



# A River Reborn

## The Restoration of Fossil Creek

*A One-Hour Documentary on the History and Restoration  
of a Wild and Scenic River in the American Southwest*



### The Rebirth of Fossil Creek

Situated in the high desert country of central Arizona, Fossil Creek has nurtured a rich diversity of life for millions of years. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the waterway was harnessed and turned to another purpose: the generation of electricity to power copper mining operations in the region. Now, in a historic turnaround, the hydroelectric facilities are being decommissioned and the river returned to its natural state.

The restoration of Fossil Creek is emblematic of a far-reaching change in our understanding of rivers and dams. Today, people in all parts of the country are reassessing the use of precious water resources. They are seeking to balance the fulfillment of human needs with protection of the natural systems that support human life. This includes the safeguarding of rare, threatened, and endangered species of plants and animals. Fossil Creek is a focal point for this reassessment, and it reveals both the challenges and opportunities associated with riparian restoration.

### A Critical Case Study

One of the most remarkable features of the Fossil Creek story is the fact that the decision to decommission the hydroelectric facilities was reached without litigation. A number of private environmental organizations, state and federal agencies, and Arizona Public Service, the owner and operator of the dam, reached a comprehensive agreement through constructive engagement and dialogue. The result is a notable “win-win” settlement that is worthy of wide attention, especially at a time when debates over environmental protection are more often characterized by friction and heat than by reason and light. Fossil Creek provides a rare and encouraging case study in the cooperative resolution of environmental disputes, and it will be of great value to individuals and organizations involved in conservation and restoration projects across the U.S.

### Science and Wise Resource Management

The story of Fossil Creek is also noteworthy for the important role played by science in the decision to decommission. Original research in the watershed conducted by scientists from Northern Arizona University demonstrated the negative impact of the dam and water diversion on threatened and endangered species of native fish, and it also predicted the recovery of those populations after decommissioning and the restoration of full flow. Ongoing scientific research is also a critical component of the adaptive management model being used by state and fed-

eral agencies with management responsibilities in the Fossil Creek watershed. Experience gained at Fossil Creek shows that good science is an indispensable ingredient in wise management.

### The Documentary

The remarkable story of Fossil Creek is recounted in a one hour public television documentary entitled *A River Reborn*. The production describes the natural and human history of Fossil Creek, examines the ecological effects of the dam and hydroelectric facilities, and reconstructs the 15-year-long process that led to the decommissioning. *A River Reborn* is produced by Emmy Award-winning producer Paul Bockhorst and is narrated by Ted Danson.

### A Versatile Educational Tool

In addition to broadcast on public television stations in Arizona and across the U.S., *A River Reborn* is designed for multiple educational applications. They include 1) use in environmental science and ecology classes in high schools, colleges, and universities; 2) use by environmental advocacy organizations as a case study in riparian restoration; and 3) use in interdisciplinary discussions of environmental issues (e.g., dialogues between scientists, economists, resource managers, and environmental advocates). Two study and resource guides support these applications, one for use in academic institutions and the other for use in informal educational settings.

### Ownership and Underwriting

The documentary is a joint project of the Museum of Northern Arizona, Northern Arizona University, and Paul Bockhorst Productions. Principal funding comes from the National Science Foundation, the Bureau of Reclamation of the USDI, and the Heritage Program of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, with additional funding from the Pulliam Charitable Trust, the Merriam Powell Center, and the Ecological Research Institute at NAU.

### Contact Information

The marketing and distribution of *A River Reborn* and related materials are being carried out by Northern Arizona University and the Museum of Northern Arizona. For more information, please contact:

Stefan Sommer, Executive Producer for *A River Reborn*  
Director of Education, Merriam-Powell Center  
(928) 523-4463 / [Stefan.Sommer@nau.edu](mailto:Stefan.Sommer@nau.edu)