



SONORAN  
INSTITUTE



# Power of Progress

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



## Message from the CEO and Board Chair



**Mike Zellner**  
Chief Executive Officer

Power of Progress. With this annual report, the Sonoran Institute celebrates a truly remarkable year of progress in our community-based conservation.

In the Colorado River Delta in Mexico, the Baja California state government agreed to consider state park designation for the restoration areas of Sonoran Institute and our partners in the Raise the River coalition. The state park could be as large as 70,000 acres and would provide permanent protection to an area where Sonoran Institute has been working for more than two decades.

Our Growing Water Smart program introduces communities to the full range of planning and policy tools available for achieving watershed health and community resilience. The program expanded from Colorado and Arizona into California and the US/Mexico border in 2023, as a part of our effort to assist the water leaders that represent 80% of the people in the Colorado River community. The Growing Water Smart program was highlighted in the Colorado state water plan—recognition of our strong partnership with the government and the effectiveness of our program.



**Richard Schaefer**  
Board Chair

In Arizona, our Santa Cruz River program began developing plans for conservation in the Green Valley area of the river and identifying urban wildlife refuge sites in Tucson. The Sonoran Institute's community engagement and planning has set the stage for doubling the flow of the Santa Cruz River and incorporating diverse communities into our work. Similarly, our One Basin program and the Water and Tribes Initiative have completed a water needs assessment for 19 Tribal Nations in the Colorado River community. This distinctive program is providing focus for collaboration to build capacity in these communities.

Just as impressive, our organization achieved outstanding financial performance through strong cost management and revenue growth.

None of these results would have been possible without your support. Thank you!

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The Sonoran Institute makes a difference because individuals like you believe in our mission to connect people and communities with the natural resources that nourish and sustain them.



# Colorado River Delta

In more than 20 years working to revive the Colorado River Delta, we have conducted relatively small-scale projects to learn and demonstrate the feasibility of someday scaling them up for widespread ecological and social impact. With proven successes and diverse partnerships powering our progress, that “someday” is within sight. The expansion and permanence of the Colorado River’s corridor and the transformation of the urban landscape to create a new, New River in Mexicali are now our focus. Both promise significant, enduring conservation outcomes for the Delta and its most vulnerable communities.

## State-protected Restoration Area

“Little by little, our various restoration areas are creating a corridor of restored habitat,” says our Senior Director of Programs Francisco Zamora. “We have now made enough progress to pursue our goal of establishing a large-scale protected area.”

The state of Baja California is reviewing a proposal submitted with our Raise the River partners to establish a state park encompassing our current and future restoration areas. At 70,000 acres, it would be the largest protected area in the state.

## New River Restoration Grant

The California Water Boards has granted us \$4.3 million to restore the New River in Mexicali. Flowing from Mexico into Calexico, California, the river is considered one of the most polluted in North America. Impoverished communities on both sides of the border are particularly vulnerable to health threats from industrial, agricultural, and municipal waste in the water.



Young environmentalists in Misión del Angel, Mexico, adopted trees, joining the urban landscape transformation. The Mexicali Fluye project aims to restore three river miles by 2026.



Arizona Growing Water Smart workshop participants and facilitators. Participating communities included Globe, Miami, Eloy, Goodyear, Maricopa, Pinal County, and Yuma County.

“This funding will allow us to address the root causes of the pollution while restoring the New River for the community,” says Zamora. “By removing trash, reshaping its geometry and establishing native vegetation, the project will enhance the river’s natural capacity to cleanse itself.”

Cleaner water and urban landscape will immediately benefit the 11,000 people living closest to the river. In the future, having a restored river and transformed urban landscape would increase the community’s resiliency to the changing climate and provide clean water and air, abundant green areas for recreation available to all, and improve the quality of life and health of inhabitants of the cities of Mexicali and Calexico.

Volunteers planting trees at Laguna Grande



The proposed state park includes communities that have never received much attention or services, such as the indigenous Cucapá. We are excited about the benefits it would bring them.

FRANCISO ZAMORA | Senior Director of Programs

# Growing Water Smart

As water resources face mounting pressures from drought, climate change, and development demands, our Growing Water Smart program is making tremendous progress throughout the West. This year, we expanded to California and the U.S./Mexico border to assist more communities in reducing municipal water use and better integrating all forms of water into the ways they grow and develop.

