LIFE RETURNS

Drop by Drop

SONORAN INSTITUTE

ANNUAL REPORT 2021
Dear Friends,

At a time when Lake Mead and Lake Powell are falling to historically low levels, 40 million people across the Colorado River Basin are bracing for a new era of uncertainty. It is undoubtedly a troubling moment, but one that Sonoran Institute is meeting with action—and hope. If there is one thing our three decades of work in this basin have proven, it is that nature only needs small amounts of water to do GREAT things.

On our cover this year, we are honored to feature a leader who captures this spirit of resolve: Antonia Torres González, a longtime partner to Sonoran Institute and cultural promoter for the Cucapá Tribe in the Mexicali Valley. Our mission speaks directly to collaboration among stakeholders and community members like Antonia.

Our work with Raise the River to support U.S.-Mexico cooperation has helped bring the promise of regular water flows to the Colorado River Delta and our restoration sites. Thanks to Minute 323, an international agreement between the Mexican and United States governments, water deliveries to the region will continue through 2026. In the Delta and in the U.S., we continue to build new partnerships and expand awareness and support for initiatives to conserve vulnerable water supplies and the ecosystems that depend on them.

In our efforts to restore and protect water, rivers, and natural resources across the Colorado River Basin, we measure success by the amount of water and its quality, by the return of diverse species to the ecosystem, and, most importantly, by the JOY we see in the people who live there. The reason for Antonia’s smile perfectly sums up the ultimate goal of our work: “I have grown up watching a river die and today I see a river revived,” says Antonia.

We believe life returns drop by drop—from the small amounts we dedicate to restoring rivers, to basin-wide water conservation measures. Life also returns hand by hand—though the support of every donor and partner. We are so thankful to have a vast network of supporters across the United States and Mexico who sustain our growing work, strong vision, and commitment to culture of diversity, equity, and inclusivity to truly represent and acknowledge the communities we serve.

Thank you for making these incredible stories possible.

Sincerely,

Mike Zellner
Chief Executive Officer

Mary Alexander
Board Chair

Life Returns Drop By Drop

Kids playing in the newly flowing Colorado River near Vado Carranza in the Mexicali Valley, June 2021

A Spirit of Connection in the Delta

While standing next to the Colorado River in the Mexicali Valley in June, Antonia Torres González describes bringing her mother, Inocencia, the Cucapá traditional chief, to see the water flowing in the typically dry channel the day before. Inocencia spent her life reviving the spoken Cucapá language, promoting the culture, and inspiring her daughter and community to care for the river given to them by the ancestors. “For my mom, seeing water in the river is everything in her life. It’s what she’s waited for for many years, and this gives her life to think that the water comes back!” The flowing river brought tears of joy.

Thanks to historic cooperation between the United States and Mexico, targeted water releases into the Colorado mimic the natural spring flows that no longer reach Mexico because of dams and diversions. Using scientific results demonstrating the success of the 2014 pulse flow, Sonoran Institute and partners successfully advocated for Minute 323, the binational agreement signed in 2017, to provide small amounts of water for environmental restoration. These flows are helping sustain some of our key restoration sites, like the cottonwood-willow forests of Laguna Grande and the estuary. People from all over the Mexicali Valley visit the river with their families and friends to swim, play, and relax.

Not long after she saw the river flowing, Inocencia passed away. The following day, on June 24, 2021, the river flow reached the sea. Many felt she helped guide the water to complete its rightful path, from the headwaters in the Colorado Rockies to the Gulf of California. We are grateful for her accomplishments and her inspiration. Because Minute 323 promises water deliveries through 2026, our team is preparing to steward several future flows—to restore life drop by drop!
Supporting Community Resilience

Across much of the Colorado River Basin, prolonged drought and extreme weather events have made our water supplies more vulnerable. With our Growing Water Smart workshops, Sonoran Institute assembles forward-thinking communities across Colorado and Arizona to share concerns and collaboratively craft plans and policies to address these challenges—even as populations grow. After the workshops, we continue to support these communities by offering small grants to jumpstart the initiatives identified as critical to their water resilience.

In 2020 alone, ten communities (six in Colorado and four in Arizona) received funding to finalize powerful projects tailored to their specific needs. One of these communities, Casa Grande, Arizona, incorporated water conservation measures into their planning policies. In partnership with Arizona Water Company, they created a public outreach campaign to promote their water-saving programs and their updated General Plan. Mayor Craig McFarland says, “Our expectations were that we would come out of the Arizona Growing Water Smart workshop with a plan that we can incorporate into our General Plan update. We have done exactly that. It is key to our city’s health and growth!”

Sonoran Institute continued to support this fast-growing town throughout 2020, and the effort brought residents together to learn about the new programs and key approaches added to the General Plan that will conserve water for the city’s future. Workshop participants even returned to present at a subsequent Growing Water Smart workshop to share their experience and encourage new attendees to make similar strides. This is how our programs work: we deepen relationships, provide space to thoroughly consider water conservation, develop leaders, and improve local policy—drop by drop.

We want to acknowledge and thank our Growing Water Smart partner, the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy, a Center of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and Growing Water Smart funders: the Arizona Community Foundation of Cochise, Colorado Water Conservation Board, Gates Family Foundation, Flume, and Northern Water.

Santa Cruz River Research Days: New format, new connections

With 156 participants, our first virtual Santa Cruz River Research Days saw the highest attendance since the program started in 2009. And because of a generous sponsorship from Tucson Water and Friends of the Santa Cruz River, we were able to offer live English-Spanish interpretation to expand our audience to the many native Spanish-speaking researchers, academics, cultural historians, and stakeholders in Southern Arizona and Northern Mexico.

