ARY PAUL NABHAN
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Gary Paul Nabhan
Between spoonfuls of *posole* at the Morning Glory Café in Flagstaff, Arizona, Gary Paul Nabhan mused about the distinctive character of western American literature. "What is western literature about?" I asked him. Without hesitation, he replied, "It is about a process of disorientation and reorientation." The mountains, sand dunes, and canyons of the western landscape govern western imagination. That landscape, he believes, is responsible for the dis- and reorientation that characterizes the work of many western writers. Nabhan continued, "I should say that in an odd way, that's even true of Native American literature [...]. Leslie Silko writes about the process of reorientation." Nabhan looked around the small diner, decorated with local art and furnished with an antique stove used as a buffet for the fresh salsa and chips. The chalkboard menu reflected the best of locally grown food made to serve mouth-watering recipes from Mexico and the Middle East. Nabhan took another bite of his *posole*, swallowed thoughtfully, and reflected on the tradition of immigrant literature in the west: "The pioneer mentality only captures a portion of the distinctiveness of the west. Whether it was Europeans coming to dry lands from more humid areas, or Mexicans coming northward, those who arrived in the west were amazed by how much the landscape dominates our very concepts" (Woods).

Nabhan’s contributions to western literature fit squarely in this tradition. His Lebanese relatives still live and garden on the
My friend Amadeo mentioned to her that I was Lebanese. "Oh, that Lebanese cooking," she said, "it has such

border of Lebanon and Syria. Much of his recent work brings the legacy of his ancestral home to bear on his home in the west. This physical and cultural legacy influences his love of desert places and his commitment to social justice and peace across seemingly impossible cultural divides. In September of 2004, he traveled to the Middle East to participate in the first formal seed exchange between Jewish and Palestinian farmers, sponsored by a group called Jerusalem City Farmers. While gathered with the seed exchange group, marveling at the durability of drought-adapted seeds, he noticed an unusual heirloom seed: the Tepary bean, traditionally grown much closer to his western American home by indigenous farmers throughout the Sonoran Desert. The seed had come to the table from a student who had traveled through Hopi and eventually made his way to Israel to work and live in a kibbutz. This seed story reminded Nabhan of the similarities between Middle Eastern and southwestern deserts. Drought-tolerant plants, rich in nutrients and electrolytes, have made their way into traditional cooking over centuries. These same plants have shaped cultures. In an era of rapid global exchange, preserving seeds is a way to share culture and language, and to promote peace.

Nabhan's interest in the unlikely pairing of desert and food seems odd until you consider the way personal stories have influenced his scientific inquiry. "I wasn't hooked into ethnobotony until I did this trip to the Pima Indian community in Thanksgiving, 1975 or 1976," he explained over lunch. In the kitchen of an elderly woman who was preparing Tepary beans, mesquite pudding, and other traditional foods, Nabhan was inspired by a connection that has fueled much of his research and writing since. He includes the story in his 2004 book Why Some Like It Hot: Food, Genes, and Cultural Diversity. He writes,

My friend Amadeo mentioned to her that I was Lebanese. "Oh, that Lebanese cooking," she said, "it has such
Before that Thanksgiving with Pima friends in central Arizona, Nabhan says he “felt like an outsider to the west. See, the thing I cherished about my own Lebanese heritage is this connection with the land through food traditions. It was then I realized that the Gila River Indian community was being endangered by these same global forces that threaten my family.” Nabhan grinned and mopped up the last of his posole. “I added layers—and girth—to that notion that an ethnobiologist was someone who eats his way through a landscape.”

Nabhan had discovered his scientific passion: the connection between plants and people. He had literary ambitions, too. He recalls his student days in a literature class at Prescott College. A noted biologist was a featured guest speaker. The biologist read to the students from John Wesley Powell, Francisco Garces, and Clarence Dutton. Then he read from recent environmental impact statements. “If any of you end up writing shit like that, rather than with the grandeur and richness of Powell, or Garces, or Dutton,” Nabhan remembers the biologist warning the students, “I will hunt you down and beat you. That was the point,” Nabhan continued, when “I realized that scientific writing could have some grace” (Woods).
The grace of Nabhan’s scientific writing and his commitment to the landscape and peoples of the arid west are the heart of his contribution to western American literature. As he noted, the landscape that so dominates the west is responsible for the disorientation of many of the region’s writers. The process of reorientation is ongoing, and occurs most profoundly through language. Through story, Nabhan believes, we can celebrate the wonders of the biological diversity that sustains cultures. In his 1997 book *Cultures of Habitat*, he wrote, “To restore any place, we must also begin to re-story it, to make it the lesson of our legends, festivals, and seasonal rites. Story is the way we encode deep-seated values within our culture [. . . ] By replenishing the land with our stories, we let the wild voices around us guide the restoration work we do. The stories will outlast us” (319).

Nabhan co-founded the non-profit conservation group Native Seeds/SEARCH, spearheaded the Ironwood Alliance (responsible for research and public support that led to a 120,000-acre Ironwoods Forest National Monument), and initiated the Traditional Native American Farmers’ Association. He has been recognized for his groundbreaking, cross-disciplinary work by literary and scientific organizations alike. He received a Western States Book Award for his first book *The Desert Smells Like Rain* (1982), and the John Burroughs Medal for nature writing for his second book, *Gathering the Desert* (1985). In 1990 he was awarded a “genius grant” from the MacArthur Foundation and a Pew Scholarship on Conservation and Environment. Sicily honored him with the Premio Gaia Award for his contributions to “a culture of the environment” in 1991, and in 2000 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society for Conservation Biology. In 1999 he received a Lannen Literary Award from the Lannen Foundation, which recognizes the value of freedom of inquiry, imagination, and expression in English-language literatures. The
following year, he moved from Tucson, where he had been the Director of Science at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, to Flagstaff, Arizona, where he became the director of Northern Arizona University’s Center for Sustainable Environments.

Gary Paul Nabhan was born in—but not named after—Gary, Indiana, on 17 March 1952. In Cross-Pollinations: The Marriage of Science and Poetry (2004), Nabhan recalls, “[A]s members of my Lebanese-American clan have reminded me, I grew up with a pen, a piece of chalk, or a pencil always in hand” (15). In third grade, he published his first poem in a local paper, but his earliest aspiration was to become a painter. When he was fifteen and deeply involved “in innumerable projects involving tempera, oil, and water colors,” he learned he was color-blind (Cross-Pollinations 16).

The following day in class, he drew the attention of an important early mentor, art teacher Dorothy Ives. Nabhan came to school wearing all gray—“pale gray Levi’s, a charcoal gray wool sweater, gray cotton socks; hell, I’d even spray-painted my Converse All-Stars steel gray” (17). Ives lifted young Gary from his funk by reminding him of her objections to words like “normal, average, fashionable [and] popular” (19). She challenged her gloomy student to become a scientific expert on color blindness, and to use the knowledge from science to guide his art. “At that point, she’d lost me,” writes Nabhan. “What did science have to do with art?” (19). Nabhan reports that throughout the semester, as he and Ives investigated the physics of light and the neurobiology of color perception, he felt a growing excitement in scientific discovery.

His newfound interest in science was not enough to keep him committed to a traditional high school curriculum, however. He began to feel confined and restless. Learning, he felt, was to be done outdoors, and he often went truant to explore the Indiana Dunes near his home. He eventually dropped out of school and worked as a day laborer. He later began his college career at Cornell College
in Iowa before transferring to Prescott College in Arizona. Prescott College proved to be an intellectual match for Nabhan's wide-ranging interests. As he notes in "Going Truant," a chapter from The Geography of Childhood (1994), "I was simply better adapted to learning by doing, outdoors, than to learning by abstract formula" (38). A small liberal arts college in central Arizona, Prescott has an interdisciplinary curriculum and relies upon experiential learning to instill in its students an ethical responsibility to community and environment.

Nabhan earned his B.A. there in 1974 with an emphasis in environmental biology and western American literature. He felt no "immediate need to slice the world up" between the humanities and the sciences, but eventually decided to pursue a master's degree in plant science from the University of Arizona. After earning a master's in 1978, he began doctoral work at the university's Arid Land Resources Program. Before completing his PhD in 1983, he published his first book, The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in Papago Indian Country. His love for Sonoran desert ecology and people is evident in this book, which grew out of research he conducted for his dissertation on ethnobotony and arid land ecology of the Tohono O'odham people.

