



SONORAN
INSTITUTE

We Are One

Working together to make communities and nature thrive

ANNUAL REPORT 2022



A message from our CEO & Board Chair



Mike Zellner,
Chief Executive Officer

WE ARE ONE. As the Colorado River community grapples with the worst water crisis in modern history, Sonoran Institute is inspiring a positive future by connecting people and nature today. Our more than 30 years of experience demonstrates that working together in challenging times is what achieves results. We Are One will lead to flowing rivers, healthy landscapes, and thriving communities throughout the Colorado River Basin.

Sonoran Institute provides communities in the United States, Mexico and Tribal Nations with tools, plans, and resources to overcome the current situation. As part of our One Basin strategy, we work with Tribal Nations to assess their capacity to manage water resources. Our award-winning Growing Water Smart program is building resilient communities in Colorado and Arizona and will soon expand to California and the U.S.–Mexico border. This on-the-ground experience informs our policy recommendations to state and federal agencies about what actions are working (and what are not) to address the crisis.

In Mexico, we are bringing the Colorado River Delta back to life. For the second straight year, the Colorado River connected to the sea and provided life to more than 700 acres of restored habitat thanks to international water cooperation between the United States and Mexico.

Emboldened by these successes, Sonoran Institute is applying innovative approaches on the Santa Cruz River to use science to track the return of life and introduce expanded reuse of water with an eye toward doubling the year-round flow in the next decade.

Undoubtedly, the lack of water is the issue for the future of our communities and nature. Thanks to your generous support—we are acting today. Together, **We Are One.**



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Mike Zellner
Chief Executive Officer

Richard Schaefer
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Front cover: A young student cups water into her hands while her classmates study the Santa Cruz River. Opposite: Santa Cruz River. ©Bill Hatcher/Sonoran Institute, 2022



Growing Water Smart workshop participants in Estes Park, Colorado (September, 2019).



Former International Boundary and Water Commissioners Roberto Salmon* (L), for Mexico, and Edward Drusina (R), for U.S., sign Minute 323 in 2017.

Growing Water Smart

“The main goal of Growing Water Smart is to empower local government leaders to identify and implement programs that make their communities water smart,” says Growing Water Smart Program Director Waverly Klaw.

“Government leaders need to recognize that water is limited and an increasingly scarce resource. As communities grow and redevelop, they need to use water as wisely as possible, and create urban systems that manage water in concert with nature.”

Operating under the philosophy that a more resilient water future is possible from the headwaters of the Colorado River all the way to its delta, Growing Water Smart workshops bring together five to eight participants from each community: land use planners, water resource managers, elected or appointed officials and other key stakeholders. They devote days to learning, collaboration, and planning, which lead to customized action plans tailored to their community’s water needs and goals.

“Water underpins life, so we start honing in on the values people hold for outdoor recreation and nature, as well as local agriculture,” says Klaw. “We provide the platform for people to realize that their current water use may not reflect the values they hold. They have opportunities to conserve water and use all types of water as strategically and efficiently as possible to promote environmental, economic, and equity goals.”

Communities can apply for follow-up technical assistance grants of \$10,000 to help them implement one of their workshop projects. “You’d be surprised what people are able to do with the seed money,” says Klaw. “Over 25 communities in Colorado and Arizona have benefitted from the grants. The benefit far exceeds the investment.”

SUCCESS: “This past year, we are proud of the launch of our peer-to-peer network,” says Klaw. There are now 400 alumni of the Growing Water Smart Program who can visit the online platform to receive information and communicate with peers across states and sectors.

“Growing Water Smart acknowledges that we have a water crisis in the Colorado River, and it’s not up to just one sector to solve it,” says Klaw. “Agricultural water use is major, but municipal water use exists and is growing. It is up to every sector and community in the Colorado Basin. We are all one in terms of forging solutions.”

“Colorado Growing Water Smart helped Fort Collins better collaborate with all of our water providers.”

— DONNIE DUSTIN
City of Fort Collins

One Basin

“We’re rethinking how we manage the Colorado River,” says John Shepard, Senior Adviser for the Sonoran Institute’s One Basin Program. “We’re coming to grips with the reality that there is less water in the river than we had previously thought, and that we need to allocate it in an equitable fashion to ensure there is enough water for all.”

Almost a year old, the One Basin Program emerged from the Sonoran Institute’s strategic planning process. It seeks to elevate the Institute’s role in policies affecting the entire Colorado River Basin at the state, national, and binational (US and Mexico) levels, says Shepard.

