

Verde River: Stewardship versus ownership

GARY BEVERLY, PH.D Special to the Courier
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I had just completed a presentation to a watershed conference describing “Ten Reasons to Protect the Verde River” and was taking questions. Vincent Randall, the Apache Cultural Chair of the Yavapai Apache Nation, rose and offered the 11th reason: “The river is alive. If you ask us “Where is the river? we reply ‘the river lives over there’ ”

This is not a technical linguistic detail, and it is typical of indigenous languages across North America. It represents a fundamental difference in how Western cultures and indigenous people view nature. For example, we regard “tree” as a noun, as an object that can be owned, chopped down, sawed up and sold. Indigenous cultures attach a state of being to the “tree” — it lives — so you harvest with gratitude and reciprocity (plant another one), and you don’t take all of them. This is the difference: stewardship versus ownership.

The Verde River lives and supports life. Perennial flowing water creates a lush and rare riparian forest supporting three-quarters of the vertebrate species in Arizona, including 19 species listed by the Endangered Species Act. It contains dozens of cultural and historic sites, provides many recreational opportunities, and supplies water and economic benefits to downstream communities.

But under Arizona water law, the Verde is an object to be exploited by extracting groundwater used to support economic development.

Groundwater in the Big Chino Aquifer emerges from Verde Springs as perennial flow. Removing groundwater from the Big Chino reduces river flow. The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) is concerned about three classes of groundwater pumping in the Big Chino:

Population growth. At current growth rates the Paulden community will eventually consume enough groundwater to dry the river. The Yavapai County Board of Supervisors could control this using zoning and building codes.

Agricultural irrigation. Even the most efficient irrigation practices consume lots of water. If Big Ag moves into the Big Chino, as it has in Willcox and Kingman, it’s game

over for the river. Here, the Arizona Legislature has the duty, authority and responsibility to act.

Exports for municipal use: The legislature has authorized enough groundwater pumping from the Big Chino Aquifer to dry up the upper Verde several times over. Prescott and Prescott Valley plan to construct a pipeline to transfer Big Chino groundwater to the Prescott Active Management Area. The water is intended to support population growth, eventually to over 350,000 people. In an agreement with Salt River Project, the cities agreed to mitigate any changes to base flow caused by their pumping, but no mitigation plan exists at this time, and CWAG scientists do not believe that mitigation is possible. The cities must either mitigate or abandon the pipeline plan.

CWAG believes that change is possible and overdue. The Board of Supervisors, the legislature and the cities should view the Verde — the sole surviving perennial river in Arizona — as a living river, not as an object to be exploited and pumped dry. If they act like stewards, not owners, solutions are possible.

All that is lacking is political will, and citizens can change that by voting for water stewardship.

I will talk about “The Big Chino Pipeline vs. the Verde River,” on Oct. 14 via Zoom. Details and registration link at cwagaz.org. “Eleven Reasons to Protect the Verde River” is also available at cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly PhD is a member of the CWAG Executive Committee and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.