**SEEDS AND SONGS (1982–1990)**

Nabhan introduces several important ideas in this first book, planting them here like thematic seeds that he continues to nurture in subsequent publications. The anecdotes throughout The Desert Smells Like Rain uncover the multivalent relationship among culture, landscape, and endemic plants, as well as the unique and fragile connection between language and place. In these pages, Nabhan the narrator encodes an enduring respect for native peoples. In her entry on Nabhan for American Nature Writers, Sara L. St. Antoine insightfully writes that in this first
book, "Nabhan apprenticed himself to the region and its native inhabitants, and his depictions guide readers to become as respectful to the desert communities as he is" (673). Reviewers point to the combination of solid research and readability that has made this book a popular choice for western American and southwest studies courses, Indigenous studies, and nature writing courses. Indeed, as Glen Love points out in his 1999 article "Ecocriticism and Science: Toward Consilience?" Nabhan is among the interdisciplinary scholars whose work "affirm[s] human connections to place as profoundly important and interesting." Love calls this sort of work "a virtual new science of place which cries out for attention from literary scholars, who, for the most part, have stayed on their side of the humanist-scientist barrier in studying place, limiting their focus to metaphor and language, while exciting interdisciplinary opportunities beckon" (572). In The Desert Smells Like Rain and numerous other volumes, Nabhan combines beautiful prose and in-depth research to construct a literary narrative.

Throughout this thought-provoking and often humorous book, Nabhan blends his knowledge of desert ethnobotany with the vernacular knowledge of the Tohono O'odham people, formerly known as the Papago. In 1986 the tribe officially changed its name from Papago ("bean eaters"), a name its members never adopted for themselves, to Tohono O'odham, meaning "desert people." During the name change, the tribe also adopted a new constitution, which created three branches of government. The approximately 18,000 tribal members' reservation homeland extends through southern Arizona and into northern Mexico.

The Desert Smells Like Rain is comprised of ten chapters, each one an essay demonstrating a different facet of the Tohono O'odham relationship with the Sonoran Desert. In each chapter, Nabhan shows how ritual practices, traditional stories, schoolboy
pranks, and community events demonstrate the intimate connection between the people and the land.

When I first read this book as an undergraduate English major at the University of Arizona, my nature writing professor Larry Evers praised it for its then unusual recognition of native sources of knowledge. Nabhan not only acknowledges his indigenous "informants," he dismantles the anthropological relationship between "sage and source" by constantly foregrounding his Tohono O'odham colleagues. They are like family, he writes, "like being with my own Lebanese aunts and uncles" (ix). The narrator makes it clear that he is among O'odham people to learn from them as friends.

At one point in the narrative, a young man asks Nabhan, "Why are you here? You trying to be Indian or something?" "No," the narrator replies. "We got friends here. Good Papago friends. Your people have been good to us" (34). An elder in the community, Marquita, teases Nabhan by calling him Milga:n Waikal—Gringo Vaquero.

In the opening chapter of the book, Nabhan explains the title by referring to the nearly ubiquitous obsession with water in desert communities. Not only does rain provide relief from sweltering heat, rain makes possible the cycle of sowing and harvesting that many O'odham families—and feast days—depend upon. But according to the O'odham worldview, "few [...] are willing to confirm that something will happen until it does," so surprise is an element in all events: "When rains do come, they're a gift, a windfall, a lucky break" (7). To Nabhan, "The desert is enigmatic, unpredictable" (9). Longtime desert dwellers may use their noses more than other senses to determine if rain can be expected, and the scent is cause for rejoicing. That is why, in a place so seemingly devoid of moisture, a young O'odham boy tells Nabhan that "the desert smells like rain" (5). The anticipation of rain, and hope for its delicious surprise, conjures up a sensual relationship for the
boy. The desert smells like rain because rain releases the intense aromatic oil of the creosote bush. And in this first chapter of this first book, Nabhan introduces an enduring theme: language and place are intimately connected. Water is sung, not pumped, into O’odham fields.

In the chapters to follow, Nabhan expands the idea of people participating in the sacred through singing and speaking. Language binds people to culture and to place by constantly renewing the connection people have with the earth. When the specificity of words is lost, when language is homogenized, Nabhan fears we will have lost our connection to specific places. Commenting on the relationship between language and place, Nabhan told me, “unless we have [...] stories to renew connection, the specific places in the landscape, we might as well just live in a globalized world, because we’re not really living in place, we’re living in an abstraction” (Woods). In The Desert Smells Like Rain, Nabhan takes pains to tie the words—and other symbolic expression—to the specific places they represent. On a November morning, he and several companions make a pilgrimage to I’itoi Ki:, a sacred site among the O’odham people. It is a hidden cave in the Baboquivari Mountains, the dwelling of I’itoi, the O’odham figure who helped the people emerge into this world. Nabhan writes,

After creating humans, deer, fire, bald-headed buzzards and much mischief, I’itoi settled down to spend the rest of his life underground. I’itoi only occasionally comes out of sanctuary these days—for instance, he helped guide wildlife to safety when the first locomotive roared through Papago Country. Now, the Desert People mostly visit the cave knowing that he is out of sight [...] (14)

Baboquivari Peak, which towers over the cave, can be seen from nearly every village on the O’odham reservation, and is "literally
and figuratively the heart of the Papago universe” (14). Tohono O’odham basketmakers refer to this sacred place and the stories of I’itoi by showing a man standing at the entrance of a circular maze. The image represents O’odham people searching for the deeper meaning of life.

On their hardscrabble hike to and from the mouth of the cave, Salvador, a richly-painted character only Nabhan could render, sings a path for the pilgrims. Salvador is too hung over to join Nabhan and his group on their hike that day, but he promises to sing an appeal to I’itoi for their journey. When they rejoin Salvador, he tells them, “there is always something hidden in this world [. . .] [Y]ou need to make contact with it now and then” (21). The physical journey to the cave, the basketmaker’s weave, the songs, and the age-old legends are all ways we maintain contact with the unseen.

According to Nabhan, many Tohono O’odham feel it is their responsibility to tend the earth and help the desert yield its food. But in between the sporadic rains and harvesting rituals, Coyote has his way with many endemic plants. Through the interplay of language and stories the narrator once again unfolds the relationship between language and plants. And once again, Nabhan makes fun of himself to foreground the respect he has for native peoples. First, Nabhan catalogs the ways Ban—coyote—makes its way into the O’odham language. Bankaj means to yell like a coyote; banma describes a greedy person, banmad a cheater, and banmakam a glutton. Nabhan’s lesson about Coyote’s plants comes at the expense of his taste buds. He shows some wild desert gourds to an elderly O’odham woman, and she begins to tell him that when the a:d “‘got ripe and turned yellow, [the people] would eat it just like a sweet apple.’ Before she had a chance to finish her story, I grabbed one tender, yellow gourd and took a bite into it. She yelled ‘DON’T’ but it was too late—that taste was so terrifically
bitter that my tongue muscles went into shock” (80). After he spits out the pulp and gulps down some water, the grinning woman tells him that a:d (roughly pronounced with a long vowel, as in “aaahd”) used to taste like a sweet apple—until, that is, “Coyote came along and he shit on it. I guess ever since then it has had that taste that is in your mouth right now [. . .]” (80). This incident inspires Nabhan to learn, through O’odham songs and legends, all the plants bearing Coyote’s signature: Ban Toki, Coyote Cotton, and Ban Bawi, Coyote Tepary Beans. The plants have stories, he concludes, that tell of the special relationship between the people, the landscape, and their ways of knowing the world.

One plant that dominates the landscape of the Sonoran Desert is the Giant Saguaro. In the chapter “Throwing up the Clouds,” Nabhan describes the harvesting, brewing, imbibing, and vomiting of the cactus fruit. This ritual, he notes, helps bring the rains to renew and cleanse the land. Vomiting can induce tears and force deep, gulping breaths, simulating the wind and rain that breaks the desert heat. This chapter is notable for more than its explanation of an important O’odham tradition, however. In his desire to uncover the complex relationship between people and plants, Nabhan takes the opportunity to explain the relationship the desert dwellers have with the Giant Saguaro and to deconstruct the glossy, Arizona Highway-like image of Indians harvesting cactus fruit. First, he asserts,

[T]he special relationship of the Papago with the saguaro cactus characterizes their response to an arid homeland. Saguaro are not seen as a “separate” life form at all, not something of an “other,” outside world. Papago classify saguaro as a part of humankind; a saguaro cactus is “that which is human and habitually stands on earth.” It is not, I believe, that saguaros are likened to humans because they often have “arms” coming off their upright trunks. It strikes
me that the Papago liken saguaros, *Cerreus giganteus*, to *Homo sapiens* because no matter how much they tend to dominate the landscape, they are still vulnerable. (26)

Contrary to the way western societies have constructed the binary of nature and culture, the Tohono O'odham worldview insists on a familial, animate view—non-human nature exists in relationship to human nature. What we miss in the bucolic photographs in tourism magazines is the extent of Tohono O'odham's sense of human-saguaro interrelatedness. The saguaros, an elderly O'odham woman says, "are Indians too [. . .]. If you hit them in the head with rocks you could kill them [. . .] You don't do anything to hurt them" (27). The vulnerability of plants and people, and the surprising, sporadic nature of the rains, underlies the rollicking narratives and vibrant characters in Nabhan's first book.

Before writing his highly acclaimed second book *Gathering the Desert* (1985), Nabhan and three of his colleagues at the Office of Arid Land Studies founded the non-profit organization, Native Seeds/SEARCH. Its mission, according to its website (www.nativeseeds.org), is to provide "ancient seeds for modern needs." Through seeds, the cofounders believe, Native American cultures can sustain a connection to their lands. The organization runs a seedbank containing over two thousand seeds.

