



**Year One Report
April 2021**

www.sonoraninsiders.com

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Executive Summary

The Sonoran Insider Ambassador program began in late 2019 through a collaborative effort between the Central Arizona Conservation Alliance (CAZCA), the National Forest Foundation (NFF), the U.S. Forest Service and the Arizona Conservation Partners.

This new program seeks to bridge the gap across industries and fields to collaborate with local digital influencers for conservation. The collaborative leadership developed an ongoing ambassador program that leverages influencer audiences for habitat protection, biodiversity conservation and responsible use of natural spaces and National Forests in Arizona. Sonoran Insiders, the Ambassadors, were and will continue to be provided with swag, products and unique experiences, tours and events to connect them with land managers, researchers and nonprofits to gain valuable insights into the inner workings of outdoor spaces and their management. Meanwhile, project partners gained an enhanced reach to outdoor communities and new audiences, and an increased ability to share key messages for responsible behavior, events, and projects to the public.

This report covers the key outcomes of the first year of the Sonoran Insiders pilot program from December 2019-December 2020.

July was the most active month with **11,692** likes. Several of our Ambassadors posted highly engaging content, two in particular that gained **7,188** likes and **2,013** likes that month. The months of June and July saw many fires in Arizona, such as the Bush Fire, which burned 193,455 acres from June 13 to July 6. The Ambassadors were actively posting about this, raising awareness on wildfire impacts and prevention. They were also sharing messages about inclusion in the outdoors. Meanwhile, December saw the highest amount of posts (**52**), and the addition of our 9th Sonoran Insider.

Feedback from the Ambassadors indicates they enjoyed participating in the project, with universal enjoyment of the events facilitated for them. Now, we also have a sense for the best components of events (in normal years) from discussions and a survey of the Ambassadors. These were in-person events which have outdoor recreation activities, service opportunities, and high-quality education elements focused on a key message.

To maintain this momentum and continue improving the program, we will be building more community with the Ambassadors, remaining focused on providing high quality experiences, and finding efficient ways to share impactful messaging through the Ambassadors.

We invite other organizations to implement this model for outreach and share their lessons and progress made with the leadership team.

The Sonoran Insiders can be followed via Instagram and at www.sonoraninsiders.com.

1 Motivation and Goals

The 2019 superbloom in California made headlines for two reasons- the beauty of the flowers, and for the now notoriously bad behavior of social media influencers, or people with relatively large followings on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Of particular concern in this case, however, were pictures posted to Instagram depicting influencers laying in the flowers, picking them and travelling off trail to photograph themselves in apparently undisturbed fields. All of these activities degrade the natural landscape, have a negative impact on seed banks, and negatively impact the experience of others enjoying public lands, as influencers are known to do just that, influence. These images were encouraging irresponsible behavior in our public lands and natural areas, with copycats attempting to recreate photographs they saw, compounding the negative effects seen. The media covered this trend closely and many started to pay closer attention to influencer behavior on public lands after the 2019 superbloom.

While 2019 raised awareness for these impacts, such bad behavior for the benefit of “clout” on social media is neither new nor did it stop when the superbloom did. Pictures of people holding baby dolphins out of the water, disturbing public lands with illegal drone photography, driving through sensitive habitats with their vehicles, defacing or destroying natural and cultural artifacts have and continue to circulate on the internet, often bringing attention (both good and bad) to the people that create these images.

However, there is opportunity in this challenge. There are many influencers who are passionate for the outdoors, understanding the need for responsible recreation, more awareness of good practices when in nature, and who are invested in ensuring public lands and natural areas exist in perpetuity. The Sonoran Insiders program seeks to create a collaborative community with just such influencers to elevate messages about biodiversity conservation and raise awareness for the work being done by various organizations to protect and maintain natural areas. People will continue to be inspired by social media to explore nature and through the Ambassadors, the collaborative leadership of the program is building and testing an innovative way, set to galvanize online communities for positive change and exploration in the outdoors.

