

Column: Ten reasons to protect the Verde



Courtesy Gary Beverly

Red rocks, blue sky, and green trees on the upper Verde River.

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The Verde River is a green artery pulsing through the heart of Arizona, a jewel of the Southwest, continuously flowing over 170 miles from Paulden to the Salt River near Scottsdale.

The upper Verde, tucked away deep within the Prescott National Forest between Paulden and Clarkdale, is remote, unknown, underappreciated, and threatened. The upper Verde's future is clouded by unmitigated groundwater pumping in the Big Chino Valley, which will eventually convert 25 miles of a living river into a dead, dry wash.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) believes that we are smart enough to live here responsibly, enjoying a comfortable lifestyle while

protecting our natural areas and our wildlife. The question is: Do we have the political will?

Here are ten reasons we should protect the Verde:

1. **Economy:** The Verde sustains over 700 jobs and over \$100 million in economic value in the Verde Valley, plus 40% of the Phoenix area's surface water supply. Natural areas are proven to benefit local economies.

2. **Recreation:** As our population grows, we require more recreational area. The upper Verde is a wonderful place for people to hike, hunt, fish, camp, backpack, kayak, canoe, view wildlife, photograph, ride horses, climb rocks, and observe birds.

3. **Quality of Life:** Clean air, unfettered open spaces and bodies of water, and opportunities to view wildlife enhance our daily living.

4. **Scenery:** Primal colors and spectacular rock formations create scenery second to none in the state — red rocks, green plants, blue sky, and white clouds. The Verde displays tremendous natural beauty.

5. **Cultural and Historic Values:** The entire river corridor is laced with ancient rock art, campsites, structures, and artifacts revealing the historical lifestyle of Native Americans. The river and its springs are an essential spiritual and cultural foundation for the Yavapai-Apache Nation. Also, remnants of early Arizona ranching history dot the canyon.

6. **Wildlife:** Although the Verde River watershed comprises only 5.8 percent of the land area in Arizona, it contains the best remaining riparian areas — lush, green ribbons full of life. The Verde supports a surprisingly large fraction of Arizona's vertebrate species: 78 percent of breeding bird species, 89 percent of bat and carnivore species, 83 percent of native ungulate species, and 76 percent of reptiles and amphibian genera — an impressive concentration of wildlife. Many bald eagles overwinter on the Verde. Seven eagle chicks have fledged at Del Rio Springs in the last five years. The Verde River, the lifeblood of the watershed, supports most of Arizona's wildlife species, a heritage we all share.

7. **Endangered Species:** The Verde River supports a rich and diverse variety of plants, animals, and fish. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) lists 21 species in the Verde watershed, including the yellow-billed cuckoo,

the southwestern willow flycatcher, the narrow-headed garter snake, the Mexican garter snake, and more. Wildlife managers monitor an additional 16 sensitive species of concern.

8. **Native Fish:** Of Arizona's original 33 native fish, three are extinct, 19 are protected by the ESA, and the Verde supports ten. The upper Verde River sustains four ESA-listed native fish.

9. **Uniqueness:** Of Arizona's six major perennial rivers, the Gila, Salt, and Santa Cruz Rivers have been consumed by dams and groundwater pumping, the Colorado is fully diverted and no longer flows to the Gulf of California, and the San Pedro is struggling for life. The Verde River is the longest surviving living river in Arizona.

10. **Stewardship:** Because we exploit our forests, rivers, and land for the resources that support our society, some environmental degradation is inevitable. Our challenge is to manage this rich and amazing world sustainably so our kids, and their children, can also live comfortably and enjoy nature and wildlife. We can learn from our local Native Americans, the Yavapai-Apache Nation in Camp Verde. Monica Marquez, a Yavapai, told me: "Water is Life. You never take it all." Vince Randall, past tribal chairman, asks: "When are you going to learn to share with all living things? When will you learn the true meaning of stewardship? Will it be when there is only one of you left?"

To protect the Verde, we need to use less water and reduce groundwater pumping. When your hand is on the faucet, your choices affect this river, our wildlife, and our children's future quality of life.

Please submit your questions or comments to info@cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly chairs the Citizens Water Advocacy Group Public Policy Committee and is a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.