

RIVER WATER QUALITY THREATENS FISH SURVIVAL

Sherry Sass 10/3/04

This spring, a State survey of fish along the river and its tributaries found reduced numbers along the river's main stem. It was speculated that high ammonia levels may be degrading the habitat for both fish and other aquatic life.

FOSCR volunteers Birdie Stabel and Sherry Sass accompanied Arizona Game and Fish Dept. biologist Jeremy Voeltz and Paul Barrett of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this past May, to help monitor fish populations. Four native species have been found in the river in past surveys, including the federally endangered Gila topminnow.

But sampling this time yielded no topminnows at Santa Gertrudis Lane (just south of Tumacacori National Park) and only a few of the topminnow's exotic competitor, the mosquitofish, and only one topminnow (but many mosquitofish) at the Tumacacori secondary river channel known as the "seep". Mr. Voeltz suggested that ammonia levels in the water high enough to smell might be the reason the fish were so scarce. Certainly, the lack of any fish—or aquatic invertebrates—at the Rio Rico Bridge site was due to poor water quality, as FOSCR and others have found in previous surveys.

Ironically, longfin dace were abundant at the Nogales Wash, as they often are in the flow that is fed by leaks in Sonora's drinking water system as well as natural groundwater and sewage system leaks.

Mr. Voeltz could not complete the survey further north to Tubac, but will return next spring, especially to check on the topminnow's status.

The results of this survey emphasize the problems FOSCR has repeatedly pointed out to federal officials who run the International Wastewater Treatment Plant which accounts for most of the ammonia in the river. The plant is slated to be upgraded to remove ammonia from the effluent discharged into the river at Rio Rico, but binational, national, and local political wrangling has slowed down the process so that plans originally discussed in 1994 are still not finalized (see article on treatment plant).