

# Resilience

By Debra VanDeventer

It was a night no Oro Valley resident will ever forget. In the dark hours of June 5, 2020, a lightning strike ignited the drought-dry foliage on Pusch Ridge, setting the mountain ablaze. For weeks, billows of smoke darkened the sky and filled my lungs with acrid air. Helicopters swarmed like angry hornets dumping fire retardant as wind-swept flames leapt up and over the mountain. At night, the fire revealed its power, lighting the night sky in its menacing orange glow. Our home was not in harm's way, but many in Oro Valley and the Catalina Foothills were on alert and later evacuated. Thanks to the efforts of tenacious fire crews, no lives or homes were lost as the Bighorn Fire raged for 48 days, burning nearly 120,000 acres.

Catalina State Park had been fire headquarters and closed to visitors as cleanup operations were underway. After the last of the flames were doused, remnants of scarlet fire retardant stained the face of the scorched mountain, a vivid reminder of the war that had been waged. What little rain we received that summer resulted in a "black monsoon" as charred debris filled the washes and pooled in molasses-colored rivulets. When the park reopened, I viewed the destruction up close. As I hiked the Birding Trail, trees that had once shaded the path were reduced to blackened stumps. Along the Canyon Loop Trail, I could see where the flames had danced, destroying one tree and sparing the next. Yuccas turned into voodoo dolls; crispy golden fronds stuck out like wild hair on their grotesque charcoal faces. Barrel cactus had boiled in their own juices.

And our beloved saguaros... It is estimated that as many as 2,000 of the iconic cacti are gone forever. I paused in reverence at the base of a brave saguaro, still standing, but beyond hope. Its head bowed, its arms lifted in desperation. What remained of its tough outer skin was burned beyond recognition and hung from its bleached-wood skeleton. Unlike some of the other desert plants, the saguaros would not spring back. It would take decades, lifetimes, to replace them. It seemed like the end of the story. One more reason to give up on a world that was in the throes of a pandemic.

But Mother Nature had other plans. A year later, the 2021 summer monsoon season was the third wettest on record for the region, and the mountain began its rebirth. From my backyard vantage point, I could see a green fuzz on the once-scorched surface. It had been nine months since I'd last visited the Catalinas. I grabbed my hiking shoes and headed out to see for myself.

I noticed the change immediately. Deep green foliage and violet morning glories lined both sides of the trail as I made my way to the top of the ridge. Fueled by the abundant food supply, the butterfly population had exploded and dozens of the dainty brown and yellow insects became my hiking companions. Many of the charred yuccas were sprouting new fronds, and baby green leaves sprung from what I once thought were dead mesquite trees. Chain-fruit cholla cacti were bent to the ground, heavy with new growth.

As I descended into the canyon, the sound of running water delighted me, a rare treat for desert hikers. No longer brown with sludge, the small but crystal clear stream bubbled over rocks and spilled into the wash. Someone before me had paused long enough to make a stacked rock sculpture on a flat boulder beside the stream. A monument to what had been lost, a token of thanks for new beginnings.

Approaching the end of my hike, on the side of the canyon that had escaped the flames, a giant saguaro stood, as it had for a century stretching its massive arms to the azure desert sky. A trail of festive morning glories fanned out at its base like the train of a bridal gown. A vision of strength, hope and resilience. A message for us all.