

A Voice for the River

By Alyson Morvay (3/22/06, published in the Tubac Villager (?))

When Sherry Sass first discovered the part of the Santa Cruz River that meanders through Tubac, she thought she was back on the East Coast. She said, "I thought I must be in New Hampshire. I just couldn't believe the big leafy trees and earth that smelled like earth... and the fish! They're tiny but they're ours and they're native." She fell in love with the river and the cottonwood and willow trees that make the river their home.

Trained in Marine Biology and being a Fisheries Biologist in Massachusetts, she is "naturally attracted to water," as she explained and was interested in the Santa Cruz River as a desert wash when she and her husband moved to Green Valley about 15 years ago. After moving to Tubac she checked into what kinds of ecological programs might be in place to protect the river and found there were none. After discovering a mailing list kept by the U of A when they had sponsored a River Day years before, she contacted several interested people who were on that list and Friends of the Santa Cruz River was born. Sherry describes the group's mission to "monitor, educate, and advocate", and to act as a voice for the river. Currently they have approximately 150 members and 300 on their mailing list.

It is the goal of the Friends of the Santa Cruz River to preserve the river's biological diversity and natural functions as much as possible as the population grows. The ribbon of trees that weave their way through the desert scenery that we see today do not have long lives and may not be here 100 years from now. Educating the public on the necessity for cleaner water and ongoing riparian ecosystem protection will allow the natural rejuvenation of the native plant growth to continue, and will provide a habitat for the wildlife we all enjoy. The trees growing along the river are the rarest forest type in North America. They can only establish themselves under very specific yet natural conditions. They grow at an unbelievably fast pace, yet new growth only occurs if proper flood and groundwater conditions exist. Spring floods and sandy soil are necessary and excessive pumping of water from the river disturbs the natural water balance.

RiverWatch, a continuing project for over a decade, has been conducted by two of FOSCR's dedicated volunteers, Roberta ("Birdie") Stabel and Nick Bleser. Water quality and site changes are monitored every month at sites along the river and on the Nogales Wash, a major tributary. A huge database has been developed and FOSCR works with the Department of Environmental Quality which helped set up the water monitoring program.

FOSCR supports public school education. Volunteer and Tumacàcori Park Ranger Roy Simpson conducts a day-long program each year that introduces 4th grade students from throughout the county to the necessity and ways to protect the river.

Through public speaking engagements and river walks that begin at the Tumacàcori Mission and are conducted by FOSCR, the public not only experiences the natural beauty of the area, but can learn conservation techniques they can practice. Water harvesting

from rooftops, for example, and planting native plants and reducing lawn size can keep water use per capita down. Building contractors can clustering new homes being built which reduces the need for impervious surfaces which disturb peak water flows.

Encouraging improved sewage treatment on both sides of the border is of the utmost importance to preserve the integrity of the river, of course, but there are other border situations that take priority. The Friends continue to work with governmental agencies on both sides of the border in the hopes of diminishing the ongoing degradation of the river.

As Sherry explained, the river has “a vibrant ecology and can largely take care of itself. The Friends are here to safeguard water flow, protect the necessary shallow water tables, get the water as clean and healthy as possible, and protect the land that supports riparian (river-related) habitat.”

Perhaps with the increased population, there will be an increased number of people interested in protecting and preserving our beautiful forest in the desert.

Friends of the Santa Cruz River also publishes a newsletter, *The Flow*. If you would like copies of their newsletter or are interested in joining or volunteering, you can contact them at P.O. Box 4275 Tubac AZ 85646, by calling (520) 398-9093, or going to their website, www.friendsofsantacruzriver.org .