2 Methods

2.1 Study Area

The state of Arizona is the ideal place for testing the model of social media ambassadorship that the Sonoran Insiders represents. Its unique habitats are increasingly at risk due to rapid urban development, climate change, invasive species and, it is becoming increasingly popular for outdoor recreation and tourism which has led to cases of overuse. Furthermore, social media has already had a huge impact on Arizona’s natural attractions, with places like Horseshoe Bend rocketing in popularity due to social media attention, and the state is home to other locations such as the Grand Canyon where photography and tourism pressures have long shaped the natural landscape since the United States colonized this region.



Figure 1: Map of Arizona

Within Arizona, we have focused on the central region with Maricopa County and Tonto National Forest being the regional focal points, although no hard boundaries were drawn around the project. Maricopa County itself is one of the fastest growing counties in the United States, and is home to the state's capital and most populous city. Due to this, the Tonto National Forest, which borders the eastern edge of the metropolitan area, is closely associated with local, domestic, and international tourism demand coming from Phoenix and Sky Harbor Airport. Central Arizona is home to a variety of outdoor recreation and tourism attractions which include events, food and culture, several lakes, and an extensive network of trails both within the city and outside of the metro-area. Trails serve hikers, mountain bikers, horseback riders, and OHV users and provide opportunities for all skill levels as well as access to several well-known natural attractions such as Camelback Mountain, the Superstition Mountains, Fossil Creek, and more. Ambassadors working near or adjacent to this area could have an amplified impact sharing key messages with the large local population, as well as visitors coming from elsewhere.

Additionally, there is a huge variety of organizations operating in Central Arizona due to the Phoenix metropolitan area. These include management agencies at all scales, nonprofits working on a range of topics like biodiversity conservation, advocacy or environmental justice, and major academic institutions. This vibrancy in partners enhances the variety of Ambassador experiences possible, and allows for a variety of messages to be explored stemming from many perspectives.

2.2 Social Media Platform Focus- Instagram

The social media platform focused on for this pilot was Instagram. This platform was selected due to its historic impact on public lands and natural open spaces globally. Furthermore, it remains one of the most popular social media platforms globally with roughly one billion users monthly in 2020. Instagram also strikes an impactful balance between visual and written storytelling in a way that facilitates strong messaging opportunities more suited to the needs of awareness raising than Twitter (which edits image display sizes automatically and limits the characters of a single post) or Facebook (which has severely cut its users' organic reach in recent years).

We used Instagram stats to identify the initial set of Ambassadors that we reached out to, and to track the program's impact over the course of its first year. However, Ambassadors were free to post about the project on any other platform of their choosing.


2.3 Ambassadors - Who Are They?

Ambassadors were initially identified based on their location, follower counts and the topics that were expressed in their Instagram photos. Local ambassadors were identified due to the in-person focus of our events (pre-COVID).

In terms of follower numbers, we looked for influencers that had moderate followings of 800+ people. We did not want to exclude passionate potential ambassadors with smaller audiences, but since the goal of the project is to elevate conservation and responsible use messages, we did have to identify a small minimum follower count number. However, we prioritized the quality of influencer content in regards to responsible recreation practices and stewardship.

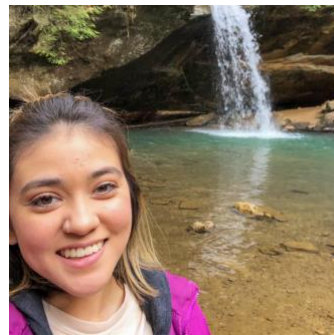
In terms of social media niches, we wanted to initially recruit local influencers who already demonstrated some interest in the outdoors or the environment. We researched the different hikers, recreationists and environmental educators by looking through local hashtags such as #hikeaz #hikearizona #explorearizona.