Nabhan's early interest in saving seeds as a cultural legacy is best expressed in his 2001 poem, "The Seed of a Song." The poem begins,

When I was young, my uncle brought me seeds he had sequestered in a cool, dark place, saying, "Now these are yours for sowing; as you plant, speak some kind of prayer, sing to the germ so that its stock will rise to be replenished."
This first stanza suggests what's at the heart of saving seeds: the personal, intergenerational connection expressed through the connection to land. The prayer and the song suggest the soul of seed saving: the sacred duty of stewardship.

The poem also foregrounds the learning process involved in stewardship:

As I went out to the garden to kneel there
next to the opened earth, at first I felt awkward talking,
my mouth dry next to the wetted soil where
I was to put the seeds in place. And so I whispered,
"May you find [. . .] enough moisture [. . .] to express
yourself [. . .]
may your growth be [. . .] long enough to [. . .] ripen,"
and soon my whisper turned into my uncle’s song.

As the young narrator finds his voice, his confidence grows and soon his “whisper” becomes a song. By the end of the poem, he passes the song down to his own children, continuing the cultural connection to land-based knowledge. The awkward prayer whispered by the young narrator to his seeds is more than a prayer for the replenishment of its stock; it is a prayer for his own related desire for dwelling and voice. To find expression, a seed—and a writer—must be rooted in the fertile ground of culture. Nabhan’s work is like the thread of a seed song. Through his writing, he restores the west so it can be a place where many cultures, languages, and ways of knowing are celebrated.

Gathering the Desert is the winner of the John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing. In it, Nabhan builds on themes introduced in The Desert Smells Like Rain. Again he examines life-ways of Sonoran Desert dwellers. Again he takes special care to unfold the relationships between language and place in a way that respects and includes indigenous voices. What is significant about
Gathering the Desert is the deliberate literary case-study approach to another, related relationship: the one between culture and plants. In his introduction, “Desert Plants as Calories, Cures, and Characters,” Nabhan sets up a specific literary context which puts this book squarely in a western studies context. Anyone familiar with contemporary western American literature, he writes, will know characters like Coyote, Bear, Raven, Eagle, and Snake. But what of the endemic plants? “It is less often acknowledged,” he notes, “that certain plants have characteristics so distinctive that they have become personae in Native American folklore” (6). If animals, or anima, can be so important to literature of the west that readers recognize their spirit, why can’t plants? This, Nabhan acknowledges, was the challenge he and illustrator Paul Mirocha set for themselves: “Can our sketches express the character of the plants?” (6). There is little doubt for the author that plants, like animals, occupy a central role in culture. Far beyond their value for a culture’s physical survival, plants can carry cultural meaning. “When a human community encourages its members to know the characteristics of select plants so intimately,” Nabhan argues, “it is also making its own cultural identity known” (7).

Nabhan and Mirocha examine twelve desert plants, each one existing in a unique symbolic and ecological relationship with Sonoran Desert people. Each short chapter, or “sketch,” uncovers the relationship between desert dwellers and plants by including ethnographic and historical information, contemporary and legendary stories from desert dwellers, and the authors’ own insights in word and pictures. Nabhan relies here, as he did in his first book, on a hybrid genre that blends scientific observation, personal memoir, and techniques from fiction. Gathering the Desert is most accurately identified as narrative nonfiction. Favored by many natural history and nature writers, narrative nonfiction combines journalistic reporting with the point of view and themes of the
novel. This blend becomes in Nabhan’s hands a highly crafted narrative which uses character and a technique called “progression” to develop its themes.

Characters in fiction, James Phelan points out, are composed of three elements: the synthetic, the mimetic, and the thematic. Poststructuralist critics are most interested in the synthetic—that is, a character in fiction is not real nor is it the image of a real person; it is a construct. Nabhan’s character portraits borrow from the mimetic and thematic. His characters are mimetic, or imitative, of possible people possessing recognizable traits. Laura Kerman, a Tohono O’odham elder who tells a story to demonstrate the healing qualities of creosote, or Joaquin Martinez, a mescalero in eastern Sonora, directly resemble people and may be composites of people Nabhan met and in many cases became friends with. Secondly, characters in Gathering the Desert and elsewhere are thematic because they exemplify a set of beliefs, values, or life-ways representative of a group. In Nabhan’s narratives, characters are carefully thematized to indicate ways of living in response to the arid west.

Progression, according to Phelan, refers to a narrative as a dynamic event moving through time. In Nabhan’s narratives, characters walk, drive, fly, or ride through space and time, moving from one conversation (and scientific insight) to another. Through these movements and conversations the conflicts between characters, values, knowledges, and expectations are complicated or resolved. In Nabhan’s signature narrative nonfiction style, “instabilities,” such as differences in knowledges and values, are resolved through conversations among diverse people.

The relationships between peoples and plants make up Nabhan’s unique vision of a western American sense of place. Instead of promoting a static or deterministic vision of place, Nabhan and his collaborator record the “diversity of historic responses that individuals and cultures have had to the set of potential plant resources
in the region” (6, emphasis added). It is this diversity that Gathering the Desert celebrates, and in this diversity Nabhan’s vision gets its strength.

According to some Tohono O’odham and Pima elders, the bush alternately called creosote, greasewood, or hediondilla—“little stinker”—was the first thing to grow from the mound of earth shaped by the Earth Maker. According to paleoecologists, seventeen thousand-year-old creosote debris has been identified near the Lower Colorado River. Jesuit missionaries who pioneered in north-central Sonora and southern Arizona recorded the medicinal uses of the creosote. It cures worms, syphilis, rheumatism, colds, chest infections, and intestinal discomfort. In the sketch entitled “The Creosote Bush is Our Drugstore,” Nabhan catalogs numerous cures and notes that in addition to indigenous people, scientists, and Jesuit missionaries, “travelers, explorers, cowboys, botanists, and anthropologists documented an incredible diversity of medicinal applications of creosote stems, leaves, and gum” (14). Nabhan describes the resilience of the creosote, tracing its history to the retreating Ice Age. The resin, or amber syrup sometimes seen on the bush, decreases the amount of ultraviolet light and heat that reaches the plant’s interior, and protects it from over-consumption by animals. This is the bush that makes the desert smell like rain during warm summer storms. “From its elemental position in Papago creation stories,” writes Nabhan, “in traditional medicines associated with childbirth, and in burial practices, it appears the creosote has accompanied desert Indians from the beginning to the end of life” (18). Creosote even survived thermonuclear testing in Nevada. Nabhan closes this sketch by reflecting on the symbolic importance of creosote: from this bush humankind can learn persistence.

Not all the sketches in Gathering the Desert are so hopeful. Some document the decline of desert plants and end with a plea
for conservation. In “Mescal Bacanora: Drinking Away the Centuries,” for example, Nabhan explains the loss of biodiversity that has resulted in the agave’s demise. Mescaleros—those who make bootleg mescal from wild agaves in eastern Sonora—are not the only desert dwellers who have a relationship with the unusual plant. Pollinators such as hummingbirds and bats are responsible for maintaining the plant populations. Nabhan provides an image of bat activity on Sonoran summer nights: “bats in small flocks take their turns swooping in to lap up the nectar [. . . ]. Each bat takes a half-second turn drinking nectar as the others circle nearby. After several turns at flowers [. . . ] the bats’ head and shoulder fur is thick with golden pollen” (42). Lyricism turns to loss, however, as Nabhan lists the threats to the region’s biodiversity. Human population in Sonora has tripled since 1950, leading to over-harvesting of the agave. Bat population has declined, in part because of chemicals like DDT, which accumulate in bat breast milk. Although DDT was banned in the U.S., migrating bats risk exposure during seasonal visits to some Latin American countries. Through Aztec legend and archaeological evidence, we know that agaves have been a major food source in northern Mexico for more than eight millennia. Nabhan laments that some people, having accepted the artificial separation between nature and culture, will continue to destroy the plant and its habitat: “Perhaps we are too aloof, too impatient [. . . ] too cocksure that we are the controllers of the world to be able to participate in a mutualistic relationship with agaves” (47). He ends the sketch with a plea to resurrect agave cultivation so the region can be a place “where plants and animals again dance to an ancient American rhythm” (48).

In Gathering the Desert Nabhan sketches the importance of these plants and others—chilies, Devil’s Claw, Panicgrass, Organpipe cactus, and wild gourds—in a way that combines
scientific knowledge with traditional, vernacular ways of knowing. He does not privilege one over the other, but uses each to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between people and plants. Sara L. St. Antoine writes that Nabhan's well-rounded portraits, including the values of the “cultural, utilitarian, ecological, [and] aesthetic [. . .] support the need for [plant] protection” (“Gary Paul Nabhan” 674).

