

Saving the San Pedro

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Last chance.

The danger in those words can distract from the opportunity they represent.

Arizona will be better off if it seizes the chance to make sure the San Pedro River in southeastern Arizona does not slip beneath the sand and permanently disappear.

Some of the reasons why a river is worth preserving are as hard to articulate as it is to describe the way a myriad of bird calls turns into a symphony under a canopy of sycamore leaves.

Other reasons are as concrete as the dollars the ecotourists spend as they seek out a front-row seat for the nature show.

Still others are unexpected and unanticipated. Who would have guessed that Gila monster spit would lead to a drug for diabetics? Who can say what other treasures are waiting to be discovered in vanishing habitats?

Your children could be the beneficiaries. Or the losers.

Last chance.

For the third year in a row, the San Pedro may run dry at a key monitoring station. When that station, the Charleston gauge, went dry three years ago, it was the first time since 1904.

Scientists say it is not the drought. The San Pedro is dying up because of groundwater pumping from fast-growing Sierra Vista and Fort Huachuca, an Army base.

Environmental groups, notably the Center for Biological Diversity, say a recent report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the impact of the Army base on the San Pedro is more about finding ways to let the base expand than it was about protecting the river.

The presence of an important military installation in the area complicates the job of protecting this river, but the balance must be maintained. The river's needs must be respected.

Unlike other rivers in the state that went from lush riparian habitats to sandy riverbeds as people shrugged, a lot of people care what's happening to the San Pedro. That's a mark of Arizona's increasing maturity and appreciation for its natural heritage.

The Nature Conservancy and the federal government are buying conservation easements along a tributary to the San Pedro.

This will assure that development will not occur on the Babacomari Ranch, thus averting the water demands of a large subdivision.

A bill signed last month by Gov. Janet Napolitano allows Cochise County to create an active management area to look for ways to deal with growth without drying up the river. If voters approve, the area could require developers to demonstrate a 100-year water supply that would not adversely affect the San Pedro.

Also last month, a report by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation recommended further study on several strategies for preserving the river's flow. One of those was extending the Central Arizona Project from Tucson, which would be an enormously costly and ambitious endeavor that suggests this isn't going to be easy.

Democratic Rep. Gabrielle Giffords announced that money is being included in the House appropriations bill for the Upper San Pedro Partnership, a multiagency group that does water planning.

Last chance?

Maybe.

But there are a lot of tools and a lot of opportunity to save this river.

As long as a strong commitment remains, there is a chance.