Growing Water Smart is a Sonoran Institute partnership with the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy, a center of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, designed to bring diverse voices and traditionally siloed entities together to achieve water sustainability. At our workshops, land use planners,

water resource managers, elected officials, and other key stakeholders collaboratively develop an action plan tailored to their community’s water needs and goals. Participants can subsequently apply for technical assistance grants to implement their strategies.

Our program is working. In Colorado, 68% of residents now live in a community that has participated in Growing Water Smart, and the state has highlighted the program in its 10-year water plan. In Arizona, 42% of residents are benefiting from the program.

## Launching Our Binational Program

We held two listening sessions last spring to gauge interest from sister cities on the U.S./Mexico border: Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora; and Calexico, California, and Mexicali, Baja California.

“We engaged with planners, elected officials, and water providers to understand their communities’ unique water challenges and how we might develop a workshop next year to help them better collaborate on challenges they share,” says Waverly Klaw, our Growing Water Smart director. “We are delighted that they are interested in our support.”

## Expanding to California

In our inaugural California workshop, four Southern California cities and several regional water providers focused on watershed health and community resilience. With support from our workshop partners Water Education for Latino Leaders (WELL) and CivicWell, we engaged communities with diverse constituencies on equitable water conservation and efficiency strategies.

Green infrastructure in Colorado



This is where we move from talking about the water crisis to executing changes that lead to long-term community resilience.

WAVERLY KLAW | Director, Growing Water Smart



# Community Collaboration

Together, we celebrate a year of remarkable conservation achievements, from Colorado River Delta restoration to Growing Water Smart expansion, Santa Cruz River plans, and Tribal water assessments, all made possible by your invaluable support. Thank you!

# River Research

**SANTA CRUZ RIVER RESEARCH DAYS**

The Santa Cruz River team welcomed Emma Robbins (former director of the Navajo Water Project) as keynote speaker at Santa Cruz River Research Days 2023. From left to right: Madeleine Oliver, Claire Zugmeyer, Emma Robbins, and Luke Cole.



# Delta Diplomacy

**COLORADO RIVER DELTA**

U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar, visited Laguna Grande Restoration area in February 2023 to celebrate the results of restoration actions achieved by the collaboration of Mexico, the US, and the Raise the River Coalition of conservation organizations under Minutes 319 and 323.



# Solstice Celebration

**SUMMER SOLSTICE FUN**

Celebrating progress and community unity at the first ever Summer Solstice Party and Conservation Benefit rooftop celebration.



# Water Wisdom

**GROWING WATER SMART**

The Growing Water Smart program team during our March 2023 Arizona Growing Water Smart workshop. From left to right: Eliza Stokes, Meryl Corbin, Waverly Klaw, and Vivian Hobbins.

# River Unity

**ONE BASIN AND COLORADO RIVER DELTA**

Two forces, one mission—Sonoran Institute's One Basin Program joins hands with Alianza Revive El Rio Colorado to restore the Colorado River's vitality.

# Board Exploration

**BOARD FIELD TRIP**

Our board members deepened their understanding of the vital role of agriculture and ranching during their visit to board member Lee Leachman's ranch.





# One Basin

Our One Basin initiative was born from the reality that as the drought-reduced Colorado River struggles to support the 40 million people and natural environment relying on it, the old ways of managing the river are not sustainable, or fair. Now in its second year, One Basin is advancing a more holistic, adaptive, and enduring approach to managing the river and its basin.

Elevating the voices and addressing the needs of the 30 sovereign tribes in the basin is central to this mission. Despite collectively holding rights to more than 3 million acre-feet (about 25%) of the river's annual flow, the tribes have not historically had a say in decisions affecting their water rights. They also lack the infrastructure to use much of the water allocated to them. We believe addressing these inequities is not only the right thing to do but is also essential to the river's future.

"These tribes have been in the Colorado River Basin since time immemorial and can play a critical role in managing the river," says John Shepard, Sonoran Institute's senior advisor and One Basin leader.

