

ELSON MILES and Al Mur River on an educational to Watershed Association (top) in a sycamore tree next to



tation abound in the riparian area. John Parsons, rvisor of the National Resources Conservation ct, explains the watershed and its ecology to rafters e heading downstream (right).

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River classroom teaches rafters about Verde

by Diane Raab Staff Writer

What better way to learn about water resources and issues surrounding the Verde River watershed than in a floating classroom?

Ten residents and two visitors from Quebec gathered in the day-use area park in Camp Verde just off the Verde River bridge early Wednesday morning.

After donning helmets and floatation, grabbing a paddle and hiking down to the river, the rafters listened to John Parsons explain the watershed and the issues surrounding it.

Parsons is the supervisor of the National Resources Conservation District and director of the Conservation Education Center. He created the concept of the floating classroom to increase public awareness of the fragility of the Verde River and its tributary watershed.

"There's a great void in public understanding of what makes this a great watershed," Parsons said.

"We're not trying to take sides or anything. We want to facilitate cooperation and consensus building."

The Salt River Project in Phoenix is a member of the watershed association. The project claims the rights to the water in the Verde River for Phoenix water consumers.

Parsons said the Salt River Project is not an adversary, and this is an example of cooperation between diverse groups and interests.

Paddlers received one day notice of the nine-mile tour. The river rose just enough to allow the rafts to pass.

"You are lucky to be on the river today," Parsons told the assemblage.

In 1996, the river never rose enough to accommodate a raft. On Wednesday, March 12, the river was flowing at about 600 cubic feet per second.

The water level was expected to drop below rafting levels by the weekend, but as of Friday was still flowing steadily, Parsons said.

The informational float trips are free to the public, funded by grants that Parsons obtained.

"This year represents the first time we've had an adequate budget and widespread funding to really promote it," Parsons said.

"In the old days, it was beg, borrow and cajole."

The Verde River is 156 miles long, and rafters paddled what Parsons calls "one of the better sections of riparian habitat on the river."

Guide Elson Miles is a 25-year resident of Flagstaff. He pointed out the white cliffs looming, white because of a highly concentrated salt deposit.

Old cottonwood trees lined the banks, covered in mistletoe. The base of several sycamore trees had been nibbled by beaver teeth. An occasional house appeared on the banks.

Jim Moreland is an avid birder from Clarkdale. He knows the Verde River from the shore, having spent hours with his binoculars. The first bird he spotted was a great blue heron, followed by a kingfisher and a family of wood ducks.

High water flows in 1993 had scoured the river flats, and debris remains clogged in the upper branches of the trees and bushes along the banks of the river.

Marge Reuten lives in Sedona, and is

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RIVER

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extremely concerned about preserving the watershed.

"I know in the old West, they used to kill for water," she said.

Faced with a burgeoning population in the Verde Valley, the watershed is a precious resource. At present, Phoenix claims the rights to the Verde River water. This claim has been unresolved for at least 20 years, and some experts claim it will be another 10 or 20 years before a decision has been made.

The Verde Watershed Association was established for the "protection and preservation of the Verde River and its tributary watershed, while at the same time promoting the wise, equitable, and sustainably productive use of the basin's water resources," according to the *Verde Cooperative River Basin Study*, published in Sept. 1996.

The association has three phases for achieving their goal, and public participation is integral to all. These include establishing an information base, developing strategies and agreeing on a long-term management plan for the water resources.

A late-February snowstorm accounted for 98 percent of the month's watershed 1.62-inch precipitation, doubling the previous year's total. River flows at Camp Verde hovered around 200 cubic feet per second for most of February, and rose to 600 in mid-March.

Dallas Reigle, a senior hydrologist for the Salt River Project, said the snowpack in the Verde River was average into February, as reported in the March 6 edition of *The Arizona Republic*.

Parsons said the amount of water in the river depends on snowmelt and spring flow.

"We don't know as much about the groundwater in our watershed as we would like to. If a lot more water wells are drilled into the aquifer ... theoretically the river could go dry," he said.

"We can't assume that these flows will exist forever without greater knowledge of what these flows depend on."

Parsons said the spring flow does not matter as

much at this time of the year because the volume of the river is from snow melt. However, in the summer, those spring flows are crucial for watering farms, pastures, lawns and gardens.

Parsons' organization is concerned about whether the river will go dry or there will be enough water resources to sustain the future.

"We all know growth and development are inevitable, and we all know more people equals more water needs. We love the river ... we all have to work together to realize we don't have an unlimited resource."

One reason for the free guided raft trips, Parsons said, is to "help the public understand why we're working together to study these things."

He said in the 1980s, when he first started these trips, there were many so-called experts who had never stood on the banks of the Verde River or dipped their hands in the cool water. He took these experts to the river for an authentic experience.

Now, the trips are available to the general public, to encourage public involvement in the various agencies and processes regarding the river.

Moreland, the avid birder, spotted an osprey, a gila woodpecker and a flicker. High in a sycamore, two great blue herons roosted, making a grand silhouette against the blue sky.

At the take-out spot, Beasley Flats, the two rafts of people compared notes on the trip.

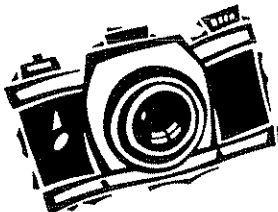
Cottonwood resident Peggy Lemanski said the trip taught her a lot.

"I never had any idea how marvelous this area is. I had no idea the Verde River was this large and had this many tributaries. I didn't know there were problems with preserving it," Lemanski said.

Her husband, Jerry Lemanski, said he wanted to return when the water was shallow to wade across and explore the indigenous ruins in the rocks.

For whatever reason people go to the river, whether it is to float in a raft, dangle their toes in the water or cast a line hoping for a fish, the flowing water will always remain a critical resource, vital to human, plant and animal life alike.

"There will always be a fight over water," said Jan Courtney, a resident of Cornville.



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