



SONORAN
INSTITUTE

ADVOCATING FOR INCLUSION

IN THE COLORADO RIVER BASIN

Spring 2022

Colorado River in Canyonlands, Utah

Sonoran Institute's partnership with the Water & Tribes Initiative is dedicated to enhancing the capacity of tribes and advancing sustainable water management through collaborative problem-solving. We do this by participating in ongoing dialogue with tribes and stakeholders, promoting new research findings and policy proposals, and developing tools and resources that enhance tribal capacity around sustainable water management.

Emerging Tribal Leadership

There are 30 federally recognized tribes in the Colorado River basin. Currently, basin tribes hold water rights to approximately three million acre-feet of Colorado River water, about 25% of the river's average annual flow. These are among the most senior water rights, and as tribes secure additional water rights to which they are entitled the percentage of Colorado River water rights held by tribes will increase.

Historically, tribes have not had been able to use the water to which they are legally entitled. Their water rights have been subject to drawn-out negotiations. Even when their rights have been secured, they often have not had physical access to their water, due to lack of infrastructure to deliver water, and were not compensated by others using their water. COVID-19 has laid bare these historic inequities, as the lack of access to clean water has exacerbated the pandemic's impact on tribal communities.

Things are changing. In the last few decades, legal settlements have been reached, and more are on the way. Individual tribes are contributing to basin-wide

responses to Colorado River water shortages and being compensated for it. Most recently, the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provides \$3.4 billion to bring water to tribes.

Tribes also are emerging as leaders in the next set of negotiations in response to Colorado River water shortages. They are advocating for a more holistic, inclusive, and adaptive framework to manage the Colorado River and are seeking a substantive role in the upcoming negotiations, including federal-tribal consultations as sovereign nations.

Collaboration between Sonoran Institute and Tribes—Sonoran Institute connects people and communities with the natural resources that nourish and sustain them. Our geographic focus is the Colorado River basin, where we work to ensure that rivers flow, landscapes are healthy, and all communities thrive.

Collaboration is a hallmark of our approach to conservation, and one of our primary partnerships is with the Water & Tribes Initiative (WTI). This tribal-led effort brings together diverse organizations dedicated to enhancing the capacity of tribes to advance sustainable water management. As a partner, we work with WTI to:

- Promote a vision for holistic, inclusive, and adaptive management of the Colorado River that is supported by tribal representatives and conservation groups and other stakeholders in the basin.
- Advocate for tribes to be fully represented in upcoming negotiations regarding management of the Colorado River



Cucapá beadwork. ©Bill Hatcher/Sonoran Institute, 2022



Cucapá ceremony at Laguna Grande restoration site. ©Bill Hatcher/Sonoran Institute, 2022

- Develop policies that allow tribes to lease water to tribal and non-tribal entities within the basin
- Support efforts to build tribal capacity to develop and use their water rights and ensure physical access to clean water

WTI focuses on collaboration and building capacity among US tribes, but it does not engage with indigenous communities in Mexico, where Sonoran Institute has a long-standing presence. In the Colorado River Delta, we work with the Cucapá, the original inhabitants of the Delta, to restore the river, tributaries, and estuary, and preserve their culture and way of life. As negotiations get underway regarding future management of the Colorado River, we will support the Cucapá as they advocate for restoration of the Delta and water for their community.

Accomplishments to Date

- Drafted a series of tribal case studies describing water challenges and partnership opportunities for 15 tribes, currently being used by WTI as background research for a report on water management tribal capacity needs.
- Co-drafted a shared vision for the Upper Basin of the Colorado River that will guide federally recognized tribes and conservation groups in reviewing and commenting on proposals put forward during upcoming negotiations.
- Developed a conceptual plan for a riparian restoration project in the Cucapá village of El Mayor along the Hardy River in the Colorado River Delta and now seeking funding to implement the project.

Support the Sonoran Institute

Your support preserves the environment for future generations and makes a lasting impact in communities across Western North America. Learn more about how you can help at SonoranInstitute.org/donate.

The Mission of the Sonoran Institute

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

We envision a Colorado River Basin where rivers flow, landscapes are healthy, and all communities thrive.

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