

A lizard's life among the Seri Indians

Posted: December 21, 2004

by: **Brenda Norrell** / Indian Country Today

DESEMBOQUE, Mexico - In the Seri homeland, the blue waters of the Pacific bay reach up and kiss the desert, with its ironwood and medicine plants. Laughing alongside the turquoise water is Amalia Astorga, Seri storyteller and herbalist.

Astorga's memory is long, like the history of the people here, and when she tells the story of "Efrain of the Sonoran Desert," she reaches back to the lizard ways.

The book, "Efrain of the Sonoran Desert; A Lizard's Life Among the Seri Indians", was sparked when ethnobiologist Gary Paul Nabhan asked Astorga why the lizards, endangered elsewhere, thrive in the Seri homeland.

Nabhan, during his years visiting the Seri, discovered there were more lizards around whenever Seri were present. Perhaps Astorga knew the secret.

"When I asked her if her people knew anything special which would help us keep lizards from going extinct, she turned to me, and began to weep," Nabhan recalled.

Astorga told him that there are many kinds of lizards here. Then she told him of Efrain, her lizard friend, and the first time she saw Efrain rising from the sand into the bright sunlight. Turning his head, he looked her house over, as if to size it up.

"He ran around without a tail, something few lizards do. At first he'd just come, sit beside me and stare out to sea, but after some months, he let me bounce him on my knee. I would bring him dry wheat, which he'd scratch at and eat, but I'd never make him do tricks for treats.

"Still, he grew big with me."

For five months Efrain came to visit. Finally, when the summer grew hot and the desert dried out, he brought his wife and kids with him to drink from Astorga's saucer of water on the sand. The lizards came to visit for many years, every day, and Efrain remained her favorite.

"My sister once looked at him and said, 'He's as true to you as any husband could be.'"

Astorga's family loved him and the whole Seri village - fishermen, ironwood carvers and makers of shell necklaces - came to know him.

Then, one day, while Astorga was out gathering limberbush to make baskets, Efrain tried to visit while she was gone. "None of my family saw him at first, which is too bad, because the wild dogs did."

The wild dogs had been dumped in the desert and were not the Mexican hairless dogs, with their floppy ears, that Astorga and the Seri loved.

"He must have tried to escape from them, running hard, but they caught him at last by one of his back legs. He kept on running toward my home, hiding under my chair, but before I had returned, Efrain had died."

While Astorga and her daughter cried, they buried him in the desert, as they would a great elder or sacred leatherback turtle. "I cried and cried for many days and couldn't bring myself to eat, even though my family brought me cactus fruits and fish. All I could do was remember Efrain, the

lizard who made my life so rich."

Astorga grew thin with sadness and ends her story here.

Neither Astorga nor Nabhan say the word, the force that holds the universe together and attracts lizards, but Astorga's tears tell of love.

Seri, who call themselves Comcaac, which means "the people," live on the coast of Baja, Calif., on the mainland of Mexico, across the water from the Baja Peninsula. They consider leatherback turtles, giant boojum trees and teddy-bear cholla people as well.

Only 650 Seri remain. But as Nabhan points out in the book, no people anywhere are more alive.

Seri tell of being descended from giants who once lived on the Peninsula of Baja, Calif. Scientists agree that the people and their language are different from other Indian tribes in North America.

Still, the invasion of the Spaniards and the diseases they brought to Mexico caused the Seri people to dwindle to 200. Although the number of Seri has now increased, ethnologists consider them an endangered people.

Seri, Nabhan pointed out, are at risk, like the 8,000 Yanomami in the Amazon, and tribal languages across North America. Now, 3,500 of the world's remaining 6,500 languages may die this century if not preserved.

Nabhan pointed out that Seri keep their language alive by making it fun for children. The desert tortoise, for example, is called "the ones who tuck their heads inside," or "the ones who hide beneath the trees."

There are songs about the 48 kinds of lizards, turtles and snake people who live in the desert here. Turtles, snakes and iguana-like lizards are survival food and 12 kinds of reptiles are emergency medicine. There are songs, too, for the mythic snakes that live in the mountains.

Earlier, Astorga and Nabhan walked 250 miles across the desert in the spring of 2000 to call attention to the need to preserve the plants and lifeways. They joined Seri, O'odham and Yaqui and walked from the Seri coast of Mexico to Tucson, Ariz., in the Desert Walk for Health and Heritage.

Pausing in Ali Cukson, Ariz., on the Tohono O'odham Nation, near the international border, O'odham greeted them with the old songs sang for tired runners from their sacred Baboquivari Mountains.

Crossing the desert on foot with saguaro ribs for walking sticks, the walkers promoted indigenous foods in the fight against diabetes. Astorga and her husband, Adolfo Burgos, said they prepared for the journey by purifying themselves with tea brewed from the ironwood plant.

Cooking over open campfires, they baked mescal from the agave plant and prepared soups of snail and shark fins. There was also venison, and chia seed drink, stewed nopalitos (cactus pads) and cholla cactus buds. They ate chapalote, a Native ground popcorn at night, and greeted the mornings with mesquite and amaranth pancakes, topped with prickly pear syrup. Wild blossoms provided a punch of ocotillo flowers.

"Native foods and medicines protected Native people from diabetes for centuries," Nabhan told Indian Country Today on the walk. "Wherever indigenous people live, eating local indigenous food is better for their bodies, their communities, their economies, and the land itself."

Nabhan said mesquite beans and acorns rank among the top 10 foods ever analyzed for

effectively controlling blood sugar. Cactus foods like nopalitos also provide an abundance of fibers known as gums and mucilages that help break down carbohydrates for digestion and convert sugars slowly.

Meanwhile, back in Desemboque, Astorga continues to teach traditional songs and dances to Seri children, gather medicine plants and wield her special brand of love.

Keeping the lifeways alive with laughter and memory, Astorga traveled to the United States and Europe to share her culture. In 1998, she was honored as a "Keeper of the Desert Treasure" by the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, Ariz., for passing on herbal knowledge, songs and stories to the younger generation of Seri.

"Efrain of the Sonoran Desert, A Lizard's Life Among the Seri Indians", by Amalia Astorga, as told to Gary Paul Nabhan and illustrated by Janet K. Miller, is available from Cinco Puntos Press in El Paso, Texas on the Web at: www.cincopuntos.com.

<http://www.indiancountry.com/content.cfm?id=1096410043>