LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

Lancaster came home in 1995. Tucson was booming. Housing developments were springing up seemingly every week. The first thing commonly laid out and asphalted were the streets. And, as throughout Tucson, during summer monsoons those streets would run like rivers, sending water pouring down into the arroyos in torrents scouring the banks, flowing too violently to properly soak back into the land.

The idea Tucson could live off its scant rainfall seemed a pipe dream. But other Tucsonans were also looking at those streets and trying to imagine a different possibility. Lancaster threw himself into teaching water-harvesting classes wherever he could find an audience, "just trying to create doors to connect people to this knowledge." Those sessions would become a touchstone and inspiration for many.

Yet even as he spread the word, Lancaster knew his own education wasn't finished. He continued to explore the history of the area he loved, often with his friends such as, Suzanne and Paul Fish, archaeologists at the Arizona State Museum. The more he learned, the more clearly he saw that the future he envisioned started with the past.

Humans have lived in the Tucson valley for thousands of years. It's sometimes referred to as the oldest continuously cultivated spot in North America. Archeologists have found evidence that agriculture in the area goes back at least 4,000 years. +

The people who lived here millennia ago were farmers who grew crops both down in the river flats and other crops in the higher elevations. To do so, they dug irrigation canals from the Santa Cruz River and gathered rainfall runoff for the higher fields, using techniques that would be familiar to Maseko in Zimbabwe.

As he began to work out his own water harvesting methods, Lancaster came to see how closely they were tied to those ancient practices.

But other Tucsonans were also looking at those streets and trying to imagine a different possibility.

Standing on Tumamoc Hill outside of present-day Tucson with Lancaster, Suzanne Fish gestures toward the valley below and conjures up the ancient world.

*"**None of this is new.** We've got such an incredible legacy to draw on," he says. "The people who through time have lived here: they learned to live in balance with these surroundings."*

Lancaster also realized that the secret about that past was that it wasn't even really past. The old lessons are still alive on today's Tohono O'odham Nation south of Tucson, the third largest reservation in the United States.

The Tohono O'odham trace their lineage back to the two-millennia-old Hohokam civilization that flourished in the area until the mid 15th century. In recent years, a cultural revival among tribal members has focused on reconnecting with the past, including traditional farming practices. + Members of the tribe currently operate a successful farm that draws on many of the ancient water harvesting techniques

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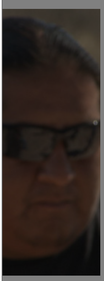

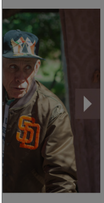

HEZ, WHO SUPPORTS HIS WATER THAT IRRIGATE THE LAND OF SEVERAL SMALL FARMERS.

+ Traditional farming practices

During a visit to the Tohono O'odham nation, several younger tribal members spoke about how coming to work on the tribal farm gave them a chance to reconnect with their elders.

Gabriel Mendoza said it reminded him of his grandmother caring for the small garden she grew near their home. "For me to land here was really a huge opportunity to learn what my grandmother was trying to teach me back then," he says.

On the tribal farm, the Tohono O'odham raise traditional crops on a commercial scale. Key to the Tohono system is careful harvesting of the rain through berms and channels that direct water to fields where terraces hold the rain, giving the water plenty of time to soak into the land, an approach that would make Maseka, half a world away, smile with recognition.

Another key to the Tohono O'odham's centuries of survival in the desert is the hard crops the tribe has bred through many generations. They have their own varieties of corn, beans and squash.

"Our traditional foods are really drought tolerant and heat tolerant," says Nolan Johnson, who manages the farm. "In the summer monsoon rains, when temperatures get to 112 degrees, with the amount of water that you get here, you need to be really careful what you grow."

But as important as the physical practices of the Tohono O'odham may be their attitude toward the Sonoran Desert. They have created a culture that not only attempts to live within its limits, but also honors its identity . Religious ceremonies calling for the seasonal rains are part of culture, and so is an attitude of thankfulness for what is there.

A basic misconception about Native American cultures is that they're anti-modern. The Tohono O'odham enjoy their iPods and televisions just like everyone else. The secret to their longevity, the centuries they have survived in this unforgiving land, is that they aren't anti-past. They don't reflexively scorn old practices, but take the best of traditional knowledge and apply it to today's challenges.

That knowledge is freely shared. Lancaster and others working to encourage rainwater harvesting in Tucson acknowledge their debt to the ancient practices of the local tribes.

"Unfortunately, I think I am the last generation working in this orchard," he says.

But as he, Garcia and Lancaster sit by the canal, talking about the traditions of water use, it's clear there is an enduring connection. "What I see here is a picture into the past of what we had, the abundance we had that we've since lost," Lancaster says, speaking of Tucson. "So it's bittersweet for me to be here, but at the same time, it makes me realize all that is possible."

Tucson's history was slightly different. The fields and orchards were fed by the Santa Cruz River. Yet a similarly lush setting once existed. Today, the river flows only during rainstorms and most of the year Tucson is, in the words of Jonathan Mabury, Tucson's historic preservation officer, a "dusty, dry town." + To change that, Lancaster knew he was going to have to do more than preach.

He knew the change was going to have to start at home.

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