

Tribal Vision for Protecting the Colorado River

1. What was the catalyst?

Since 2006, the Cocopah, Colorado River, Chemehuevi, Fort Mojave, and Hualapai Tribes and the National Wildlife Federation have collaborated on various projects to protect the ecological and cultural values of the Colorado River. The partnership has invested in a variety of strategies from convening gatherings to share perspectives and ideas to conserve the River, to conducting intertribal exchange via field trips and community events, to developing a shared tribal vision statement for the future of the River. These strategies have been identified and advanced by consensus of all the parties to ensure a process of solidarity.

The tribes came together to share their values and perspectives and lay a foundation for our collaborative effort based on mutual understandings about the River. To that end, we sought to envision a Colorado River with habitat being actively restored and conserved by our tribes who have an innate bond to the land, water, and wildlife.

Our tribes recognize both a cultural and environmental need to ensure protection of Colorado River habitat, wildlife, water and plant life on our lands. Our tribes have witnessed the damming, development, and over-allocation of the River in the last century; we see the devastating impacts on fish, wildlife, and plants. Our tribal communities are experiencing first-hand the impacts of climate change on the River. Our tribes engaged in this effort continue to rely on the natural landscape for both physical and spiritual nourishment as we have for hundreds of years. Fundamental to this effort is the understanding of the strong connection between people and place and that those connections are vital to protecting the natural world. We believe the tribal vision for the Colorado River can have a substantial impact on the future of the River and our tribal peoples that depend on it.

2. What are the objectives?

Our goal was to develop a united tribal vision for protecting the Colorado River and its environmental and cultural resources. By developing and affirming that vision, we sought to establish a voice of solidarity for protecting the River. Tribal unity provides us a position of strength and a negotiating space to influence how the river is viewed, valued, managed and utilized, opening opportunities to ensure that tribal environmental and cultural values are recognized. Further, creating the vision and increasing tribal collaboration provides the opportunity for communicating and showcasing how the tribes value and utilize the River and its resources. Finally, the united tribal vision provides the impetus for increased efforts for restoration and protection of River habitat and our subsistence and cultural activities associated with the River.

To develop the Tribal Vision for Protecting the Colorado River, we began with three priorities:

- Increased tribal collaboration and solidarity provides a united voice for protecting the Colorado River.
- Increased opportunities for communication and engagement which showcase how the tribes value and utilize the River and its resources as well as connecting tribal elders and youth to pass on cultural and environmental knowledge about the River.
- Increased efforts for restoration and protection, guided by the united tribal vision, of River habitat and the subsistence and cultural activities associated with the River.

3. Who participates?

The Cocopah, Colorado River Indian, Chemehuevi, Fort Mojave, and Hualapai Tribes. Participation included tribal natural resource and cultural resource staff, council members, elders, and youth.

4. What are the outcomes to date?

Designated representatives from the Cocopah, Colorado River, Chemehuevi, Fort Mojave, and Hualapai Tribes convened over one dozen workshops and meetings to discuss their perspectives and priorities for the River. Each of the tribe's councils designated a lead representative to coordinate with its elders, staff, and community members and bring their perspectives about the River to bear upon this process. Through a series of collaborative discussions over the course of two years, the tribes developed their Tribal Vision for Protecting the Colorado River. In addition, the tribal coalition convened a workshop in January 2016 that brought together the tribes, water managers from the basin states, conservation NGOs, and academics to discuss priorities and options for keeping water in the river to protect wildlife, ecological and cultural resources, and other priorities as outlined in the tribal vision.

5. What enabled the project to be successful?

From the outset, representatives from the five tribes agreed that the effort had to be a consensus-based process, whereby the tribes identified shared goals and values to come to a unified position. While this goal meant that the effort would take considerable time and effort, we believed that a shared outcome, agreed to by all the tribes, was fundamental. In addition, we felt it was vital that each of the tribe's councils supported the process, which we secured via tribal council support letters, and that each tribe had to designate official representatives (and alternates), so there was commitment to completing the effort and consistent participation.

6. What were the obstacles or constraints, and how were they addressed?

Whether it can be termed an obstacle/constraint, we knew this would take a lot of time, commitment, and dialogue. Ultimately, the current obstacle is how to ensure that the Tribal Vision is considered, valued and utilized by water managers and other constituencies as they move forward on any process for river management and planning.

7. For more information, please see:

The Tribal Vision for Protecting the Colorado River (inserted below).

Tribal Vision for Protecting the Colorado River

Ratified by the Cocopah, Chemehuevi, Fort Mohave, Hualapai
and Colorado River Indian Tribes

The Colorado River is sacred, water is life, the peoples are the keepers of the River, and we take full responsibility to care for the River. The River is integral to our past as peoples, our present, and our future. The River is the Chemehuevi, Cocopah, Fort Mojave, Hualapai, and Colorado River Indian Tribes (Mohave, Chemehuevi, Navajo, and Hopi). In alignment with our respect for the River, we assert the following principles:

The Colorado River is necessary for tribal subsistence, culture, and ceremonial practices. Clean water is vital and necessary for our peoples' health, the vibrancy and diversity of the plants and animals, and all life that depends on it.

The River is spiritual – there is a timeless flow of oral traditions and cultural connections to the River that needs to be passed on to preserve our cultures and languages for our future generations. There is a responsibility to our stewardship of the River, and our children must understand this so they can be caretakers of the River as their ancestors have been. The River is crucial to restoring the native plants and wildlife that are the roots of our oral traditions, cultural practices, and well-being.

The Colorado River is the origin of our peoples. The River must be viewed holistically. As tribes, we have a responsibility to the River, the land, and all resources. Just as we have a responsibility to the River, the federal government has a trust responsibility to consult with and listen to us about how the River should be managed and protected. There needs to be a balance between our traditional lifeways, reliance on the River and the economic uses of the River. We call upon all peoples to learn about and understand our historical and present connections to the River and to make a *shift in thinking* about the River – tribal traditional values must be taken into equal account along with western science in relationship to the management of the River.

There are many threats to the River: climate change, resource depletion, over-allocation, and contamination. As a result, those that depend on the River – animals, plants, tribes, farmers, and communities – are suffering. This trajectory of increasing anguish must be changed.

Clean and abundant water must be available for the health and well-being of human, animal, and plant communities. Our tribal perspectives must be respected, valued, and taken into full account in how the River is managed. We are the River Keepers and our youth must be provided the knowledge to become the future keepers of the River.

We call on our fellow sovereign tribes to unite. Under our tribal leadership, we ask federal and state natural resource agencies, water managers, local communities, and recreational industries to join and actively support us in meeting these objectives of our tribal vision.