



Restored creek getting trashed

Rejuvenated waterway too popular for its own good

Shaun McKinnon

The Arizona Republic

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STRAWBERRY -- A mound of dirt and rocks piled thigh-high against a concrete highway barrier blocked an unauthorized trail from Fossil Creek Road down to the creek itself.

For now.

Wildlife biologist Janie Agyagos spied what she feared could be the blockade's undoing: a steel ring embedded in the barrier.

"When people are determined to get in there, they look for things like this," she said. "You have to think ahead and make sure you don't give them something they can winch out with a truck."

Thinking like a vandal saddens Agyagos, who would rather spend her time charting the recovery of leopard frogs, but she and other U.S. Forest Service employees have little choice.

Since a full stream of water was restored to Fossil Creek in June 2005, the growing numbers of unregulated visitors threaten to overwhelm one of Arizona's unique and fragile riparian gems.

Trash litters the ground, leaching pollutants that wash into the creek when it rains. Human waste contaminates makeshift campsites and threatens to spoil the creek's water quality. Hikers and off-road motorists carve new trails that damage vegetation and destroy aquatic habitat.

A coalition of environmental groups asked the Forest Service to limit public use and install trash cans and portable toilets, but agency officials say they lack money and staff. More critically, the Forest Service will lack authority until a management plan imposes rules rangers can enforce.

"We have to have something to enforce," Agyagos said. "We can cite them for littering, but if we see them on a road someone else created, we can't do anything. We need some rules."

Picking up trash

From the other side of the rock-and-concrete blockade, Mike Ward and Mickey Gershtenson emerged with bags of trash. Ward opened one; a rancid odor escaped from a mash of bottles, cans, torn flip-flops, empty cellophane wrappers and food remnants.

"This is about 30 pounds from one campsite," said Ward, who leads volunteers from the Sedona-based Friends of the Forest on cleaning excursions at Fossil Creek. "If we don't pick it up, the next people here will throw it into the grass, or animals will get into it."

Fossil Creek has always lured people with its warm, spring-fed water shimmering blue-green in travertine pools on a 17-mile trek to the Verde River. It rises just below the Mogollon Rim, a little over two hours from Phoenix or Flagstaff.

For a hundred years, a pair of power plants diverted most of the water from the creek bed, but after the plants shut down and flow was restored, a string of newspaper and magazine stories revealed readers with irresistible tales of a hidden paradise.

"We fill up the bed of a pickup every other week with trash," Ward said. "Most of the trash is from people who have easy access to their cars and just dump it out anyway. I guess they think the trash fairy is going to come by and pick it up."

The Forest Service won't install trash cans partly because people vandalize them and partly because trash services don't want to drive trucks on the winding dirt roads down from the Rim or up from Camp Verde. Toilets pose the same problem: pump-truck owners won't provide service.

Other contaminants

Unburied human waste worries authorities because of its health risk, whether someone comes in direct contact or whether the waste washes into the creek. It also hampers efforts to clean up trails.

Michelle Harrington, rivers program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said volunteers at a summer clean-up were unable to clear some areas of trash because it was coated in waste. Toilet paper wraps around brush or unfurls into trees, turning into a gluey mush after a rainstorm.

"It's disgusting," Harrington said. "The returned flows have been fabulous for the ecology, but the creek is getting absolutely hammered."

Some of the damage hides at first, lurking in crushed vegetation or murky pools of water. Agyagos, the Forest Service biologist, said unauthorized trails already have damaged the creek's ecosystem.

When one person creates a trail, the evidence can linger for weeks or months, encouraging others to use the trail. As foot or vehicle traffic compact the soil, a hard surface develops, speeding runoff from storms. Fast runoff erodes soil, carrying sediment into the creek.

Agyagos knelt at the base of one such trail and scooped up a handful of muck. The muck has coated rocks and other clean surfaces used by small aquatic creatures to feed and breed. Without the rocks, the creatures vanish and, with them, a food supply for frogs and wildlife.

"The food chain gets interrupted when you lose the bottom levels," Agyagos said. "All because of that trail."

Limits vs. rules

Environmental groups want the Forest Service to ban overnight camping at Fossil Creek, at least temporarily, to install portable toilets at parking areas and trail heads and to begin monitoring the water for fecal coliform and other contaminants.