Table 1: Ambassadors as of Dec 2020

 <p>Julie Bridwell @desertmoon.wanderer</p>	 <p>Jaymee Bohannon @jaymes_blythe</p>
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Veronika Countryman
@azveronika



Bianca Garcia
@o.bianca.nobi



Lisa Hankinson
@arizona.wilderness



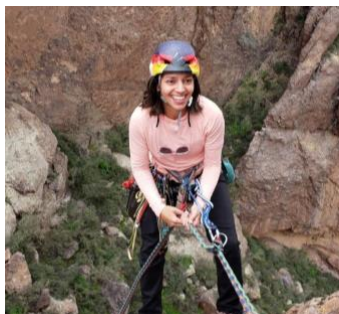
Benita Hogue
@capturing_the_outdoors



Sean McClue
@az_chuckwalla



Isaiah Ortiz
@isaiah.ortiz_



Rebeca Rodriguez
@8tskid

2.4 Recruiting Insiders

Ambassadors were initially recruited through targeted digital outreach either via direct messages on Instagram or via email. They agreed to join the program under a 6 month trial period in which they could then choose to remain as an Ambassador if they connected with the different opportunities we offered throughout the year. As part of their joining, they signed a non-formal agreement to attend at least five events per year, create two to four posts on the events and another two to four posts about responsible recreation such as Leave No Trace.

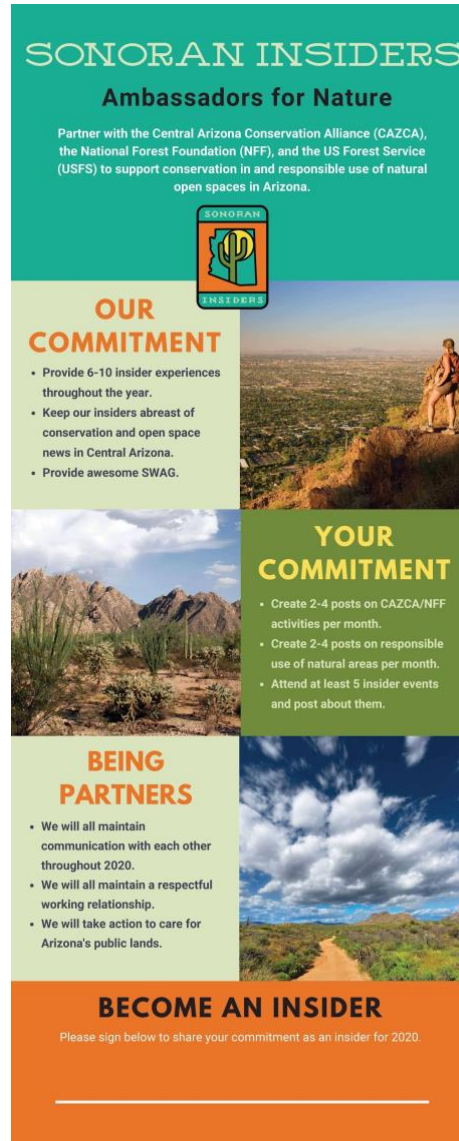


Figure 2: The non-formal agreement

Once we had a small group of ambassadors willing to try out our new program with us, we then allowed for ongoing recruitment through the Sonoran Insiders website. Throughout 2020, we had people apply through the website to join the effort and several of our most active current members came from this passive recruitment tool.

2.5 Events and Briefs

A key priority of the program has been to create opportunities and events themed or centered around conservation challenges and priorities for the natural spaces and National Forests of Arizona. Most the events were hosted with the understanding that the Ambassadors will share two to four posts to their followers regarding the event and important messages discussed. For example, invasive species awareness and education, wildfire awareness and prevention, important restoration efforts or citizen science opportunities.

Table 2: Year 1 events, timing, and leading organizations

Date	Event Theme	Leading Organization
December 2019	Restoration on the Salt River	National Forest Foundation
January 2020	Leave No Trace	Sonoran Insiders Core Leadership
February 2020	Ecological Field Science	McDowell Sonoran Conservancy
March 2020	Cancelled (COVID-19)	
April 2020	Cancelled (COVID-19)	
May 2020	COVID-19 Impacts on the Outdoors (Digital)	Sonoran Insiders Core Leadership
June 2020	Hiking 101 Webinar	Sonoran Insider Ambassadors
June 2020	Inclusion in the Outdoors (Digital)	Out Back Learning
November 2020	Invasive Apple Snails on the Salt River	Tonto National Forest (US Forest Service)
December 2020	One Year Celebration	Sonoran Insiders Core Leadership

To assist the Ambassadors with the sharing of key messages, briefs are developed that succinctly summarize the theme, messages and calls to action for easy dissemination. These briefs are meant as a guide with resources and further action that the Ambassadors themselves or their followers can take, while still leaving room for their own creative license. They include relevant hashtags, links, and sample text.

