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Let's go with the flow

Fossil Creek will need help, protection

Opinion

The right thing to do.

Those five words sum up why Arizona Public Service Co. put the water back into Fossil Creek.

Native fish, airlifted to the central Arizona stream earlier this year, will flourish. Exquisite travertine formations, creating pools and cascades, will build up again. Cottonwoods and other water-loving plants will multiply.

The whole chain of animal life, from tiny insects to large predators, will grow.

APS President and Chief Executive Officer Jack Davis threw a symbolic switch at Fossil Creek on Saturday, ending nearly a century of diverting most of the flow to run two hydroelectric plants.

The Childs and Irving plants, completed in 1909 and 1916, were the right thing for their time. They powered the mines of central Arizona, and in the 1920s, they provided three-fourths of the electricity used by a small town called Phoenix.

But now, the plants contribute less than 1 percent of the electricity APS generates. With more than 90 percent of Arizona's rivers lost or severely degraded, the creek has far more value as a natural resource than a power source.

When the time came to recommission the plants in 1999, APS could have fought with environmentalists.

Instead, it did the right thing. And did it the right way.

In a remarkable collaboration, APS worked with government agencies, environmentalists, Northern Arizona University and the Yavapai Apache Nation. Lots of details and red tape had to be worked out before Saturday's historic step.

APS is spending \$13 million for plant deconstruction and stream restoration, a farsighted contribution to Arizona's long-term vitality. APS will return the site to the U.S. Forest Service in 2009.

We must figure out the right thing to do after that.

Fossil Creek, northwest of Payson, is bound to attract a growing number of visitors.

As Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., pointed out in a statement on Friday, "There is a critical need to provide additional protection and adequate staffing and management to the area to maintain the outstanding values of this reborn stream."

McCain will do his part by introducing a bill to include Fossil Creek in the national system of Wild and Scenic Rivers. Other members of the delegation should give the legislation their strong support.

The Forest Service is working on a watershed management plan and expects to publish a decision on it in fiscal 2006, says Ken Anderson, district ranger for the Red Rock District of the Coconino National Forest.

Right now, people drive right up to the creek, camping and picnicking on the banks.

As visitation grows, a key management goal is to pull those heavy uses away from the edge of the creek.

The collaboration that liberated the creek will be critical for preserving it. The possibilities include Scouts, Chambers of Commerce, historical societies, conservation groups and retirees with special skills. A strong "Friends of Fossil Creek" is a must.

We have a four-year breather as APS wraps up, so there's no excuse for being caught off-guard.

The remote power plants were logistical and engineering marvels of their time. As it dismantles the facilities, APS is leaving the Childs powerhouse and ice-house.

One of the challenges will be figuring out how best to preserve and interpret them afterward.

Many of the original workers on the project were Native Americans.

But it was always troubling to see the living water dammed up, says Vince Randall, former Yavapai Apache tribal chairman, whose great-grandfather is buried two miles upstream from the Irving plant.

Now we join Randall in saying, "We can rejoice that the water's free again."