Nabhan further demonstrates the need for plant protection in his next book, *Saguaro: A View of Saguaro National Monument and the Tucson Basin* (1986). Nabhan's text, accompanied by images from photographer H. H. Huey, gives a descriptive and pictorial overview of the unlikely saguaro. In a 1994 *Omni Magazine* interview, Nabhan explains the significance of the saguaro cactus to writer Carol Goodstein: “The saguaro cactus,” he tells her, “is an indicator species of the Sonoran Desert. The saguaro may live 200 to 300 years, but only one in 10 million seeds from a saguaro survives the first ten years” (74). The saguaro is not only a stunning movie backdrop, in other words; it is an ecological miracle deserving of human protection.

In 1989, Nabhan returned to the theme so eloquently described in *Gathering the Desert*—the close and crucial relationship between people and plants—but this time his tone was more stringent. In *Enduring Seeds: Native American Agriculture and Wild Plant Conservation* (1989), Nabhan provides an overview of native farming traditions in North America. As Wendell Berry writes in the foreword to the first edition, *Enduring Seeds* offers a corrective on two counts: it offers us a real vision of native farmers, an image not often encountered in pop culture portrayals of American Indians, and second, it demonstrates the intelligence and ecological persistence of sustainable practices in agriculture. Folk varieties of plants, Nabhan writes with some wonder, “represent distinctive plant populations, adapted over centuries to specific
microclimates and soils. They have been selected to fit certain ethnic agricultural traditions” (71). Cultures have preferred certain plants for aesthetic reasons, too, and these plants have become part of the stories they tell about themselves. This complex of seed and culture cannot be replicated in a laboratory. In a review of the book for the Native America’s Journal, John Mohawk praises *Enduring Seeds* for its call to activism. The book could easily have been an obituary, the reviewer notes. Instead, “it is a text that will inspire people to a new understanding of the world we inherit, and one we will leave behind for future generations” (Mohawk, n.p.).

As in his previous books, Nabhan does not forsake the natural in favor of the cultural or vice versa; instead he gives readers a glimpse of the important liminal spaces between cultivated and wild land. He writes, “[W]hat many Native American farming traditions integrate with wild species within their cultivated fields and domestic economies is a dynamic balance of wildness with culture. This is what modern farmers lose when they cultivate their fields from edge to edge, leaving no hedges, no weeds, no wildlife habitat” (194). Nabhan returns again and again in *Enduring Seeds* to this discussion of the border between wild and domestic. In Tepehuan fields of central Mexico, Nabhan describes how wild *maizillo* supports domestic crops of maize. In a Pima village on the subtropical edge of the Sonoran Desert, he learns from a farmer how wild chilies growing beyond his garden “inoculate those in my garden with their piquancy” (37). And in this physical and theoretical space lies the significance of this book to western American literary studies: in order to think critically about western spaces, we need to engage the places beyond our national and disciplinary borders. Nabhan reports on places beyond the western states, places like Chihuahua, Mexico, and Lake Okeechobee, Florida. He relies on numerous scientific traditions, indigenous
oral traditions, and American natural history writing to read the relationship between farming practices and landscape.

The origins of the essays collected in *Enduring Seeds* may be of further interest to the student of American culture, literature and environment, and western American studies. Many of the essays, Nabhan tells us in his Acknowledgement, were originally prepared as lectures to western American conservation societies. Others were published in diverse publications such as *Coevolution Quarterly*, *Earth First!*, *The Seedhead News*, and *The (New) Ecologist*. During our October 2004 interview, I asked him about his creative process. What comes first, I wanted to know, the science or the poem? The lecture or the essay? He replied in typical fashion, constructing a narrative replete with metaphors:

A lot of times, as I get interested in something, a poem or short story or essay comes out of it and I sort of formulate my hypothesis there [. . .]. [R]elationships crystallize, and then I spend the next four or five years elaborating that—for example, the relationship between birds and chilies I wrote about in 1983 or so. . .and then I wrote about why chilies are hot in 2000, and finally the book *Why Some Like it Hot* in 2004. There’s a much more protracted focus on the science. The other thing to remember about my process is my form of attention deficit disorder is really hyper focus, and I’m consumed by something and can’t let it go, and play out every artistic and scientific permutation that I can. My instinct is to dig a hole, hop into it, and then pull the world into the hole around me.

Nabhan’s approach runs somewhat contrary to the grain of American nature writing. He is in a hole, not on a vista. Instead of positioning himself as a transparent eyeball, who sees all, Nabhan’s observational self is humble, often fumbling. While
preparing a lecture on seed adaptation for Hopi students, Nabhan draws what he considers a simple, explanatory poster of bean sprout germination. A Hopi teacher tells him that he probably shouldn’t use the poster, since information about the sprouts is sacred and as such is taught during ceremonial times. Nabhan concludes by reflecting that placing science in a cultural context is “a lesson more valuable than the display of one bean diagram” (Enduring Seeds 68).

The Emersonian legacy in American nature writing, according to Gretchen Legler, assumes that “the eye is the most valued sense-organ, and second, that in some way the eye is transparent or can be, meaning that it can be separated from the body, and [...] it can see purely, absolutely, objectively, apolitically, and ahistorically” (244). Nabhan resists this trend by constantly embodying ways of knowing, locating wisdom in place. Tepehuan vernacular knowledge of maizillo, for example, is passed down through generations and remains “alive in their cornfields, alive in their hearts” (37). Indeed, Nabhan relies on sensual experience to guide him through landscape—but vision is only part of the experience. We must cultivate our imagination, Nabhan urges, if we wish to understand what native farming once was. “To feel at home here,” he insists, “to learn from our predecessors on this continent, each of us must kneel on the ground, put an ear to the earth, and listen” (49). In order to “see” the biological diversity that shaped a field of sunflowers, Nabhan writes, “I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to root myself within those habitats” (134).

Ultimately, Enduring Seeds is an argument for thoughtful stewardship. A seed, Nabhan believes, contains “more information than is contained in the Library of Congress,” and the fate of seeds, the fate of cultures that have relied on them, and the future of North American biodiversity depend on how well we listen (xi).
In his 1993 foreword for *Faith in a Seed*, the first publication of Henry Thoreau’s last manuscript, Gary Nabhan writes, “Thoreau’s dedication to learning the language of the forest is humbling” (“Learning” xvi). Nabhan counted Thoreau among his earliest influences, and in the foreword, Nabhan argues that the significance of Thoreau’s work is the manner in which he used literary insight in understanding ecological process. “Instead of turning his back” on literature, Nabhan writes, Thoreau incorporated literature in his studies in order to learn the language of the forest, “a language more difficult [than human speech] but more enduring” (xviii).

With his foreword to *Faith in a Seed* and other projects of the early 1990s, Nabhan turned his considerable powers of observation to matters of spiritual ecology. Like a Thoreauvian figure wandering and observing the woods, Nabhan wanders in these books through a spiritual landscape. Can earthly stewardship be learned through spiritual teachings? If so, what greater good can caring for creation give to individuals and communities?

In 1990, Nabhan traveled to Italy to undertake a pilgrimage to the birthplace of St. Francis of Assisi, often called the patron saint of ecology. The resulting book, *Songbirds, Truffles, and Wolves* (1993), is part spiritual quest and part ecological history. Emotionally adrift, Nabhan is reeling from a recent divorce and resulting homelessness. In the aftermath of the divorce, he has “lost whatever rooted sense of place” he had found (30). As a seed saver, he has become dissatisfied with simply banking and trading seeds—he wishes to learn about spiritual ecology from the legacy of Saint Francis. Did Saint Francis inspire his followers “to a greater sensitivity to the land and its creatures?” (xxii). Did the “folk knowledge of nature” lived by Francesco di Bernardone keep wildness alive in Italy?
The book is a fine example of Nabhan's narrative style. The journey compels the narrator from independence to connection, from alienation to wholeness, and from confusion to clarity. Insights about the self, about the wild, and about culture are occasioned by the movement of colorful characters through the book and the Italian landscape. Nabhan the narrator is the central character, and as in previous books, is humble, searching, and respectfully curious about local traditions. His traveling companion Ginger Harmon, an "elder activist and hands-on enthusiast of the wilderness and conservation movement," is a close friend of Nabhan's and better known for "leading high-elevation treks through Nepal" than for sauntering through Tuscan cornfields (xii-xiii). From La Verna to Assisi, Nabhan meets Tuscan chefs, rural seed savers, truffle grubbers, and wine makers who, in characteristic Nabhan style, converse with the narrator and thus help resolve the textual instabilities. Nabhan weaves historical figures into his narrative, too. In Genoa, he calls to mind Columbus, and throughout the journey, he reflects on the life of Saint Francis. Throughout the book Nabhan invokes insight from many places: from the eighteenth-century Italian fruit and landscape painter Bartolomeo Bimbi, to literary figures like Italo Calvino, Mark Twain, and poet Joy Harjo. He invokes scientific and technical insights from across the globe and through history. He harnesses many disciplines in the service of his ultimate quest: "connection, not independence" (37).

