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ARIZONA GEM: Groups call for action against Fossil Creek trash

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Courtesy/Center for Biological Diversity Hikers pass graffiti on a rock along Fossil Creek.

It is a cruel irony that efforts to save Fossil Creek also have hurt it.

Widespread publicity over the rare 2005 decommissioning of a power plant on Fossil Creek has spawned a significant increase in visitors and trash, agree conservation groups and U.S. Forest Service officials. However, the agency has not been tracking visitor changes.

More recently, Arizona's Congressional delegation introduced legislation to make Fossil Creek a Wild and Scenic River.

The dramatic increase in trash and other defacement at this central Arizona gem prompted several conservation groups to send a letter to the U.S. Forest Service Wednesday that seeks emergency protection measures.

The letter calls for an emergency order limiting visitors to day-use only, until a management plan or other measures can solve the problems. It also calls for portable toilets and water quality monitoring for fecal coliform.

The letter came from the Center for Biological Diversity, American Rivers, Arizona Riparian Council, Arizona Wilderness Coalition, Arizona Wildlife Federation, Friends of Arizona Rivers, Audubon Society and Sierra Club. They sent it to the supervisors of the

Coconino and Tonto national forests.

"Noted impacts include shooting in a congested area (shell casings were observed), vehicles crushing vegetation, proliferation of social trails, kayak impacts and severe sanitation deficiencies," the letter states.

"An exceptional amount of trash was encountered during the (July 28) clean-up, despite the fact that Friends of the Forest provide regular clean-up visits every other week," the letter continues. "Even more disturbing was the amount of human excrement within the riparian zone of the creek, much of it within a few feet of surface flows."

The Forest Service also recently received a letter of concern about Fossil Creek trash from the Yavapai-Apache Nation, whose members have used the Fossil Creek area for centuries.

Arizona Public Service, with the help of government agencies and [Northern Arizona University](#), has spent millions on creek restoration efforts, eradicating non-native fish to help bring the creek back to a natural state and give endangered native fish a chance at survival in this delicate ecosystem.

The Verde River tributary is in a relatively remote area where the two forests meet southeast of Camp Verde. That makes it harder to manage all the new human use.

While the forest supervisors have not had time to answer the letter yet, Forest Service officials set up a meeting with conservation groups and NAU later this month to talk about Fossil Creek, said Connie Birkland, public affairs officer for the Red Rocks Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest.

Birkland noted that she joined in a trash clean-up effort just this past Friday with the Friends of the Forest. They found rafts, shoes, towels, trash, toilet paper and human excrement.

"It was disgusting," Birkland said. "I was very appalled. In fact, I personally sent out a message across the forest. It's just unacceptable what's happening out there."

"We really want to get across the 'leave no trace' message."

While the Forest Service did a lot of work on a Fossil Creek area management plan several years ago, officials never finished it, Birkland said. A lack of money was part of the problem, she said.

Lack of personnel also is a widespread issue, added Jim Payne, public affairs officer for the Forest Service in Arizona.

"There's just a massive amount of work that's come our way," Payne said. "We're all swamped."

However, the agency did implement several of the draft plan's recommendations, such as road and campsite closures, Birkland added.

The Forest Service also did some work in the lower Fossil Creek area following the 2004 completion of the Verde Wild & Scenic River Comprehensive River Management Plan, said Terry Adams, recreation operations manager on the Red Rock District.

The agency has three river rangers in the area and started a horse patrol, he said. Officials have plans for informational kiosks, a second restroom, relocation of the rustic campground and possibly a host for it.

"We're all trying to meet the demand, but it is kind of out in the middle of nowhere," Adams said.

APS employees were a huge help when they were stationed at Fossil Creek full time, Adams said. But now they're there only to continue the decommissioning.

People love to be near places with water, Adams observed.

"Unfortunately, they're just being loved to death."

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