SONORAN
INSIDERS

AMBASSADOR BRIEF

Restoration on the Salt River

THEME
Restoration on the Salt

TAGS & MENTIONS
#sonoraninsiders @SonoranInsiders
#nationalforests #nationalforestfund

THE MESSAGE
The Salt River is a major artery for city water supplies, and on the Tonto National Forest, the Lower Salt River Recreation Area boasts a well-loved destination spot for many thousands of visitors each year.
To improve the health of the system and the sustainability of water resources, the NFF and its partners are working to restore an 11-mile stretch of the Lower Salt River by removing exotic plant species, planting over 500,000 native plants, and developing educational and volunteer opportunities. Visitors can help by picking out trash and donating to plant native trees.

HOW WE CAN HELP
1. What part of the event stuck out to you? What are some important practices to remember when kayaking? Pick one or two and share these to your audiences!
2. The Salt River Restoration project focuses on restoring our river from invasive species, degradation and even litter. Help others get involved and learn more by following the @az_forest_fund!

Questions? Contact us through IG at @sonoraninsiders or email aquiroz@dbg.org

Figure 3: Example brief

3 Outcomes/ Key Results

3.1 Year One Engagement

The Sonoran Insiders hashtag was used **311** times during year one, accumulating **57,059** likes. We had an annual reach of **5,996,329** people, and an average monthly reach of **935,641** people. The term “reach” on Instagram refers to the number of unique users that saw the Instagram post using the #sonoraninsiders hashtag on any given day. This amount was calculated here by adding all of the followers of each account that engaged with the post using the hashtag.

3.2 Community Growth and Events

Since the start of the Sonoran Insiders program in December 2019 we have gained **401** followers on Instagram. There have been **133** unique views to the website since the launch of the site in Dec 2019. We successfully recruited three Ambassadors through the website. We have hosted **9** of Sonoran Insider events, additionally we also hosted one Introduction to Hiking

Webinar led by three of the Ambassadors. During the month of July we did two Instagram takeovers hosted by our Ambassadors, Lisa Hankinson and Sean McClue. Additionally, Lisa Hankinson, Sean McClue and Rebeca Rodriguez hosted a Hiking 101 Webinar in response to the huge influx of new hikers in the Phoenix metro-area in June. We've covered a range of topics including: responsible recreation, citizen science, inclusion and diversity in the outdoors, restoration in the desert, and invasive species removal.

