

Poetry Pollinators unveils ‘bee hotel’ sculpture along Santa Fe River

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Ally Aran, pets Katia Ahmed's dog, Sofi, on Thursday in front of the new bee habitat sculpture in Santa Fe.

Javier Gallegos/The New Mexican

'Downwind'

*When the air clears after
days of smoke,*

*you yearn to swim in an
alpine lake*

*that mirrors clouds and wash
the scent*

*of burned pines from your
hair;*

*from the west, smoke has
traveled*

*a thousands miles, the point
of ignition*

*where a pine snapped a
transmission line.*

*When the air clears after
days of smoke,*

*you noticed the serrated
edges along*

*apple leaves, locate a point of
ignition*

*in a word, a jab: a man
chalks*

*a cue stick and, slamming the
white ball*

*into a pyramid of balls, feels
for a millisecond*

From the crevices of a decayed cottonwood tree along the Santa Fe River emerged a single bee ready to fly out into the world to gather nectar and pollen.

These bees don't form colonies, don't build hives and don't make honey — but they play a crucial role in the survival of the ecosystem in New Mexico.

They pollinate local wildflowers, trees, shrubs and even the food we eat. But decades of pesticide use and habitat destruction has led to a decline in their population.

That's why Poetry Pollinators — a public art initiative dedicated to bringing back native bee populations — recruited local artist Peter Joseph and poet Arthur Sze to merge their talents and build a home for the hardworking insects.

The group unveiled its first sculpture, made from a hollow log, Thursday at Camino Escondido Park along the Santa Fe River.

The 2,000-pound log came from a 65-year-old cottonwood tree that once stood at the Harvey Cornell Rose Park. Joseph embedded metal boxes into one side of its trunk that will soon be filled with paper and bamboo straws to serve as a “bee hotel.”

The bees will be able to live in the sculpture by nestling themselves into holes and crevices.

*a point of ignition and surge
in the clatter.*

*When the air clears after
days of smoke,*

*you believe you were simply
casualty*

downwind, but, as you hold

*a Rubik's Cube of time in
your hands,*

*the orange sunrise is
nowhere,*

*everywhere, and — damn —
that the pieces*

*are pieces you cannot flip
back.*

By Arthur Sze, inaugural poet
laureate of Santa Fe, 2006-08

On the other side of the log is Sze's poem and information about the little creatures that will soon make the sculpture their home.

The group hopes to create three more of these bee hotels along the Santa Fe River.

"Pollinators are part of this cycle that we need to help make sure that our urban ecosystems are healthy," said Morika Vornberg Hensley of the Santa Fe Watershed Association. "We all need clean air to breathe; we all need habitable temperatures to survive in; and we need natural beauty for our mental health and for our physical health."

Vornberg Hensley said pollinators are essential for maintaining a diverse ecosystem that is resilient to changes in the climate and environment the state has been experiencing, such as unpredictable and more extreme weather patterns, severe drought, wildfires, smoke and pollution.

"We have destroyed a lot of their habitat, so by creating these human-made habitats, we are giving them the opportunity to recover their populations," Vornberg Hensley said.

The U.S. is home to over 4,000 native bee species — including 1,000 that live in New Mexico.

Native solitary bees are the primary pollinators for agricultural plants in the country, making them vital to the nation's food supply.

Melissa McDonald, the city of Santa Fe's parks and open space director, said the old cottonwood tree used to create the sculpture had been rotting from the inside and needed to be removed.

"It was a huge, beautiful tree that we were lamenting having to cut down, quite frankly," McDonald said. "When the tree was coming down, we had prayer flags and we had people tell stories about it."

The Santa Fe Community Foundation gave the city Parks Department a grant to take the tree down and offset its carbon footprint by planting more trees in its place.

Wood from the tree was donated to local artists who could give it new life.

Joseph and Poetry Pollinators were among those who received a piece of the old trees.

"We all love trees," Joseph said during the unveiling of the sculpture. "But this piece is to propose that we can regard a tree that's down and gone with a similar kind of reverence, and maybe even more because it's got a patina and it's got a history."

Joseph had experience making homes for bees before undertaking the project with Poetry Pollinators.

In 2015, he was commissioned to create a bee hotel near the Santa Fe Railyard gardens. The project was one of 27 from around the state funded by a community grant from Public Service Company of New Mexico.

“It’s kind of architectural and [made of] steel. It reflects what needed to be said about territorialism and railroad, and all that,” Joseph said.

The new sculpture is meant to fit in with the natural habitat that runs along the river, he added.

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