SUMMER 2026 CONSERVANCY CONNECTION

The Amargosa River Basin is a special place. It is special because of its beauty, its rich natural and cultural resources, and because of the people like you who are protecting it. I speak for the entire board by thanking you for your support, which allows us to continue to protect the Amargosa River Basin. Your continued support will help ensure the next generation can also enjoy the wonders of the Amargosa River Basin as you and I do today.

Russel & Pele the aussiedoodle

Russell Scofield
BOARD PRESIDENT

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AMARGOSA CONSERVANCY

Our Mission

Working toward a sustainable future for the Amargosa River and Basin through science, stewardship and advocacy.

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COVER IMAGE : **MUDD CATHEDRAL, MATT CROTTY**
LAYOUT AND DESIGN **BY LISE WATKINS**

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A Big Dune Sunset, Mason Voehl

Fairbanks Spring, Mason Voehl

I can hardly imagine anything more ***vulnerable.***

This thought occurs to me time and time again, crouched at the edge of a desert spring. I am as an observer from another dimension, peering through the looking glass of cerulean waters, watching pupfish and dace flit and dart in dances older than music. They move freely, seemingly unaware of my gaze, oblivious to the heat and aridity on the other side of the looking glass that would kill them almost instantly, heedless of the danger that faces them on land. They live quiet but active lives, their world a pool of ancient flowing groundwater nested in a vast galaxy of desert. I envy them, and I fear for them.

This year, the Amargosa River was named to American Rivers' 10 Most Endangered Rivers list. For over 40 years, American Rivers has published this annual list to support local conservation efforts and drive positive change on rivers in our nation whose futures hang in the balance. It is objectively a shame that such a list must exist, and frankly frightening to see our demure desert river named on it.

However, I see this campaign as an inspiring duality. Surely, it is a stark recognition of the many threats facing the Amargosa River and its communities from mining, energy, and a host of other extractive industries. But it is also a loud public statement that time yet remains for decision makers to stand up for the river and for the brave local leaders who have been adamant that protective measures must be taken without delay.

As a conservation organization, we must always live and work in this duality. To be effective in pursuit of our mission, we have to feel the weight of what's at stake – flowing springs, verdant river forests, salty alkali wetlands, extremophile species of plants and animals, storied rural communities, Tribes living in

> *This year, the Amargosa River was named to American Rivers' 10* ***Most Endangered*** *Rivers list.*

their ancestral homelands – and acutely sense the perils they face. But through my time with Amargosa Conservancy, I have learned just how much more important it is to simultaneously feel and believe that paths toward protection and security remain open to us.

This edition of the Conservancy Connection features stories born from the land, written by people who thoughtfully and fearlessly continue to walk those paths and fight to keep them open for others to follow. Our organization continues to grow, with new staff and board members bringing an infusion of new energy and novel perspectives to drive our work forward. Those who have been with our organization for some time remain as steadfast and dedicated as ever to see the Amargosa River safely through to the other side of this dangerous moment.

But as a member of our board recently remarked, we must remember that a place is never finally and fully saved. It is always ever in the process of being saved by people who love it. I believe fervently that so long as there are those who spend their precious moments crouched at the edge of a spring, witnessing the improbable miracle of life in some of its most astonishing forms, sensing the dangers they face and responding in the faith that they can indeed be stopped, the Amargosa River will meander its way off any future list of the endangered.

Thank you for standing by and with us, through it all. We look forward to walking this path with you.

Onward,

Mason Voehl
Executive Director,
Amargosa Conservancy

Learn more!

Curious Characters in a Vast, Beautiful Place

Five Years with the Amargosa Conservancy

By Ashley Lee

BADWATER BASIN BY MATT CROTTY

I hated the desert.

I remember long road trips with my parents through the California desert, thinking… who would live here? It's so ugly and brown. Who would have thought that 20 years later it would become the most captivating landscape of my life.

I moved to Las Vegas 12 years ago because I had to keep my job. I figured I'd last maybe a year, put my time in, and get the hell out. But once I got settled, I needed to get out of the city. My first trip out, in 2015, was to the Amargosa River Basin. I had heard there was some hot water in a hole somewhere.

I soaked in Borehole Spring reluctantly since it looked questionably unsafe, but what the heck, I got in. After a while, a naked guy soaking nearby told me to check out China Ranch.

That was the beginning.

The desert out here is quiet. It pulled me in slowly. I kept finding myself going back every weekend, until eventually I started making friends with locals.

One of those people was Justin Blake. He owned the Second Wind property, a place that felt like coming home. Over five years, I spent Thanksgivings and Christmases there, bringing friends from Las Vegas and visitors from out of town to soak in the clawfoot tubs overlooking Death Valley sunsets.

There was something magical about sitting in those tubs under the desert sky. For the first time, I could feel the beauty in this vastly empty landscape.

Justin's place had its own kind of charm. His father, Mac, had a degenerative bone disease and bought the property in the 1970s so he could walk more easily out on the sand and salt. Justin also had some body ailments that gave him healing in these waters, along with Mac's collection of everything—cast iron heirlooms, roadside bells, old scrap pieces scattered across the property.

He once gave me a Souvenir of Indiana bell from Mac's collection, something I still cherish. The place was filled with RVs in various stages of heroic survival, and what I called the "library room," a twin bed tucked between shelves of books. It was imperfect, eccentric, and unforgettable.