3.3 Annual Metrics

Sonoran Insider Posts

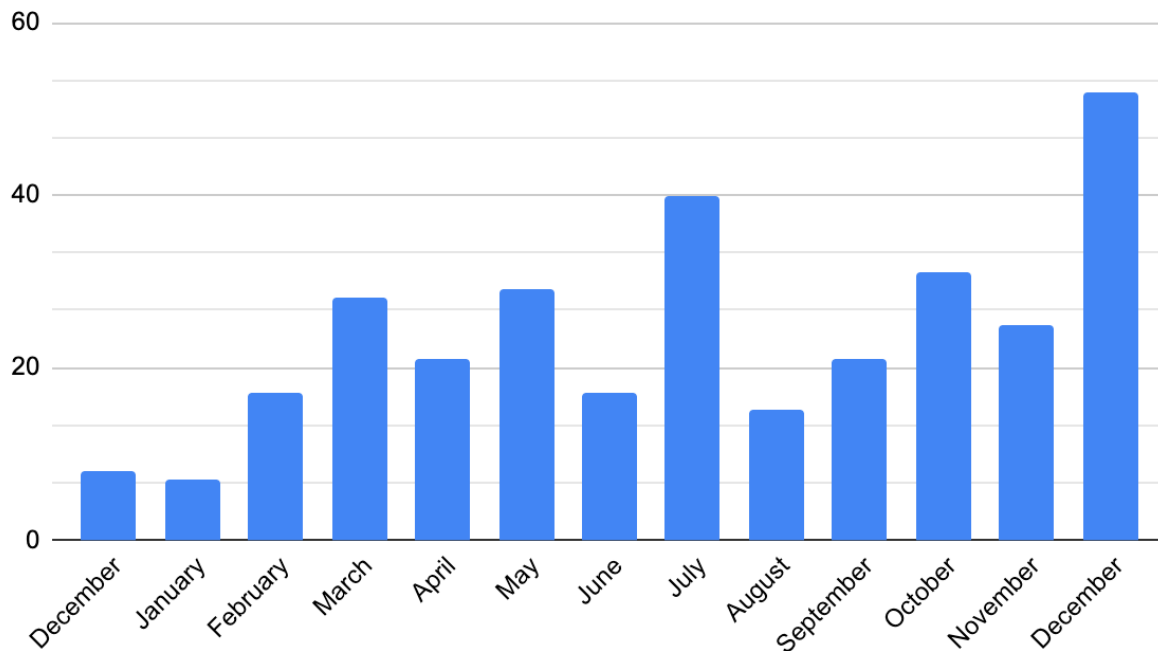


Figure 4: Number of posts on Instagram with the hashtag #sonoraninsiders by month, from Dec 2019-Dec 2020.

Over the course of Y1, the number of Insider posts increased as the community of Ambassadors grew and the program engaged more with the participants through events, online discussions, and social media collaborations (e.g. Instagram take-over, and Insider-led hiking webinar). This trend culminated in the largest number of posts in December 2020 (n=52). While this growth is positive overall, continuing and maintaining this trend will be a focus of our work on the Sonoran Insiders program in 2021.

We have also noted that use of the #sonoraninsider tag and clear messaging needs to be strengthened; it would be ideal that all posts associated with the tag will include quality visual and/or written communications about messages associated with the monthly theme or long-running program themes (e.g. leave no trace). Longer-term partnership with Ambassadors will assist with this, as will community building and improvement of events and information briefs.

Active Ambassadors per Month

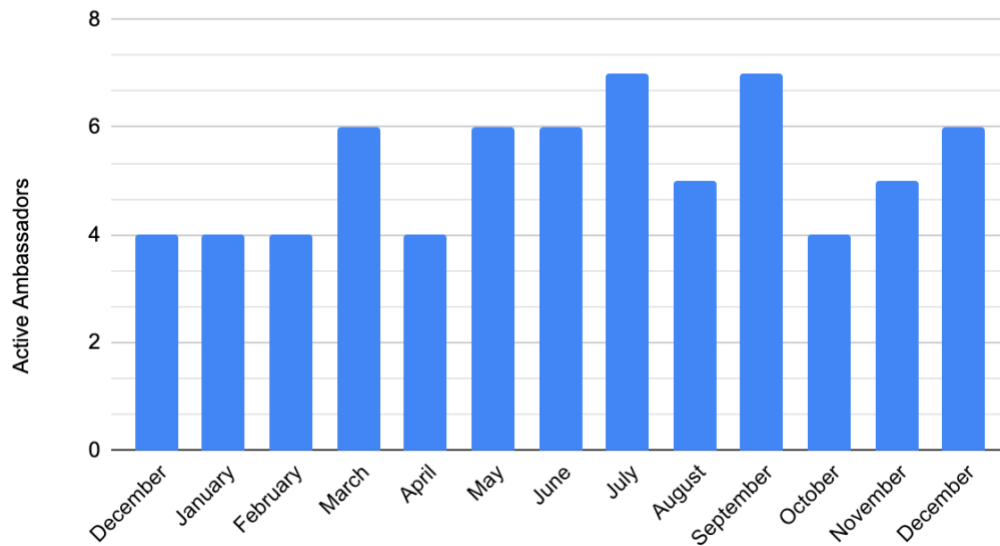


Figure 5: The number of active Ambassadors tracked by month from Dec 2019-Dec 2020.

While the number of Ambassadors grew throughout Y1 (December 2019-December 2020), the number of active Ambassadors varied by month and didn't necessarily grow in direct connection to the size of the group. From this information, and from on-the-ground experience with events, it is clear that maintaining high engagement with the Ambassadors throughout time is key and is something we can work to improve. In 2020, we were limited in our ability to do in-person events, so we would expect more engagement in 2021 as we can again start excursions together. However, we also believe that community building among the Ambassadors, leadership team, and other partner organizations will assist in growing and maintaining activity across time.

