

EDITOR'S PICK

TOP STORY

## 30+ historic photos of the Santa Cruz River through Tucson

**Rick Wiley**

Jul 28, 2023

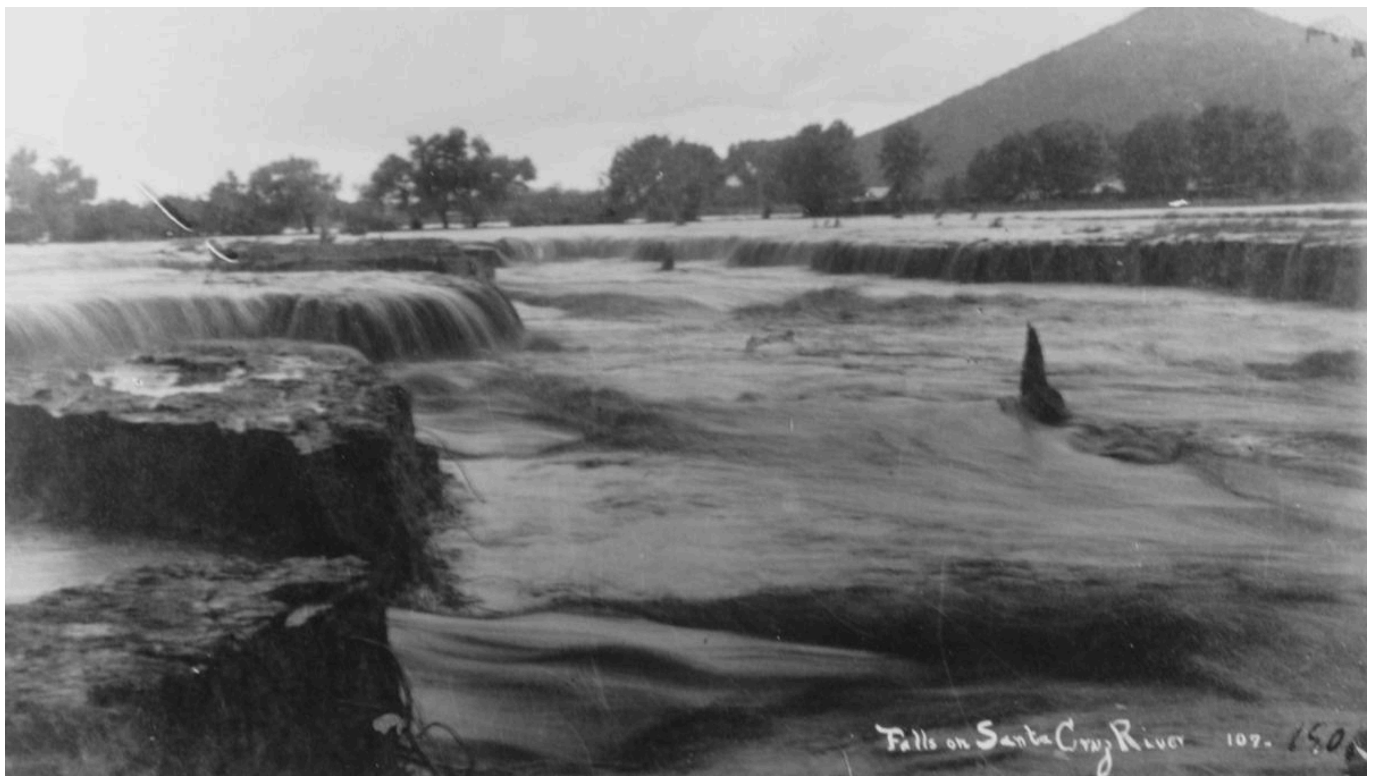
The Santa Cruz River was the lifeblood of Tucson for early Native Americans, the Spanish Conquistadores and early American settlers. It languished for years and became dry most of the year as the water table dropped.

It also became a neglected trench and trash heap. City leaders envisioned something better. By the early 1970s, the Army Corps of Engineers was studying the feasibility of channeling the river and creating a park. In 1977, work began.

It is now an integral part of The Loop bicycle and pedestrian trails.

