

Published: 02.25.2008

Buffelgrass has potential to radically alter desert

Opinion by Dennis Dickerson

If there were no saguaro cacti in Saguaro National Park 100 years from now, it would sadden anyone who appreciates their beauty and value to the Sonoran Desert environment that we enjoy today.

That scenario, however, is something that possibly could become reality if we don't do something soon to prevent the further spread of an invasive weed known as buffelgrass. This unwanted plant is colonizing the Catalina foothills and the Tucson basin at an astonishing pace.

Buffelgrass is commonly seen along roadsides across the Tucson region and is spreading into our mountain parks. In some areas, vacant lands are covered with buffelgrass. The buffelgrass plant establishes a foothold and spreads rapidly, eventually taking over large areas. It literally crowds out existing plants, denying them room to grow and robbing adjacent plants of water.

The most serious threat is that buffelgrass burns. It burns very hot. Think of a saguaro (or any other cactus) in the midst of buffelgrass burning in excess of 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Once an area is burned, buffelgrass returns even stronger since fire is part of its natural life cycle. Fire has been unknown in the Sonoran Desert. Unless we stop it now, eventually the desert will change into a savannah-like ecosystem, dominated by buffelgrass.

Something at a communitywide level needs to be done to raise the awareness of this invasive plant, which poses a serious fire threat to our native environment.

If you would like to invest in the ongoing security of our Sonoran Desert environment, we invite you to volunteer on Saturday for a regionwide, concerted effort to remove buffelgrass.

Organized by Pima Association of Governments, Buffelgrass Eradication Day is intended to highlight the challenge posed by this new threat to our desert and to mobilize a greater volunteer response. While we cannot eliminate buffelgrass overnight, we can work together to stop what will, if left unchecked, destroy the desert environment that makes the Tucson region unique to the world.

You won't get many chances to personally change the world or to save an ecosystem — this opportunity is real and is literally around the corner or down the street.

Help make a difference by visiting www.buffelgrass.org to learn more about the organized volunteer efforts Saturday and register with one of the groups to help preserve the Sonoran Desert beauty around us.

How to help

To participate in Buffelgrass Eradication Day, go to www.buffelgrass.org to sign up or contact Dennis Dickerson at 792-1093 or ddickerson@pagnet.org.

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