

Friends of the Forest Help Protect Fossil Creek

By Mike Ward

Volunteers of Sedona's Friends of the Forest make a 100-mile roundtrip in a Forest Service pickup truck to pick up trash in the Fossil Springs and Fossil Creek area twice every month. The two volunteers stop at the two trailheads and dispersed campsites along Fossil Creek Road (FR 708).

Then with the cooperation of APS, the volunteers are allowed to drive four and one half miles up the now closed and gated very narrow serpentine Flume Road to the dam near Fossil Springs. There they collect trash and other waste from the many dispersed campsites at the springs above the dam. Each trip results in filling the bed of the pickup with a hundred or more pounds of trash.

Fossil Creek begins at Fossil Springs located about five miles upstream from the Irving Power Plant located on Fossil Creek Road. The springs along a quarter-mile of creek bed pump 72-degree water to the surface at the rate of about 20,000 gallons per minute. In fact, more water flows from Fossil Springs than the East Verde River or the headwaters of the Verde proper, and at a more constant rate of flow. Early settlers named the springs Fossil Springs because minerals in the water coated everything with white travertine deposits that made objects look like fossils.

The endless water supply supports one of the most diverse riparian ecosystems in the state, with more than 30 species of trees set among native desert shrub. It also creates a haven for abundant wildlife: elk and deer higher up, javelina, coyote, skunk, ring-tailed cat, fox, and smaller mammals lower down; and more than 100 species of birds.

Until the Childs and Irving power plants were decommissioned in 2000, the entire Fossil Springs flow was diverted into 10.5 miles of flumes and pipes to the Childs Plant completed in 1909, and the Irving Plant completed in 1916. To construct the dam, flume and power plants, mule teams carried construction materials up the mountainous terrain to where men with hand picks and shovels toiled. The total cost was less than \$500,000. The power plants were so remote that it took five or six days on horseback to reach them from the nearest railroad.

While small by present-day standards, these plants once took care of the entire electric requirements of Yavapai County. In the mid-1920s, these plants delivered 70 percent of all electricity used in Phoenix, then a city of forty-four thousand. Fortunately, Fossil Creek was not totally lost. Although the flume cut the natural stream flow to about 90 gallons per minute, seasonal runoff water from the watershed area kept the creek alive. Today with the flume closed, even during the dry season, 20,000 gallons every minute flow over travertine and river rock, bedrock gorges and deep canyons of Fossil Creek.

The Forest Service and many other conservation partners like APS, Northern Arizona University and the Arizona Department of Game and Fish have joined to restore the ten and one half mile Fossil Creek riparian area between Fossil Springs and the Verde River. There currently is a bill before the US Congress to make Fossil Creek a National Wilderness area to preserve and protect this unique riparian habitat.

Recent newspaper and television programming publicity about the restoration of Fossil Creek has resulted in an increasing number of visitors to Fossil Creek and Fossil Springs. This increase in visitors has caused both a major disturbance of the riparian areas and hundreds of pounds of discarded trash from day users and overnight campers.

Public access to the springs is either along a four-mile hike down over 1300 feet from the Fossil Springs trailhead below Strawberry or a very hilly four and one half mile hike up the Flume Trail from the trailhead near the Irving Power Plant. Unfortunately, some visitors to the springs are unwilling to pack out their garbage and instead leave it in bags near the dam. The animals then tear the bags apart spreading the debris all over. A second problem is the human waste and toilet paper that litter the area. This not only is unpleasant but also fosters the growth and public health threat of E. coli in Fossil Creek.

Some of the people who frequent the trailheads and areas along Fossil Creek that are accessible from FR 708 near the Irving Power Plant also leave tremendous amounts of trash behind. Considering how close they are to their vehicles to take the trash with them, this behavior is inexcusable.

Once again, Friends of the Forest volunteers are making a difference by helping to keep the trash left behind by a few of the visitors to this beautiful location from damaging the riparian areas along Fossil Creek.

If you are interested in making a difference, become involved with the **Friends of the Forest**. For more information visit our website at: <http://www.friendsoftheforestedona.org> or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at (928) 282-4119.