**UNDERSTANDING THE ATACAMA DESERT BY STUDYING ITS LICHENS**

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The Atacama Desert is considered the most arid in the world, commonly the people who live there think that there are very few living organisms, however, in this extreme environment interesting organisms are adapted to tolerate high solar radiation conditions, extreme temperatures and a high dryness. Among these organisms are lichens, which are able to colonize the most hostile environments, being in some cases as the only living species present in salt flats or mountain areas. Promoting knowledge of the Atacama Desert, protection and conservation, as well as developing local cultural identity, has been the reason to design a school scientific program based on the distribution of lichens in the Atacama Desert, its relationship with other species, with abiotic factors and their similarity with other desert ecosystems or Antarctica. With the support of the Explora program of CONICYT (national commission of science and technology) INACH (Chilean Antarctic Institute) and the participation of teachers and students from different educational establishments in the Tarapacá region (northern Chile) workshops, informative talks, training courses, school scientific research clubs and advice for participation in school science fairs have been held, with the lichens of the Atacama desert as protagonists. As a result, greater incorporation of the study of the Atacama Desert has been obtained through the school curriculum, greater participation of students in scientific fairs with research related to lichen and greater knowledge in teachers about the environmental dynamics of the Atacama Desert. In addition, many of the students who have participated in school scientific research based on lichens of the Atacama Desert have followed university studies in scientific careers, postgraduate studies and scientific research in extreme ecosystems. In addition, the increased interest in lichenology allowed the Iquique school and academic community to organize the thirteenth Latin American meeting of lichenologists in 2017