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# SANTA CRUZ RIVER

**THREAT:** Water scarcity

**STATES:** Arizona (United States), Sonora (Mexico)

**AT RISK:** Community and cultural connection, fish and wildlife

## SUMMARY

The Santa Cruz River was once a desert oasis that was dried up and polluted for decades – and only recently is it coming back to life. Climate change and water scarcity however, threaten progress to ensure clean, flowing water in the river. What’s more, rollbacks to clean water protections at the federal level could add new challenges to the health of the watershed longer term. To ensure this river remains a community treasure, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should establish an Urban National Wildlife Refuge.

JULIUS SCHLOSBERG

## THE RIVER

The Santa Cruz River has provided life-sustaining water to humans for more than 12,000 years—including some of the oldest communities in North America. The Tohono O’odham Nation have stewarded these lands and waters since time immemorial, and both the Tohono O’odham Nation and Pascua Yaqui Tribe continue to live in the area today. After western expansion in the 1800s, over a century of intensive groundwater withdrawals caused the Santa Cruz River’s perennial flows to end in 1913 and seasonal flows ceased by 1940. The intervening decades saw partially treated wastewater discharges into the Santa Cruz, creating harmful conditions for the native ecosystem and human residents alike.

The Santa Cruz River has been on a steady path to recovery since 2008 when wastewater treatment facilities along the river began to upgrade. Wastewater facilities now provide approximately 35 miles of perennial flows—improved water quality, and native fish, birds, reptiles, vegetation, and people are all returning to the river. These gains are seen in beautiful flowing sections in Santa Cruz County that support a rare cottonwood–willow forest within the unique and extraordinary Sonoran Desert, as well as a vibrant urban corridor through the City of Tucson. The river has historically provided for strong communities of ranchers and farmers, and now contributes to the success of the Tumacácori National Historic Park, the de Anza Trail, and Sweetwater Wetlands as important recreation and birding sites. The growing tourism and service industries complement those still working the land and add to prosperity for the region.

## THE THREAT

While binational, state, local, private, and academic institutions have put time and money into reconnecting people to the Santa Cruz, the river’s recovery remains tenuous. The greatest challenge to the Santa Cruz River today is maintaining the water that remains and

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## TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/)  
[SANTACRUZRIVER2024](https://SANTACRUZRIVER2024)



to avoid backsliding on the progress made over the past decade.

As an effluent-dominated river, the Santa Cruz is reliant on consistent source water, and in Tucson, that water comes from the import of Colorado River water. As those water supplies dwindle due to climate change and overuse, so could flows in the Santa Cruz. Nonetheless, climate change has dried Tucson's drinking water source (Colorado River) and changed local rainfall patterns, increasing the likelihood that we will again return to depleting groundwater reserves and reallocating Santa Cruz River water for advanced water purification (i.e., direct potable reuse).

Longer droughts, rising temperatures, and intense competition for water threaten limited supplies. Southern Arizona has a growing population and a rebounding economy, which both increase water use. The amount of effluent going into the river is also at risk because local, state, and federal jurisdictions all influence how treated waste water is used, and how water owners are credited. There is no guarantee that effluent will remain in the river unless changes are made.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Sonoran Institute, in partnership with The Wilderness Society has been working to establish a Santa Cruz River Urban National Wildlife Refuge. The purpose is to celebrate the river's diverse and rich cultural heritage, honor the revitalized river, increase access to the nature, and protect this crucial greenspace. An Urban National Wildlife Refuge would establish parcels which will be put into permanent federal protection, create an acquisition boundary—within which future parcels can be purchased and likewise protected—and would bring much-needed national attention to this ecologically and culturally significant waterway. Increased recreational use and appreciation of the Santa Cruz River through the Urban National Wildlife Refuge program would be a powerful and strategic protection tool toward preserving the ecological value—including flowing water.

To ensure this river remains a community treasure, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should establish an Urban National Wildlife Refuge. The public can take action by urging Secretary Deb Haaland to designate this new wildlife area for birds, wildlife, and people!