



INVESTIGADORES DEL DESIERTO SONORENSE
SONORAN DESERT RESEARCHERS

N-Gen Mentorship Program 2026

Kino Bay Retreat, Sonora

April 24 - 26, 2026

Prepared by

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Executive Summary

From April 24–26, 2026, the N-Gen Mentorship Program 2026 Retreat was held in Bahía de Kino, Sonora. The retreat brought together 36 participants, including 16 mentors and 20 mentees, creating a space for dialogue, reflection, and the exchange of experiences. Throughout the weekend, participants explored different perspectives on their respective roles while mentor–mentee pairs began identifying and aligning their shared goals for the mentorship process.

The retreat opened with an interactive team-building activity designed to strengthen connections among participants while highlighting the importance of effective communication and active listening as essential tools for understanding challenges and working toward common objectives. Participants then co-created the event agenda through an unconference format, proposing topics of interest for the mentor panel, mentee panel, and mixed discussion panel.

Two parallel working sessions were held—one for mentors and one for mentees—each following its own agenda. These were followed by a joint panel discussion, where mentors and mentees exchanged ideas, expectations, and perspectives on the mentorship experience. Participants later met individually with their mentor–mentee partners to begin developing their shared work plans, building upon the insights gained throughout the retreat.

In the afternoon, participants joined a Walkxcape experience, exploring the landscapes surrounding Bahía de Kino while engaging in conversation, observing the local biodiversity, and reflecting collectively on their relationship with the Sonoran Desert.

The retreat concluded with a Projects of Passion showcase, an informal session in which participants voluntarily shared the projects, creative pursuits, and personal interests that inspire them and strengthen their connection with the Sonoran Desert.

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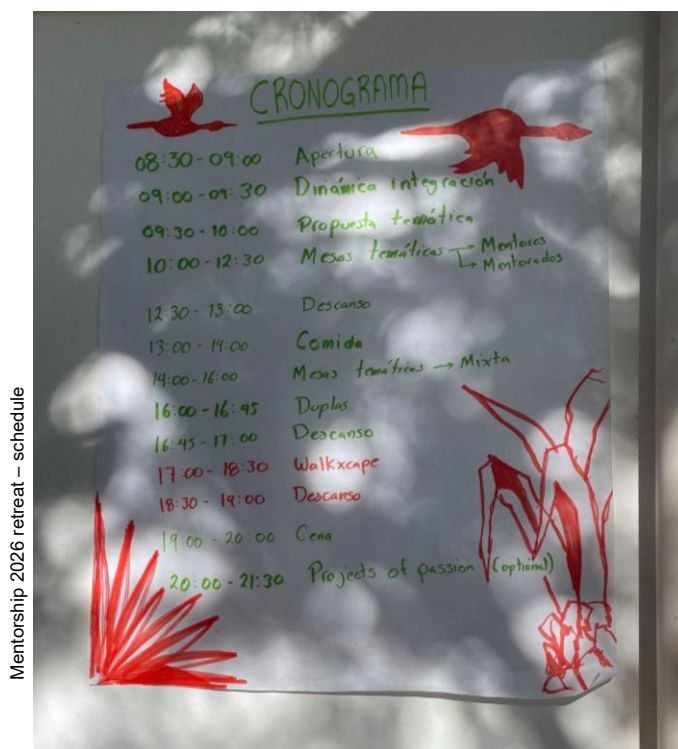
Hiking at Cerro Prieto / Photo: Gabriel Molinares



1. Summary of activities

Activities began on Friday, April 24, with participants arriving in Hermosillo before traveling together to Bahía de Kino. Upon arrival at the Kino Bay Center, participants settled into their accommodations and had time to explore the facilities, interact with one another, and visit the beach. Later that evening, the group gathered for a community dinner, followed by an informal walk along the beach that further strengthened relationships within the cohort.

