



Ribbons of Green

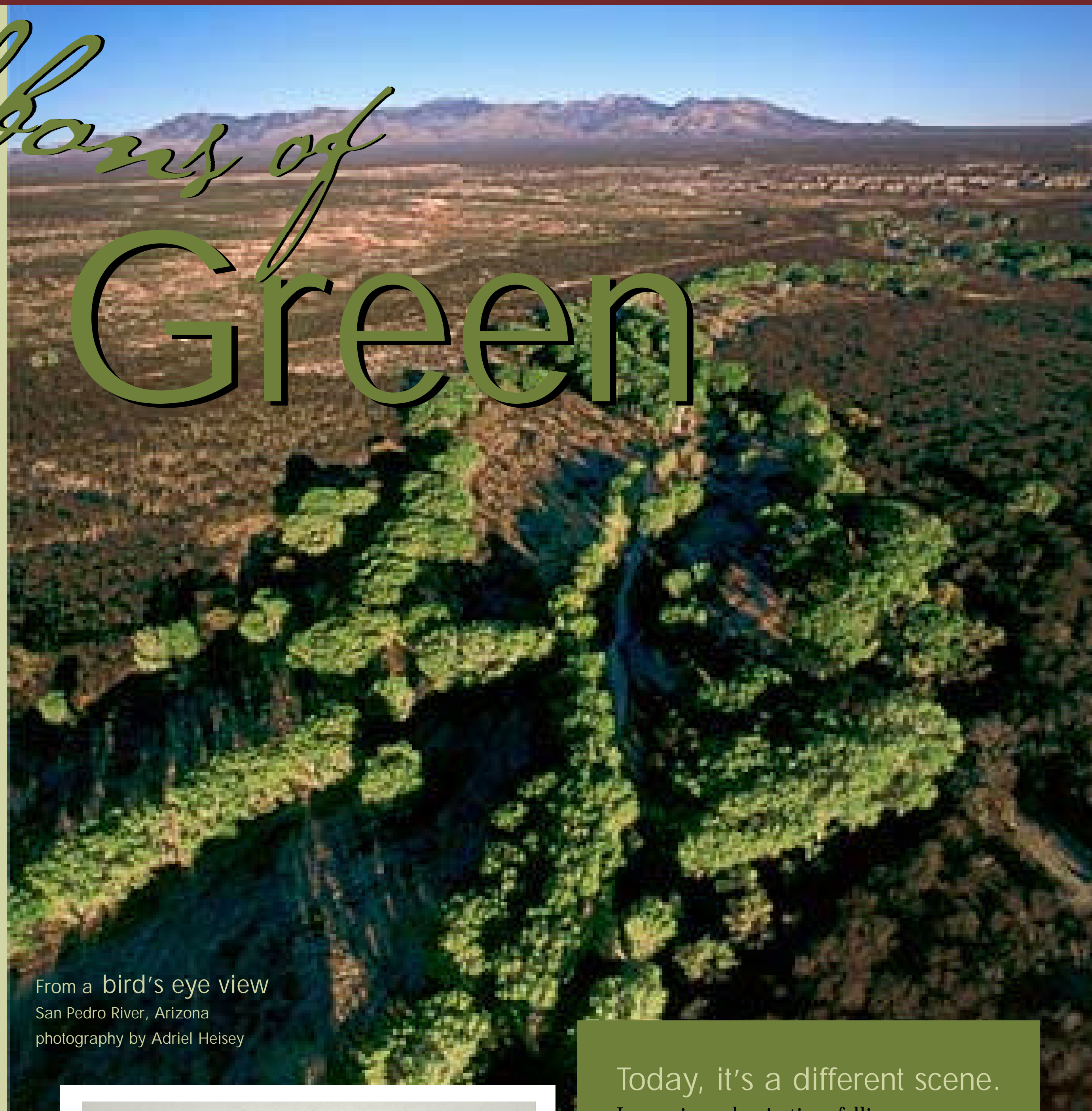
Riparian areas are rich with life

Many desert dwellers depend on the resources riparian areas provide. Riparian vegetation helps convert the sun's energy into food for a variety of animals, which in turn are nourishment for animals higher up the food chain. It also provides an important refuge from heat and drought, especially for animals crossing barren stretches of the surrounding desert.

Riparian habitats benefit humans, too— by controlling soil erosion, slowing the speed of floodwaters, and improving water quality.



Arizona's riparian habitats are shrinking. One hundred years ago, perennial rivers like the Santa Cruz and the San Pedro were lined with thick groves of cottonwood or mesquite, while grasslands and cienegas were plentiful in the surrounding valleys.



