

## Habitat ebbs with changing river

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APPLE VALLEY — Spring has once again greened the Lower Narrows of the Mojave River, one of its reliably lush areas.

Along other stretches of the river, increased ground water pumping and dams have decreased the amount of water that comes to the surface and the size and frequency of floods that once scoured the riverbed on a more regular basis.

The demands of a growing population have changed the river, possibly increasing the habitat along the Lower Narrows and causing plants to die and disappear in others, according to a 2001 U.S. Geological Survey report.

“Historically, we’ve taken out more than we put back,” said Kirby Brill, general manager of the Mojave Water Agency. “We’re at the point now where we’re starting to manage it. If left unmitigated, we would probably see further loss of habitat.”

The agency recently began purchasing water to recharge the aquifer, which Brill said should stabilize current levels of habitat but will not return the river to the way it was nearly a century ago. At that time, photos showed vegetation in places like Afton Canyon that are no longer green.

Riparian habitat, the vegetation along rivers, is rare throughout California, said Matt Huffline, a middle and high school teacher at the Lewis Center.

In the Lower Narrows, riparian habitat is home to western flycatchers and the endangered “least” Bell’s vireo, two birds that like to build their nests in thick stands of willows.

Many plants that grow along the river are phreatophytes, which like their “feet wet” and will die if they cannot reach water within 14 feet underground, Huffline said, so a lower water table

causes them to disappear.

While clay barriers force water to surface consistently in the Lower Narrows, other locations on the river without this type of aquifer are more drastically affected by these changes.

Shrinking habitat could be one reason that the Mojave tui chub, the only fish native to the Mojave River Watershed, disappeared from most of the river, although it mostly fell prey to hybridization after people introduced another species of chub for bait, according to the Lewis Center Web site.

The Mojave tui chub could return to the Lower or Upper Narrows again, since federal and state biologists are searching for more refuge areas to re-introduce the fish so that it can be down-listed from an endangered to a threatened species. A marsh near the Lewis Center is one candidate, and the biologists will be inspecting it today.

People who grew up near the river have noticed the changes. Environmental consultant Steve Lilburn, who grew up in Victorville during the 1950s and 1960s, remembers floods large enough that he floated down the river with friends on surfboards or in a canoe.

Apple Valley Mayor Rick Roelle grew up near the river and said he used to hunt abundant ducks and see many beavers in the river. Only a few beavers remain now, he said.

Although riparian habitat has increased in the Lower Narrows, it includes cottonwoods that are crowding out bird-friendly willows and sucking more water out of the aquifer.

With less frequent and smaller floods, the cottonwoods have developed into a “climax community” that is the culmination of growth.

Without regular flooding, the river is also subject to invasion by more non-native species such as tamarisk or “salt cedar,” said local biologist Tom Egan. “The flooding is actually a faucet that helps clean out the river,” he said.

The Mojave Water Agency is working with the California Department of Fish and Game to preserve habitat along the river, under a management plan that was part of a 1996 court judgment.

“We’re talking about a man-made environment,” Lilburn said. “Nothing is pristine anymore, but of course it hasn’t been for 100 years.”

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