

Friends of the Santa Cruz River
Who Are We? What Do We Do? And Why Do We Do It?
Sherry Sass 4/8/05

The Santa Cruz River Valley is biologically and culturally integral to the character of Southeastern Arizona. The river flows from its headwaters in Arizona, south into Sonora, Mexico where it completes a 25 mile u-turn and re-crosses the U.S./Mexican border east of Nogales. From Nogales north for about 40 miles, the river flows perennially and provides the majority of recharge to the aquifer basins on which municipalities, industries, and family-owned agricultural operations rely for their water supplies. The river also sustains one of the country's largest cottonwood/willow riparian corridor and is home to over 568 species of plants, insects, birds, reptiles, and mammals. Since riparian habitats and wetlands represent less than 2% of the land area in Southwest, but support the highest density and abundance of plants and animals in the region, the Santa Cruz River is quite literally a ribbon of life in Southeast Arizona that connects the U.S. and Mexico.

Friends of the Santa Cruz River (FOSCR) is a Santa Cruz County-based community organization established in 1991 to “protect and enhance the flow and water quality of the Santa Cruz River.” The non-profit, all-volunteer group focuses on the perennial portion of the river in the United States. Dedicated to working with a broad range of partners and community members, FOSCR collaborates with riverside landowners, government agencies, community groups, business leaders, and citizens on both sides of the border. Their mission has always been to ensure a continued flow of the river's surface waters, promote the highest river water quality achievable, and to protect and restore the riparian ecosystem and diversity of life supported by the river's waters. FOSCR accomplishes its goal and conserves the river for the benefit of present and future generations through monitoring, conservation, and advocacy.

FOSCR is fueled by the support of our members and a dedicated and passionate 13-member Board of Directors. The Board brings diverse skills and backgrounds to the mission of FOSCR, including but not limited to: hydrology, environmental education and policy, real estate, ecology, ranching, and permaculture design. The following list summarizes some of their most significant achievements:

Monitoring

- RiverWatch, FOSCR's water quality monitoring program, has been keeping tabs on the river's health since 1992. They have compiled the most complete water quality database that exists on the river, and have shared it freely and frequently with agency personnel and the public.
- Since 1994, FOSCR has participated in the planning for upgrading the bi-national wastewater treatment plant which is both the river's current lifeblood and its major source of nutrient pollution.
- In the early 1990's, FOSCR encouraged the creation of the Santa Cruz Active Management Area (SCAMA) to help focus attention on water issues unique to the upper Santa Cruz River watershed and to establish regulations and rights for future water use. FOSCR member Sherry Sass is a governor-appointed member of SCAMA's

Groundwater Users Advisory Council, where she advocates for the protection and health of the river.

Conservation

- In 2003-2004, FOSCR President Ben Lomeli mobilized a volunteer bi-national work crew to clean up Oso Wash, which crosses the border and is a major source of trash in the river. Not stopping at the clean-up, Ben Lomeli also tracked down the source of the trash that was flowing north across the border, and is currently working with Mexican officials to stop the dumping.
- FOSCR designed the South River Road re-vegetation project, a project intended to repair a washed out road and replace flood-damaged vegetation. Together with a bi-national, multi-agency crew, the volunteers planted over 200 new trees to control erosion, protect the road and riverbank, and restore riparian habitat.
- Throughout their 14 years of stewardship, FOSCR has collaborated with local and regional government officials on modifying floodplain ordinances, establishing a wellhead protection program, sharing information with Mexican officials, and advocating for increased funding for rural water issues.

Advocacy

- The “Riverway Partnership” program, funded by a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant from 1998-2000, established a foundation of trust with riverside property owners and developed mutually beneficial conservation projects to protect and enhance private property. This project helped establish FOSCR as a mainstream community conservation resource.
- The FOSCR Board of Directors spent two years contributing to the development of Santa Cruz County’s revised Comprehensive Plan, which was adopted in June, 2004. The Comprehensive Plan places special emphasis on the importance of the river and envisions maintaining its essential cultural and ecological character through a variety of land use and conservation tools. FOSCR now sits on a Citizen’s Taskforce that is charged with implementing conservation measures from the Comprehensive Plan.
- In cooperation with Tumacácori National Historical Park, FOSCR educates hundreds of schoolchildren using an award-winning river-based curriculum developed by FOSCR Board member Roy Simpson.
- *The Rambler’s Guide to the Life of the Santa Cruz River* was written and illustrated by FOSCR members Sherry Sass and Joel Floyd. When published (soon!), it will guide river users to the great diversity of life that the river supports.