



4

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