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Hait: Save the Verde River



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By Pam Hait
My Turn
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Ogden Nash famously wrote, "If called by a panther, don't anther." I have no experience with panthers, but I know that if you get a call to kayak the Verde River from Clarkdale Mayor Doug Von Gausig, "don't miss it."

Our group put in close to town and immediately was transported to a wet and wild wonderland. True, the water was historically low, causing us to bump along on some rocks, but the experience proved to be a high. We knew going in that this wasn't only a pleasure trip, that along with rapids and water fights, we'd gain an insight about the importance of Verde River and its watershed to Clarkdale, the Verde Valley and the Phoenix area. And we'd see for ourselves how essential the river is to sustaining the diversity of wildlife that thrives in its riparian embrace.

"The story of the Verde River is a tale of so many uncontrolled variables," Mayor Von Gausig explained later to me. "It's why I, as a biologist, am drawn to this problem. What we're facing here, with the depletion of our rivers, is the same problem that's happening all over the world. We've become dependent on cheap water. We're overconsuming water and depleting our rivers. We've killed seven rivers in Arizona because it's easier and cheaper to deplete a resource than to conserve it."

What makes Von Gausig so unusual is that he doesn't just talk about issues; he does something about them. When he saw Clarkdale potentially moving in a direction of embracing rapid growth, he figured that, since he couldn't show people water flowing underground, he would do the next best thing. He began bringing people onto the Verde River, reasoning that if the river became important to them, they'd want to help save it. Happily, Verde River

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Adventure Center recently started kayaking tours on this same stretch of the river, which will expand the town's outreach.

If you miss the connection between kayaking and groundwater, understand that all rivers in the Southwest are fed by groundwater discharge. As the mayor said, "In the Southwest, rivers don't usually add to groundwater; rivers are fed by groundwater."

The groundwater recharge comes from snow that falls on the peaks in northern Arizona during the winter. And we know how that's going. Thanks to climate change, snow is less predictable and snowmelt can occur too soon, causing torrents of water to race down the mountains instead of seeping into the ground and recharging our groundwater.

It is refreshing to meet an elected official who is unafraid to take an unconventional approach to addressing problems. But this seems to come naturally to Von Gausig, biologist, photographer, recorder of natural sounds and successful entrepreneur. In addition to serving in elected office, he is executive director of the Verde River Institute and he also owns a consulting company that focuses on riparian systems.

As a person who has been involved in water issues for many years, both as a reporter and civic activist, I understand the complexity of groundwater issues and the impact of this long drought. We are experiencing a dramatic loss in recharge, especially when compared with the high-flying days of the 1970s through 1990s. Sadly, according to Von Gausig, even if the drought broke tomorrow, it would take 10 to 20 years for most of the recharge to reach the Verde.

Meanwhile, the Verde Valley, like the Phoenix metro area, continues to grow. By 2050, the Verde Valley is expected to top 200,000 people. Von Gausig asked the hard question: "Can we have that many people and still have a Verde River?" If groundwater is depleted and the river stops flowing, Salt River Project will need to drill wells, which will raise the cost of water in the Phoenix metro area.

I was delighted to learn that Arizona Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake recently entered into this conversation through a letter, dated June 28, sent to elected officials in the Verde River watershed.

Based on findings in a new water study for that region, our senators urged elected officials to develop a long-term water-management strategy that protects the Verde River. They noted that "the USGS (U.S. Geological Survey) predicted that over the next 100 years the annual baseflow of the Verde River will decrease up to another 8,600 acre-feet and that groundwater wells in parts of the Verde Valley will drop below 100-feet with some running dry. ... We believe that the study serves as a call to action. In order to ensure the region's future prosperity, we view it essential that you and your neighbors protect both groundwater supplies and the Verde's riparian habitat."

When I asked the mayor of Clarkdale, who is also president of the League of Arizona Cities and Towns, how he would reverse the decline of groundwater, he answered, "We're stuck in the 1800s in surface-water law in Arizona. But we're at a place where we have to do things a little differently. We should manage groundwater and surface water conjunctively, and treat rivers as if they are our primary and most important customers. We need to engage in best management practices that include recycling and recharging."

Happily, the senators agree that action is called for. "It's clear that current water uses in the Verde River Watershed are unsustainable, with communities on a path that will distress the Verde River, dry up groundwater wells, and weaken the economic prosperity of the area," they wrote. "We urge you to lead your community into taking a new path that balances current uses with future growth in a manner that protects the River for the enjoyment of future generations."

The senators closed the letter saying they stand ready to help.

Which brings me to a final note: "Dear Verde Valley elected officials: You got the call from Sens. McCain and Flake to save the Verde River. Please deliver."

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