

F26.52 Agaves, bats, and bacanora: Translating academic jargon into everyday language for communities in Sonora, Mexico

Overview

This project will translate findings from an ethnography about human/non-human relationships into useful tools for communities. The in-depth study captures the nuances and complexities of several research sites just south of the US-Mexico border. The investigation examines bacanora, which is a type of mezcal with deep traditional ties to 'La Sierra' in eastern Sonora, Mexico. This cultural drink is made with one species of agave, *Agave angustifolia* haw, which is a culturally significant plant across Mesoamerica. Also included in the study is a nectar-feeding bat, *Leptonicterus yerbabuena*, who migrates from southern Mexico to southern Arizona during the summer. These bats rely upon the nectar of agaves to nourish them on their journey across Mexico. As the bacanora industry grows and demand increases, producers are harvesting wild agave at an unsustainable rate. This threatens the well-being of the plant, the bats, and the livelihoods of bacanora producers. How are communities responding? This multispecies ethnography explores this question and the relationships between these three species—agave, bat, human—in relation to sustainable management of bacanora production. We will develop educational resources from the findings of this research that are accessible--and fun--for communities in La Sierra and across the Arizona-Sonora borderlands.

What the student will DO and LEARN

This particular project will share culturally relevant information about bacanora, as well as the life histories, co-evolution and ecological roles of the agave and the bats with communities in La Sierra. The student will help me develop age-appropriate educational materials, including games and stories, to be shared with schools in rural towns in the region. We will also write a policy report with documentation of the situation in the region and recommendations for creating a more sustainable bacanora industry. This report will be distributed to political leaders in La Sierra and the Bacanora Regulatory Council, the government body that oversees the industry. The student will have an opportunity to accompany me to an agave summit in Alamos, Sonora in April 2026. We will share these materials with conference members, to include--among other professions--bacanora producers, government officials, conservationists, and scientists. This is an excellent opportunity to network and learn more about the work people are doing across the US-Mexico border. There may also be an opportunity to visit some of the towns in La Sierra to share our resources with community members. The student will learn valuable skills in how to turn academic writing into less-theoretical, more accessible and relevant materials for schools, community members, and government officials. Proficiency in Spanish is not required, but it is preferred.

Additional benefits

This project will help develop student's critical thinking skills while encouraging them to get creative, help me tell a story that intertwines three species. The work de-centers the human and encourages students to think about the world differently than our human-centric perspective. It offers the opportunity to learn about another culture in the mountains of Sonora, our neighbor to the south. We will discuss binational relations, looking at how groups work across borders. The student will develop communication skills as we create educational materials and policy reports.

Additional qualifications

Experience or familiarity with social science research
Ability to develop bilingual educational materials

A passport if traveling to Sonora, Mexico

Junior or Senior status

Time commitment 3

hrs/week for 30 weeks