

## Center takes desert under wing

Volunteers to propagate swath of preserve land

**BY JOE KULLMAN  
TRIBUNE**

In the middle of the Scottsdale Community College campus, a pair of ducks have taken up residence in a pond only a few feet wide and shaded by long-stemmed plants.

"It just shows you that if you plant it, they will come," said Mark Harding, assistant director of the Center for Native and Urban Wildlife, based at the college.

Luring ducks to nest in a spot where thousands of people frequently pass by is a small illustration of the center's larger mission: keeping urban growth from making the East Valley inhospitable to the plants and animals that provide the Sonoran Desert with a fertile ecosystem.

Not yet 2 years old, the center has several budding projects aimed at raising environmental awareness and getting communities involved in conservation efforts.

The center also has developed a greenhouse, a plant propagation garden and a wildlife exhibit facility where college, high school and elementary school students are taught the value of desert biodiversity and how to nourish it.

The center's biggest endeavor gets off the ground Thursday through Saturday, when volunteers from the McDowell Sonoran Land Trust and students from Chandler High School's earth science class begin habitat repair on part of Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve.

More than 200 trees - native mesquite and paloverde - will be planted over 16 acres where the Brown's Ranch homestead once stood.

Since the ranch's demise, off-road vehicle riders, desert target shooters and others have almost denuded the landscape. The wildlife center is hoping to green the area up within two to three years.

The optimistic outlook hinges on a new technique used to restore parts of Joshua Tree National Park in California. It enables

cultivation of seedlings into plants with hardy tap roots, heightening chances for successful transplantation in desert soil.

"As far as we know, we are only the second to experiment with this (method)," Harding said.

"There's more to this than making the area look pretty," said wildlife center director Virginia Korte. "This is about rebuilding a viable ecosystem. We're going to see a return of the wildlife there once the trees grow enough to make it inviting for them again."

### *Photo 1*

*Caption: Ray Leimkuehler, 21, a student at Scottsdale Community College, measures the growth of 16-month-old velvet mesquite trees as part of a project with the Center for Native and Urban Wildlife.*

### *Photo 2*

*Caption: Mark Harding, assistant director of the Center for Native and Urban Wildlife, stands next to an exhibit displaying the Sonoran Desert environment.*