
DAC 30th Anniversary

by: Margaret Stewart, December 2004

PRESERVATION AND EDUCATION REMAIN THE MISSION

Light some candles on a cake for the Desert Awareness Committee of the Desert Foothills Land Trust! On December 3, 2004, the group will celebrate its thirtieth year of faithful service to the Cave Creek and Carefree communities. The Committee's name has changed several times over the years, and activities have expanded to meet fresh needs, but the heart of its program remains the same: Protection of the Sonoran Desert habitat and environment through the education of its residents.

Way back in the 1940s and '50s the folks who lived in the unincorporated area known as Cave Creek felt so remote from the county government that they formed the Cave Creek Improvement Association (CCIA) to promote community welfare and education. Hardy CCIA volunteers got the county to pave Cave Creek Road, acquired property for a cemetery, initiated the Foothills Scenic Drive, collected books for a library and got rave reviews for their deeply moving Christmas Pageant.

At a CCIA meeting in 1974, it was revealed that falconers were illegally trapping young Harris hawks in our area to train for falconry in California. On hearing that shocking news, the CCIA members swung into action and the Wildlife Committee of the CCIA was born. Eleanor Radke, an acknowledged expert on birds, was made chairman. The members, working with Arizona Game and Fish Department, successfully nabbed the culprits and put a stop to the thefts.

A couple of years later the Committee changed its name to the Wildlife Protection Committee. Cave Creek was beginning to grow, and as new residents moved to the Foothills the Committee saw the need to offer nature walks and a series of classes, opportunities for the community to learn how to live in harmony with the natural desert.



In 1977, still affiliated with the CCIA, it changed its name again, to Conservation Committee, and wrote a book. The first edition of *The Fragile Desert*, written by committee members, contained the philosophy and details of desert preservation in a simple, easy-to-read style.

In the next ten years, the Committee expanded its classes, started a weekly column called "A Desert Place," participated in the efforts to pass a bottle-recycle bill, manned "natural merchandise" booths at crafts fairs and led wildflower hikes. As more homes and businesses sprouted on the land around Cave Creek and Carefree, the Committee put its zeal for preservation to work by rescuing desert vegetation from the bulldozers for replanting in safer locations.

While the established work continued, the group's reputation as a source of information on native wildlife and vegetation grew. Members worked with Cactus Shadows High School to establish a nature preserve, as well as an outdoor science laboratory on district land, and designed the interpretive trail for Cave Creek's Gateway Park.

In the early '90s, the committee's name was changed for the final time to the Desert Awareness Committee. The town of Cave Creek had incorporated in 1986, and most of the responsibilities shouldered by the CCIA volunteers had become part of the town government. While the CCIA was winding down its activities, the tasks for DAC had grown larger. Its new name signaled a response to the population spike in the area. For the committee the influx of new residents meant its education opportunities needed to be refined and expanded.

With the blessing of the CCIA, the Desert Awareness Committee found a new home as the education committee for the Desert Foothills Land Trust. In addition to their established educational activities, DAC members pitched in to blaze trails, lead tours and count saguaros on Land Trust preserves. Their popular guided hikes were opened to Land Trust members and their guests.

In an effort to create a new generation of conservationists, an original program for fourth graders was designed by DAC member Diane Vaszily. The two-hour, hands-on session was launched in Cave Creek District elementary schools in 2003. Trained instructors guided the pupils and teachers as they learned firsthand how to



live with and respect all of the native critters and plants of the Sonoran Desert. The program will be expanded to other classrooms in 2005.

This month the Desert Awareness Committee proudly introduces the latest edition of *The Fragile Desert*. Full of pictures and information, the book covers a raft of new topics and updated material about bewildering plants and animals, our cohabitators in this amazing Desert Foothills.

Thirty years young and still growing, the Desert Awareness Committee of the Desert Foothills Land Trust looks forward with confidence and caring to the challenges of the next thirty years.

Editor's note: As of June, 2010, the Desert Awareness Committee became affiliated with the Foothills Community Foundation and now has web pages within the FCF web site at http://www.azfcf.org/desert_awareness_index.html. In recent years, the DAC has refurbished Gateway Desert Awareness Park in Cave Creek, and installed new desert plant identification signage at the Cave Creek Museum. DAC continues to work cooperatively with the Carefree/Cave Creek Chamber of Commerce on local events and has expanded the school program, Desert Reach, to include all five Cave Creek elementary schools.