“The rate of change in the Colorado River has accelerated so dramatically in the last 15 years—and we’re now playing catch-up. We need to get ahead of the rate of change and come up with long-term, durable solutions,” he says.

WATER AND TRIBES INITIATIVE: A critical component of the One Basin Program is ensuring that tribal nations in the basin have their rights legally enforced and that they have access to the water they have rights to, Shepard explains.

The Sonoran Institute is now a member of the Water and Tribes Initiative, says Shepard.

“Basin-wide, the initiative is bringing tribes and stakeholders together to come up with solutions. Historically, tribes have not been involved as much as they should be.” There are 30 tribes living in the basin.

A resilient and sustainable Colorado River Basin will only be realized if all major stakeholders can come up with solutions, he adds. “Change is going to continue to be rapid and dramatic. In order for this to work, we need to be adaptable and inclusive so decisions are made quickly.”

Ultimately, we are going to have to rethink how we grow our food and thrive as communities, he says.

It also means we have to save more water than planned, the climate being so volatile, so severe. “We have to save water for a non-rainy day.”

“The Sonoran Institute provides invaluable strategic advice to the Water & Tribes Initiative.”

— DARYL VIGIL AND MATT MCKINNEY
Co-facilitators, Water and Tribes Initiative

*Roberto Salmon is a member of the Board of Directors at Sonoran Institute.



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Conducting research along the Santa Cruz River.

Santa Cruz River

“Our vision is to have a healthy, flowing Santa Cruz River, from Mexico to Marana,” says Luke Cole, PhD, Director of the Santa Cruz River Program. “Right now, less than 35% of the river is flowing. We’re hoping our work will allow the river to get to 75%.”

For 12,000 years, the Santa Cruz River and the aquifer lying beneath it have provided life-giving water to humans as well as the plants and animals living in and near the river. But overuse and climate aridification largely depleted the aquifer and dried up the river.

“It will take all of us working together.”

— RAÚL E RAMÍREZ
Resident of Tucson's Ward 1 and Barrio Sin Nombre Neighborhood

For decades, Sonoran Institute has worked with communities and policy makers at all levels to improve the entire Santa Cruz River. The Santa Cruz River program is exploring strategies to work with the Mexican federal government on opportunities that would increase flows into the Santa Cruz and restore the river north of the border. Sonoran Institute's *Living River* reports bolster this partnership by demonstrating the social, environmental, and cultural benefits that come from clean, flowing water.

MAJOR SUCCESSES: “One of the major successes that the Santa Cruz River program has had this year is a large-scale assessment of trash in the river,” says Cole. Assisted by University of Arizona interns, the team is deploying a rigorous scientific methodology to

understand what the trash is made up of and where it is. A second intern will create a database. “Partners at the state level are very interested in learning from us.”

Clean-up includes community events and strategic placement of trash barrels and dumpsters. “There are significant styrofoam cup producers nearby who are local generators of trash who we would like to start working with,” Cole says.

URBAN WILDLIFE REFUGE: “Another big project started this year is to assess where we could create a federally protected urban wildlife refuge.” The principals of such a refuge include addressing environmental justice and economic need, he says.

“The urban core of Tucson has been subjected to years of environmental injustice. We’ve been working with elected officials, neighborhood groups, and other nonprofits to tell them about the project and to understand what their interests are—because an urban wildlife refuge needs to reflect the culture and the community. It’s very encouraging, very hopeful.”

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A young girl playing with her family and enjoying the Colorado River Delta in Vado Carranza, Mexicali Valley.

Colorado River Delta

The Colorado River once flowed mightily to the Gulf of California, aquatic life and birds brimming in the river and its delta. But the river largely dried up in the early '60s as its water was diverted to farms and growing city populations.

For more than 20 years, the Sonoran Institute has been working with other environmental groups to help restore the river delta. "The Colorado River Delta Program's main goal is to connect the people and wetlands around the Colorado River to create corridors of habitat for native species and the community," says Edith Santiago-Serrano, Interim Director for the Colorado River Delta Program.

Thanks to international water cooperation between the United States and Mexico, the Colorado River for the second straight year has connected to the sea, once again giving life to 721 acres of restored habitat.

"We try to connect people with nature, not only the Colorado River and its tributary the Hardy River, but other areas of the delta, too. We want people to be aware of the important services the ecosystem provides us," she adds.

