



STATE OF ARIZONA: SAN PEDRO RIVER ECOSYSTEM

Conservation easements (CE) are an important tool to ensure land remains in private ownership while retaining its environmental values.¹ The San Pedro River Ecosystem Forest Legacy Project is situated on 612 acres of riparian forest along the San Pedro River and is permanently protected through the use of a CE enabled by the USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program (FLP).

Riparian forests serve a critical role for wildlife and are at extreme risk of conversion. According to the Arizona Riparian Council, approximately 90% of the riparian forest habitat that existed in Arizona at statehood has been lost or extremely degraded. The San Pedro River Ecosystem riparian forests support nearly half of all U.S. bird species and diverse wildlife populations, including federally-listed species



Scenic properties, such as those located along the San Pedro River, are attractive to real estate developers in Southeast Arizona. Many nearby properties have already been purchased and subdivided into smaller lots for resale as rural recreational properties. The real estate development market is booming, with urban sprawl reaching the Cascabel area, where the San Pedro Ecosystem Forest Legacy Project is located.

“The Forest Legacy Program has provided opportunities to protect rare and important plant communities in southern Arizona. The Cottonwood-Willow riparian forests and adjacent mesquite bosque areas provide critical habitat for wildlife and enhance the well-being of people. The stewardship component is a real benefit to this program. The development and implementation of the stewardship plan fosters collaboration between the private landowner, the Arizona State wildlife and forestry agencies and others including NGO’s. The Nature Conservancy in Arizona views the Forest Legacy Program as a valuable and essential tool to provide private landowners support to protect critical habitats on the San Pedro River and other areas in Arizona,” said Bob Rogers, Stewardship Director, The Nature Conservancy, Arizona Program.

The importance of the San Pedro River to wildlife and people is recognized through its designation as a World Heritage Natural Area by the United Nations, Globally Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society, and Riparian National Conservation Area (RNCA) designation. This FLP project contributes to the success of a large landscape-level collaborative effort that has protected over 65,000 acres of riparian forest in the San Pedro River Watershed.

The San Pedro River Ecosystem Project is a network of private, state, and federal lands which encompass a critical wildlife corridor extending from the Catalina Mountains to the Galiuro Mountains. Local, state, and federal partners include Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management, The Nature Conservancy, Coronado National Forest, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Arizona Game and Fish, San Carlos Apache Tribe, local governments and organizations, and many others.

Conserving the project lands, and limiting development and demand for water, helps to protect the water supply for the greater San Pedro River ecosystem. The 140-mile San Pedro River is one of the longest undammed, free-flowing rivers in the arid southwestern United States. As such, it provides great benefit to wildlife and people, including water supply to U.S. Army Fort Huachuca, San Carlos Apache Tribal land, and the communities of Sierra Vista, Tombstone, Benson, San Manuel, Mammoth, and Winkelman.

Preservation of the property supports **wildlife, water quality and quantity, forest health, and aligns with many neighboring conservation objectives.**



Federally-protected and sensitive species that rely on the river corridor include the Southwestern Willow Fly Catcher, Gila chub, long-fin dace, lowland leopard frog, Yellow billed cuckoo, and Bell’s vireo.

The Forest Legacy Program is imperative to protect the land and benefit the people and animals who rely on the property and its watershed. The San Pedro River Ecosystem Project is a continuous collaborative effort working with private, local, state, and federal agencies to come up with the best strategy to protect the conservation values on the property for future generations.

AT-A-GLANCE



Protects **612 acres** of riparian forest.



One of the most diverse vertebrate faunas in North America, with **14 fish, 41 reptiles and amphibians, and 84 mammal species** (BLM San Pedro RNCA website).



140-mile San Pedro River is **one of the longest undammed, free-flowing rivers** in the southwestern United States.



“The Cascabel Conservation Association has been working for decades to protect one of the major wildlife corridors across the San Pedro Valley. We are grateful that the Forest Legacy Program has funded conservation easements within this corridor, and to have these conscientious private landowners as close neighbors to our own conservation properties.”

— Pearl Mast, Chair of the Cascabel Conservation Association

Reference:

¹ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/forest-legacy/program>



Supports **100 resident breeding species** and **250 species** that use the river as a **migratory corridor** (BLM San Pedro RNCA website).



National Audubon Society has recognized the San Pedro River as a **Globally Important Bird Area**.



Mammals on the property include **jaguar, mountain lion, bobcat, coatimundi, foxes, bears, bats, mule deer, javelina, bighorn sheep, and beaver**.

Top L: San Pedro River Ecosystem Forest Legacy Project pictured on the top of a limy slope outcrop. (Photo: Matthew Jewell, Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management); **Middle L:** Uneven mixed aged stand of Mesquite trees on the banks of the San Pedro River. (Photo: Matthew Jewell, Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management); **Top R:** Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), Endangered. (Photo: Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management); **Top R:** Yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), Endangered. (Photo: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Coccyzus_americanus.jpg) © CC BY-SA 3.0)

For more information, visit <https://dffm.az.gov/legacy-program>.