

Southern Arizonans Rediscover

The River



ALLAN FERTIG

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Earth Day 1990 observances found many Southern Arizonans trekking the bed and banks of the Santa Cruz River.

In April, more than 600 people participated in a series of four guided walking tours of the river in Tucson, Tubac, Patagonia and Nogales, Ariz. The Santa Cruz begins near Sonoita, Ariz., heads into Mexico, and turns northwest into Nogales, Mexico, and Nogales, Ariz. After passing through a waste treatment plant, the river continues north toward Tubac and on into Tucson.

The Santa Cruz, which supplies the ground water aquifer for Tucson and several smaller towns, flows aboveground year-round in some areas and underground in others.

Residents of the four communities organized the "Discover the River" walks with The University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Partners in Natural Resource Policy program to increase public awareness of natural resource issues.

One Tucson woman's walk down the Santa Cruz River resulted in her persuading city officials to stop the dumping of trash and dirt into the east bank of the river near Tucson's Drexel Road. Other walkers carried trash bags with them and picked up debris as they walked. And some Tubac and Nogales residents are pushing their local governments to clean up the nearby Nogales Wash.

"This means our program is working," says Nancy Cole-Huber, co-director of the project. Cole-Huber, Extension assistant director for community leadership and resource development, and George Ruyle, an Extension range management specialist, direct the project.

The Partners program, working with county Extension offices, encourages rural and urban



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(Left) Walkers visit the Kino Springs area of the Santa Cruz River near Nogales, Ariz. (Above) Guide Simon Ince, a UA hydrologist, traces the route of the Santa Cruz River with help from Richard Harris. Harris is the Santa Cruz County Extension director.

Arizonans to join forces to protect the state's environment by influencing the public policy process. The project is funded by a three-year grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Mich., in cooperation with the Farm Foundation in Oak Brook, Ill.

"What's exciting about this project is in giving it away," Cole-Huber says. "If you can get people involved in an issue, get them to care about something enough to want to make a difference, then you've got leadership waiting to happen."

The "Discover the River" walks sprang from the results of a bilingual phone survey of 429 residents of Santa Cruz County conducted last fall. Survey participants were asked to identify the environmental issues that concerned them the most, the amount of responsibility they feel government should assume for solving environmental problems, and the degree of their own involvement in politics and community affairs.

The quality and quantity of their water proved to be the primary concern of Santa Cruz County residents, who indicated they would welcome government involvement in protection of natural resources. Compared to their Patagonia and Tubac neighbors, few Nogales residents participate in political and community affairs.

The Earth Day 1990 celebration, coupled with Santa Cruz County's strong interest in protecting water resources, provided the impetus for "Discover the River" activities. Hundreds of local residents attended informational meetings and planning sessions for "Discover the River" events in their communities.

Cole-Huber says Santa Cruz County was chosen as the pilot county for the Partners project because of the variety of natural resource issues currently existing in the county, such as water quality, water rights, grazing rights and riparian habitat preservation. Another reason is Santa Cruz County Extension agents Richard Harris and Janet Paz were interested in the project and provided the local connection.

The next phase of the Santa Cruz County program involves development of a river atlas containing the historical, cultural and scientific background of the river. Also, the Partners staff is planning a county-wide symposium on county issues and the public policy process.

Ultimately, "people from all walks of life in Santa Cruz County will have formed a coalition based on what they have decided is best for their county, and a plan for approaching the issues," Cole-Huber says. "You start with the people—that's why we're there."

—Jan McCoy

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