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## Editorial: With great 'Wild & Scenic' designation comes great responsibility



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Post  

As a people, the residents of the Verde Valley love to see their river as both wild and scenic. But there is much more attached to the official designation than a feel-good slogan.

As local communities get on board with the campaign to have the Upper Verde designated as a Wild & Scenic River, everyone should be reminded of the personal responsibility involved.

In the list of pros and cons of the designation, as listed by The River Network, the biggest drawback is the increased popularity that follows. It is a Catch 22 of sorts. To be truly appreciated, the river must be visited and enjoyed, spreading awareness of the need to protect the river. That brings more people to its shores, and more people can be destructive.

The designation, part of the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (celebrating 55 years in 2023), creates a quarter-mile buffer on both sides of the waterway to protect current uses and keep out development. The Upper Verde is in four sections, with the latest "suitability assessment" phase applying to a 37-mile stretch between Clarkdale and Chino Valley.

Over the years, the designation seems to have worked quite well in the lower section of the Verde River, which is by turns "wild" and "scenic."

But the designation is not a magic wand. In the past 55 years, what river conservationists have seen is that government agencies do not always have the time or resources to maintain a plan. Sometimes they don't even have the authority on private land.

So volunteers in the form of local river groups need to present themselves as tools to be used to maintain the purposes of “Wild & Scenic” and decrease the impact of unintended consequences. It is a great opportunity to build even stronger bridges between nonprofit organizations and the U.S. Forest Service.

The Clarkdale-Chino stretch includes two fish barriers meant to protect native species but which also add to the complexities that caused requests for additional stipulations. Various conservation agencies can sometimes be at cross purposes as the work of one department may step on the toes of another organization, though both have the same end goal. Local voices with “on the ground” knowledge are necessary to keep everyone on the same page before, during and after the designation cycle.

Towns and cities signing letters of support for the designation is helpful, but there are much bigger expectations attached to that.

Verde River-loving groups will be leaned on to promote and to educate, to welcome and to caution those seeking to learn about an amazing waterway. Gaining the Wild & Scenic River designation is not a destination but a signal to become even more personally involved in preserving the river in its best state.

Resources are needed to make the designation work, and the people who love the Verde River are its greatest resource.

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