

A teacher as never seen before By Ben Wilder

Words for Humberto Romero Morales

Humberto opens new worlds.

He did it for me when I found him through the help of Cathy and Steve Marlett with questions of what plants occur on, Tahejöc, Isla Tiburón. I found my way to his house in Punta Chueca, just across from the largest island in Mexico. I was a completely young and green researcher. I introduced myself, told him I was working with botanist Richard Felger, and of my interest to learn what plants occur on Tiburón. Almost immediately Humberto said, “OK, let’s go to the island” and was instantly ready as I, in shock, assembled my loads of field gear, bags for collecting, and plant presses.

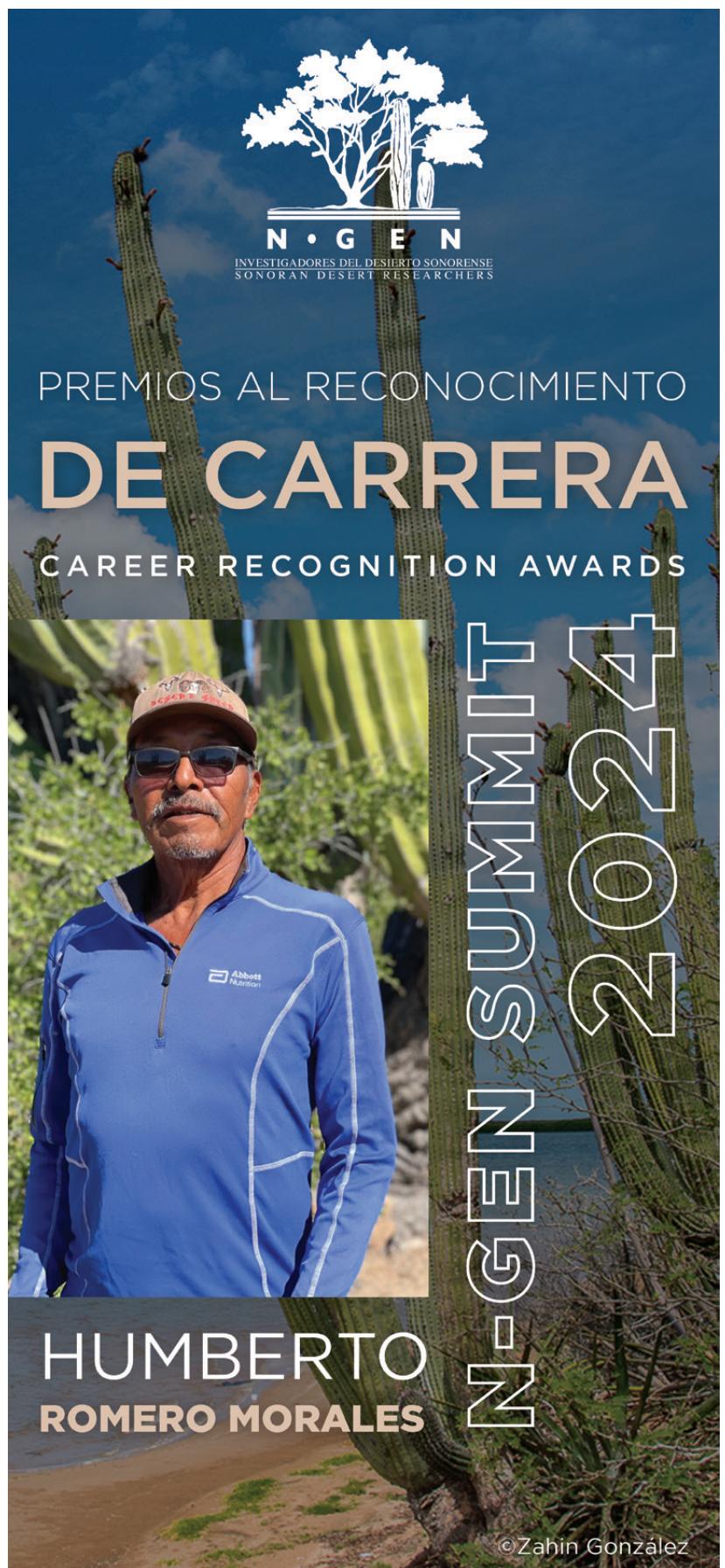
I am still amazed at how quickly we were whisked across the Canal de Infiernillo to the island, then into one of the SUVs used in bighorn sheep hunting on the island, and up to the base of the towering Sierra Kunkaak. We dismounted from the car and I tried to keep up with Humberto as he set a blistering pace through the dense desertscrub. Past steep hillsides, we emerged upon a beautiful view of an arroyo and the Sierra. It was quite green compared to the rest of the island’s vegetation. Humberto stopped, and I could tell we had reached our destination. He sang a song in Cmiique Itom (the language of the Comcaac) for the vegetation. He finished and said, “OK, where do you want to go.”