In the book, the narrative desire for this connection is made tangible in the ways the American west and central Italy converge in the narrator's imagination. Nabhan, feeling like a vagabond, first arrives in Italy in Genoa, the birthplace of Columbus. At the farmer's market, he sees prickly pear fruit for sale, rendering him "homesick for the borderlands between the United States and Mexico," his home for more than twenty years (12). Partly
discouraged by the evidence of the global economy, and partly hopeful for a taste of his desert home, he approaches the ficondia table and asks the vendor how much she charges. These prickly pear are not, he learns, from the American southwest. A well-dressed, “loquacious” Italian geographer informs the rumpled, travel-weary Nabhan that these fruit are Sicilian grown. This conversation leads the narrator to reflect on the cultural and natural history of the prickly pear, and ultimately, to the ways a New World fruit has been at home in the Old World for over three centuries. After a meal of prickly pear, a “fruit that linked my desert homeland to the place I found myself at present,” Nabhan comes to a realization that informs much of the book’s meandering insights: “I had come here in search of just such lost threads: those that bind the old and new worlds together” (22).

One of the threads that ties Sonora to Umbria is the author’s deep interest in Saint Francis. It was in the American west, he writes, that he first became interested in Francesco di Bernardone. In a Utah gas station in the late 1970s, he found a quote from Saint Francis: “All which you used to avoid will bring you great sweetness and exceeding joy” (xvi). Here, Nabhan concludes, “was a figure who could do more than adorn my birdbath; he might inspire me to live more fully engaged with all parts of this world” (xvi). As his interest grew, he began to notice the influence of Saint Francis among his Tohono O’odham friends, many of whom were Franciscan Catholics. The Franciscans, he notes, had introduced many southwest indigenous peoples to the captivating stories of the thirteenth-century heretic-turned-saint. A San Francisco cult emerged in northern Mexico, and the southwestern feast of Saint Francis included a pilgrimage to a shrine in Sonora.

Nabhan was drawn to the vows of poverty, the objection to violence, and the “humility in the presence of other creatures” that Franciscans embrace (xix). The example of Saint Francis, Nabhan
explains, compelled devotees to help the poorest of the poor. Nabhan felt called to work on behalf of endangered and neglected plants, and began an initiation process that would make him a secular Franciscan, a “tertiary.”

In many ways, *Songbirds, Truffles, and Wolves* echoes a tried and true narrative course: the main character sets off on a physical journey that is also a spiritual journey. After exploring the cultural, historical, spiritual, and ecological aspects of the Italian landscape—and his own inner landscape—he eventually returns to the American west. The book’s closure signals resolution in his personal and professional lives. Like a Shakespearean romance, there is a wedding, during which Nabhan and his new wife’s friends and family each contribute a seed from home. Nabhan writes that he keeps the legacy of Saint Francis with him in his work. He vows to protect “the rarest of the rare [. . .] the neglected species [. . .]. I am no longer happy with simply collecting rare seeds and the last stories about them; I want to see them remain, evolving, in place” (211). As he told *The New York Times* in 1994, “I’m grateful for seed banks [. . .]. But they freeze evolution” (Raver, “Seed” 1).


The middle 1990s were a productive time for Nabhan, particularly for collaborative and edited projects. Taken together, these projects illustrate Nabhan’s unique vision of a western American sense of place, a sense of place that goes beyond political, national, and generic boundaries. Perhaps because of his experience with the legacy of St. Francis, Nabhan turns increasingly toward projects that go beyond just writing the “last stories” about seeds. Motivated by a renewed sense of responsibility, he joins and forms a variety of activist partnerships and coalitions. As usual, he
recognizes the importance of involving a multitude of voices to effect change. His work in this period is shaped by an interdisciplinary commitment to western conservation. As he notes in a 1997 interview, “[C]onservation is too important to leave to scientists alone” (Ives, n.p.). Scientists and non-scientists must work together to reach large constituencies.

This sense informs the monograph Conservation of Plant Genetic Resources: Grassroots Effects in North America (1992). Cowritten with Kevin Dahl, the Natural Resources Superintendent of Pima County Natural Resources and Native Seeds/SEARCH member, the monograph surveys community-based and grassroots conservation programs and comes to a similar conclusion found at the close of Songbirds, Truffles, and Wolves: the seeds most significant to people are those from the local environment; seeds “should remain, evolving, in place” (Songbirds 211). Conservation of Plant Genetic Resources is part of the Biopolicy International series, which seeks to make available bioscience research to the global community—particularly in second- and third-world countries.

In 1993, Nabhan edited Counting Sheep: Twenty Ways of Seeing Desert Bighorn. Like other western trailblazers, including New West historian Patricia Nelson Limerick and American literary critic Annette Kolodny, Nabhan conceives of a west populated by a diversity of voices, telling their stories over and over. It is this west—the process, the contact zone—that is uncovered in Counting Sheep. “Ultimately,” Nabhan writes, “[Counting Sheep] celebrates the diversity [. . .] of voices within and around us: masculine and feminine; Anglo, Hispanic, Kiliwa, Paipai, Cucupá, Quechen, Chemehuevi, and O’odham” (xvi). Contributors—among them Ann Zwinger, Charles Bowden, and Terry Tempest Williams—write on Kiliwa mountain sheep traditions, Baja ethnohistory, bighorn sheep hunting, military land use, and ruminations into the western American imagination.
Nabhan’s western sense of place challenges limiting metaphors, and in *Counting Sheep* he asks readers to reconsider the image of the “stinking hot desert.” The desert is a “wasteland” not because of the scarcity of animal and plant life, he argues—but because of “our lack of knowledge and imagination” (xi). The anthology, unabashedly conservationist, makes a compelling argument for the relationship between culture and nature. How will our dreams, metaphors, and legends change, Nabhan wonders, if we continue to lose species?

By overtly bringing the “two cultures” of humanities and science together, Nabhan challenges another long-held assumption: that nature “elicits a limited range of responses and that all nature writers sound the same” (xvi). Long a fan and scholar of American natural history writing, Nabhan suggests ways that natural history can “diverge from the narrative journal style and didactic tone of the early twentieth-century scientist-explorers who searched exotic lands for wisdom” (xi). The writers anthologized here do not search “exotic lands,” but true to Nabhan’s vision of the west as a wondrous home enriched by a natural and cultural diversity, they “stay home” and observe. In his book *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell characterizes the narrator of much American nature writing as ahistorical, removed from the corrupting influences of civilization. *Counting Sheep*, like Nabhan’s previous work, is not an “androcentric pastoral escape” (Buell 24). Nabhan’s narrative impulse is to impel characters beyond the constructed divisions between nature and culture to find a sustainable middle place, a place where cultural and biological diversity exist in a mutually supportive relationship.

With this relationship in mind, in 1991 Nabhan helped bring together scientists, artists, activists, businesspeople, and writers to ponder the fate of the Ironwood tree. Asked by one workshop participant “why we should care” (65), Nabhan concluded that science
and poetry in collaboration could provide this reminder, with poets making the loss of biodiversity “more palpable [. . .] intolerable” (74). This fruitful interchange between thinkers in diverse disciplines led Nabhan to actively pursue federal legislation creating a new national monument to protect the Ironwood and the habitat upon which it depends. The Ironwood Alliance, a coalition of conservation groups on both side of the U.S.-Mexico border, was formed. In 1994, together with John L. Carr, Nabhan edited *Ironwood: An Ecological and Cultural Keystone of the Sonoran Desert*. The booklet, an Occasional Paper in Conservation Biology, brings together essays by United States and Mexican ecologists demonstrating the diversity of the Ironwood forest and the way local cultures rely upon it. Many of the essays, including Nabhan’s introduction, are printed in Spanish and English.

Finally, in July 2000, President Clinton proclaimed 129,000 acres near Tucson the Ironwood Forest National Monument. The monument includes the richest stand of Ironwood trees in the Sonoran desert. In his proclamation, President Clinton writes, “[T]he landscape of the Ironwood Forest National Monument is swathed with the rich, drought-adapted vegetation of the Sonoran Desert. The monument contains objects of scientific interest throughout its desert environment. Stands of ironwood, palo verde, and saguaro blanket the monument floor beneath the rugged mountain ranges” (Clinton).

By the mid-1990s, Nabhan had written many thousands of words and brought together scores of committed conservationists. In this spirit of collaboration, Nabhan and longtime friend Stephen Trimble co-wrote *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places* (1994). The book grows from Nabhan’s conviction that the loss of contact with wild places is detrimental to the health of the human species. As he told interviewer Susan Ives, “We use ‘wild’ in a pejorative way, where in the O’odham language the
words for healing, curing, wildness, wholeness, and health are all from the same root.” We should not, he cautions, equate “wildness” with “wilderness,” however. True to form, Nabhan insists that the false separation between nature and culture should be dismantled. “I think there are patches of wildness in our backyards, within our own bodies, within every urban and rural area in North America, but our contact with the wild nevertheless has been diminished” (Ives).

