



Verde Springs

19:29 -- Sun 19.Apr.2009 :: 1240194596

Paulden, Arizona



I join Joanne on a half-day excursion to Verde Springs at the headwaters of the Verde River. she is an old acquaintance from the mid-80's when she and Mike led biology and geology field trips at the local community college -- I was on a memorable week-long one to Death Valley in the winter of 1985. the hike today is part of local Earth Day activities, although she has been leading these monthly for the last year as part of the public awareness campaign that the Center for Biological Diversity is mounting in opposition to the plans for massive groundwater mining by the towns of Prescott, Prescott Valley, and Chino Valley. a representative of the Nature Conservancy was along as well to introduce the land that they recently bought protecting one of the most sensitive areas of the riparian headwaters. there was an eclectic group of folks from a thirteen-year-old to several couples who've retired to Prescott.

we started out at the 100-year-old Sullivan Lake impoundment in the middle of Paulden which is fully sedimented and the dam itself is crumbling. it sits at the head of a 20-meter deep canyon cut into a late Cenozoic basalt flow that forms the immediate subsurface for much of the immediate area. Joanne gave a brief overview of the issues that are threatening the Verde headwaters. the primary one being the construction of a huge pipeline by the Prescott city government that will tap into the Big Chino Aquifer, spur rampant development, and have a major impact on the springs that feed the Upper Verde.

we then proceeded to the parking at the Little Thumb Butte Bed and Breakfast where we hiked down to the river at the confluence of Granite Creek and the Verde (not until I did a *before* group portrait). upstream of the confluence the Verde is blocked by the influx of sediment from Granite Creek and forms a turbid still water lake that is cut into the canyon sediments -- clearly the Sullivan Lake dam silting up has deprived the river of its normal sedimentation load and caused heavy down-cutting of the pre-existing flood-plain (which now lies about 8 meters above the current water table). this has largely destroyed the riparian environment above the confluence. I would suggest the first thing to do is to begin to cut the dam down, slowly, so that there can be an incremental release of the 100 years of backed up sediment to bring back the former water-table level and reclaim the upstream riparian environment. this solution is likely impossible given that the upstream watershed feeding Sullivan Lake has significant human development of the huge watershed area which covers Paulden, Chino Valley, and much of Prescott as well as the entire Big Chino Basin.



there are many significant Hohokam archeological sites in the area, structures and petroglyphs alike: the ancient ones were here in force. and disappeared as they did elsewhere in the region. suddenly, in the mid-1300s. unfortunately these are minor sites compared to other more spectacular places, so often petroglyphs are chipped and defaced, and certainly the areas have been thoroughly cleaned of movable artifacts. it is illegal to disturb any findings, but the laws are almost never enforced.

we wander upstream to a wide but now down-cut and parched floodplain with large and elaborate (and inscrutable) petroglyphs chipped into the desert varnish that is present on basalt boulders fallen from the cliffs. then we head back below the confluence where the canyon transforms into a rich riparian environment with the river simply appearing in the midst of the gravels first as a stagnant trickle. as we go on further downstream it grows rapidly with the influx of numerous springs coming in from the north side of the canyon through some fractured limestone (and ultimately from the Big Chino Aquifer. I spot a *long* gopher snake lounging on a branch in the riverbed. the fish increase in size as we move down stream. evidence of beaver activities are everywhere. we lunch at the Nature Conservancy segment, wade in the creek a bit, head downstream another fifteen minutes and then wander back to the cars in the hot afternoon sun.

Joanne has taken many tens of people on this hike and rightly assumes that once people have experienced the richness of the riparian environment they are more likely to be able to imagine the consequence of its potential loss. as everywhere in the West, and increasingly, in the world, water becomes an object of contention -- to some an economic commodity, to others merely another extractable resource, and to the entire ecosystem that depends on every drop, an indispensable ingredient of life.

access to the area is somewhat restricted (much of it privately owned), but the headwaters area that is managed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department as the Upper Verde River Wildlife Area is open to the public. highly recommended!