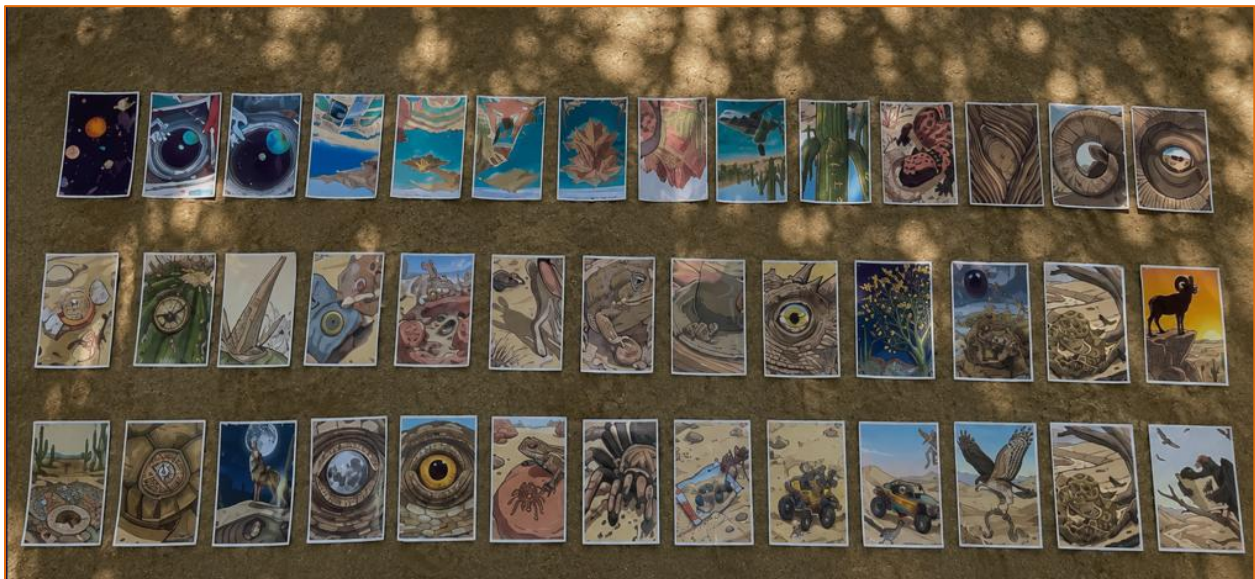
The program officially began on Saturday, April 25, with a group breakfast followed by the opening session. General guidelines and the retreat agenda were presented, and each participant introduced themselves by sharing their name, hometown, and area of work or interest.



The opening activity focused on team building and communication. Each participant received a card featuring an illustration related to the Sonoran Desert, which they were instructed not to show to anyone else.

Every illustration formed part of a larger visual sequence, with each card connected to both the one before and after it through a shared element. Working together, participants were challenged to reconstruct the complete sequence through conversation, observation, and collaboration.

The purpose of this activity was to encourage communication among all participants while illustrating the interconnected nature of the cohort. It emphasized the importance of teamwork, collective problem-solving, and working toward a common goal. At the same time, it highlighted the value of communicating one's own knowledge clearly while remaining open to listening to others and appreciating different perspectives and approaches.



Opening activity / Photos: Ben Wilder

2. Co-creating the agenda

The second activity introduced participants to the unconference format, a collaborative and participant-driven approach in which everyone contributes to building the event agenda. Rather than following a predetermined schedule, attendees were invited to freely propose topics they wished to explore and discuss. The proposed topics were organized into three discussion tracks: Mentor topics, Mentee topics and Mixed mentor–mentee topics.

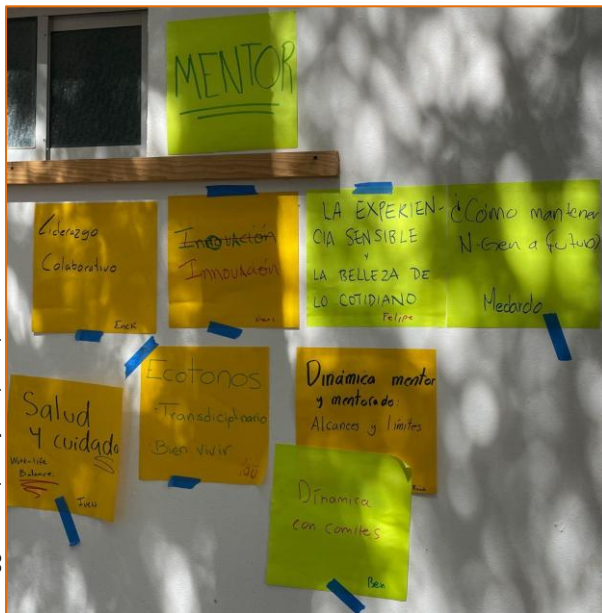
Participants wrote their ideas on cards, briefly explained their proposed topics, and placed them on the discussion board corresponding to their preferred session. This collaborative process resulted in 8 topics for the Mentor Panel, 8 topics for the Mentee Panel and 21 topics for the Mixed Panel Discussion. Together, these participant-generated topics became the foundation for the conversations and collaborative work carried out throughout the retreat.