Sonoran Insider Post Likes

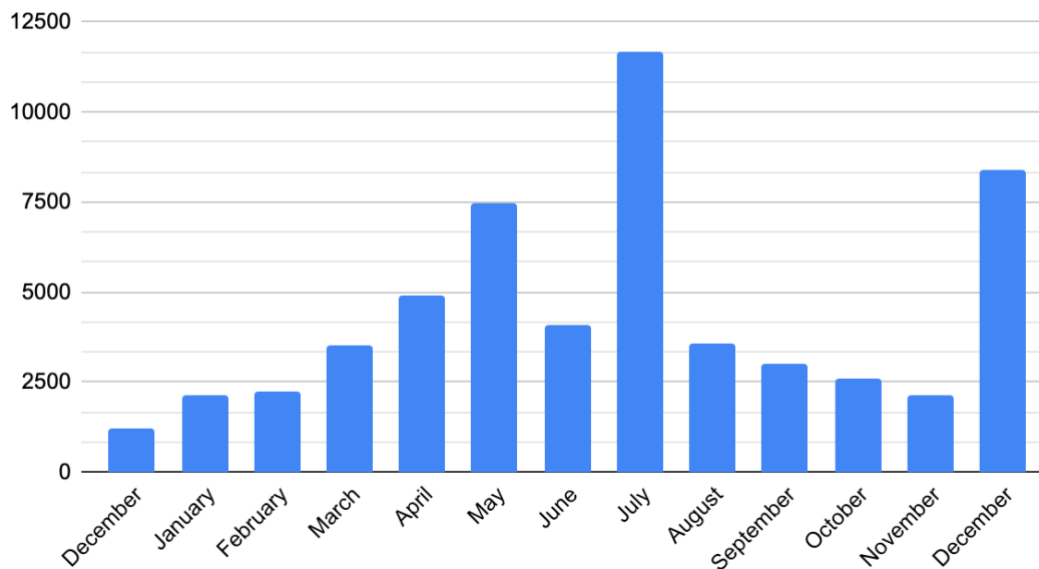


Figure 6: Post likes on Insider posts that include the hashtag #sonoraninsiders tracked by month from Dec 2019-Dec 2020.

As illustrated in Figure 6, public engagement with Insider posts via likes was not as straightforward as Insider post growth. The overall trend was a positive growth, even if there was some variation in monthly posts by Ambassadors. Meanwhile engagement peaked in the summer before showing a negative trend into December 2020, where it peaked again. We are unable to say why this was the case, although our metrics don't capture changes external to our program, such as updates to Instagram's algorithms, and annual trends in blog engagement (e.g. summer and winter break surges). Y2 data will help expand on these trends and help us understand more about longer-term engagement.

3.4 Partner Organization Impacts

AZCP - This project has helped shape our understanding of how to better connect with social media audiences around public lands recreation, which has unlocked new project ideas we're considering for the future. It also led to the launch of a pilot project aimed at using content marketing approaches to leverage existing blog posts into published guidebooks as a way to activate better stewardship for specific public lands areas that are experiencing a big increase in first-time user activity.

CAZCA - The Sonoran Insiders program is moving forward innovative work that furthers the Regional Open Space Strategy for Maricopa County Goal 3: Love and Support which calls for broadening the community of natural open space champions across the region of Central Arizona. Specifically, this program has created a community of social media influencers who are willing and able to speak to their audiences about key topics related to conservation and public land management. And it also creates a larger public community surrounding those influencers to raise awareness for our work and the work of our partners. Internally, this has also increased CAZCA's partnerships and built new relationships.

NFF - The National Forest Foundation (NFF) works on behalf of the American public to inspire personal and meaningful connections to our National Forests. By directly engaging Americans and leveraging private and public funding, the NFF leads forest conservation efforts and promotes responsible recreation. Each year the NFF restores fish and wildlife habitat, facilitates common ground, plants trees in areas affect by fires, insects and disease and improves recreational opportunities. The NFF believes our National Forests and all they offer are an American treasure and are vital to the health of our communities. The Sonoran Insiders program is an exciting way to engage local influencers and connect with our Arizona community while showcasing the value of public lands, the importance of responsible recreation.

