

# Ruined Rivers: An Eagle's eye view of the Verde

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ABOARD THE VERDE CANYON RAILROAD – The train slowed, but it couldn't stop because this stretch of the Verde River is bald eagle habitat and the proof was perched just below a cliff on the opposite canyon wall.

Two eaglets sat on the edge of a cave, not moving much, perhaps watching us, perhaps not. They weren't newborns, but it wasn't clear if they'd fledged yet either, whether they were resting or still unable to launch themselves into the morning air.

Those two eaglets, distant and fleeting as they were, silenced the rail car, which was full of people with an interest in the Verde River, whether it was as member of a conservation group, government regulators, elected officials or just lovers of this central Arizona waterway.

What was clear was their shared desire to protect this view, this piece of bald eagle habitat on the upper Verde, a reach of river many feared could be lost if Prescott and Prescott Valley moved ahead with plans to drill wells and pump water from an upstream aquifer on the Verde headwaters.

“The Verde River,” said Dan Campbell, resuming his overview of issues, “is the second-best native fishery in Arizona, after Aravipa Creek.” Campbell is the Verde program manager for The Nature Conservancy and a devout riverphile. “Six of the eight native fish species remain here. And there are plans to make the middle Verde a designated native fish river.”

That sort of protection would go a long way toward preserving flow in the river,

but it wouldn't guarantee it, not as long as Arizona's laws leave exposed the link between groundwater pumping and surface water, a link accepted by most scientists and feared by developers and property rights advocates.

Ed Wolfe, a retired U.S. Geological Survey scientist who now spends long hours volunteering on Verde River issues, tried to explain some of the legal and geological issues that get in the way of simply imposing preservation measures on the river.

The Prescott pipeline, he said, would take a significant share of the underground flow at the headwaters, enough that Owe could see a measurable drop in a relatively short amount of time. He also pointed out that Prescott was not the only threat to the headwaters. Wells are being drilled all over the Chino Valley and many of them are probably drawing water out that otherwise would surface in the river.

The train nears Perkinsville Ranch, the turnaround point on the four-hour tour. The group files out onto an observation car and breathes in the clear air, takes in the pastoral setting. This is a part of Arizona, a length of the Verde that not many folks see; those who do take away a new appreciation for the river.

The Center for Biological Diversity is preparing legal arguments designed to stop the Prescott pipeline if the two cities don't produce clear plans to protect the upper Verde's flow. City officials have pledged to mitigate if the wells hurt the river – an event they consider unlikely based on studies their own hydrologists produced. But with projected costs escalating from a planned \$80 million to as much as \$170 million, conservation groups fear that environmental protection will slide down the list of priorities.

As the train chugs back to its depot in Clarkdale, the conversation turns to what

else might help. Perhaps a wild and scenic designation or an extension of the state's river greenway. Mayors of several cities say they are pushing for more water conservation by residents.

“People often say, ‘what are we going to do when we run out of water?’” said Clarkdale Mayor Doug von Gausig. “Well, we’re not going to run out of water, but we’re not going to be able to keep using as much as we do now.”

The train doesn't even slow as it passes the eagle nesting area on the way back and hardly anyone notices as talk about strategies grows more intent.

If the eagles are going to keep their home, there's work to do.