Collective topics proposal / Photos: Ben Wilder





Suggested topics by the participants for the three sessions.



3. Mentor session

The Mentor session began with a discussion on maintaining a healthy balance between professional responsibilities and personal life, recognizing that mentorship requires a meaningful investment of time, commitment, and energy to effectively support a mentee.

Participants emphasized the importance of establishing the mentoring dynamic from the very beginning through an open and honest conversation between mentor and mentee. They agreed that fostering self-awareness and defining clear objectives from the outset creates a stronger foundation for the relationship. Mentorship should be understood as a space built on trust, where both individuals feel comfortable listening actively, sharing their experiences, expressing concerns, and learning from one another.

The discussion also addressed the role and boundaries of mentors. While mentors are expected to provide guidance and professional advice, they are not intended to replace health professionals or, in the case of graduate students, members of an academic advisory committee. Clarifying these expectations helps establish appropriate roles and responsibilities throughout the mentoring process.

Participants highlighted the value of creating an explicit Mentorship Agreement, to be jointly developed and accepted by both mentor and mentee. This agreement should outline expectations, communication guidelines, meeting frequency, shared responsibilities, and the commitments of both participants, as well as their relationship with the N-Gen Mentorship Program.

The group also discussed the importance of maintaining flexibility throughout the mentoring process and proposed adopting principles inspired by Open Space Technology, recognizing that meaningful conversations often emerge organically. The following principles were identified as valuable guidelines:

1. Whoever comes are the right people, recognizing that those present are the ones capable of generating meaningful ideas and solutions.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened, encouraging participants to focus on the present process rather than hypothetical alternatives.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time, acknowledging that creativity cannot be forced and should instead be embraced whenever it emerges.
4. When it's over, it's over, allowing conversations to conclude naturally, whether they finish early or continue as long as energy and interest remain.
5. Mentorship is a relationship between colleagues, emphasizing a horizontal rather than hierarchical relationship.
6. Promote mutual learning, encouraging shared experiences and two-way dialogue instead of one-directional instruction.

The panel also explored strategies for monitoring the mentorship process over time. Among the topics discussed were:

- a) Mentorship evaluation includes the importance of defining an appropriate frequency for assessing progress and requesting feedback from one another.
- b) Communicating outcomes, encouraging participants to document and share the experiences, projects, or achievements that emerge from the mentoring relationship. These could serve as inspirational stories, outreach materials, opportunities for new collaborations, or documented evidence of the program's impact.
- c) A closing event, where mentors and mentees could collectively share their experiences, lessons learned, and accomplishments at the end of the program.

Innovation was another important topic of discussion. Participants agreed that mentorship should move beyond a traditional model of knowledge transfer toward a co-creation process, in which mentor and mentee jointly define the products, outcomes, or experiences they wish to develop. Whenever possible, the relationship should prioritize shared experiences that foster reciprocal learning and collaborative growth.

The panel concluded with a discussion about the many benefits that mentorship can generate. Participants shared examples drawn from previous mentoring experiences, including:

- Fieldwork experience.
- Feedback on writing and editing.
- Increased self-confidence.
- Professional recognition and validation.
- Career and employment opportunities.
- Access to new experiences.
- Expansion of professional networks.
- Positive and constructive feedback.
- Guidance in writing research proposals and scholarship applications.
- Active listening and reduction of personal biases.
- Support in resolving questions and challenges.
- Sharing knowledge, information, and professional resources.

Participants agreed that these examples represent valuable opportunities that mentors should consider incorporating into their mentoring relationships whenever appropriate.



