

# TUCSON, ARIZONA

With 350 days of sunshine per year, on average, Tucson, Arizona is the sunniest city in the United States. The city is a gateway to the over 200,000 acres of preserved natural resources and wilderness that surround the metropolitan area. The county's ultimate goal is to continue preserving the area's natural resources by connecting these public lands to one another and forming a ring of preserved areas around the city. This area boasts the world's largest population of Saguaro cactus—a universal symbol of the American west and producer of the white saguaro blossom, state flower of Arizona.

These tracts consist of federal and non-federal lands, but the Park Service is most prominent at Saguaro National Park. The park has two parcels, one on the western and one on the eastern side of the city. This gives the park a unique opportunity to serve populations around the city, and connect to the other public lands that also house the diverse and unique wildlife of the area.

Diana Rhoades, the Urban Fellow in Tucson, affirms that Saguaro is the National Park for the people of Tucson. Additionally Tucson serves one of the largest metropolitan populations of Latinos (40%), yet Latinos only make up 2% of the Park's visitors. With the plethora of natural resources around the gateway community, combined with the potential to engage with a growing and key demographic, Tucson was a prime

gateway community in which to activate the Urban Agenda.

The implementation of the three principles of the Urban Agenda often connected to the mission of connecting Latino audiences to Saguaro and surrounding public lands. "I approached it from being embedded in city politics and the Latino community. I was constantly in the community advocating

for the NPS. I reached a new audience just by being in an urban space downtown in an urban co-working location," Rhoades said, rather than basing her office in the park outside Tucson.

One of the most effective culminations of this work was the formation of an all-volunteer hiking and advocacy group for national parks and public lands: Latinos for Parks. Through the creative leveraging of resources from partners like Latino Outdoors, the National Parks Conservation Association, and more, NPS was able to offer a Latino campout and volunteer day at the Grand Canyon for Earth Day. The group that went decided to become more active in using and protecting parks and public lands, so they created a social media page and presence to engage new members for campouts, hikes, and days of service.

Another key way NPS tackled relevancy and diversity was by hiring and mentoring diverse youth through new programs like



the Next Generation Ranger program. Over the course of the pilot, in partnership with Friends of Saguaro National Park, NPS hired 30 Next Generation Rangers to work in Tucson and at Saguaro, and connected many of these youth to career opportunities in outdoor recreation and conservation. These youth were also encouraged to participate in the work of the Urban Agenda, and were able to offer new perspectives in regards to the Latino and other disadvantaged communities in the city.

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## LESSONS LEARNED

### When You Think Big, Everyone Thinks a Little Bigger

Large initiatives like the Urban Agenda, or the National Park Service Centennial give people the the freedom to take chances in establishing new perspectives, creative methods of work, and effective capacity-building. “One of the things that I’ve been impressed by is the continued elevation of women into powerful superintendent roles,” remarks Rhoades. The Urban Agenda calls for institutional changes that better address and reflect the diversity of Americans. Doubling-down on the commitment to elevate women invested in the principles of the Urban Agenda into leadership roles where they “think big,” promotes a supportive working community, and inspires other women in NPS to see that they can build the organization’s capacity by pursuing and stepping into leadership roles as well.

### Reinforcing Parks as Healthy Refuges in Which to Live Work and Play

Statistically it has been shown that recreation in National Parks and other public lands are excellent for improving and maintaining one’s health. Programs like Healthy Parks Healthy People and the more recent Park Rx Program connect and familiarize urban populations with natural and healthy resources around them. These programs concurrently tie back to One NPS. With the support of health initiatives connected to parks and public lands, NPS showcases the collective and overlapping benefits of various National Park and public land units, and presents them as



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one robust resource where different land management organizations and agencies align their programmatic goals around improving community health.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NPS

While reflecting on how to the Park Service should continue implementing the Urban Agenda principles after the pilot, Rhoades noted the importance of stressing the economic benefits of parks. “Parks and public lands are economic drivers and job creators and we need to be talking about it more often,” Rhoades impresses. Using data—like visitors to Saguaro spending nearly \$53 million in communities near the park, or that the outdoor recreation economy in Arizona generates \$10.6 billion in consumer spending annually—was the most successful perspective to galvanize support across elected and public officials.

She asserts that Urban Agenda principles can work anywhere in the country – urban or rural. “The goal is to connect to the community in which you work. Have you met your elected officials, have you talked to your local parks and recreation and health agencies? Get to know your gateway community.” Hire locally and hire diversely whenever possible. Hiring locally leads to bringing in someone with a new network, with potential new connections to partners and community members to be made. Hiring diversely achieves a similar connection, and must be a priority of the Park Service in urban areas with rapidly growing populations of people of color.