

Everything is possible By Ben Wilder

Words for Exequiel Ezcurra

I had just returned from Mexico City in 2010 where I met Carolyn O'Meara, and we found a shared interest in seeing if there was a larger community of young researchers interested in the study and conservation of the Sonoran Desert. We developed an idea for a conference, the Next Generation Sonoran Desert Researchers. I took this seed of an idea to my major advisor, Exequiel Ezcurra, whom I had the honor of studying with at UC, Riverside. I shared our sense that we did not know who was doing what and where, and felt disconnected from our colleagues across the region and in different disciplines. Were we crazy? Was this something worth pursuing? Exequiel met my questions with a wave of excitement and encouragement. He instantly validated the idea and, in true Exequiel fashion, shared with me the historical context of previous cross-border initiatives such as the Reunies del Mar de Cortés and the International Sonoran Desert Alliance in the 1990s. However, those initiatives had faded and since the hardening of the border following 9/11 in 2001 the Sonoran Desert research community was indeed becoming increasingly fragmented. Yes, such a meeting as we were proposing was needed and Exequiel committed at that moment to making it happen. He provided \$20,000 of initial funding and wrote a letter challenging the foundations of the region to match his investment.

I will never forget leaving Exequiel's office that day, my head spinning. As in so many things, what starts as a dream, a far-flung idea, or an inkling becomes reality once Exequiel touches it. With him, anything is possible.

Simply put, Exequiel is the most consequential scientist, thinker, and conservationist the Gulf of California and the Sonoran Desert have ever had.

The imprints of Exequiel's efforts extend across our desert and sea, throughout Mexico, and across the globe. They are evidenced in the tens of thousands of acres conserved through his leadership within and outside of the Mexican government, from the Pinacate y Gran Desierto de Altar Biosphere Reserve, to the Vizcaino desert, condors soaring in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir, and protected waters and islands of the Gulf of California. His words shape how we look at the desert. I think I can safely guess his general writing featured in dozens of books and films has inspired each of us here many times over. They capture the intangible quality of the Sonoran Desert that fuels our passion better than any other writer I know. Yet, he also underscores these words in over 200 scientific articles and book chapters that reveal novel and

fundamental aspects of how the desert and sea function. These are almost always done in concert with his dozens of students and collaborators, never with his name first, though many should be. As any collaborator of Exequiel can tell you, what begins as a pile of data you have painstakingly collected for years, though can't discern, becomes an elegant and statistically robust paper that not only addresses the question you had in mind, but has far broader impacts than you imagined. Anything becomes possible.

Among the many topics he has focused on, his work has elevated our understanding of the critical role of mangroves for fisheries and blue carbon, the ecophysiology and brilliant adaptations of dozens of desert plants, how global scale climatic phenomena are manifested in the behavior and demography of seabirds and plants on desert islands, the imprints of the previous glacial cycles on the patterns of biodiversity we see today, and the cosmology and calendar systems of the early inhabitants of the heart of Mexico – always connecting these results to conservation.

Perhaps the most wonderful part of Exequiel is how fun it is to work with and learn from him. As those of us that are lucky enough to have the privilege to call him a teacher and a friend know, any opportunity to be with him in a zoom meeting, a call, and if you are especially fortunate - the field - is a gift we will always treasure. You will learn more than you could have imagined, and in every possible direction from history, statistics, population theory, ethics, and of course botany and ecology.

When Exequiel speaks, people listen. His career transcends borders and political agendas to find a common ground between nature, scientists, and government. In an interview for *Nature* magazine, Exequiel said: "I learned that when you do good science to build a good case, the opportunity to use it will eventually arise". The model Exequiel exemplifies and sets for us – pursuing knowledge and making people care – anchors us in the fact that anything is possible.