Mentor's panel / Photo: Ben Wilder

4. Mentee session

The Mentee Panel began with a conversation about environmental education and the different ways participants have sought to communicate conservation messages through their own initiatives. Many described their experiences using social media and other communication platforms to engage broader audiences, while also acknowledging the challenges of creating meaningful connections through these channels.

Participants reflected on the idea that social media may not always be the most effective medium for environmental education. Instead, they emphasized the importance of fostering direct, intentional, and community-based communication spaces that encourage dialogue and genuine engagement.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of recognizing and integrating the traditional knowledge of local communities within environmental education efforts. Participants agreed that conservation initiatives should acknowledge, value, and incorporate the experiences and perspectives of the people who have long inhabited these landscapes.

Another major topic centered on defining personal goals for the mentorship process. Several mentees expressed enthusiasm about receiving guidance from a mentor but admitted they were uncertain about what specific objectives they wished to pursue. To support one another, participants voluntarily shared their own aspirations, which included:

- a) Pursuing graduate studies and seeking guidance on possible academic pathways.
- b) Receiving advice on career development or returning to academia.
- c) Obtaining support for specific research projects.
- d) Deepening artistic skills and creative practice.
- e) Expanding professional networks and connections.

This exchange helped participants begin identifying potential goals for their mentorship experience and provided inspiration for shaping conversations with their mentors.

Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining a human-centered approach throughout the mentorship process. They stressed the value of openness, empathy, curiosity, and mutual respect, recognizing that mentors voluntarily dedicate their time, knowledge, and experience to support others. In return, mentees share the responsibility of maintaining communication, asking questions, participating actively, and making the most of the opportunities provided through the relationship.

Another discussion focused on the concept of success and how it should be understood within the context of conservation. Participants agreed that success should not be measured solely by the ability to persuade others, but rather by the capacity to foster awareness, inspire reflection, and encourage lasting changes in attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, participants proposed maintaining communication as a cohort throughout the duration of the program. They expressed interest in creating opportunities to continue exchanging ideas, providing mutual support, sharing resources, and collaborating as they advance in their professional development.



Mentee's panel / Photo: Ricardo Rodríguez

5. Mixed session discussion (mentors and mentees)

Following the mentor and mentee panel discussions, participants came together for a Mixed Panel discussion, providing an opportunity for mentors and mentees to exchange perspectives and collectively reflect on the mentorship experience.

The discussion began by reaffirming mentorship as a reciprocal relationship, where both mentor and mentee contribute to and benefit from the learning process. Participants emphasized that mentorship should not be viewed as a one-way transfer of knowledge, but rather as a collaborative partnership grounded in mutual learning, respect, and shared growth.

The conversation also highlighted the importance of identifying a clear and achievable objective early in the mentoring relationship, as well as jointly defining the methods, expectations, and timeline needed to accomplish it.

To help mentors better understand the needs of their mentees, participants were invited to openly share their expectations for the mentoring experience. The ideas generated included:

1. Expanding personal and professional perspectives.
2. Creating a safe, open, and dynamic space for communication.
3. Learning together through shared experiences.
4. Connecting personal needs with professional opportunities.
5. Exchanging experiences and knowledge.
6. Receiving practical tools while developing new skills.
7. Maintaining honest and transparent communication.
8. Establishing a written agreement outlining goals, expectations, and responsibilities.
9. Building a flexible and evolving mentoring relationship.
10. Receiving guidance in an atmosphere of trust.
11. Opening doors to new opportunities and experiences.
12. Creating a space where differing opinions are welcomed and respected.
13. Encouraging co-creation throughout the mentoring process.
14. Being honest about individual capacities, limitations, and expectations.
15. Providing a forum for sharing experiences, learning from others, and exploring different ways of working.
16. Promoting gender equity within the conservation community.
17. Contributing to reducing gender gaps in professional development.
18. Fostering empathy among participants.
19. Building a supportive community where ideas can be openly shared.

The session concluded with a collective reflection on the importance of maintaining communication throughout the mentorship process and recognizing that strong mentoring

relationships are built through trust, openness, and continuous dialogue. Following this discussion, the group moved on to the next scheduled activity.



