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Asombro Institute for
Science Education

PO Box 891
Las Cruces, NM 88004
575-524-3334
information@asombro.org
<https://asombro.org>

Desert Stories Project Ignites Students' Wonder About the Desert

The desert is full of fascinating stories, from the relatively nondescript moth that is solely responsible for pollinating yuccas to the clam shrimp and tadpole shrimp that hatch only when enough rain fills low-lying desert playas.

Thanks to Asombro's 10-year-old Desert Stories Project, these stories are coming alive for elementary students throughout southern New Mexico.

"When New Mexico adopted new reading and math standards 10 years ago, even teachers who loved teaching science told us that they were having trouble fitting science into their busy schedules," said Asombro's Executive Director,

Dr. Stephanie Bestelmeyer. "We knew we could develop three-lesson modules that cover reading, writing, math, and science standards while engaging students in hands-on activities focused on these fascinating stories from the desert."

Desert Stories started with a 3rd-grade module on the yucca and yucca moth mutualism. Students complete full science investigations, describe yucca seed pods using adjectives, and practice measuring skills on a model yucca roots.

Inspired by the success of the 3rd-grade module, Asombro's team

developed modules for 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th grades over the next seven years. Each module intentionally combines grade-level standards in reading, writing, math, and science while focusing on a new desert story:

- 1st grade - what humans can learn from desert plant and animal structures
- 2nd grade - seed dispersal
- 3rd grade - yucca/yucca moth mutualism
- 4th grade - desert plant and animal adaptations
- 5th grade - food webs in desert playas

With modules for 1st through 5th grades, an individual

student can participate in these three-lesson modules throughout elementary school. This dream is closer to reality this school year thanks to a grant from the Lineberry Foundation. Asombro staff will bring the Desert Stories modules to every 1st through 5th grade class at several schools this year.



"THE STUDENTS ARE VERY ENGAGED. I LOVE HOW SO MANY OTHER SKILLS [MATH, READING] ARE INCORPORATED INTO THE SCIENCE LESSON."

-ANONYMOUS TEACHER REVIEW



Meet Asombro's New Science Educator, Jeremy Lane

Jeremy is originally from Corsicana, Texas, but he has adopted Las Cruces as his home and loves the desert southwest. He has a Bachelor's degree in Rangeland Ecology and Management, with a minor in Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, from Texas A&M University. He went on to study the effects of prescribed burning and grazing on Texas horned lizards for his Master's degree in Biology from West Texas A&M University.

All of Jeremy's professional experience comes from the Chihuahuan Desert, having spent over six years in biologist roles and an additional six years as a public information specialist for a state wildlife agency. Though much of his previous experience comes from being a wildlife biologist, Jeremy has realized that his true passion is in outreach education, and he is beyond thankful to be doing what he enjoys on a daily basis.



What do you like most about your new position?

I like seeing people get excited about their local wildlife. Being interested in exotic animals from faraway lands is great, but appreciating the amazing species in our own backyards promotes understanding and protection of natural resources locally.

Red or green?

When it comes to picante fuerte, I'm a lightweight, so I usually ask which one packs less of a punch. It's hard to beat that leftover red sauce on a plate getting mixed with a fresh sopapilla and honey though.



Meet William Lukefahr, Asombro's First Nature Park Manager



William has always been a naturalist at heart, and he enjoys observing and studying all aspects of the environment. He received a Bachelor's in Science in Biology with a minor in Chemistry at Texas A&M University-Kingsville (TAMUK). He also worked at TAMUK's venom research center where he assisted with venom extraction from most of the venomous snake species in North America.

William then received his Master's in Evolutionary Biology and Ecology from the University of Texas at El Paso, where he studied the ecological and parasitic effects on parthenogenetic whiptail lizards here in our beautiful Chihuahuan Desert.

In addition to now serving as Asombro's first part-time Nature Park Manager, William is a biology instructor at Doña Ana Community College, teaching major and non-major biology courses.

True to his naturalist tendencies, when he's not working, William enjoys hiking, camping, and road-cruising for "herps" with his wife. He also gives tours at Mt. Cristo Rey, highlighting the cretaceous dinosaur tracks and other fossils that are preserved there. William also serves on the board and as a tour guide for Celebration of Our Mountains. No matter what course he is teaching or tour he is giving, William always tries to bring his expertise along with his love for nature and our unique Chihuahuan Desert. While he's caring for the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park, he'll also bring these passions to the lucky visitors he meets on the trails.

Sumitra Neupane: Wonder Award Recipient of the Quarter



Congratulations to Sumitra Neupane, the recipient of Asombro's Wonder Award for outstanding volunteer service this quarter!

Sumi is originally from Nepal. She recently moved to Las Cruces with her partner, a new Postdoctoral Physical Scientist with the Jornada Experimental Range.

Sumi enjoys working with elementary school students the most. No matter what Sumi is helping Asombro with, whether preparing materials at monthly volunteer gatherings or assisting with field trips or classroom visits, she always has a delightful attitude. Recently, during one of our busiest weeks, Sumi was in the classroom with us every day, allowing Asombro to reach so many students and teachers.

Thank you, Sumi, for your outstanding service to Asombro!

Annular Eclipse Viewing at the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park

On Saturday, October 14, more than 200 visitors watched the annular solar eclipse at the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park. Many thanks to NMSU's Dr. Paul Mason and Dr. Ludi Miao for sharing their expertise and telescopes with visitors!



Photos by Will Keener

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Luminarias Light Up the Desert December 8, 2023

Celebrate the holiday season with one of the Asombro staff members' favorite events of the year! Enjoy more than 400 luminarias along the paved Desert Experience Mini Trail at the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park. Sip a cup of hot cocoa, purchase science-themed gifts, enjoy a cookie, and sing holiday carols in the heart of the desert.

Date: **Friday, December 8**

Time: **5:00 - 7:30 p.m.**

Location: **Chihuahuan
Desert Nature Park**
(56501 N. Jornada Road)

Cost: **Free, although
donations to support
Asombro's work are
always welcome.**

Suggested donation: \$5



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