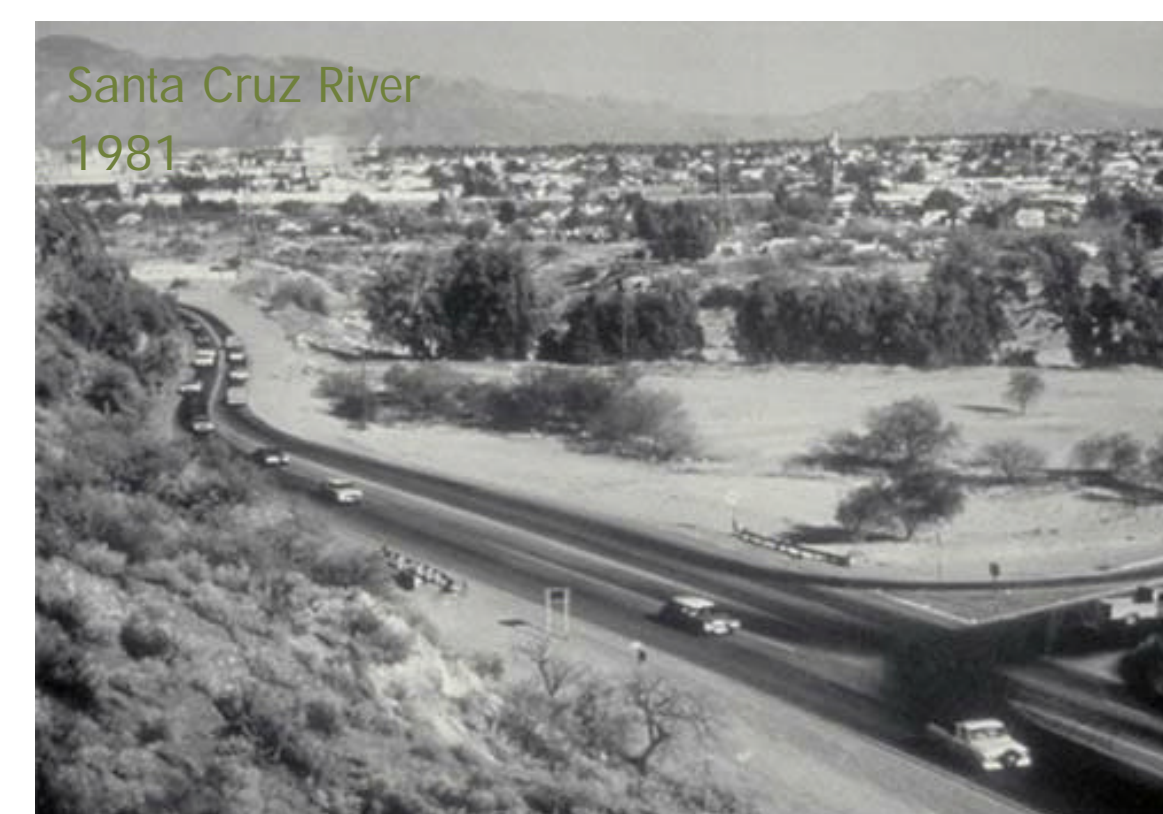
From a bird's eye view
San Pedro River, Arizona
photography by Adriel Heisey



Santa Cruz River
1904

Today, it's a different scene.

Increasing urbanization, falling water tables, over-grazing by cattle, dams, development on floodplains, and a changing climate have all contributed to the loss of riparian communities throughout Arizona. No more than 10% of our riparian habitats exist in their original condition. Those that remain are among Arizona's most precious natural treasures.



Santa Cruz River
1981

Arizona's riparian areas are ribbons of green in a dry desert

What's a riparian area?

It's the environment at the water's edge.

Riparian communities include plants, animals, and habitats that thrive near bodies of water. *Wherever water collects*—whether a perennial stream at the bottom of a canyon, or a temporary pool in a seasonally flooded arroyo—you'll find vegetation that needs more water than the desert can provide.

In Arizona, riparian areas range from lush, leaf-shaded banks beside year-round rivers like the Verde and San Pedro to desert stands of mesquite and palo verde along sandy washes where water runs seasonally. The southwestern cienega—a spring-fed marshland of bulrushes and cattails—is yet another type of riparian community found in Arizona.

These isolated corridors

Riparian areas account for less than 5% of Arizona's land, yet they're the most productive ecosystems in the desert. Roughly 60% of all species in the Southwest are directly dependent on riparian areas, and another 10-20% use them during some part of their life cycle. Even dry washes can contain up to ten times more species than the surrounding desert.

