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Eligible for protected status, Perkinsville Bridge recreation area gets clean



Don Decker, an elder of the Yavapai-Apache Nation, blesses a soon-to-be planted willow tree, while Jimmy, a member of the Sierra Nevada tribe held the tree during the ceremony. (Submitted)

By Lo Frisby

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Post



PERKINSVILLE- Perhaps best known as a historic area and pass-through on the Verde Canyon Railroad tour rather than as a modern-day community, Perkinsville has been the site of a little-known ecological gem since time immemorial.

It is situated near the headwaters of the Verde River, which supplies nearly a third of the Verde Valley's water.

Gary Beverly, chair of the Sierra Club Yavapai Group, says that currently, most people in the Verde Valley are "not really aware" of the importance of the area.

"I am trying to change that," he said.

According to Beverly, until recently, the Perkinsville Bridge area has been suffering from the negligent acts of "destructive recreationists," who were "driving on the river banks, cutting green trees for firewood, building fires where they shouldn't have been and shooting guns and leave ammo all over the place; that's illegal.

"They were spreading human feces up and down the riverbank; they were spreading trash up and down," he said. "The place was a disaster."

In 2010, the area, which is managed by the Prescott National Forest, was considered "eligible" for protected status under the Wild and Scenic Rivers System, a federal system.

According to Beverly, the U.S. Forest Service is supposed to manage the area “as though it is a wild and scenic river” until it receives the federal government’s official designation.

Twelve years later, the designation is still yet to come, which Beverly says is a matter of politics.

“Around the same time (the area became eligible), the Sierra Club released a proposal to send to Congress to have the river designated as wild and scenic,” he said.

However, Beverly said, “We could not get it introduced into Congress because our local congressman was Paul Gosar, and he was totally opposed to any kind of land protections and designations.”

Now, the proposal could have a second chance.

With redistricting and an upcoming election, Gosar will no longer be in the district, and it is yet to be determined who will be the representative from the new District 2. Current District 1 Rep. Tom O’Halloran is running for the seat, and Beverly says he is in support of the bill.

“If we can get him elected, he’s amenable to putting the wild-and-scenic bill into Congress,” Beverly said.

In the meantime, Beverly said the Sierra Club is celebrating recent efforts by the Forest Service to clean up the Perkinsville Bridge area, which has undergone a “resurrection” since special closures took place last year.

The closures included changing the status of the area from overnight to day use, and the placement of a gate, which prevented vehicles from entering the area near the riverbank. However, visitors can still access it on foot.

Since the changes were implemented by the Forest Service last October, Beverly said the area has been reborn.

“It turns out that destructive recreation people aren’t willing to walk,” Beverly mused. “There’s no more trash, we removed most of the graffiti; Sierra Club has been doing a lot of cleanup work.”

April 30, the Sierra Club hosted a celebration to commemorate the positive changes and to bless the river for the future.

The celebration, which was open to the public, took place at the newly rehabilitated site. Attendees were encouraged to bring a picnic lunch and enjoy the music of locals Meg Bohrman and Peg Millet.

The blessing was performed by Apache Elder Don Decker, whom Beverly described as a spiritual leader among the Apache people. Beverly said it was important to have an indigenous person speak at the event, because “indigenous people have used the Verde River for over 10,000 years.

“We wanted to acknowledge that this land, that’s now U.S. Government public land, was really first occupied by indigenous people, he said. “We wanted to recognize that they have a really strong spiritual connection to water and the river.”

After years of working with multiple tribes in the region, Beverly said he has noticed a common thread among Native people.

“They all have a common phrase, that water is life,” he said.

To learn more about the Sierra Club Yavapai Group, visit [SierraClub.org/arizona/yavapai](https://www.sierraclub.org/arizona/yavapai).

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