Relationships with the wild begin in childhood, so Nabhan and Trimble are concerned with “how few children now grow up incorporating plants, animals, and places in their sense of home” (xi). The Geography of Childhood also attempts myth-busting: “most published writing about the human quest for contact with the natural world can be classified as ‘outdoor adventure literature,’” declare the authors (xi). Instead of focusing on the adventures of well-educated, Anglo-American urban males, this collection of essays focuses on the voices often lost to conservation efforts: those of children. The authors reflect on differences in perception between adults and children, on the preoccupation of children with the “small picture” versus the panorama, and how gender differences influence wilderness experience in children. The book moves between essays by Nabhan and Trimble, and each contributes anecdotes and research supporting the book’s central argument.

In a particularly fine essay, “Going Truant,” Nabhan recalls how his childhood and teen experiences shaped his naturalist tendencies. As a gandy dancer on a track repair crew, he witnesses a half-dozen blue herons looking for a place to land. The young Nabhan is entranced by “their deep wing beats, their hoarse squawks as they called to one another over the mechanical cacophony of foundries, refineries, and finishing plants” (35). Where will the herons land, and why are they here? he wonders. He concludes that they “may have been pulled to this place by
genetically encoded memory [. . .]. It was then that I had my own magnetic encounter with an encoded legacy [. . . .] I had the capacity to see the world as freshly as any naturalist could. Even in the most damaged of habitats, in the drudgery of the most menial labor, whatever wildlife still remained could pull at me deeply enough to disrupt business as usual” (36).

Children need wildness, the authors contend, for their emotional, spiritual, and physical well being. Environmental education may be an important part of this process—but even more significant is regular exposure to what is wild all around them. The rural and even the urban west, explains co-author Stephen Trimble in his essay “A Wilderness, with Cows,” can provide the perfect classroom, if we make efforts to conserve its wildness. “The diversity of lives” shaped by the arid west, he writes, “leads to a diversity of vision—and maybe, just maybe, the astonishing chance to pass along to our children a healthy and distinct land” (132).

Reviewers of The Geography of Childhood appreciated the well-crafted anecdotes and passionate—but not strident—tone of the book. “Most of the personal anecdotes are touching and provocative,” the Kirkus Review noted in February 1994. In The Houston Chronicle, Bob Sipchen wrote that “Nabhan and Trimble were careful not to turn The Geography of Childhood into a soapbox” (5).

Another collaborative and activist book, Desert Legends: Restoring the Sonoran Borderlands (1994), beautifully evokes Nabhan’s desire to “reconnect with the umbilical cord of deserts as a place of spiritual nourishment” (Woods). Nabhan’s creative non-fiction and Mark Klett’s photographs document Sonora on both sides of the border. Included are Seri Indian songs about desert heat and traditional healing ceremonies of an elderly curandera. Flora and fauna make appearances as central characters, too—the night-blooming cereus, mescal gardens, and desert toads testify to
the rich biological life in Sonora. In these pages Nabhan echoes a by-now familiar theme: the cultural and biological diversity of the borderlands is threatened. Conservation efforts are necessary, and so are stories that help us re-imagine the west.

A story, like a map, can help westerners see beyond political borders. “Somehow,” laments Nabhan, “we talk ourselves into slicing the land into pieces” (Desert Legends 86). Before the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, southern Arizona and northern Sonora were known as the Primeria Alta. In the book’s central essay, “Shuttling Across: Weaving a Desert Serape,” Nabhan attempts to weave a new map of Primeria Alta on foot. His two hundred-mile journey follows a centuries-old pilgrimage route of O’odham, Yaqui, Hispanic, and Anglo travelers to the shrine of San Francisco in Magdalena, Sonora (86-87). Pilgrimage is about transformation, Rebecca Solnit points out in her book Wanderlust: A History of Walking (2000), and Nabhan seeks to transform the widely held mental map of Sonora. Solnit further explains that a pilgrimage is fixated on an end point, a resolution; it’s “one of the fundamental structures a journey can take—the quest in search of something [...] the journey towards a goal” (45). In this way, a pilgrimage is similar to a narrative—movement and progression to resolve instabilities. A pilgrim walks to make the earth holy, “to connect the lowest and most material to the most high and ethereal” (Solnit 49). In a conscious effort both to connect heaven and earth and to connect his own ancestral desert heritage with his self-appointed task, Nabhan calls his pilgrimage by its Arabic name, hadj, sacred expedition.

“Shuttling Across” progresses like many of Nabhan’s narratives: characters move through the land, meet human and non-human inhabitants, and through conversation, come to ecological and cultural insight. In this iteration, Nabhan’s narrative self is a weaver, one who gathers strands of history and story from those
he encounters along the journey. Upon reaching Magdalena, he notes that San Francisco, the same Saint Francis who inspired his Italian pilgrimage four years before, was “stretched thin, like an ancient serape, over the entire body of the desert” (145). Finally, before a wooden statue of San Francisco, Nabhan whispers a hurried prayer for all he experienced on his journey through Primería Alta: the land, he says, needs healing; “It’s gonna take time to reclaim the mined-over hills, to restore the grazed-over range, to reforest the floodplains. Give us the patience to try our hands at that [. . .]. Help us reach our hearts across any borders” (146).

Klett’s photographs are stunning, calling to mind ancient ways of living on the land as well as contemporary responses to modern technology. Pictured here are desert adobe homes and rodeo arenas; arrowheads and missile heads; signs of drought and signs of flood. The book’s purpose, in part, is to re-story the land as habitat, not just scenery. A reviewer in the Albuquerque Journal notes the book’s success on this score: “Nabhan makes the still-life move.” He calls the collection “nature writing at its best,” especially as it blends “natural and human history along with the testimony of Tohono O’odham farmers, Sonoran campesinos, and Anglo friends and scientists” (Moore C12).

Nabhan returns to his beloved Sonora in this book’s introductory essay, “Querida Sonora.” “La Vida norteña,” Nabhan writes, “is a frugal yet fruitful way of life that may be vanishing as fast as the very desert and thorn scrub habitats on which it is based” (3). The natural, cultural, and economic systems of Sonora are threatened by a swelling, mostly migrant, population. “Sonora is alive, still wild, still bursting at the seams,” Nabhan insists. “One of those seams,” he cautions, “is the U.S.-México border” (10).

THE NECESSARY STORIES:

The project of conservation in the west and beyond, Nabhan believes, is not as simple as setting aside tracts of land. In the mid-1990s, Nabhan returned to the complex issue of conservation, this time in collaboration with pollination ecologist Stephen L. Buchmann. Like Ironwood, The Forgotten Pollinators (1996) is the result of bi-national and cross-disciplinary collaboration. In 1995, while Nabhan was serving as director of science there, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum began an awareness campaign called The Forgotten Pollinators. The campaign was designed to focus attention on threatened interactions between plants and their pollinators. Unless pollinator conservation moved forward on a global scale, the campaign argued, two hundred vertebrate and ten thousand insect pollinators would remain at risk. Crop yields would decline and keystone plant survival would be threatened. In 1998, the Forgotten Pollinator Campaign adopted an official “conservation across borders” approach. It became a multi-institutional, bi-national consortium, recognizing that pollination conservation needed the support of more than one nation and a few isolated scientists.
Like many of Nabhan’s projects, the ideas that inspired *The Forgotten Pollinators* were rooted in a particular western place—the arid region just south and north of the United States border with Mexico. In the early 1980s, he writes, he began to hear puzzling stories from indigenous farmers. Farmers claimed their squashes were becoming bitter and their chilies too hot to eat. Nabhan, ever committed to diverse ways of knowing, took the stories seriously and began researching gene flow between closely related plants. In 1984, traveling through the foothills of the Sierra Madre, “where the desert meets the tropics, where western civilization meets Mesoamerican civilization,” Nabhan and Buchmann investigated a place where “pollinators continued to connect the gene pools of wild fieldside plants with those of native field crops” (6). That trip eventually resulted in the collaborative project that became *The Forgotten Pollinators*. Throughout the west and beyond, the coauthors argue, “highly engineered agricultural landscapes” have threatened pollinators and the special relationships they have with numerous keystone plants (11). The book is a clarion call to action to address the biodiversity crises its authors say we face. And the crises shouldn’t interest just “middle-class bird watchers,” the authors warn. “These issues should strike a cord in every person who cares about where our food comes from and whether it is wholesome to eat. After all, one in every three mouthfuls you swallow is prepared from plants pollinated by animals” (12-13).

The book proceeds through a blend of science and narrative:

We will need tales, fragrances, tastes, and images that inform us about how the world works and what is at stake if we simply ignore the needs of pollinators and the habitats where they make a living. And so the two of us will be telling you stories interspersed with explanations of global trends. (6)
The stories take place in locales all over the United States, in Mexico, on the Galápagos Islands, in Panama, in Malaysia, and beyond. All these places are threatened by the loss of pollinators. Nabhan and Buchmann urge readers to see global connections to local issues, and thus challenge the idea that the American west is a monolithic frontier whose borders are closed to influence. The book’s close finds Nabhan once again back in his Sonoran desert home, not traveling through dramatic landscape on a bumpy road, or traversing the “stinking hot desert” on foot, but in his pollinator garden. The suggestion of domesticity, order, and stewardship in this final chapter is the perfect setting for Nabhan to discuss principles of ecological restoration. Even the most threatened of relationships and most denuded of landscapes can be restored, he explains, through a personal and cultural commitment to conservation.