Mixed panel discussion / Photos: Ben Wilder and Gabriel Molinares

6. Mentor-mentee working sessions

Following the sessions, each mentor–mentee pair was given dedicated time to meet individually and begin designing their shared work plan. During these sessions, participants discussed their interests, expectations, and professional goals, working together to define initial objectives and establish a roadmap for their mentoring relationship.



Mentor-mentee work session / Photos: Ben Wilder

7. Walkxcape experience

As part of the retreat's integration activities, participants joined a Walkxcape experience in the surrounding landscapes of Bahía de Kino. Walkxcape is an initiative that encourages participants to experience the landscape through walking, using movement as a starting point for observation, conversation, reflection, and documentation. Throughout the walk, participants shared stories, exchanged knowledge and photographed the landscape. The activity also strengthened relationships within the cohort by creating opportunities for informal conversations and shared experiences outside the workshop setting.



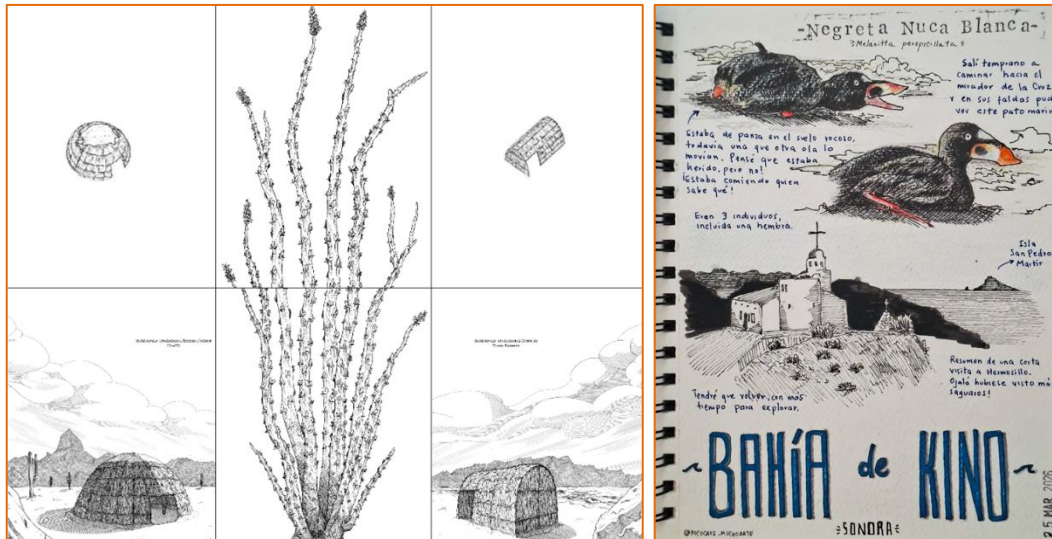
Walkxcape experience / Photos: Ben Wilder and Edoar Pimental

8. Projects of passion

The retreat concluded with an informal gathering dedicated to the Passion Projects Showcase. During this voluntary session, participants were invited to present the personal projects, creative endeavors, hobbies, or initiatives that inspire them and strengthen their connection to conservation and the Sonoran Desert. Presentations included videos, photographs, illustrations, artistic work, and personal stories. Each participant had the opportunity to explain the motivation behind their project, share their experiences, and answer questions from the audience.



Project collage/ Authors: Gabriel Molinares, Jules Wyman, Edgar Pimental, Felipe Estrada, Elizabeth Brassea, Arturo Cruz



9. Final considerations

The N-Gen Mentorship Program 2026 Retreat marked an important milestone in strengthening a learning community built on collaboration, trust, and the exchange of experiences. Beyond formally launching the mentor–mentee relationships, the retreat created an environment where participants recognized one another as colleagues united by a shared commitment to advancing conservation in the Sonoran Desert through diverse perspectives and complementary expertise.