During the symposium, our lead sponsor, Pima County, announced a huge success for the health of the river. For the first time, a minimum level of water flow has been designated to prevent a stretch of the river from running dry, thereby protecting critical habitat for the endangered Gila topminnow.

By bringing so many participants together, we were able to have open dialogue about the current projects that are restoring the river as well as the future opportunities for partnership and collaboration—all of which will increase the health and sustainability of the river and the community. Evan Canfield, Division Manager Watershed Studies Division, Pima County Flood District praised the event, saying, “Santa Cruz River Research Days has always been a great way to work on our partnerships with the research community and this year it allowed us to move forward with the things Pima County leadership really cares about.”

Santa Cruz River Research Days was generously sponsored by Pima County, Tucson Electric Power, Kimley Horn, CMG Drainage, Friends of Santa Cruz River, Lelo Gass, and Tucson Water.
Welcome to the Colorado River Basin, a landscape where every stream and wash eventually makes its way to the Colorado. Covering seven states in the U.S., two in Mexico and the lands of more than thirty tribes, this arid region is home to 40 million people that rely on its water every day.

CONSERVING AND PROTECTING THE MIGHTY RIVER

From restoring the Delta to championing water conservation, Sonoran Institute works to bring communities together to address the challenges people and nature experience in the face of climate change.

Growing Water Smart Cities and towns throughout the Basin are growing fast and face hotter, drier climates. Our workshops host elected officials, planners and community leaders to set policies that conserve water.

Santa Cruz River Many southern Arizonans rely on the Colorado River for their drinking water supply. Once the water has been used at home it is highly treated at treatment plants and released to the river. We protect and track the health of the Santa Cruz River, which flows year-round thanks to this process. The river provides homes for wildlife and a beautiful place for recreation.

Los Arenitas Half of all the water used in Mexicali comes here to be treated. Artificial wetlands naturally help purify wastewater, and the aquatic plants and trees provide homes to over 140 resident and migratory bird species. Some of this water flows into Río Hardy benefitting tourism, agriculture, and native communities such as the Cucapá.

Laguna Grande Home to more than 500 acres of revived cottonwood, willow and mesquite forests, this restoration site is the largest and densest riparian forest along the river in Mexico. Visiting families and schoolchildren enjoy our Laguna Grande Interpretive Center and nature walks.

Estuary While the estuary has faced many dry decades, Sonoran Institute’s efforts result in flowing water to the sea, improved water quality, and increased habitat for diverse bird and marine species. We are reconnecting the river to the sea drop by drop!
Bringing Nature Home for Students in Mexico

Before the pandemic hit, we were hosting an average of 3,000 Mexicali students and families each year in classrooms and field trips to our Laguna Grande Interpretive Center in the Colorado River Delta. With schools across Mexico closed this year and visits to our sites also paused, we launched our first digital environmental education platform. Available online in Spanish, it provides students ages eight-and-up with a way to learn about the river and conservation. The three modules: Restaurar, Renover y Reconnectar (Restore, Renew, and Reconnect) are readily accessible on phones, tablets, and computers—with downloadable resources to learn more!

We premiered the platform at a Facebook Live event in February with the Alianza WWF | Fundación Carlos Slim, whose generous funding made the course possible. Another proud co-host of the event was CONABIO, the federal Mexican Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity, whose support has been essential. More than 450 viewers watched live as Rocío Torres, our Colorado River Delta program director, welcomed our many partners and supporters from across Mexico. The broadcast included special presentations by the esteemed Dr. José Sarukhán Kermez, national coordinator of CONABIO, Jorge Rickards Guevara, director general of WWF México, and our CEO, Mike Zellner. By the end of the day, over 200 people had enrolled in the course, and within hours dozens had already viewed every video presented by our environmental education and research coordinator, Gabriela González Olimón.

As of October, 550 students had enrolled in the online program, equivalent to the number of students in 20 field trip groups. The program is also reaching people who live too far away to visit. “Even though I am in Monterrey, I want to continue learning about the Colorado River Delta because it is part of Mexico, too, and my students can learn about it virtually,” posted Mayita Estefanía Rodríguez Salinas. Hers is just one of hundreds of positive comments letting us know the program is building awareness about conservation and the incredible ecosystem of the Colorado River Delta.

Gabriela González Olimón, environmental education coordinator and instructor for our first online course on the Colorado River Delta

Liliana Gaytán Cruz, one of the first thirty people to complete the course won a set of Delta-related gifts curated by our staff.

Financial Summary
FY 2021: July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021

REVENUE
Contributions: $966,977
Foundation Grants: $924,794
Government Grants: $393,569
Contract Income: $369,254
Other Income: $448,343
Revenue Total: $3,102,938

EXPENSES
Programs USA: $941,899
Programs MEX: $856,388
Administration: $441,981
Fundraising: $308,869
Expenses Total: $2,549,136

Reporting based on unaudited FY21 results. The Sonoran Institute will be audited by Ludwig, Klewer and Rudner PLLC and a copy of the audit will be posted on our website as soon as it becomes available.
THANK YOU | With your support the Sonoran Institute made positive impact throughout the Colorado River Basin in 2021. Our community-based conservation approach provided the vision of a sustainable water future for all residents and wildlife.

The Sonoran Institute is grateful to all our donors, partners and volunteers for their support. Please note, the contributions listed below reflect gifts for the period July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021. Please contact Abigail Clarke (aclarke@sonoraninstitute.org) with any errors or omissions.

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In Memory

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In-Kind

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The Santa Cruz River flowing in northwest Tucson
OUR MISSION
The Sonoran Institute 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.

WHERE WE WORK
Colorado River Basin | Northwestern Mexico
Desert Southwest | Rocky Mountains

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