

Lessons of habitat

Last July, Nancy Eastman was leafing through *HCN* when she came across a photo of artificial cholla built by California scientists (*HCN*, 7/21/08). The imitation cacti are intended to serve as nesting sites for beleaguered coastal cactus wrens, but they're also great gangly jumbles of spikes, pipes and spindly legs. Eastman, an artist and landscaper, thought she could improve them, at least aesthetically. "They were so ugly," she said.

So over the next few months, Eastman bound together jute cord and barrel staves, silk thread and sagebrush to make four habitat structures of her own. Her creations won't end up in the wilderness; they're destined for a client's property near Telluride. But that's OK: She built them not only to become habitat, but to symbolize it as well. "People think sagebrush is endless and lasts forever, but nothing is beyond extinction," she says. "The art reminds us of our transience."

Eastman, who grew up on Colorado's Front Range before its communities merged into a sea of sprawl, shakes her head at the way our lives have become insulated from the landscapes in which we live. So she works to "bring as much wildness as possible into Denver"



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through her landscaping firm, Art of the Land, which plants native flora. Lately, she's also been making small sculptures inspired by threatened habitats. Before the fake cacti caught her eye, she stumbled upon a piece of cottonwood that reminded her of coral. Eastman fashioned it into a comment on the under-sea ecosystems that suffer as our carbon emissions cause the oceans to acidify.

Every natural community that collapses takes with it a unique means of relating to the world around us, says Eastman, and there's knowledge in those relationships that we can't afford to lose. "The work is about the human habitat and the animal habitat, and how much we can learn from each other," says Eastman. "In the greater ecosystem, we're all equal."

—Terry Sylvester



Artificial cholla (left) inspired Nancy Eastman's sagebrush habitat art (right).

COURTESY OF IRVINE RANCH CONSERVANCY (LEFT); SAGEBRUSH ART BY NANCY EASTMAN AND PHOTO BY DIANE HUNTRESS