That day in late 2004 marked the beginning of the most rewarding collaboration and dear friendship. Over the dozens of trips and projects since, Humberto has consistently and unwaveringly shared his knowledge and insights into the plants and landscapes of his homeland. His knowledge is vast and spans multiple foreign languages (especially Latin), world views (tradicional y occidental), and generations. I have never met anyone who is as voracious for new information and who so readily absorbs it. “What is the new name for *Acacia greggii*,” he asked me just a couple months ago after botanists changed its scientific name again. After telling him the new name once, *Senegalia greggi*, he had it committed to memory, while I am still working to recall these new scientific names.

I am lucky enough to have found my way to Humberto’s side, where we instantly connected to a shared passion for discovery. Some of my best times have been when we would climb the highest peaks of the island, him showing me plants he had seen years prior on bighorn sheep hunts or us seeing them together for the first time. With herbarium specimens in hand, we would later, most often with Richard, put names to

these species - almost always new records for the island's flora and range extensions. Otro más en la mochila, Humberto would say.

I am far from alone from having benefited from Humberto's generosity and expansive knowledge and wisdom. After being one of the first buceos for calle de hacha among the Comcaac out of Desemboque, captaining his first boat at the age of 16 and collecting about 40 kilos of callo a day, Humberto changed his trajectory at 35. Bighorn sheep had just been introduced (re-introduced) to Tiburón and hunting efforts were just starting. Humberto started as a chauffeur on the hunts, but quickly rose to a guide and leader of the hunting effort for many years to come. Around that same time, in 1998, Gary Nabhan and Lori Monti offered the first courses on para-ecology with the Comcaac. That is where the knowledge about the plants he had learned from his mother in his youth connected with a broad external framework for understanding, and for him instantly clicked. From there he kept exploring, observing, and connecting his observations and discoveries to what he taught himself from the Seri Ethnobotany. Our subsequent work then built on his incredible platform to further document the plants of the islands.



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As Humberto recently explained to me, he sees the compilation of Comcaac and Western knowledge systems as the vehicle to extend the limits of what others can learn and achieve. This is vibrantly manifested in Humberto's drive to educate. He is a powerful medical healer, using the plants and their long-held knowledge to alleviate ailments for many in his community - though keeping some secret recipes. He is a natural teacher and leader and readily shares his knowledge with whomever is lucky enough to ask.

I was fortunate to accompany Humberto on a brief trip to Desemboque last spring. It was during a time of elections and a bit of division within the community. I was taken aback by the outward affection and respect everyone showed to Humberto, and how recognized and honored he and his efforts are. There was a similar outpouring of support and recognition for Humberto when we announced his receipt of this award, from all across the region.

His current project, Jardín Botánico Xasscla Án (garden of columnar cacti), just outside of Punta Chueca creates a space for research, conservation, education, and culture. It is an investment in the younger generation and a place where people can connect to the multiple ways of knowing the plants of the desert.

Humberto preserves and ceaselessly passes along millennia of knowledge. He does it in a way that has never been seen before. He sets a precedent for how to document, preserve, and share understanding that bridges distinct world views. His efforts have opened new worlds for those fortunate enough to learn from him, and will continue to inspire and guide for decades to come.