As a member of the Water & Tribes Initiative (WTI), a collaborative partnership involving tribes and other leaders in the basin, the Institute is working to help tribes build water-related capacity and leadership. After conducting a first-ever needs assessment, WTI embarked on several initiatives to help tribes better manage their water resources and address water policy issues.

Projects include establishing a peer-to-peer network for tribes to exchange lessons learned and best practices. WTI is also

"The tribes bring perspective, knowledge, and an abiding interest in the area that is crucial to making the river and its basin more resilient in the face of climate change."

**JOHN SHEPARD** | Senior Advisor



connecting interested tribes with resources to establish their own water departments, build water infrastructure, or conduct conservation work requiring water. This includes creating a "circuit rider" team of specialists who can provide assistance and expertise to tribes that may not have the resources to hire full-time employees.

"The Water & Tribes Initiative is a true partnership, with a vision embracing conservation, preservation of historic and cultural resources, and a more holistic approach to the river," Shepard says. "To me, that's what authentic conservation is all about."

"The theme of this year's Santa Cruz River Research Days symposium reflected our goal to involve diverse communities, especially those most affected by environmental injustice, in the river's conservation."

**LUKE COLE** | Director, Santa Cruz River Program



About a quarter of its length now flows regularly, including a two-mile stretch through downtown Tucson. Clean water has created new life. Plants, animals, fish, and birds are all returning, and our program is drawing people back as well.

"Raising All Voices in Conservation"

In-person for the first time in three years but also available virtually in both Spanish and English, the annual Santa Cruz River Days symposium saw the second-largest turnout in its 13-year history. Keynote speakers included Tucson City Council member Lane Santa Cruz, representing the diverse demographics of Ward 1, and Emma Robbins, the former executive director of the Navajo Water Project.

"We actively sought to engage people whose voices have been important and needed but historically overlooked in the conservation community—in this case, the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and queer communities," says Dr. Luke Cole, our Santa Cruz River program director.

River Cleanups in Tucson

With food trucks providing refreshments and businesses offering prizes and giveaways, our two river cleanups became festive community gatherings where 170 volunteers collected 11,000 pounds of trash. Our trash-mapping study with University of Arizona interns will eventually lead us to identify trash sources and prevention strategies.

"We are attracting church groups, Spanish speakers, children, tribal representatives, neighborhood and civic groups, large corporations, and small businesses," Cole says. "People are realizing the river is an amenity—a fun place offering cooling shade in the heart of the city—and that their involvement can effect change."

## Santa Cruz River

For generations, people heard one message about the Santa Cruz River: stay away. With most stretches dry and barren due to excessive groundwater pumping, and others dirty and foul-smelling, it was sound advice.

Thankfully, much has changed in the 30 years we and our many partners have worked to restore the Santa Cruz.



Top Photo: The Cucapá celebrate the land and water of the Colorado River Delta.

Bottom Photo: Three Sisters, Monument Valley



Top Photo: Josefina Cardenas, executive director of Favor Celestial, closed Santa Cruz River Research Day by reading reflections on the Santa Cruz River written by children of Tucson.








Bottom Photo: Conservation-minded community leaders join a Santa Cruz River cleanup in downtown Tucson. Sonoran Institute and partners throughout the Santa Cruz River valley are committed to researching, removing, and preventing trash from spoiling this cherished waterway.













# Thank You to Our Donors

We are grateful to all of our donors, partners, and volunteers. With your support, the Sonoran Institute continues to make a positive impact throughout the Colorado River Basin.







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# Financial Summary

## Revenue and Support

Contributions	\$2,274,306
Foundation Grants	\$886,883
Government Grants	\$384,586
Contract Income	\$363,509
Other Income	\$233,220

**Total Revenue and Support \$4,142,504**

## Expenses

Programs US	\$1,211,255
Programs MEX	\$890,366
Administration	\$400,731
Fundraising & Marketing	\$294,427

**Total Expense \$2,796,779**

Reporting based on audited FY23 results. A copy of the audit will be posted on our website as soon as it becomes available.



# Harnessing the Power of Progress

Here are a few ways you can make a difference for future generations:

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For easy access, we have included a remittance envelope. Or, give online at [sonoraninstitute.org](https://sonoraninstitute.org).

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

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## 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.



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