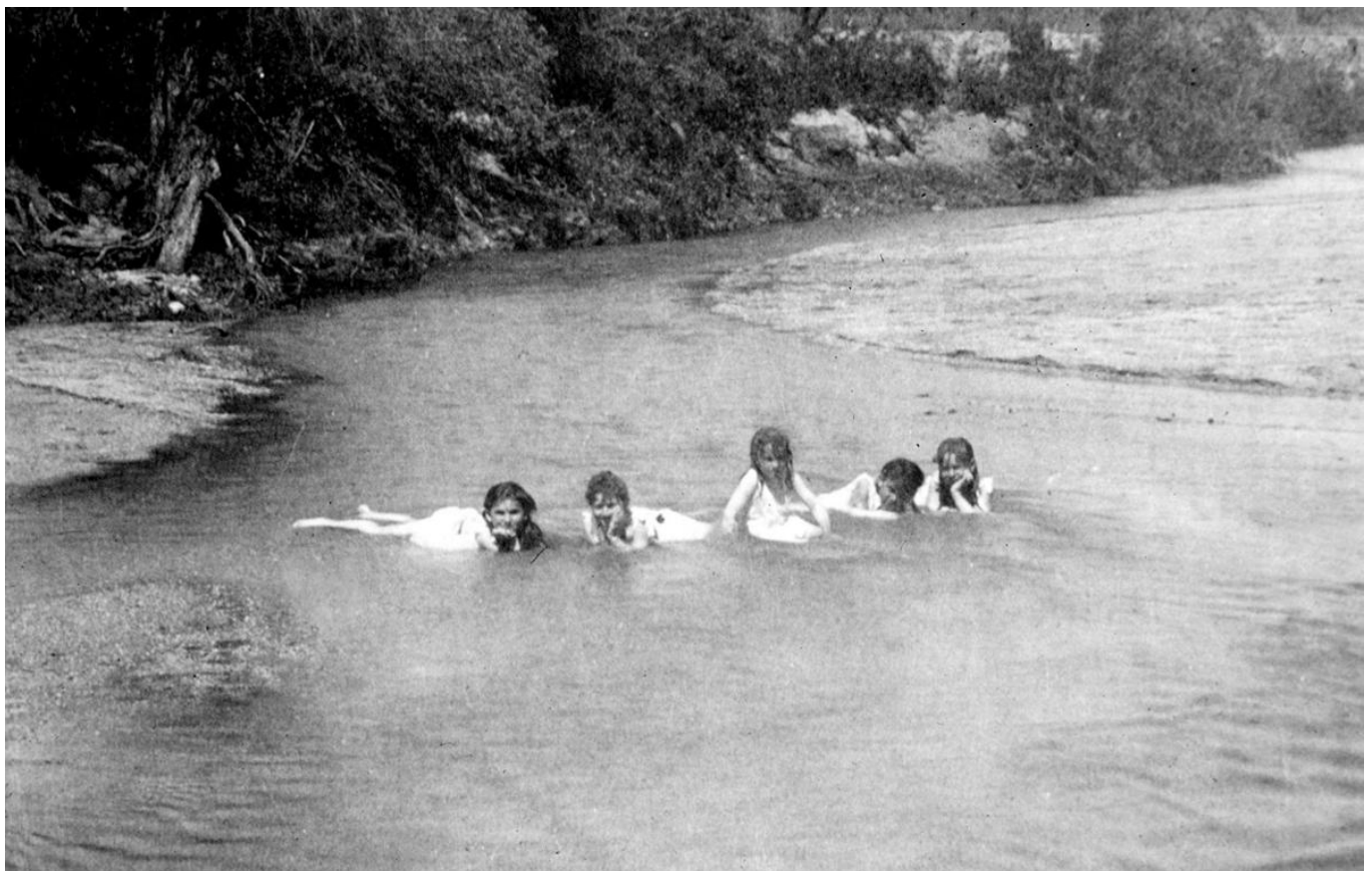
*If you like photos that explore Tucson's past, you can see more each week by subscribing to our historical newsletter: **<http://tucne.ws/time>**.*

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Waterfalls on the Santa Cruz River in 1889 near Sentinel Peak in Tucson.  
*Arizona Historical Society*

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Girls in Santa Cruz River, 1889-1890.



A bridge over the Santa Cruz River near Sentinel Peak in Tucson washed out during flooding in 1915.

