitan area.

"More than at many other parks, the job here is to create and perpetuate partnerships with the various elements of the community," including private landowners, neighborhood associations, Pima County

agencies and officials in charge of nearby national forest lands, Morris said. "All of these people are our neighbors."

Morris said he has determined that "support for the monument is almost unanimous."

"As Tucson grows, people have come to value what we have here," he said.

He acknowledged, however, that proximity to an urban area presents a unique set of problems.

Indeed, one of the several theories on the cause of the decline in the saguaro population suggests that air pollution might contribute to the bacterial necrosis, or slow decay, that's killing many of the monument's cacti.

Among the victims of the disease is the monument's largest saguaro, a 40-foot-tall giant with about 50 arms. Known as "Granddaddy," the big cactus recently lost one of

its large arms and is believed to be dying. Among the victims of the disease is the monument's largest saguaro, a 40-foot-tall giant with about 50 arms. Known as "Granddaddy," the big cactus recently lost one of its large arms and is believed to be dying.

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"There have been significant studies of this (the effect of air pollution) over the past five years, but we don't have indisputable evidence that air pollution is hurting the plants," Morris said.

Location near an urban area also means Morris is likely to deal with continued debate over controversial projects such as the

Rocking K development south of the monument.

"Many people feel there is a need to minimize the density of development as developments approach the monument," he said. "We want to identify what these needs are and then work with the county and development interests to reach agreement."

"It certainly isn't our goal to turn back the clock on development, but to make sure development is compatible with resource needs."

He noted that Congress approved expansion of the monument's east unit by 3,600 acres in 1991. Negotiations haven't been completed with owners of the land on the selling price of the parcel, Morris said.

Meanwhile, officials are looking into proposals for expanding the west unit. Morris said studies have identified several thousand acres of land with "park values" that

might be sought for inclusion in the west unit.

A new west-unit visitors center is scheduled for completion by November.

Morris, whose previous Park Service assignments include the Cape Hatteras National Seashore in North Carolina and the Point Reyes National Seashore in California, said he's learned to look at entire natural systems instead of focusing on a park's most famous natural wonders.

Saguaros, he said, are a very important part of the monument — but not the whole story.

"The saguaro itself is what gave rise to the monument," Morris said. "But it's important to emphasize the natural system

near monument boundaries and planning for increasing throngs of visitors.

"Last year, we had just over 2 million visitors at the monument," Morris said. "We expect that number will probably increase as the population of Tucson increases and the area gets more visitors from around the country."

"I don't anticipate any drastic changes" in administration, he said. "We want to make sure the park serves the visitor — and that includes everything from providing clean restrooms to providing good visitor programs. It's easy to talk about flashy new programs. But especially in these economic times, we're committed to those basic programs that make a park work."

Morris, operating with a \$1.5 million budget, directs the work of 30 full-time staff

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