

A Force of Nature

ONE SOUTHWEST RIVER
COMES BACK TO LIFE



Photo by Robin Silver

Central Arizona's Fossil Creek

Wild Desert River Runs Dry

The Charleston gauge measuring station on the Southwest's last undammed desert river ran dry for three days in mid-July, for the first time in 75 years.

The 140-mile-long San Pedro River flows north from Mexico through southeastern Arizona until it meets the Gila River. The San Pedro is fed by groundwater reserves, which have long kept it flowing even through the driest months. While hydrologists and government officials were quick to blame a late rainy season and a nine-year drought for the river's woes, environmentalists note that the San Pedro has weathered these natural variations before. The culprit, they insist, is excessive groundwater pumping to feed the exploding population of the region's sprawling cities and military bases. Sierra Vista, for example, currently pumps out 10,000 more acre-feet of water than the rains replenish every year.

"We can't control nature," said Robin Silver of the Center for Biological Diversity. "What we can control is the groundwater pumping."

By the 1940s, excessive groundwater pumping had caused the Santa Cruz River, which flows through Tucson, to run dry except during heavy rains. In 1998, hydrologist Rick Koehler predicted that the San Pedro was on course for the same fate, and that the Charleston gauge station would run dry for a few days by 2006.

A 35-mile stretch of the San Pedro River was designated in 1988 as the US's first riparian national conservation area. The lush vegetation along the river's banks provides a home for 400 species of birds, 81 species of mammals and 43 species of reptiles and amphibians, and it provides a critical stopover for migrating birds.

BY RENÉE GUILLORY

Near Strawberry, Arizona, full flows returned to Fossil Creek for the first time in nearly a century, on June 18. Back-to-back celebrations took place that day—one sponsored by Arizona Public Service (APS), the utility that operated Fossil Creek's dams, and another hosted by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), who led the campaign to decommission the dams.

David Harbster, professor of biology at Paradise Valley Community College, was moved by both the ceremony and the spirit of the day: "The release of the water offers a sense of freedom, and you can never take this back.... It's a very emotional and uplifting thing."

Fossil Creek flows from Fossil Springs, greening the arid landscapes along the Mogollon Rim, just north of the rugged Mazatzal Mountains. So abundant are the springs at its source that Fossil Creek, which eventually flows into the Verde River, provides up to half of the Lower Verde's water during the driest times of the year.

The area was once a wilderness in the fullest sense of the word (if not legally protected as such): remote, rugged and bustling

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with wildlife. The travertine pools and waterfalls along this raucous stream provided (and in places still provide) rare sanctuary for native fishes like the Sonoran sucker, the desert sucker, the speckled dace, the longfin dace and the roundtail chub.

In the early 1900s, in order to serve the power needs of nearby mining towns, two diversion dams began siphoning a whopping 95 percent of Fossil Creek's waters into what were Arizona's first hydroelectric power plants. Silenced to a whisper, Fossil Creek itself felt the thirst of the landscape it once thrived in.

But in the West, boom can quickly turn bust. By the 1990s, the plants no longer fed greedy mines and provided only about 0.01 percent of APS's power supply. A window on restoration was opening.

APS faced impending CBD lawsuits in 1997 and 1999, as well as the specter of mounting public pressure and a prolonged campaign of disparaging protests. APS was forced to compare the enormous environmental and economic costs of operating the plants against the benefits of letting a gem of a river run freely again and the reasonable, one-time cost to dismantle the sites.

Robin Silver, a co-founder of CBD, took APS's then-CEO Bill Post on a field trip to Fossil Canyon. The men share a common history growing up in Arizona and enjoying its wild places. They talked about rivers and the toll that human impact has taken on them in the desert southwest, and about the fact that more than 90 percent of the southwest's rivers are already gone.

Post gave restoration the green light. However, he faced a not-too-surprisingly reluctant staff and board at APS—and an uphill battle within his company to follow through on his personal commitment. While Post fought the inside game, a fledgling coalition, the Fossil Creek Environmental Partners, campaigned to broaden public support for restoring Fossil Creek.