*Tucson Citizen file*

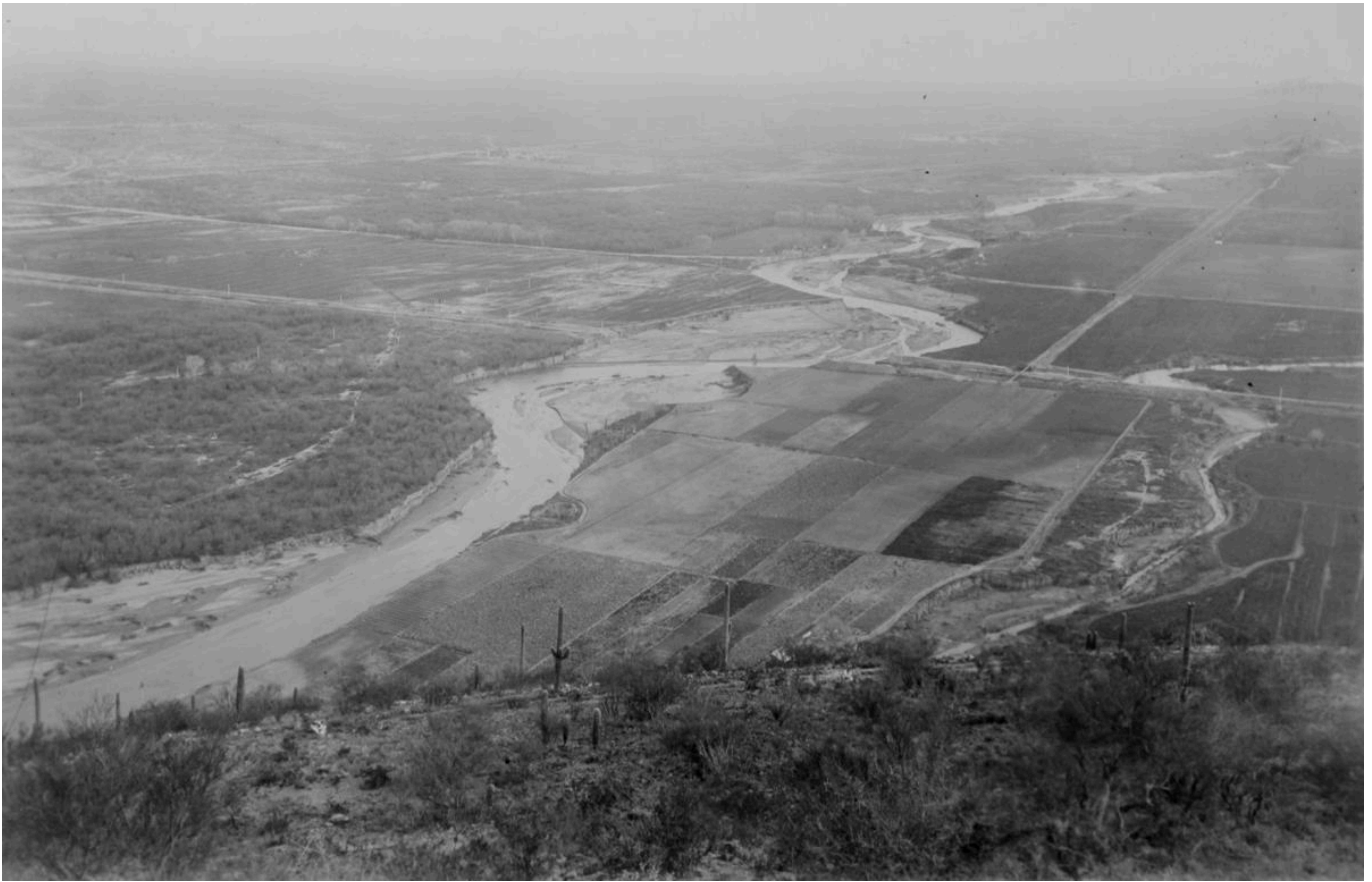
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Santa Cruz River at St. Mary's Road bridge in 1931.

*UA Special Collections*

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The Santa Cruz River flows north as seen from Sentinel Peak in Tucson in the early 1900's.

