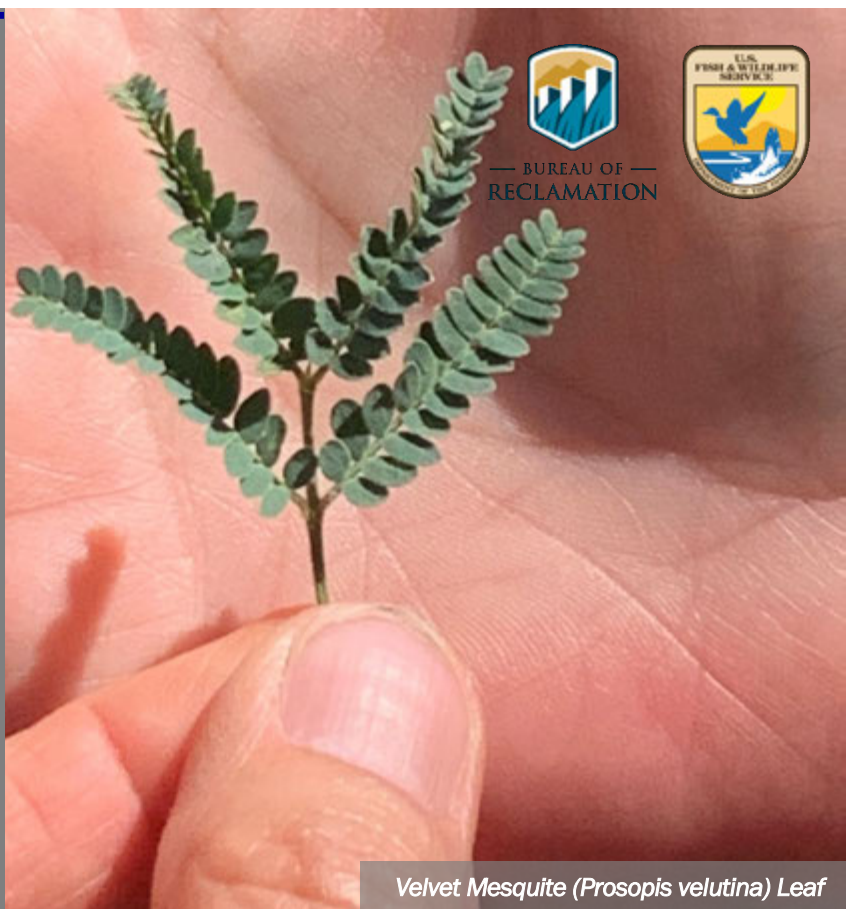


COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

Community Outreach Encourages Mesquite- Based Land Stewardship and Livelihoods in the Borderlands



Mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) is an adaptable woody plant that provides many ecosystem services for wildlife, the environment, and people, especially in the face of climate change. However, to ensure the most beneficial use of mesquite resources, communities in the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands need better access to information about the multiple uses of mesquite. Therefore, the Borderlands Restoration Network has developed the Mesquite Stewardship Program which utilizes community-based educational workshops, presentations, and field trips to fortify passions for wild foods, enhance community wellness, and promote a restoration economy in the Borderlands.



Velvet Mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*) Leaf

KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED

Those wishing to utilize mesquite may not have regular access to the knowledge, equipment, or tools required for optimizing their utilization of mesquite's resources. This hinders the potential for a mesquite-based restoration economy. Harvesters of mesquite pods may not be aware of best practices. As a result, products may be contaminated by Aflatoxin, a naturally produced carcinogenic toxin that is not safe for consumption. Additionally, the varied distribution of mesquite stakeholders across the Borderlands may disrupt the sharing of perspectives on mesquite processing, management, and utilization. Mesquite stakeholders need to be connected in a way that promotes the sharing of valuable mesquite-based information.

PROJECT GOALS

- Use community partnerships to establish a wild foods-based restoration economy
- Utilize community-based education and outreach to share information about improved harvesting and processing of mesquite pods
- Assist stakeholders in developing more informed mesquite perspectives
- Promote versatile mesquite applications



SONORAN SISTER- HOOD

Traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous Comcaac communities inspired this program. These partners maintain a strong cross-border relationship that inspires respect for mesquite and community health.

Volunteers Learn to use a Hammer Mill

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Milling Workshops: The Mesquite Stewardship Program hosted and participated in several mesquite milling workshops that guided participants through the process of milling their own mesquite flour. These included Mission Garden's Mesquite Milling Mania and several milling workshops with Baja Arizona Sustainable Agriculture. All served as examples of the program's potential to provide the public valuable knowledge, technical skills, and access to equipment.

Diversification of "Mesquite-teers": The program supported a more complex understanding of the various applications of mesquite and developed a more diverse network of mesquite stewards including ranchers, wood workers, honey producers, bakers and more.

Ranching and Regenerative Agriculture: The engagement of local ranchers, ethnobotanists and ecologists encouraged managers to view mesquite as a means of regenerative agriculture while also noting the importance of managing mesquite encroachment on grasslands.

Community Engagement During COVID-19: Mesquite Stewards were limited by reduced event capacity, strict sanitation protocols and social distancing. However, the prospect of "normality" and purpose during trying times motivated participant involvement resulting in a heightened sense of community at events.

Collaborators

- Baja Arizona Sustainable Agriculture (BASA)
- See online for full list of collaborators

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Photos courtesy of Juliet Jivanti/BRN
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LESSONS LEARNED

Having capable and willing volunteers is essential to success. The program learned to avoid overextending volunteer effort.

Strong partnerships between the Mesquite Stewards and other organizations enabled the program to secure funding, increase volunteer hours, and gain access to the equipment necessary for the Mesquite Stewardship Program's events.

The reputability and relatability of presenters was essential to audience responsiveness; a bit of humor further enhanced the successful delivery of information.

Events that utilized the hands-on nature of mesquite pod milling were successful in encouraging an atmosphere of unity among participants. A remaining challenge is that potential mesquite stewards are distributed throughout the Sonoran Desert, which means that in-person events based in a particular mesquite "hub" may not be uniformly accessible. The program now considers alternative outreach methods to ensure that all stakeholders can benefit.

NEXT STEPS

- Improve accessibility to in-person events by accommodating participants and eliminating barriers such as transportation availability or cost of travel
- Engage a more intergenerational audience through the inclusion of regional youth
- Improve the number of actively participating mesquite stewards, and increase support for the program through membership expansion

For more information on this project, contact Juliet Jivanti (jjivanti@borderlandsrestoration.org) or Laura Monti (lmonti8@arizona.edu)



Velvet Mesquite (*P. velutina*) Pods to be Milled into Flour