Using provisions of a cornerstone environmental law, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), environmental groups worked with land managers and other interested parties to exchange ideas and information. They worked to craft a wish list for the river and its pristine environs.

Meanwhile, plans for legal action continued, since it looked like Post would not be successful in winning APS's voluntary support for the project. Large protests were planned. Then suddenly, on the eve of a picket at APS's Phoenix headquarters, word came that APS was on board.

It would take years, yet a persistent coalition made up of natural resource agencies, university scientists, the

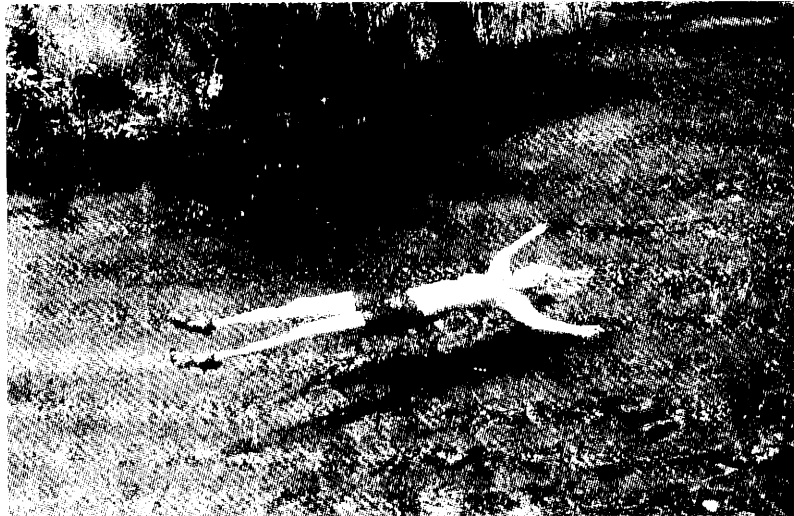
Yavapai-Apache Nation, APS and the Fossil Creek Environmental Partners eventually finalized plans to decommission the dams and restore the creek's disturbed areas.

During the decommissioning celebration in June, one could see that Fossil Creek has many soul mates. Speakers from the Yavapai-Apache Nation offered eloquent sentiments, which surely once informed Aldo Leopold's philosophy and land ethic: "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

Vincent Randall, a Yavapai-Apache Nation Tribal Council member, remarked that "water is alive.... The water has been angry because our people built the flume, the dams.... My nephew, the holy man here, said whenever you dam up the water, you have stopped up its life, its freedom; it may flow, but it lacks vitality."

Earth First! folk musician Dana Lyons joined the festivities. He suggested that if a place such as Arizona—a place thirsty for water and burdened with increased demands for power—could take out a dam, it could happen anywhere. Lyons stood in the creek, playing his guitar and singing his classic anti-dam song: "There's a drop of water on the wall, and the drop's about to fall...." Before long, the water began to rise around his ankles.

Silver lamented that just as Fossil Creek was being fêted, some members of Congress want to trash the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and NEPA. In fact, Arizona Congressman Rick Renzi was hosting an anti-ESA/NEPA hearing in Pinetop, Arizona, on that very same day. These laws are the heart, bone and muscle of habitat protection, and they would probably have ensured the success of any lawsuit



Soaking up the cool waters of Fossil Creek during a day of celebration

photo by Robin Silver

to restore Fossil Creek, had that step been necessary.

"Someday our kids will look back on what we've done—hopefully, Fossil Creek won't be the only stream that's left thriving in Arizona," said Silver.

What next? Well, the restoration of Fossil Creek will test both our political will and our scientific acumen. Vigorous support will be needed for legislation that will designate federal Wild and Scenic River status for Fossil Creek. A 40-mile stretch of the Verde River is Arizona's only contribution to the Wild and Scenic River system. Fossil Creek meets the Lower Verde along that stretch, and it makes sense that Fossil Creek should be designated as a Wild and Scenic River as well. With that level of protection in place, Fossil would be an excellent case study for how to dismantle a working power plant and restore native fishes and the habitats that sustain them.

Renée Guillory is a freelance writer based in Phoenix, Arizona. A version of this article originally appeared in the Sierra Club Grand Canyon Chapter's Canyon Echo.