*Arizona Historical Society*

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El Convento along the Santa Cruz River, ca. 1910.

*Arizona Historical Society*

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Flooding of the Santa Cruz River, Tucson, in September, 1926, from "Letters from Tucson, 1925-1927" by Ethel Stiffler.

*Courtesy Roger E. Carpenter*

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Flooding of the Santa Cruz River, Tucson, in September, 1926, from "Letters from Tucson, 1925-1927" by Ethel Stiffler.

*Courtesy Roger E. Carpenter*





Aerial view of the Santa Cruz River as it winds its way through Pima County north of Cortaro Road in 1953. The county was considering a bridge at several locations, but had to contend with the ever-changing course of the river.

*Tucson Citizen*

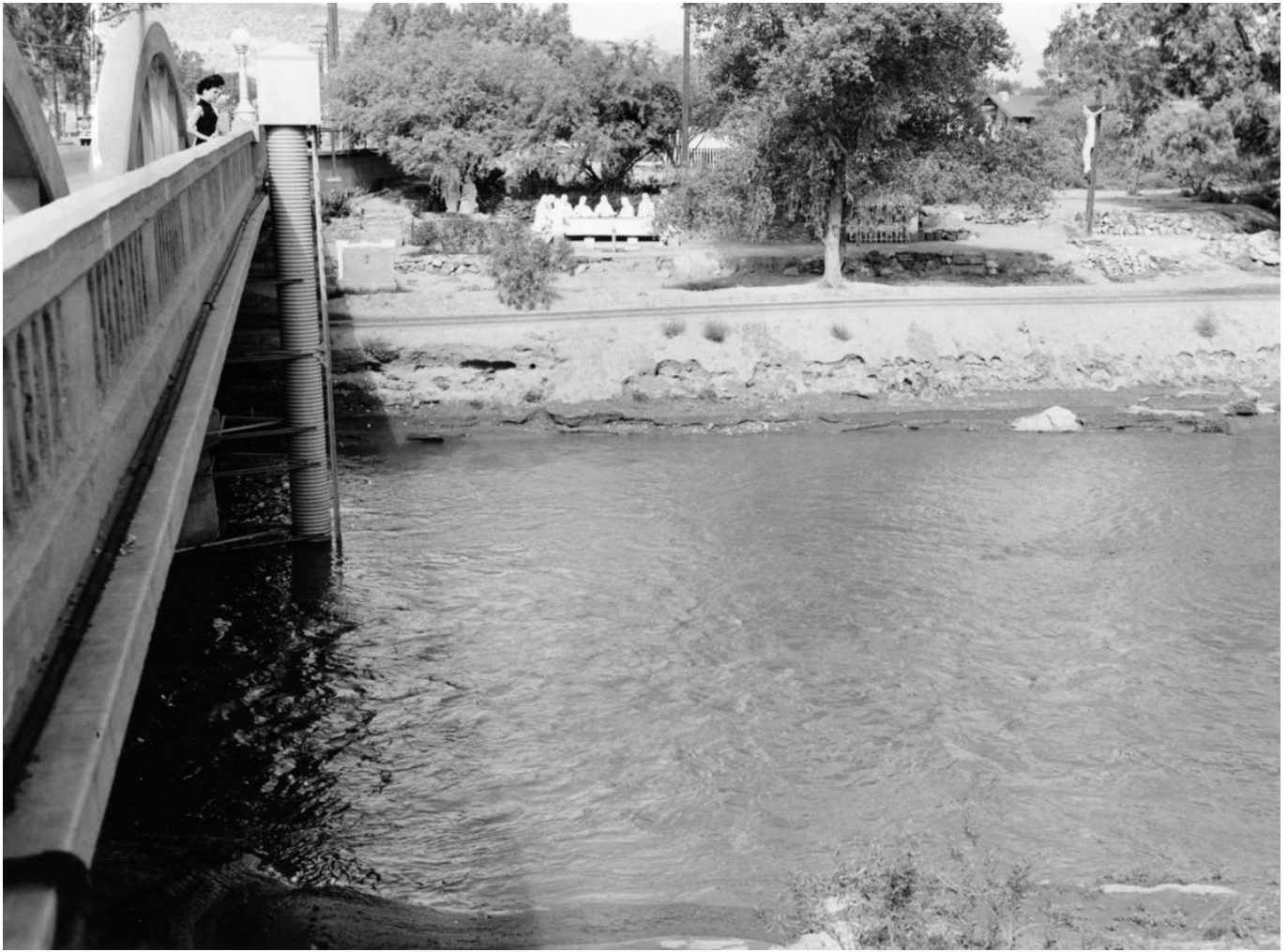
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The Tucson Citizen wrote in 1970, "The Santa Cruz River is a garbage dump."