TNF - Tonto National Forest has prioritized building relationships and is working to expand education and stewardship opportunities. Engaging a peer to peer method utilizing social media platforms has noticeably benefitted many of our lesser known projects and programs. The forest also benefited from the volunteer efforts of the Sonoran Insiders. Strong relationships and partnerships have been built over the course of the year that have helped create more opportunities within this program and in other programs as well.

3.5 Insider Testimonials and Feedback

We surveyed the Ambassadors in December 2020 in order to get feedback on Y1 of the Sonoran Insiders program. Eight of the nine Ambassadors responded to the survey, with some Ambassadors skipping questions they didn't feel they could answer based on when they joined the project (e.g. after COVID). When asked to rank the in-person Sonoran Insider events on a Likert scale from 1-5 with 1 being low ranking and 5 being high, 71.4% (n=5) rated the events at 5, and 28.6% (n=2) ranked it at 4. There were no lower responses, indicating the in-person events were considered enjoyable and high-quality. For digital events, they received a likewise high rating across the board, with a slightly lower average ranking than in-person events with 25% (n=2) ranking them at 5 and 75% (n=6) ranking them at 4. This appears to indicate a preference for in-person events (when safe) but also allows for digital events when weather or speakers require it.

We then asked several open-ended questions, the first of which asked the Ambassadors which event was their favorite and why. Three events were mentioned by the six people that responded, with one person mentioning the National Forest Foundation tree-planting event that we kicked off the project with, two people mentioning the hiking/science event that we did in partnership with McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, and three people mentioned the kayaking and apple snail removal event done with Tonto National Forest. In all cases, these events were in-person, and many of the comments discussed ambassador preference for events which couple outdoor activities (e.g. kayaking or hiking) with opportunities to do hands-on learning, impactful activities and presented opportunities for discussion with the group and experts.

This is exemplified by the following comment: "Kayaking on the Salt River. Enjoyed talking with everyone, learning about how to protect the river (getting rid of the apple snails and picking up trash from the river), and actually putting it into practice so we could share it with our followers." This provides us with a good outline for creating impactful and enjoyable events for the future.

The Ambassadors were asked about their least favorite event and what could be improved about it. Six people answered this particular open-ended question and four of the six did not have a least favorite event. One respondent mentioned they did not prefer the virtual events, and another person provided feedback for a digital event asking for future events to be more interactive.

"The online event where we talked about cultural experiences in the outdoors was interesting and I enjoyed it, however I think that the conversation could have been more interactive between everyone who was present." This confirms that virtual events should be used sparingly in the future, but that all events benefit from encouraging and providing space for interaction and discussion.

We asked the Ambassadors about whether or not the briefs were useful to them and why or why not. Of the six people that responded, five responded that the briefs were very helpful. Of this feedback, comments had different helpful perspectives and illustrated some impacts of this work:

“Yes, it helps refresh the goals of that post. It provides well rounded information that helps me get the big picture and not only focus on the notes I took at the event.”

“Yes, very much. I saw them as challenges to think broader about who my posts are impacting and they helped me have a particular focus.”

“Yes, the briefs provide a good launching point for ideas. Many times I find myself trying to figure out how to express a point and the briefs are a helpful source of information.”

One further comment on the briefs, also provides insight into the issue of #sonoraninsider posts being shared without associated messages. “I find the briefs helpful but with how busy my life gets I often forget to post along with the messaging. To be open, the briefs ended up sitting in my inbox for some time.” In conjunction with other activities discussed in the preceded sections, this calls for the leadership team to consider potential methods for making materials more digestible and easy for the Ambassadors to implement in their posts, and it highlights the need for in-person debriefs with the ambassadors at the events to make sure that key points are absorbed and have been shared in an understandable way.

