



Invasive Shadows

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Amidst the blazing sun and barren landscapes, the Mojave Desert is a place of surprising resilience and hidden treasures. With its sweeping vistas and otherworldly rock formations, this desert is a landscape of contrasts and contradictions. Yucca and cacti stretch towards the sun, hot and beating as it paints the sky with its scorching embrace. It may seem like an eerie, inhospitable wasteland, but it is a thriving ecosystem filled with unique flora and fauna.

My painting aims to showcase this ecosystem. Just as in the Mojave, cacti and yucca speckle the dark foreground of this painted landscape. Desert ecosystems are some of the most fragile and biodiverse networks on the planet yet are simultaneously some of the harshest conditions to survive. Deserts such as the Mojave are rich in biodiversity and ecosystem services, as well as areas for cultural and scientific significance.

One such creature who calls this desert home is the native western banded gecko. This gecko is a

nocturnal gecko that plays an important role in the food chain and helps maintain ecological balance of these deserts. However, this vital gecko's well-being may be threatened by the presence of an invasive gecko, the bowfoot gecko. Through increased military presence in the middle east, the invasive bowfoot gecko has arrived in the United States through transported cargo and building materials. This invasive gecko is thought to displace other invasive geckos, making it a particularly aggressive gecko. Invasive species can mean increases competition for resources between native species and can often cause the displacement of native species. Limited resources for native species could mean lower survivability of the native and can result in a decrease in biodiversity.

Our study hopes to determine the densities of the native western banded gecko with the invasive bowfoot gecko. We expect to find an increase of bowfoot geckos in anthropogenic areas, and potentially more invasive geckos when in place of the native gecko's habitat.

Few places on Earth as are starkly beautiful or as unforgiving as the Mojave Desert. This painting portrays this important, fragile biological environment that is at risk by these invasive species. This why these ecosystems must be protected and acknowledgement towards invasive species must be known.