

COLORADO RIVER PROJECT

Advancing Balanced Water Management to Meet Human and Ecological Needs

conservation profile

targets aquatic and water-dependent species, riparian communities

stresses water development, residential development, invasive species

strategies identify vital river reaches, educate stakeholders, create planning partnerships, influence statewide water policy

ecoregions Southern Rocky Mountain and Colorado Plateau Ecoregions

project size Colorado River Watershed

partners Roaring Fork Conservancy, Eagle River Watershed Council, Colorado Water Trust, Colorado River Water Conservation District, Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program



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The mighty Colorado begins its journey in the headwaters of the Blue, Eagle and Roaring Fork Rivers, where it gives life to native cutthroat trout. Then, as it twists and falls toward the canyon plateau at lower elevations, the Colorado also supports four endangered and native fish—the Colorado pikeminnow, humpback chub, razorback sucker, and bonytail.

In addition, the Colorado's watershed feeds magnificent stands of narrowleaf cottonwood and quaking aspen whose colors paint a stunning nature picture every autumn. In some reaches of the river, intricate cave

systems provide a home to a rare bat, called the pale lump-nosed bat. Along the river's cliffs, particularly behind waterfalls, nest black swifts and high above the river's waters soar peregrine falcons and bald eagles.

Ultimately, of course, the Colorado River also provides an invaluable resource for human uses. The Colorado River supports irrigated agriculture on both the West Slope and Front Range and bolsters municipal and industrial water supplies for numerous Front Range communities including Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo.



Map of the Colorado River Watershed.

The river also supplies water for snowmaking at numerous ski resorts and generates electricity at hydroelectric plants throughout the basin.

But given the recent drought, the state's declining agricultural economy and still-surging populations along the Front Range, flows of Colorado River water are sure to be dramatically altered in the years immediately ahead. The pivotal question is, "How?"

What is known now is that the vast majority of the state's population lives along the Eastern Slope of the Rockies, yet most of the state's remaining water originates within watersheds on the Western Slope.

Little wonder, then, that state legislators are debating a number of water proposals that could have a significant impact on the Colorado River system. In addition, Front Range cities are seeking ways to exercise their West Slope water rights, thereby exporting even more water to the Front Range. At the same time, citizens and community leaders throughout Colorado—eager to ensure adequate water for their future use—are working to understand water science and often arcane water laws.

Given the serious water challenges facing the state, The Nature

Conservancy has launched The Colorado River Project. Through this important new project, the Conservancy will work collaboratively with Western Slope communities—particularly those in the Eagle and Roaring Fork River Valleys—to conserve their globally significant ecological resources.

As matters stand now, the Blue, Eagle, Roaring Fork and Gunnison rivers are among the likely targets for Eastern Slope water. As a result, these rivers may be threatened by more reservoirs and trans-basin diversions, which in turn, could diminish available habitat and harm water-dependent fish and riparian communities. Under the auspices of our Colorado River Project, the Conservancy will work with state agencies, county and local governments and West Slope water interests to ensure that future water development protects the integrity of the most ecologically significant tributaries.

Land conservation is an equally daunting and important challenge in the Eagle and Roaring Fork River Valleys. The Conservancy will employ our knowledge of innovative land-conservation techniques, our public and private fundraising capacity and our understanding

of biodiversity conservation to complement the efforts of existing land trusts and non-profit partners to help protect for the long term those lands deemed "most critical."

In summary, via our new Colorado River Project the Conservancy will:

- Use sound science to identify ecologically vital river reaches and terrestrial habitats;
- Team with partner organizations and agencies to complete watershed planning and ensure appropriate in-stream flows and restoration of key river stretches;
- Educate stakeholders—from state lawmakers to local citizens—about the importance of protecting biologically significant areas;
- Generate support for balancing human and ecological water needs;
- Share the lessons we learn with other interested parties to positively influence statewide water policy.

Our new Colorado River Project offers the Conservancy and our supporters the opportunity to achieve a dramatic conservation success story on the upper reaches of the Colorado River.

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