MINUTE 323: Mexico has said that rejuvenating the Delta is a conservation priority. Minute 323, the nine-year agreement signed by the United States and Mexico in 2017, has improved the habitat of the Colorado River Delta with funding and by allocating water for environmental use, explains Santiago-Serrano.

The Sonoran Institute has played a key role in the initiative by actively planning and restoring habitat, providing scientific information, and local

knowledge. "Collaboration between the governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is relevant for both countries, as well as from a global point of view," she says, "because knowledge gained from improving one river can be replicated to improve the habitat of another river."

SUCCESS: "We're very proud of the fact that in the last year we created about 81 acres of riparian habitat and also allocated water for the environment through the use of highly treated waste-water," says Santiago-Serrano.

"We have noticed that many of the endangered species can now be found in restored sites, especially ones that have been restored for a long time. As an indicator of the good quality of the water, you can now find beavers in one restoration site," she notes.

"The Colorado River Delta Program is on-the-ground river restoration, as well as nature-based solutions for improvement of water quality."

— FRANCISCO ZAMORA
Senior Director of Programs,
Sonoran Institute

Donor Highlight: Ann Hunter-Welborn



Courtesy of Ann Hunter-Welborn

Sonoran Institute Advisory Council Member Ann Hunter-Welborn has always been interested in conservation. "I just grew up that way. It just must have been in my DNA," she laughs. "It wasn't a family thing. When I was young, I did a lot of camping—my favorite place was Lake Mead," says the Riverside, California native.

"I got exposed to a lot of nature and really loved animals," she says. "It was never my college major and never my job—but it was always in my heart."

When it comes to conservation and sustainability, Hunter-Welborn has followed her heart her whole life, donating and working for conservation causes. While at Hunter Industries, a manufacturer of irrigation and outdoor lighting equipment, in the '80s, she decided to help restore an ecosystem near a stream that ran through the Hunter Industries Campus. "We brought it back to its native habitat."

Because of Hunter-Welborn's leadership, sustainability has been embedded in the company's culture to mean achieving a balance between the people Hunter Industries affects, the planet it impacts, and the profits it earns.

In 2018, Hunter Industries launched the Ann Hunter-Welborn Circle of Excellence Award to recognize leadership in social responsibility and sustainability in the industry. Through the award, Hunter Industries hopes to inspire others to join the movement.

In addition to donating to conservation efforts locally, she and husband David Welborn have been very involved in the organization Nature and Culture International. They have served on its board for 20 years, she says, raising money for conservation projects in Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Colombia, and Bolivia.

The Sonoran Institute is grateful for the support of Ann Hunter-Welborn and all of our supporters. It is because of people like you and Ann, the organization is able to make a significant impact on the environment and conservation. Thank you.

Annual Report Credits: Katherine O'Donnell, senior editor; Helen Pettay, senior editor; Jack Huber, graphic design. Editors: Bianca Chavez, Luke Cole, Melissa Cordero, Kim Egita, Toni Garcia-Bullington, Ann Hunter-Welborn, Waverly Klaw, Edith Santiago-Serrano, Richard Schaefer, John Shepard, Francisco Zamora, Mike Zellner, Claire Zugmeyer.

Financial Summary (July 1, 2021–June 30, 2022)

REVENUE

Contributions	1,104,180
Foundation Grants	751,972
Government Grants	472,302
Contract Income	470,759
Other Income	(216,728)
Total	\$2,582,485

EXPENSES

Programs US	916,080
Programs MEX	1,129,770
Administration	390,810
Fundraising & Marketing	249,580
Total	\$2,686,240
Deficit	(\$103,755)

Reporting based on unaudited FY22 results. The Sonoran Institute will be audited by Ludwig Klewer and Rudner PLLC and a copy of the audit will be posted on our website as soon as it becomes available.

Thank You to Our Donors

Thank You! With your support the Sonoran Institute continues to make a positive impact throughout the Colorado River Basin. Our community-based conservation approach provided the vision of a sustainable water future for all residents and wildlife. The Sonoran Institute is grateful to all of our donors, partners, and volunteers for their support.

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Preserving native species in the Santa Cruz River.

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Hummingbirds are a major pollinator in the West.

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You'll have fun, meet great people, and learn more about our important work.

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The more who hear about us the more impact we can make.

OUR MISSION

The Sonoran Institute's mission is to connect people and communities with the natural resources that nourish and sustain them.

OUR VISION

A Colorado River Basin where rivers flow, landscapes are healthy, and all communities thrive.

WHERE WE WORK

- Colorado River Basin
- Northwestern Mexico
- Desert Southwest
- Rocky Mountains



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