The activities carried out throughout the retreat demonstrated the value of creating spaces for open dialogue, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving. The co-creation of the agenda, panel discussions, and dedicated mentor–mentee working sessions enabled participants to establish shared objectives, clarify expectations, and lay the foundation for mentoring relationships rooted in mutual respect, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Ultimately, the retreat reaffirmed that the N-Gen Mentorship Program extends beyond professional guidance to serve as a platform for strengthening collaborative networks, fostering emerging leaders, and cultivating a community committed to conservation and sustainable development across the region. The relationships, ideas, and commitments established during the retreat provide a strong foundation for the work that will continue throughout the program and for future cohorts that will become part of this initiative.

We acknowledge Prescott College (Kino Bay Center) for its support and the facilities that made this event possible.



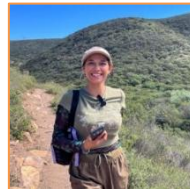
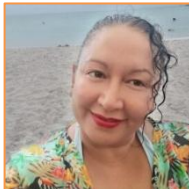
The Next Generation of Sonoran Desert Researchers (N-Gen) is a collaborative network of individuals committed to the remarkable social and ecological landscape encompassing the greater Sonoran Desert, the Baja California Peninsula, the Gulf of California, and the U.S.–Mexico border region.

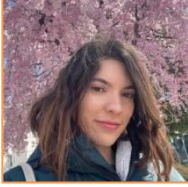
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Photography: Ben Wilder, Edgar Pimienta, Gabriel Molinares

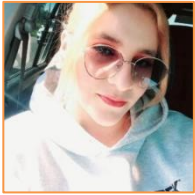
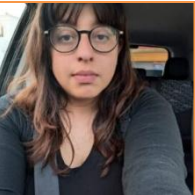
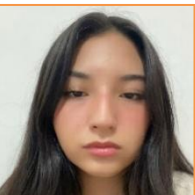
N-Gen 2026

10. Mentorship 2026 cohort

Mentor	Mentee
Alfredo Leal-Sandoval 	Tessa McClain 
Ana Gisel Pérez Delgadillo 	Grisel Guadalupe Heredia Córdova 
Benjamin Wilder 	Diana Valeria Quiñonez López 
	Nahomi Yulemi Burgueño Ramírez 
Caitlyn Hall 	Shane Michael Myers 
Celene Lizeth Navarro Hurtado 	José Arturo Cruz López 

Mentor	Mentee
Elizabeth Brassea Pérez 	Natalia Alejandra Rodríguez Ruiz  Sonia Márquez Guerra 
Enriquena Bustamante 	Juliana Ahumada 
Erick Manuel Zepeda García 	Evelyn Nathalí Quintero Álvarez 
Gloria Mariel Suárez Gutiérrez 	Alejandro Ortega Jaramillo 
Guadalupe del Carmen Cornejo Gutiérrez 	Kate Ostrom 

Mentor	Mentee
Gustavo Pablo Lorenzana Piña 	Carlos Daniel Gaspar Melchor 
Héctor Valtierra 	Ray Tonatiuh Vilchis 
Horacio Jesús de la Cueva Salcedo 	Michael Krzywicki 
Ivett Peña Azcona 	Irene Nadxieli Talavera Martínez 
Jorge Luis Navarro Serralde 	Arleth Villalvazo Amaya 
Jules Wyman 	Jeremy Audric Portillo Loera 

Mentor	Mentee
Luis Felipe Estrada Gaviria 	Diana Romero Rodríguez 
Medardo Cruz López 	Katia Chávez Elizalde  Rebecca Lampl 
Miguel Ángel Ojeda Ruiz de la Peña 	María Matilde Verdugo Murillo 
Minerva Ángela Uribe Rivera 	Sara Cecilia Ríos Pérez 

Mentor	Mentee
Nemer E. Narchi 	José Ángel Ortega Borchardt  María Isabel Meraz Campoy 
Rafel Lara Reséndiz 	Ricardo Rodríguez Medina 
Ricardo Rodríguez Medina 	Tessa McClain  Víctor René Morales Molina 
Santiago Landois Álvarez-Icaza 	Laura del Refugio Ayala Narváez 

Mentor		Mentee	
Silvia Gabriela Maytorena Salcido		Mariana Durán Román	
			
Trudi Angell		Azucena Guadalupe Arce Arce	
			
		José Manuel Román Apodaca	
			
Support mentors			
César Iván Ojeda Linares		Gabriel Molinares Barceló	
			
Zulema Gómez Lunar			
			