The Forgotten Pollinators received a significant amount of attention by book reviewers, who saw Nabhan and Buchmann’s unique blend of science and story as a positive force in conservation activism. The New York Times, in particular, became interested in the two writers from the “far west” and their quirky new cross-disciplinary study. In an initial 1996 review in The New York Times, Carol Kaesuk Yoon praised The Forgotten Pollinators as a “pleasing concoction of natural and cultural history,” declaring the book “entertaining and informative [. . .] the heart of a public awareness campaign.” Furthermore, Yoon picked up on a facet of the book that may ultimately serve to herald a paradigm shift in conservation. Yoon saw the book’s most significant contribution to be “a new view of nature [. . .]. [B]y devoting their book to an endangered process—not a species, not an ecosystem, but an ephemeral interaction—[the authors] tacitly ask us to take the next great leap” in imagining the natural world and ways to act as stewards of it (23).
In a 25 December 1996 editorial, "America’s Endangered Honeybees," the Times discussed the issue of endangered pollinators in greater detail. Nabhan, along with Forgotten Pollinator Campaign co-founders Buchmann and Mrill Ingram, wrote the newspaper thanking it for the editorial and reminding readers more money is needed for honeybee research. The following year, New York Times reporter Anne Raver traveled to Tucson to meet with Nabhan in his pollinator garden. She writes that the Sonoran desert “might seem a strange place for a New York gardener to find inspiration, but I returned from a trip to Tucson, Ariz., fired up about pollinators” (“Music” 40). She advises New Yorkers on the ins and outs of pollinator gardening, from allowing fruit to rot to drilling holes in dead trees, and humorously predicts that “pollinator gardening will be hot in the Hamptons” (40). The Forgotten Pollinators traveled east with more force than any of Nabhan’s previous work.

In Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture, and Story (1997), Nabhan collects new and previously published essays. The book brings together many of Nabhan’s related concerns, including plant biodiversity and cultural diversity. Like The Forgotten Pollinators, it is rooted in the American west while demonstrating the region’s connection to the forces of globalization. Through his characteristic blend of science and story, Nabhan tracks ecologist Aldo Leopold in the Sierra Madre Mountains, describes increasing occurrences of diabetes in O’odham communities, and laments the fall of Mexico’s tequila industry.

Cultures of Habitat concerns itself more with the metaphors and narratives we live by than with science. According to Nabhan, narrative expression of the natural world, a practice made salient in The Geography of Childhood and Counting Sheep, helps humans become involved in a relationship with that more-than-human world. In a statement clarifying his reasons for relying upon
narrative throughout his career as a western writer, Nabhan explains,

If I could distill what I have learned during a thousand and one nights working as a field biologist, waiting around campfires while mist-netting bats, running lines of live traps, or pressing plants, it would be this: each plant or animal has a story of some unique way of living in this world. By tracking down their stories to the finest detail, our own lives may be informed and enriched. (12)

Stories give shape and purpose to life; stories express values. To learn from the non-human creatures in the region may help the human dwellers become better westerners. And when those creatures no longer share the west with us, Nabhan increasingly believes, we need ecological restoration. Conservation, even of complex relationships, is not enough to heal the west.

Ecological restoration seeks to heal ecosystems damaged by human activities. Restorationists use science to determine how extensively to thin forests, reseed tracts of land, and reintroduce endangered species. Increasingly, these same restorationists recognize that more than science should guide their hand—they need to attend to the stories about place, as well. Nabhan makes this connection clear in the epilogue of *Cultures of Habitat*. He believes that ecological restoration’s new dance, as he calls it, “works and plays at reintroducing endangered plants and animals in habitats where they have disappeared [. . .]. It is as much an art as a science, for it allows us to improvise, to listen to the land, to intuit where the harmonics of a natural community are going” (318).

The west, Nabhan told me, means “nourishment. I move through the West with my eyes, with my tastebuds, nose and belly” (Woods). The closing lines of Gary Snyder’s poem “Ethnobotony” speak volumes about Nabhan’s methodology over the past three decades, and are especially relevant to his recent work. Nabhan seeks to “Taste all, and hand the knowledge down,” in Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods (2002). Within these pages Nabhan introduces a discussion about the effects of globalization on the west and rewrites the frontier myth that has so shaped western values.

At its most basic, Coming Home to Eat recounts Nabhan’s year-long experiment of eating locally. From his home outside Tucson, Arizona, Nabhan vows to eat only what is grown within a 250-mile radius. By eating his way through his foodshed, Nabhan makes a case for an intimate, sensual connection with the west. Inspired by a trip to his Lebanese homeland, Nabhan laments life on the global grid while celebrating the cultural and biological diversity of the west.

After a jet-lagged dinner in war-wounded yet cosmopolitan Beirut, the conversation and the cuisine left Nabhan wondering about the apparent desire “for a life unspoiled by local, regional, cultural, or even nationalistic constraints,” where consumers are freed from responsibilities to the local (22). He determines to discover “what [it is that] we want to have cross our lips, to roll off our tongues, down our throats [. . .]. What do we want to be made of? What do we claim as our tastes? And what on earth do we ultimately want to taste like?” (27). Instead of reducing these concerns to a common binary—that of stasis versus movement, or home versus away—Nabhan considers them within the context of globalization.
With pronounced attention to globalization and its relationship to western place, he demonstrates what feminist geographers call “glocation,” localities produced by the intersection of local and global processes (Massey 154; McDowell 4). How, asks geographer Doreen Massey, in a globalized world, does one hold on to geographical difference, uniqueness, rootedness? Moreover, how does one do so without distilling a place to a single, essential, identity? In Coming Home to Eat, Nabhan offers answers to these complicated questions. By exposing the diversity of food systems in the arid west, Nabhan demonstrates how to live sustainably while being mindful of local and global intersections. Loath to give up a favorite Lebanese dish, he is disappointed by the failure of his Middle Eastern squash seeds in his Tucson garden. The O’odham squash that had been grown in Sonora for centuries, on the other hand, had thrived. He concludes, “[T]he natives had won out. I would have to learn to make stuffed koosa with the baby-girl squashes my neighbors call hail mamad. My love of the steamed and stuffed squashes of my childhood had not diminished, but if it was to flourish in this Sonoran Desert setting, it would have to embrace the kinds of squash best adapted to this peculiar land” (138). Making his ancestral recipe with local disease-resistant and desert-adapted squash is an act of “glocation.”

He discovers many food producers living against the pressure of a globalized economy: turkey and quail farmers, prickly pear wine and beer distillers, and tortilla vendors willing to resurrect ancient food traditions. Throughout the book he celebrates the way a locality, his desert west, is an intersection of ancestral traditions and contemporary innovations. The taste of homemade food, Nabhan discovers, is related to the very taste of one’s home soil. Homemade, he writes, is an “oral pleasure that rose from the flavors, the minerals, the sourness or sweetness of the very ground we walk on” (50).
Not all effects of globalization are positive, and many food traditions cannot be resurrected in the globalized west. Nine-tenths of American food comes from non-local sources, and in his quest to rid his life of dependence on the “global vending machine,” he purges his cupboard of imported and processed foods like instant pudding, canned salmon, and corn chips. He explains the deleterious effects of American reliance on genetically modified Bt corn and wonders at the lack of the word “chicken” on KFC’s fast food menu. Why has nutritious, locally grown food faded from popular use? he asks. Maybe colonial forces that sought to “civilize” indigenous peoples are responsible. Maybe it was the way humans desired to separate themselves from animals. Whatever the cause, Nabhan determines to follow Thoreau’s dictum to “live each season as it passes, breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each” (35).

In Coming Home to Eat, Nabhan introduces the idea of the “foodshed” as a parameter for local living and consumption patterns in line with a sense of the sacred. The term “foodshed,” borrowed from the concept of a watershed, was coined as early as 1929 to describe the flow of food from the area where it is grown to the place where it is consumed. Nabhan and others have revived the term to encourage reliance on local, sustainable food systems. Foodshed thinking uncovers the hidden environmental, social, and human health costs of global food supplies. Along with his new sweetheart and third wife, Laurie, Nabhan travels the Rio Colorado and the Gulf of California locating communities living with native foods. “Where old faith communities persisted,” he notices, “—among the Mormons, Hopis, the Seri of the coast and even mixed Anglos and Hispanics of the Santa Cruz—the food shed had not completely unraveled” (237). These communities continued to treat food as something sacred, and this gives Nabhan hope for ecological restoration and agricultural revitalization in
the west. By exposing the connection between the sacred and the mundane—between faith and food—Nabhan effectively builds upon his efforts to rewrite the myth of the west.