"Something needs to be done immediately, or the place could become a health hazard," she said.

Harrington said unregulated use could undo early signs of progress toward restoring riparian habitat. She objects to people who suggest the restoration could bring about the creek's demise.

"People are ruining it, and a lack of funds or unfortunate priorities by the Forest Service is ruining it," she said.

Forest Service officials acknowledge tight budgets but insist they want to devise management guidelines that will protect the creek and still allow people to enjoy the public lands. The agency wants to hear ideas from a wide range of interested people, offering a rare opportunity to write rules almost from scratch.

Some management policies would change if Congress agrees to add Fossil Creek to the list of Wild and Scenic Rivers, a designation that brings with it more protection.

Agyagos said a revised plan could curb overnight use or limit the number of people who can use the area at any given time. Determining a capacity for the land would help avoid problems like those at Oak Creek Canyon above Sedona, where contaminated water forces the closure of Slide Rock State Park each summer.

"We're going to have to get creative," she said. "We'll always have the yahoos who don't care. We just need to teach everyone else how to do it right."

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- [William1777](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 1:32 AM
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So it was better off when APS owned it. Amazing.

- [David7811](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 1:33 AM
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I say restrict the use of the area until the creek can fully recover; then, monitor the creek's progress and make determinations based on that.

- [Jamie8551](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 2:25 AM
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Possible solution:

- 1) Require a permit to visit.
- 2) Place two portable cabin's in a nearby suitable area and allow retired law enforcement officers to live there in return for monitoring the creek year round.

- [lyle7760](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 3:30 AM
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Stop the flow of people moving to Arizona !!!

- [lonewolf40](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 3:44 AM
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Man, the great destroyer!!!! I gave up being amazed by what selfish, stupid, human pigs, can and will do, long time ago. Some have the idea, that they can do whatever their little heart desires and others can like it or not. Just look around you, their filth and stupid ignorance is every where, all around you!!! Do they live like that in their own home? Undoubtedly. Guess their parents, if they had any, couldn't or wouldn't teach them anything better. There always have been and always will be two legged pigs in this world. Such a shame.

- [seldomseen](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 4:57 AM
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I've never been in favor of limited access. I absolutely hate it when the govt requires permits to visit public land. After a recent hike up Fossil Creek, however, I changed my mind. I'm like lone wolf, I'm a little cynical to begin with, but the amount of garbage along the creek shocked even me. The forest gets worse every year, but this... I've never seen anything like it. The forest service has no choice but to start closing roads. If people can drive to it, they will ruin it. It's that simple. I don't understand how backpackers can pack it in and pack it out, but car campers with their behemoth SUVs can't, but that's been my observation. CLOSE THE ROAD! If you want to see Fossil Creek, obtain a permit and pack in ten or twelve miles to see it! Let the party people stay in the bar...

- hillrunner50
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 5:36 AM
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Seldomseen, good point. I hate ATVs, big SUVs and the trash that they bring to beautiful areas like this.

- [PhxN8TivInBoston](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 6:14 AM
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Jamie8551,

You don't need to put an apostrophe in the plural form of the word "cabin." I.e., cabin's is incorrect. But otherwise, good points.

- [Mike867](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 6:21 AM
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Let me reiterate that this was never a problem before these transplants showed up in droves.

You people who are afraid of any discipline when it comes to your kid, thank yourselves, because they grow up with no respect for anything around them, so California parents, give yourselves a round of applause.

Other transplants, when you come here, respect where you moved to, this includes everything from the way of life to land you moved too. I am so sick of people from out of state coming here, trashing this place, trying to change everything, it is you guys that allowed for development of preserve land, made it darn near impossible to get a hunting tag (they should give first choice to natives) and generally caused the downturn here.

- sargentc
- Posted: Oct 10, 2007 at 6:21 AM
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Not pointing any fingers but, if youre raised in a pig sty, then you treat the rest of the world the same.

I own one of those giant 4x4s, and when Im out on the trail I spend a great deal of time picking up garbage from the inconsiderate morons that leave it there. I see quads and motorcycles tearing up their own trails. If all ATVs, bikes, and 4x4s were required to have plates on them, then you could write down the plate number to help with getting them nailed for fines. We cant leave it to law enforcement only. They dont have the manpower to cover it all.

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