



Verde River, Cottonwood, Arizona



Animas River, Farmington, New Mexico

Verde River Economic Development Study

Executive Summary 8/12/2011

For
The Walton Family Foundation
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“I think the more people use and enjoy the river the better the future health of the river will be.”

“Drive up and down the Verde Valley and find out how many places go ‘River opportunity—fun, fun, fun.’ It doesn’t exist. It’s almost like it’s been completely ignored.”

“How can you not love the Verde Valley? It’s one place that you can still come and sit outside and watch geese fly over, birds of all kind coming into the area, and just know that you’re still in a setting that is natural and beautiful. If we lose that, our economy will go down the drain...down the river.”

These three quotes, taken from the nearly 100 stakeholder interviews conducted by the Verde River Economic Development Study (VREDS), sum up the challenge facing the Verde River if we are to have a healthy, sustainable, free-flowing perennial river in our future. The Verde Valley is blessed with a singular asset, the Verde River, and today it is an under-performing asset. The river is threatened by groundwater depletion from its headwaters and throughout the Verde Valley, by invasive species which are outcompeting natives, by pollutants from septic systems and stormwater runoff and by neglect. But perhaps the biggest problem the Verde River faces today is the lack of engagement of the people who live near it and whose livelihoods depend to some extent on it.

To identify ways of increasing the public’s engagement in the health of the river, the VREDS study explores the connection between sustainable economic development in the study area and a healthy Verde River. It also suggests ways to strengthen that connection and therefore increase the value of a perennial river to the Verde Valley’s residents. A third goal of this report is to examine whether an organization whose mission is to educate the public about water, the river and river-based economies might increase the likelihood of conserving the Verde River as a healthy perennial stream in the Verde Valley. Finally, VREDS was tasked to determine where additional investment in the Verde River could be applied most effectively and efficiently.

To inform the study, the VREDS team interviewed approximately 100 stakeholders, including public officials, businesspeople, educators and “men on the street.” Their answers to eight standard and three optional questions helped our team understand the current state of economic development related to the river, the barriers to establishing a stronger connection to the river and how an organization like the Walton Family Foundation might make practicable and effective investment into this system.

VREDS also conducted an extensive review of documents related to economic development and its tie to healthy river systems. These included previous studies in our study area, studies of systems in the United States outside our area and statistical analyses of such things as park visitation, the value of recreational wildlife viewing, and the impact of fishing and hunting on similar river systems.

What VREDS uncovered was at times surprising and sometimes almost intuitive. The lack of safe, pleasant, well-maintained access to the Verde River in the Verde Valley emerged as one of the most glaring deficiencies. This lack of public access seemed to permeate almost all other findings, as it impacts the public's understanding of and connection to the river so severely. Perhaps second only to poor access we heard time and again that for all practical purposes, the river did not play a role in the identity of the people, the municipalities or the businesses in the Verde Valley. In short, it is ignored in its own home. The good thing about these two results is that they can be effectively addressed and the effort to correct them can pay handsome rewards in the preservation and valuation of this rare and beautiful river.

Another interesting finding is that currently very little economic activity in the Verde Valley has a close tie or dependency on a healthy, flowing Verde River. In fact, most respondents in our interviews could name only one business activity that is related to the river, a kayaking tour company. Some agriculture in the study area depends on the river for the water it provides in irrigation ditches, but these activities, while popular and important to local food enthusiasts, make very little or no profit.

Opportunities to increase the river's importance to the local economy are many and varied. They include recreational pursuits, such as canoeing and kayaking, fishing, birding and aesthetic and "lifestyle" activities that can tie the area strongly to the Verde River. Also, small, local-consumption agriculture can be promoted and probably made profitable. Tourism has been almost completely untapped as a source of area income, and this, too, can be corrected using the proper promotion and infrastructure improvements. The identification of the Verde Valley with the Verde River will need to be promoted if we want to maximize the public's valuation of a healthy river. This can be done with a coordinated branding and promotional campaign.

Interestingly, the literature review turned up some very good work that had been done in the past. Many of these projects made solid and practical recommendations for action – but most were "put on the shelf" without implementation. This finding alone is one of the most instructive in the report. One 2-year study done in the late 1990's, the "Verde River Corridor Project" brought stakeholders together with professional facilitators and produced a very high-quality report replete with recommendations on how to improve the fate of the Verde River. That report is difficult to find today, and no planning department in the Verde Valley could put their hands on it when asked! It and others like it are a cautionary tale of failure to implement after an excellent study is done. We do not want this report to suffer that same fate, and the report suggests ways to avoid "on the shelf" syndrome.

An analysis of the current organizations that advocate for the Verde River or which are involved in water resource management and planning, revealed none that are currently capable of taking on the task of Verde River education, promotion, and conservation. While there are several well-attended organizations that work one way or another for the health of the Verde River, none is staffed or funded adequately for the task. Over the years, each has earned a reputation for advocacy that may hinder its ability to do what we believe needs to be done. The lack of funding and professional, accountable and responsible staff also makes their missions very difficult to perform. This means that a new, impartial, well-staffed and funded professional organization may be more effective.

This new institute could have several responsibilities, including education of the public and decision makers, decision support for any organization whose activities may impact or be impacted by the river, growing the connection between sustainable economic development and a healthy Verde River, acting as a document repository, and even implementing the recommendations of other studies.

Additional areas to apply additional investment in the Verde River's future can be summed up in a few broad areas: access, promotion, and preservation of flows. These three categories of investment can be targeted to produce the maximum benefit in the minimum time.

Access is minimal now, and any injection of capital can be extremely effective. Signage directing people to the current access points, almost entirely missing now, could improve river use immediately. Improving current public recreational areas by adding adequate facilities and providing active management, has a high potential for increasing use and value. There are also several opportunities to increase public recreational areas. Some of these areas are privately owned, but currently unused, and some are already owned by various public agencies, such as municipalities, Forest Service, The State of Arizona and Yavapai County.

One of the principal findings of this study is that, by and large, the Verde Valley's residents do not identify with the Verde River. Businesses, municipalities and organizations seldom link their identities to the Verde River, even though the river is one of the primary reasons most of them are in the Verde Valley. One solution to this "identity crisis" is a branding campaign that strengthens the linkage of the residents' day-to-day lives with a flowing, healthy Verde River. This will build loyalty and interest in the river and can increase people's desire to see that no harm comes to the object of their identity.

Promoting best management practices and preservation of agricultural acreage for small farming along the Verde River greenbelt could reward investment by increasing the agricultural use, decreasing conversion of farmland to residential development, and nurturing a culture of locally grown food and other related economic development opportunities in the Verde Valley. This alone could greatly increase the perceived value of the river in the area. A program of encouraging and even purchasing agricultural

easements on existing irrigated land would help protect that land from conversion to other uses. The success and efficacy of such a program would depend to a great extent upon maximizing the efficiency of surface water irrigation, better fertilizing and pest control practices and education of small farming families in appropriate business models aimed at improving yields and profits.

Finally, the VREDS team suggests funding a feasibility study which will identify the specific programs, costs, timeframes, responsible organizations, and odds of success of several alternatives to improve the chances of sustaining the Verde River. Such a study would conduct a cost/benefit analysis to rank several possible courses of action by the estimated cost, the amount of time needed to produce substantive results, and the probability of achieving the desired result.

The VREDS team is extremely optimistic that the Verde River will have a better future because of the work being funded by the Walton Family Foundation, and we are proud to be a part of the team that will help ensure success.