Richard Slotkin explains the role of western myth in his classic three-volume study of western history, *The Fatal Environment, Regeneration through Violence*, and *Gunfighter Nation*. The western mythos, Slotkin writes, “provides people with a meaningful relationship” to the frontier legacy. Furthermore,

although the frontier was enacted by a minority of Americans, the themes give people an emotional and intellectual link to their lives. . . . America is characterized by “frontier values”—mobility, desire for a fresh start, and the emigrant quest for a better life. We resort to myths to find something that will allow us to imagine a way of coping with and even transforming the present crises [. . .]. The myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience. *(Gunfighter Nation 5)*

What Nabhan does throughout his work, and especially in *Coming Home to Eat*, is to rewrite the myth of regeneration through violence. Instead of a lone hunter or Indian fighter, Nabhan’s narrator is a farmer, hunter-gatherer, and community-builder. He does not strike out alone, but engages in heroic struggles by joining with a diversity of neighbors to build a sustainable western community. Finally, Nabhan rewrites the west as a spiritual space. Locally grown food that is tasty and healthy is a spiritual matter, he says, connected with how we perceive the earth. “If we no longer believe the earth is sacred,” he concludes, “or that we have a caretaking responsibility given to us by the Creator—Yahweh, Earth Maker, Gaia, Tata Dios, Cave Bear, Raven, or whatever you care to call him or her—then it does not matter how much damage is done by the way we eat” (304).
Nabhan characteristically crosses disciplines in order to conduct the research for *Coming Home to Eat*. In her review of the book, Ceridwen Terrill notes that Nabhan “bridges the humanities and the sciences by encouraging readers to become literate about their natural communities” (291). In a *New York Times* book review, Anne Raver comments that *Coming Home to Eat* “is a good book for gardeners to read this winter, as they dream of what to order from that avalanche of catalogs” (“Cuttings”). But the book has other benefits: “it’s a seasoned primer on the risks of bio-engineered crops [. . .]. Gardeners can play an important part in eating locally, thinking globally” (Raver, “Cuttings”).

Food production and consumption have always been important topics in western American literature. Food, Nabhan told me, is “the best way to talk metaphorically about what’s going on” in the west. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, “food is one more indicator or signal from the land about its health. The dialectic between drought and cornucopia in the west shapes cultures here” (Woods). Besides *Coming Home to Eat*, Nabhan has recently published three other books dealing with the sometimes threatened relationship between food traditions, culture and spirituality, and human health.

In his ethnobiological study *Singing the Turtles to the Sea: The Comcác (Seri) Art and Science of Reptiles* (2003), Nabhan again ventures south of the border. The book is the result of several interviews conducted with Seri Indians about their beliefs and relationships with—and nutritional reliance upon—animals, especially reptiles. Nabhan makes clear that he wants to avoid the painful legacy left by some early ethnologists and anthropologists by including the voices of Seri people as “collaborators,” not simply “informants.” Through interviews, observations, and anecdotes, Nabhan explores the relationship these Sonoran Desert dwellers have with the natural world and its influence on their language
and culture. *Singing the Turtles to the Sea* repeats and often deepens Nabhan’s literary and scientific convictions: narratives progress through character movement, the natural world influences language and culture, and indigenous ways of knowing are as valid as scientific methods. A more inclusive science, he writes, “will treat Indian people not as mere objects of research, but as collaborators in understanding and wisely managing the world” (5). Throughout the book, Nabhan makes observations about the role of art and language symbolic of the Seri relationship with the natural world. When a leatherback turtle is beached, the people often decorate its back before returning it to the sea. Local carvers make a living selling their statues of chuckwallas and rattlesnakes. And the Seri language demonstrates the multivalent and enduring relationship the people have with their environment, including, of course, their food traditions.

Nabhan continues to use food as a lens through which to view culture and its relationship to the natural world in *Tequila: A Natural and Cultural History* (2004). He brings his abundant knowledge of the agave to bear on this collaborative project. His co-author Ana Guadalupe Zapata is a professor at the University of Guadalajara and a leading expert on the blue agave, the species used in tequila production. *Tequila*, like his other food books, is rich with cultural, historical, economic, and ecological contexts. Intertwined with anecdotes from the field and the cantina are a history of Mesoamerican agave culture and warnings against the program of crop monoculture the Mexican government has insisted upon.

In late 2004, Nabhan published yet another exploration of the relationship between food and culture, *Why Some Like It Hot: Food, Genes, and Cultural Diversity*. *Why Some Like It Hot* is the result of many years of scientific and anecdotal observation of the link between human health and traditional foods. The book is
written against the trends of synthetic fats and fad diets. A reviewer in Publishers Weekly notes that "with 21st-century science promising better living though genetic engineering [...] this exploration of the co-evolution of communities and their native foods couldn't be more timely" (Anon. 63). Nabhan begins in the arid west with stories from Pima friends about the high incidence of diabetes, lactose and alcohol intolerance, and other food-related health issues among their tribe. Early in the book, Nabhan relates a humorous story about some Pima friends using government-distributed powdered milk to mark baselines for an evening baseball game. The stories and the science—which originate from the desert southwest to the Mediterranean to the Hawaiian Islands—demonstrate Nabhan's thesis: "traditional cuisine has evolved to fit the inhabitants of a particular landscape or seascape over the last several millennia" (31). He concludes by reiterating the concern that has motivated his work since the early 1980s. Conservation or restoration of the connections between "food, heritage, and habitat" is a dire necessity.

As Director of the Center for Sustainable Environments (CSE) in Flagstaff, Nabhan has spearheaded numerous projects linking biological and cultural conservation. In partnership with other western Slow Food organizers, CSE published Fresh, Organic and Native Foods of the Four Corners: A Directory of Eco-Regional Food Sustainability. In the fall of 2003, the RAFT Coalition (Renewing America's Food Traditions) was formed to develop and support strategies for saving heritage foods. The monograph Woodlands in Crisis: A Legacy of Lost Biodiversity on the Colorado Plateau (2004), co-written by Nabhan and other western scientists, takes up issues of diverse land use histories in the west in an effort toward more sustainable management practices. In November 2004, Nabhan, along with co-editor Ashley Rood, published Renewing America's Food Traditions: Bringing Cultural and
Culinary Mainstays from the Past into the New Millennium. In the introduction, Nabhan explains the motivation behind RAFT and the book as a search for lost diversity. In 1598, he writes, “diversity on the farm and on the table was the norm—not the exception—across most of North America” (xi). Declining diversity, Nabhan continues, results in the loss of “traditional ecological and culinary knowledge as well” (xi).

Nabhan continues to be a leading voice in conservation research. In our October 2004 interview, he lamented the deep cultural and ecological effects of the long drought in the southwest. Through his concern, though, I could detect the hope that motivates his belief in the positive power of literature. “I just hope someone does the great American novel about this drought,” he said. Does he have plans to write such a novel? “Well,” he admitted, “I’ve abandoned science writing for now [. . .]. I wanted to imagine myself as a poet [. . .]. I want to go back to my more imaginative roots. [. . .] You can’t mess around with words; you have to become a virtuoso” (Woods).

Nabhan also expressed a deep desire to continue challenging clichés and stereotypes that still dominate much of the canon of western American literature. One way to do this, he believes, is to continue to meaningfully include more voices from the margins. “The irony of 9/11 for me,” he said, “was I didn’t want to hear more American voices about what was happening to America . . . it seemed too familiar. At this point more than any point in American history, we need to hear what other voices were saying, rather than listening to voices most familiar” (Woods). This view has led him to join the board of al-RAWI, the Radius of Arab American Writers, and to participate in numerous gatherings of Arab American writers in the west and beyond.

Gary Paul Nabhan’s fruitful imagination lives within the interstices of human culture and non human nature, in the academic
borders of science and poetry, and in the liminal physical spaces of the arid west. He is conservationist, gardener, poet, and chef. He advocates for the rights of human animals to have access to healthy food, to live without violence, to hold close the meaningful places that define their lives, and to nurture the connections between language and habitat. He writes with wonder about the ecological processes humans live by: pollination, animal migration, evolution, and storytelling. He considers sacred the projects of sustainability and ecological restoration. He tunes his ear to the creative dissonance in languages, the blending of Texmex, Spanglish, Yaquismos, Arabic, and English. In all these endeavors, he seeks the stories of the west that will reorient readers away from destructive myths and toward a more sustainable future.
Selected Bibliography

REVERSE CHRONOLOGY OF WORKS BY
GARY PAUL NABHAN

This selected bibliography of Gary Nabhan's work includes single-authored, co-authored, edited, and co-edited books, as well as essays, poems, and scientific articles that relate to his developing trends and themes. As Nabhan has said, he works and re-works ideas in multiple contexts and disciplines. This bibliography attempts to capture the various iterations of those ideas.

For information on the Center for Sustainable Environments and Gary Nabhan, direct a web browser to http://environment.nau.edu/.


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