City leaders were pushing to upgrade and beautify the channel. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was studying the possibility.

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The Santa Cruz River flowing under the Congress Street bridge in August, 1952. The Garden of Gesthemane is in the background.

*Tucson Citizen*

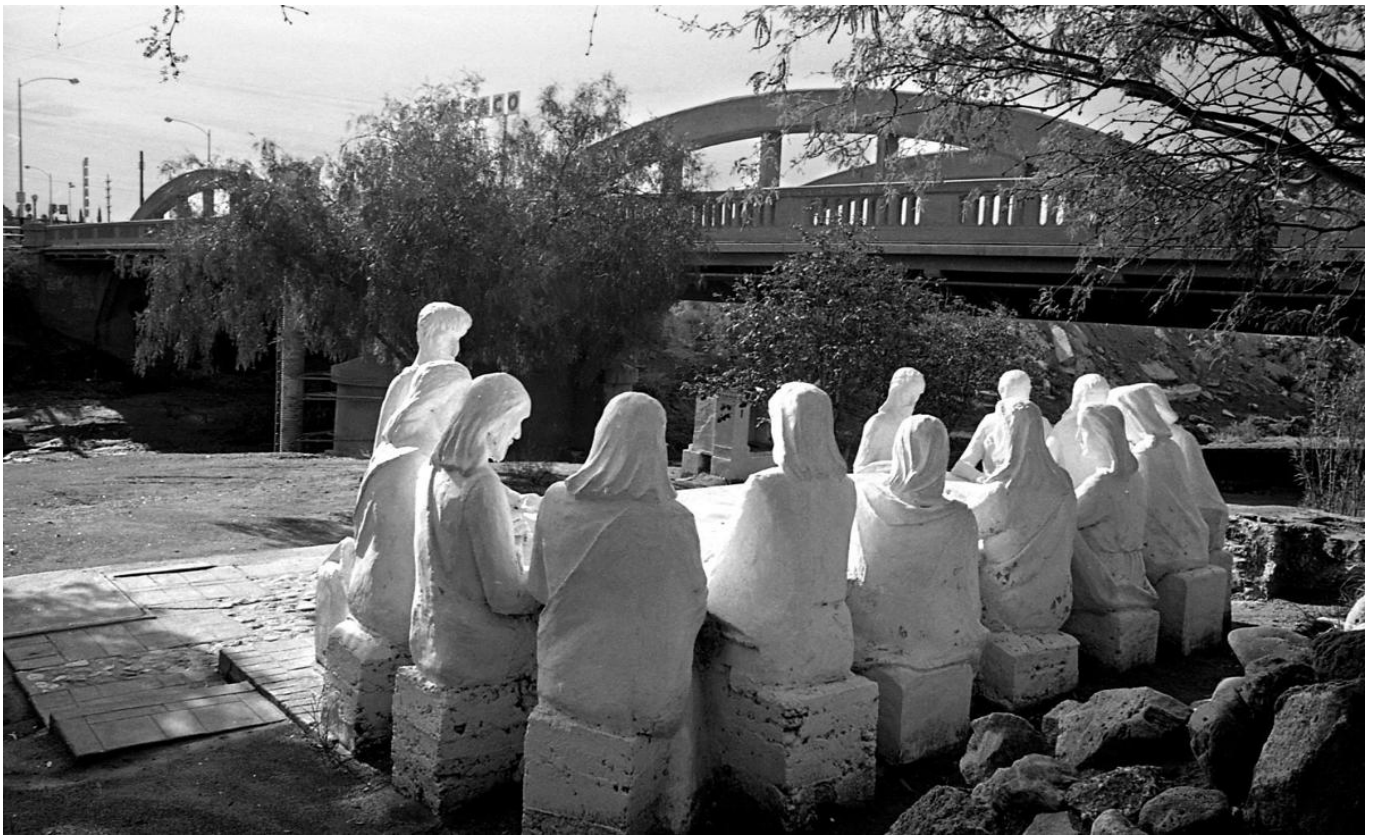
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By July 24, 1970 the old bridge on West Congress over the Santa Cruz River had to go and be replaced by a new bridge.

