

Protect Arizona's Imperiled Rivers and Riparian Areas

The passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972 set a national priority to protect our water resources. Since that time, significant measures have been taken to “restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the nation’s surface waters,” but we are a long way from reaching the act’s ultimate goal of safeguarding all of the nation’s lakes, rivers, and coastal waters.

Arizona’s rapidly growing population has put additional pressures on our available water quantity and on its quality. In 1980 Arizona passed the Groundwater Management Act to limit groundwater pumping. Protection is still not provided for surface flows or for riparian areas along our rivers and streams. Riparian areas are some of the most threatened and important ecosystems in our arid state. Water diversions and activities associated with livestock grazing, mining, irrigated agriculture, motorized recreation, and urban/suburban sprawl present ongoing threats to stream flows and water quality.



Existing and proposed groundwater pumping threatens the San Pedro River in southern Arizona, the Verde River in central Arizona, and the seeps and springs in Grand Canyon, among other areas. Groundwater pumping has already significantly depleted rivers in agricultural zones. The state’s heaviest water users continue to be in the agriculture sector, so it is no surprise that rivers in agricultural areas no longer flow.

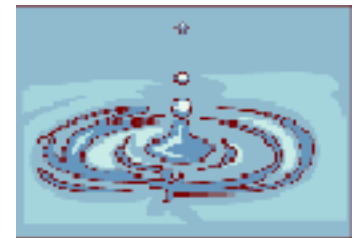


Some estimates indicate that less than 10% of Arizona’s original riparian acreage remains intact. These areas are of immense

ecological importance – 60% of Arizona’s native wildlife depends on riparian areas and 10–20% use riparian areas for part of their life cycle. Unfortunately, Arizona’s fish species have already suffered greatly. Of the 36 fish species native to this state, one is officially extinct, at least one has been extirpated from Arizona, and 20 are listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Keeping water in the rivers does much more than provide important habitat. It also helps support tourism and recreation. Tourism contributes significantly to Arizona’s economy and constitutes the state’s largest employment sector; it affects one in five jobs in Arizona, directly and indirectly.

Changing water laws in Arizona is a difficult prospect at best. The Sierra Club is supportive of better planning and consumer protection relative to water resources. This should be coupled with protecting streams and rivers, however. We need to protect consumers, limit groundwater pumping, promote conservation, and protect our rivers, streams, and riparian areas.



Spotlight on the San Pedro River



Robin Silver

The 140-mile long San Pedro River begins in Sonora, Mexico, and travels north to join with the Gila River. This important resource is one of the last few large undammed

ivers in the Southwest and contains the highest diversity of vertebrate species in the inland U.S. and the second highest diversity of land mammals in the world. The river provides important habitat for more than 350 species of birds (about two-thirds of the U.S. total), 80 species of mammals, 40 species of amphibians and reptiles, and 2 species of native fish (reduced from its original 14).

In 1988, Congress designated the San Pedro National Conservation Area for the purpose of conserving, protecting, and enhancing the desert riparian ecosystem. However, pumping in both Mexico and the U.S. threatens this river. Each year, more than 2.3 billion gallons of water are pumped out of the aquifer than are recharged by rainwater. It is expected that the deficit will reach 4.2 billion gallons per year by 2020. To protect the river, we must act now to limit groundwater pumping.

Spotlight on the Verde River



Tom Slaback

The U.S. Forest Service describes the Verde River as a “unique ribbon of riparian life amidst a desert landscape.” This 195-mile long river begins south-east of Paulden in

northern Arizona and ends at its confluence with the Salt River. A portion of it has been designated as Arizona’s only Wild and Scenic River.

The Verde supports 57 special status species, including the bald eagle, lowland leopard frog, southwest river otter, and razorback sucker. This river provides habitat for more than 60% of the vertebrate species that inhabit the Coconino, Prescott, and Tonto National Forests. It is also a critical source of drinking water for Phoenix and other communities.

Unfortunately, the Verde is severely threatened by excessive groundwater pumping. In 2006, it was nominated by the Sierra Club and named one of “America’s 10 Most Endangered Rivers” by American Rivers. Proposed projects to pump water from the Big Chino Sub-basin, which provides 80% of the base flow, would put an even greater strain on the aquifer and the Verde. The Bureau of Reclamation has included the Verde River Watershed in their potential water crisis areas by 2025.

You can help!



Make smart water choices

Water conservation begins with you. Check out www.wateruseitwisely.com for simple and money-saving ideas.

Stay informed

Visit the Arizona Department of Water Resources website at www.azwater.gov or the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality at www.azdeq.gov for more information about water concerns in Arizona.

Sign up for legislative alerts by contacting Sandy Bahr at 602-253-8633 or sandy.bahr@sierraclub.org.

Get involved!

Join the Upper Verde River Water Sentinels! This project provides a great opportunity to get your hands dirty and your feet wet. For more information, contact the Grand Canyon Chapter office at 602-253-8633 or grand.canyon.chapter@sierraclub.org.

Join the Grand Canyon Chapter’s Water Committee! For more information, contact Lisa Dwyer at 602-885-0893 or turbolisa1@cox.net.

For more information, contact Lisa Dwyer at 602-885-0893 or turbolisa1@cox.net or Sandy Bahr at 602-253-8633 or sandy.bahr@sierraclub.org & visit our website at <http://arizona.sierraclub.org>.



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Sentinels