4 Lessons Learned

Through the first pilot year we learned a few lessons in regards to the program’s management in order to ensure a more robust, engaging and efficient effort moving forward. These were:

4.1 Refining and Maintaining the Quality of Events

Based on in-person and surveyed feedback from the Ambassadors, it is apparent that our events were well received, but we will need to continue providing engaging experiences in order for this project to continue growing. Feedback indicated that events with components of outdoor recreation activities, meaningful service, and hands-on learning opportunities were the most enjoyed and impactful. Digital events, for normal years, should be used sparingly when conditions require them, and when they are done, an emphasis should be put on interactive discussion in conjunction with the learning opportunity.

In conjunction with the events themselves, feedback indicates that briefs were well received, but that some ambassadors struggle to utilize them to produce impactful posts due to a lack of time. This illustrates the importance of focused and effective messaging/education during events, which plant stronger seeds in the minds of the Ambassadors such that they can utilize the briefs if needed, but don’t rely on them to produce content. Otherwise, posts with the #sonoraninsiders tag that lack messaging are not entirely valuable to the mission of this project and thus we would like to minimize this issue.

4.2 Creating Community with Ambassadors

Although COVID-19 definitely hindered and affected the course of the program, we realized that creating a space for open dialogue and feedback with Ambassadors on topics and events they think important to them is critical to success. For example, July saw a big boost in posts

because Ambassadors saw it important to talk about wildfires and wildfire prevention. We didn't have an event or opportunity around this built into the schedule. A more open and frequent dialogue would have allowed us to capitalize on this interest.

Which leads to the importance of creating community and building this into the program. We now understand that in order for this effort to be successful we must have a dedicated person that interacts, talks and leads engagement with the Ambassadors through our Instagram channel. By having a dedicated person who is more proactive, responsive and available to lead safe but more impromptu events such as hikes, or even assists in informing the Ambassadors about important issues or challenges i.e. wildfire season, we can build a better program with even strong engagement and education.

4.3 Importance of Collaboration

Although not covered extensively in this report, our collaborative leadership team has acknowledged on many occasions that this program would not be possible without one another's help. Together, we pool our networks of partners, service projects, and conjoined capacities to organize events and communicate with the Ambassadors. This has allowed us to launch this innovative effort at outreach without initial funding or the extra capacity of a coordinator for the Sonoran Insiders program. While we are searching for options to increase our capacity such as funding opportunities and/or volunteers to help us, collaboration will continue to be key to this effort and we would encourage anyone looking to replicate this model to similarly partner with other, like-minded organizations to bring it to life.

4.4 Gathering Metrics

Gathering the different elements such as reach was a bit more time consuming than originally thought. We are not only gathering information about the Sonoran Insiders own social media channels but also those of our Ambassadors. Some key questions the leadership team is now focusing on are: what metrics are most important and how can we incorporate self-reporting? As per our agreement we would like to increase Ambassador accountability and be better able to track the amount and types of posts they are creating. Right now gathering this data is extremely time consuming and can be subject to user error.

5 Looking Forward

We have learned much in the first year of the Sonoran Insiders program, illustrated throughout this report, and in Y2 we will continue to do what we have done well and improve based on our lessons learned.

We will also continue to work on growing the ambassadorship, perhaps through the inclusion of other blog niches such as family and lifestyle bloggers. We had initially discussed this as being impactful during the planning phases of the Sonoran Insiders program. In practice, we primarily connected with local outdoor enthusiasts who were willing to try this experimental program based on their interests and dedication to our local environment. With more blog niches

represented by the ambassadorship, we could increase the kinds of audiences reached and raise more awareness among the public.

In response to the need for more dedicated community building and monitoring, we are looking to bring on a dedicated program volunteer(s) to help increase the project's capacity. We will also seek to implement new tracking and analytic techniques such as purchasing social media scheduling and analytics software (such as Hootsuite Professional), or using polls to gather self-reported data. This is in effort to make gathering valuable metrics more streamlined and efficient.

We are also seeking to expand the use of the website to better fit our needs and increase both the engagement with our Ambassadors and the general public.

Finally, we would like to share this model for public outreach with other organizations seeking to make change through outreach among a variety of communities and using digital platforms to elevate their messages and build new kinds of champions in the age of the internet.

If you have any questions about the program or the report please contact, Annia Quiroz at aquiroz@dbg.org.