*Ross Humphreys / Tucson Citizen*

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By July 24, 1970 the figures from Felix Lucero's Last Supper had been on the west side of the Santa Cruz River for more than 20 years. City authorities had decided to leave it in place while a new bridge on West Congress Street was to be replaced.

*Ross Humphreys / Tucson Citizen*

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Volunteers from the Tucson Jaycees and Junior Chamber of Commerce finish restoration of the statues and grounds of the Garden of Gethsemane along the Santa Cruz River in May, 1964. The statues were ravaged by vandals and weather. The city parks and recreation department worked with the volunteers. Artist Felix Lucero began sculpture project in 1938 and finished it nine years later.

*Tucson Citizen*

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Drought in June, 1974, turned the Santa Cruz riverbed into crunchy chunks of dried mud.

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The Santa Cruz River flowing under Silverlake Road in August, 1970.

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Children play in the Santa Cruz River near Speedway Blvd in August, 1970.

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The Santa Cruz riverbed at Congress Street in November, 1967.  
*Tucson Citizen*

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After years of waiting, crews began clearing debris and channeling the Santa Cruz River in November, 1977, and constructing what would become a 14-mile river park. The Speedway Blvd. bridge is in the background.

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After years of waiting, crews began clearing debris and channeling the Santa Cruz River in November, 1977, and constructing what would become a 14-mile river park.

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The Santa Cruz River looks peaceful flowing underneath Speedway Road after days of flooding in October, 1977.

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Adalberto Ballesteros rides along the Santa Cruz River west of downtown Tucson in 1980.

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The Santa Cruz River looking north from Valencia Road in July, 1974.

*P.K. Weis / Tucson Citizen*

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Junked cars and trash spill into the Santa Cruz River, looking south, just south of Grant Road in July, 1974.

*P.K. Weis / Tucson Citizen*

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Road graders scrape the Santa Cruz River channel between Speedway and Grant roads during bank stabilization construction in May, 1991.

*Benjie Sanders / Arizona Daily Star*

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Water surges in the Santa Cruz River at the St. Mary's Road bridge on Oct. 2, 1983.

*Ron Medvescek / Arizona Daily Star*

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Flooding in Marana after the Santa Cruz River overflowed its banks in Oct. 1983.

*Tucson Citizen file*

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A bridge on the Santa Cruz River northwest of Tucson washed out during flooding in October 1983.

*Arizona Daily Star file*

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Residents watch the surging Santa Cruz River rush past West St. Mary's Road on January 19, 1993.

*Rick Wiley / Tucson Citizen*

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Tucson firefighters are standing by and waiting for two kids floating in the Santa Cruz River on some type of object during flooding in July, 1996.

*Benjie Sanders / Arizona Daily Star*

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As the Tucson Modern Streetcar rumbles across the Luis G. Gutierrez Bridge, water flows bank to bank along the Santa Cruz River after a morning monsoon storm on July 15, 2014.

*Mike Christy / Arizona Daily Star*

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Johnny Dearmore skips a rock in the Santa Cruz River as reclaimed water is released into the channel at 29th Street as part of the Santa Cruz River Heritage Project on June 24, 2019. The release of effluent is the city's first effort to restore a fraction of the river's flow since groundwater pumping dried it up in the 1940s.

*Mamta Popat / Arizona Daily Star*

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The Santa Cruz River flows Friday morning July 23, 2021 after an overnight monsoon storm passed over in Tucson, Ariz.

*Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star*

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Betsy Grube, center, with Arizona Game and Fish Department, releases longfin dace fish into the Santa Cruz River at Starr Pass Boulevard on March 23, 2022, as Mark Hart, right, takes a video and Michael Bogan, a professor in aquatic ecology at the University of Arizona, picks up more fish to release. The 600 fish were captured from Cienega Creek in Vail.

*Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star*

**By Rick Wiley**

**Photo editor**

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