National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Natural Resource Program Center
U.S. Geological Survey and University of Arizona

The Sonoran Desert

A ***Views of the National Parks*** knowledge center

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, located in southern Arizona, is a stunning example of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem. (Photo by Tim Tibbitts)

The Sonoran Desert is a place of extreme beauty and marvelous adaptations. The plants, animals, and people of this desert are intimately linked to the physical environment, forming a unique and fascinating ecosys - tem. The *Views of the National Parks (Views)* Sonoran Desert module is the first in a series exploring the ecosystems of the United States and the national parks located within those ecosystems.

One of the keystone species of the Sonoran Desert is the saguaro cactus. With its giant, spiny, green arms reaching upward, it is a well-known symbol of the southwest. It is a home, food source, and even a water source to many animals. And this is just one of the many unique species of the Sonoran Desert.

Water is scarce, yet many species have found ways to survive. Plants and animals have adapted and offer interesting lessons in the art of survival. The Sonoran Desert is home to several different native peoples, and this module will offer some of their viewpoints on understanding and living in the desert. This is a place of unexpected diversity and the unending flow of life. As you will learn, there are mountains, sand, and sky islands; cacti and Gila monsters; green trees and blue springs.

Come, explore the Sonoran Desert.

Features

Your journey begins with the physical environment and the forces which have created the desert. You will then learn about some of the plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert. Listen to people from different cultures as they tell you about the Sonoran Desert from their point - of- view. Be sure to visit some of the Sonoran Desert national parks to learn about their natural resources and how National Park Service (NPS) personnel protect those resources.

- **Introduction**
  Begin your exploration by learning about the natural processes that create deserts, the conditions that exist there, and where in the world, and specifically North America, these ecosystems are located.

The Sonoran Desert is a complex ecosystem that is at times hot, dry, and dangerous for its native animals and yet it is still home to many wildlife species.

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Visit *Views of the National Parks* online:
www2.nature.nps.gov/Views

Investigate the physical characteristics of the Sonoran Desert, such as climate and geology, and discover the plant and animal species that thrive there.

- **The Sonoran Desert**
  Explore the physical attributes of this unique ecosystem – the climate, topography, volcanic history, and soils - and meet animals and plants that call the desert home. Take a virtual walk through the desert (presented in English and Spanish) to learn how native peoples used desert plants for many purposes.
- **People and Places**
  Learn about the human inhabitants of this special place and how they have learned to use and respect desert resources. Listen to people from several cultures talk about their connections to the land. Explore national parks that have been established in the Sonoran Desert, and learn how Mexican and American resource managers work together to protect desert resources.
- **Impacts on the Desert**
  Human development, water quality, and invasive species all threaten the Sonoran Desert ecosystem. Learn about these threats and what is being done to protect the desert's natural and cultural resources.

The story is not complete, however, without describing the people that live here, the cultures that contribute to its history.

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Teacher Resources

Lesson plans from the Juntos program are incorporated into the module. Provided by the Environmental Education Exchange, the Juntos lessons offer teachers relevant ecology and environmental science lesson plans, support materials, and resource opportunities. They present the basics of ecology, natural resource use, and environmental issues as prescribed by the state of Arizona and national science education standards, all using examples based on the Sonoran Desert ecosystem.

Partners

The NPS Natural Resource Program Center's Office of Education and Outreach teamed up with a wide range of experts from organizations and parks to create this module. Special thanks to

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