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CENTERPIECE

Celebration of the San Pedro draws 200

Raising awareness about threats to the San Pedro River

Dana Cole 3 hrs ago



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David Fitzsimmons, an editorial cartoonist and humor columnist for the Arizona Daily Star, entertains a crowd of 200 master of ceremonies Sunday during a Tucson Audubon Society event at Sinaina Wind Bookshop in Benson.

BENSON – It's hailed as the "Southwest's last real river," a vital corridor for thousands of migratory birds, described as mystical and magical and defined as a nationally recognized treasure.

Passion for the Pedro River, coupled with a desire to protect it, drew nearly 200 people to a Tucson Audubon Society event hosted by Singing Wind Bookshop in Benson Sunday afternoon.

“Storytelling and Poetry on the San Pedro” featured a celebration of the San Pedro River Valley through music, art and literature. Teodora “Ted” Ramirez, a musician who has been proclaimed as “Tucson’s Official Troubadour,” performed folk music while four local authors presented readings in a program with David Fitzsimmons as master of ceremonies. The Arizona Daily Star cartoonist and columnist kept the crowd entertained with his quick quips and engaging personality, skillfully weaving jokes with solemn reminders of the real reason for the gathering.

“That river is a treasure... it’s exquisite, it’s beautiful, it’s rare, there’s nothing like it...do not let anyone diminish it! Not a single soul,” implored Fitzsimmons.

As the only flowing river along the Mexican border between the Colorado River and Rio Grande, Audubon and other conservation groups are concerned about the impacts future large-scale development will have on the San Pedro, which serves as an essential migratory flyway for several hundred bird species as they travel between North and South America every year.

“This is a story about two rivers,” said Fitzsimmons as part of the program’s introduction. “First, you have the beautiful San Pedro. It flows north, bringing life and beauty to all the inhabitants in this region...The second story is about a river of dollars, flowing south to Maricopa County, bringing ugly choices to the residents of this region...”

Pointing to a mural representing what once was the Santa Cruz River before it was diminished to a dry, barren ravine, Fitzsimmons said, “I love this mural. It’s a memorial. It’s a tombstone, an epitaph to what once was. We do not want to see something similar to happen to the San Pedro.”



Steve and Lauvon White of Sierra Vista chat with author Richard Shelton as he signs a book they purchased at an event organized by the Tucson Audubon Society on Sunday. Also pictured are authors Ken Lamberton of Bisbee and Midji Stephenson of Tucson.

Several volunteers and staff members of Tucson Audubon Society attended the gathering. Helen Kim, who is Tucson Audubon's strategic events coordinator, said, "We are so pleased with the turnout here today. We were hoping for this but weren't sure what to expect. Once the word got out, it snowballed into what you're seeing. It's a wonderful response and shows a genuine interest in this issue."

Steve and Lauvon White of Sierra Vista were among the 200 in attendance.

"This event was more than awesome," Lauvon said while waiting for author Richard Shelton to sign a book she and her husband had just purchased. "It brought out a very deep, passionate and emotional awareness about how fragile the river really is. I'm so glad we decided to attend. And what a beautiful setting for something like this."

Mike Holmes, a candidate for state representative said, “This was more of a cultural event than an environmental event, and everyone came with an appreciation for the problems faced by the San Pedro River.”

Holmes also touched on the Villages at Vigneto development proposed for Benson and his concerns about potential impacts the development’s groundwater pumping could have on the river and surrounding region.

“The impact of that many homes (28,000) in such a small area is huge,” he said. “It makes no environmental sense and it makes no economic sense. We keep hearing about how Benson needs to improve its economy by creating more jobs, and the development is expected to be exactly what Benson needs. We don’t create jobs by building more homes to create jobs,” argued Holmes, who has a background in economic development and tourism in Pima County.

Tucson Audubon Society analyst Matt Clark was on hand to provide information about the San Pedro River watershed and explain how to engage conservation groups in an effort to protect the river.

“This region loves the San Pedro River and the people want to see a happier ending for the San Pedro than the Santa Cruz River,” he said. “This issue of protecting the river is much broader than just the Benson area. We have a national riparian conservation area here, so this is a national issue.”

Clark also noted that postcards were provided to those interested in contacting such decision makers as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency and Benson Mayor Toney King, “urging them to do everything in their power to protect this so-loved national treasure from the negative impacts of proposed developments.”

More Information

The following local authors were featured at Sunday’s celebration of the San Pedro River, an event of the Tucson Audubon Society held at Singing Wind Bookshop in Benson: Richard Shelton, Ken Lambertson, Robert Houston and Midji Stephenson, with David Fitzsimmons, an editorial cartoonist and humor columnist for the Arizona Daily Star serving as master of ceremonies.

Entertainment also included music performed by Ted Ramirez, a celebrated local musician who plays authentic folk songs from Mexico and the American Southwest.
