



River Run Dry

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The San Pedro is in peril, thanks in part to Sierra Vista's explosive growth

By [TIM WESTBY](#)



Ed Honda/Sierra Vista Herald
A blue heron at the San Pedro River.

It's a recent Saturday along an isolated stretch of the San Pedro River east of Sierra Vista, and the cottonwoods have turned yellow, giving the air around them a golden aura. A small pool of pea-green water next to the river is surrounded by dozens of animal prints: beaver, raccoon and coyote. Javelina and coyote take cover under a nearby small ledge carved into the riverbank as the river flows lazily north.

Earlier this year, on July 9 and for several days afterward, the San Pedro ran dry for the first time in the 70 years that people have been keeping track, just a few miles north of here, where the Charleston Road crosses the

river. Like many San Pedro advocates, Robert Glennon saw the dry spell as a potential paradigm shift in efforts to protect Southern Arizona's last free-flowing river.

"It's no longer a projection from some academic that this gem is going dry. Now it's really happened," says the UA professor of law and public policy and author of *Water Follies: Groundwater Pumping and the Fate of America's Fresh Waters*, which includes a chapter on the San Pedro.

But more than four months later, efforts to protect the San Pedro are as mired in politics, bureaucracy and studies as ever, say Glennon and others.

"I was hoping it would create a sense of urgency, but I haven't even seen that," says Tricia Gerrodette, president of the Huachuca Audubon Society. And she calls the work that went into finding out why the river went dry a distraction. "It should have been pretty clear to anyone watching the trend that this was bound to happen at some point."

Southeast Arizona is booming. Since the 2000 Census, Cochise

County and Sierra Vista have had growth rates hovering at just more than 5 percent. And flowing right through the middle of the growth is a ribbon of cottonwood and willows that supports more than 300 species of birds and the second largest concentration of mammals in the world outside of Costa Rica. Bird-watching alone pumps an estimated \$28 million annually into the local economy.

There isn't much dispute over the combination of factors that caused the river to go dry: years of drought, a late monsoon, a recovering and healthy riparian area with a vast gallery of trees sucking up more water, an increase in the number of unregulated wells pumping groundwater in the county and increased growth in the Sierra Vista.

Not surprisingly, it's the two man-made problems--groundwater pumping and growth--that are the most contentious. Deep divisions remain over how to address these issues and even over who is ultimately responsible.

For years, the Fort Huachuca received the brunt of the blame for pumping vast amounts of

water and depleting the aquifer that feeds the San Pedro. But after a 2002 court-ordered agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army instituted an aggressive water conservation effort. The base is now nearly halfway to its target of reducing groundwater pumping by 3,077 acre-feet annually by 2011. (An acre-foot is 326,000 gallons, or enough water to cover an acre a foot deep). In June, the Center for Biological Diversity filed suit against the Department of Defense, among others, alleging that the fort still was not living up to the 2002 agreement. But many San Pedro advocates like Glennon are beginning to cut the fort some slack and say the responsibility has shifted to local government.

"I don't think the fort is the bad guy anymore," he says. "But I haven't seen that the local people have done much at all."

Here's where the finger-pointing begins. Bob Strain, Sierra Vista's mayor pro tem and chair of the Upper San Pedro Partnership, a 7-year-old consortium that represents government, environmental and development interests charged with finding ways to stop the overpumping of groundwater in the region by 2011, says growth is not necessarily detrimental to the river. In fact, from 2003 to 2004, the city reduced daily water use from 172 gallons to 157 gallons per person, per day.

But in the last year, developers have proposed two large housing developments that could bring upwards of 10,000 homes to Sierra Vista over the

next 20 years.

Environmentalists argue that large-scale developments like this could be the death knell for the river. Strain brushes aside those concerns by rattling off a long list of water-conservation measures the partnership has instituted, like various wastewater and storm-water recharge projects. When it comes to growth, he adds, "The size of the development is not the issue. The management of the development is the issue."

Strain says local officials have their hands tied by the state when it comes to regulating growth anyway. He blames the state Legislature's unwillingness to address state laws that allow property owners to divide their land down to four-acre parcels with little, if any, regulation. In southern Cochise County near the San Pedro, wildcat subdivisions and agricultural pumping have resulted in an estimated 3,000 unregulated wells that are allowed to pump as much as 35 gallons of water per minute. A 2004 report by the U.S. Geological Survey estimates that these wells have contributed to a groundwater deficit that has increased almost 135 percent, or from 5,144 acre-feet to 12,050 acre-feet. (Cochise County Supervisor Pat Call, whose district includes the river, did not respond to numerous requests for an interview.)

"These are local problems, and the Legislature needs to realize that they need to be resolved locally," says Strain.

Thomas Maddock, chair of the UA's hydrology department,

agrees that the unregulated wells have a significant impact on the river. But he is quick to add that it's only one in a long list of problems adding to the San Pedro's woes. "As much as people would like to discount Sierra Vista's impact on the river, you can't," he says.

Sierra Vista sits smack in the middle between the Huachuca Mountains that are the river's major source of runoff and the river itself. "It should be obvious to a duck," he says, that the city's pumping plays a major role.

"If they build another 8,000 homes in Sierra Vista, you might as well forget about it," says Maddock. Even if they don't, he admits to being a pessimist when it comes to the river's long-term survival. "If growth continues, it's going to create another Santa Cruz."

Back on the river, the water runs several feet deep at a curve in the bank, making this summer's dry spell and the ongoing fight seem far away. The hike to get to this spot is a difficult two miles of bushwhacking from the nearest road through face-tall grass and over hidden logs and holes. The effort to save the San Pedro is increasingly becoming just as difficult.

"People have to make their choices," says Maddock. "Do you want growth, or do you want a healthy riparian?"