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## Rivers pushed to the brink

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Arizona's rivers are running out of water and running out of time.

In little more than a century, human activities have drained hundreds of miles of once-thriving desert waterways and left what remains more vulnerable to drought and climate change. Dams block river channels, development ruins habitat, wells hijack underground water and pump it out unchecked.

Only the Verde, among the major rivers that begin or end within Arizona, flows on its own from start to finish. The Gila dies near Coolidge, less than halfway along its journey to the Colorado River.

As rivers dry up, their the life-sustaining ribbons of trees and willows give way to invasive plants that choke the riverbed and degrade the ecosystem.

For Arizonans, the loss is immeasurable. Gone are the water and the wildlife, the places of refuge and recreation, the engines that grow our food. Gone also is a sense of who we are and where we live, the cultural and spiritual touchstones that give the desert its voice, that give it life.

No one knows for sure how much time is left to save Arizona's rivers. Along some stretches, it's too late.

Attempts to resuscitate short lengths of some rivers have succeeded, usually one hard-fought mile at a time. But restoration requires money, commitment and a steady flow of water. Preservation will demand more.

Antiquated rules treat groundwater and surface water separately, which has allowed tens of thousands of wells to draw unknown amounts of water from aquifers that feed rivers. Proposed changes sit entangled in a 32-year-old court case.

The best solution for the rivers is the one least likely to be applied: Use less water.

Desert rivers are resilient and, given water, recover with speed. Most ecologists say Arizona could continue to grow and save its rivers with only modest sacrifices.

"One of the perspectives we have to change is that it's an either/or, that you have an environment or an economy, that you have to choose one," said Pat Graham, state director for the Nature Conservancy.

"Over the long term, failure to choose a healthy environment will lead to collapse of the economy. It's not an either/or. We need it to be a both."

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