At one point, I seriously considered buying Second Wind. But I was working at REI, making about twenty dollars an hour, and couldn't make it work. I still regret that. Even now, when I drive past, I pause for a moment of reflection and gratitude.

During my time at REI, I helped award grants to Amargosa Conservancy and was eventually asked to join the board. It took me two years to say yes. I wanted to give something back, even though I realized I still understood very little about this place.

Ashley Lee and her pup Shiya exploring the wonders of the Amargosa Basin

At my first board meeting, I was completely lost. For months, I struggled to follow conversations filled with acronyms: NEPA, EA, EIS, etc. On the calls were former career land managers, scientists, and experts who had spent decades studying this landscape. I felt out of place.

Science has never been my strong suit. More than once, I wondered if I had walked into the wrong room.

But I stayed.

Over time, I realized the organization didn't need another scientist. It needed someone who could lead, organize, and keep momentum moving.

That part I knew how to do.

I had experience running meetings, motivating people, and moving projects forward. During my first year, I mostly listened and observed, figuring out where I could contribute.

Eventually, I found my lane: fundraising, event planning, communications, and operations. Some months I was putting in thirty or forty hours of volunteer work, but it never felt wasted.

What I discovered is that the people drawn to this place truly love it. The Amargosa attracts a certain kind of curious people who spend decades studying what others might overlook.

Hydrologists studying water flows. Botanists cataloging desert plants. Soil morphologists—still one of my favorite job titles—examining what lies beneath our feet.

As president, I did whatever was needed: cooking meals, cleaning up after events, and helping host gatherings like the Summit, Devils Hole and Beyond, Pupfish and Pints, National Public Lands Day, and cleanups at Dumont Dunes.

The basin also gave me unforgettable moments.

I met Brian Brown at China Ranch and learned how to pollinate date palms. I explored old mines with Cynthia. I ran into Dan from Death Valley Brew-

> The Amargosa Basin has given me more than I could ever repay.

ing at Alkali Hot Springs on a random Wednesday. I crossed paths with Wonderhussy and countless other characters drawn to this place.

I even experienced the landscape through the Rebelle Rally. One year, I slept among date palms during the marathon stage; another year, I camped at Dumont Dunes in winds so strong they nearly folded my tent in half.

Through it all, the Amargosa Basin has given me more than I could ever repay.

I've learned about geology, water systems, and the resilience of life in this harsh climate. But more importantly, I've learned about community: the people who dedicate their lives to protecting places like this.

Stepping down as president feels bittersweet, for a region known as Bitter Springs. I'll continue serving on the board while focusing more on my real estate work and off-road advocacy.

But the Amargosa will always remain what it was the first time I truly experienced it: a magical place of quiet renewal, waiting patiently for anyone willing to slow down long enough to let it reveal its beauty.

One of my favorite parts of this role has been handwriting thank-you letters to donors. I recognize recurring names, note how long they've supported this work, and read the dedications attached to their gifts. It keeps me connected in a simple, human way.

In the end, it's the people.

I love learning. I love curiosity. And no place has drawn that out of me more than the Amargosa Basin.

To my five years as Amargosa Conservancy President, thank you. And to the board and staff: thank you for the work you do to ensure others can discover their own curiosity and wonder here.

Ashley Lee is a Amargosa Conservancy Board Member and Off Road Explorer.

Tecopa Peak in Lake Tecopa

PHOTO BY BOB WICK

Local Communities Defending Our Endangered River

By Claire Vaye Watkins

How does it feel to learn the **river that raised you** is *endangered?*

For me, the news that the Amargosa River has been named among the country's most endangered waterways was painful. It hurt, but I doubt many of us who live on the river will be surprised to learn of this tragic distinction. We know the river's fragility because we know its home, our home, the vast and intensely dry eastern Mojave, where nature's intensity humbles us daily. We are also keenly aware of the industrial shenanigans bombarding the river because we fight them off again and again in a dire game of Whack-A-Mole. Many of us have been doing this work for decades. This resistance crested last year in a robust coalition of locals, tribes, lawmakers, and the Amargosa Conservancy demanding a mineral withdrawal to protect Amargosa Valley, home to Ash Meadows, from unnecessary and dangerous mining.

The more I learn about how mining claim speculation works, the more absurd it seems, and the angrier I get. Most of the claims seem to be a get rich quick scheme, a con game played by outsiders. Schemes of this sort have cycled through this place since the Gold Rush.

Hyped as the claims may be, the damage done in the process of pitching claims to investors is very real: Exploratory drilling that could perforate the aquifer. Pumping groundwater we need to mitigate dust on construction sites. Drawdown that could, according to the State of the Basin Report assembled by hydrologists and other experts, destabilize the plume of irradiated groundwater under the Nevada Test Site. A terrifying possibility.

Everything's connected here. We who live here know this. As much as we appreciate the expertise assembled in the State of the Basin report, its findings are not news to the desert communities along the Amargosa River: Beatty, Amargosa Valley, Crystal, Charleston View, Shoshone, Tecopa, and the Timbisha homelands in Death Valley. So, sad as we are to learn our river is endangered, we are not surprised. Inclusion on this list formalizes for the wider environmentalist community the fight we on the Amargosa watershed have been fighting since the days of nuclear testing.

I can imagine some surprise, however, will greet the executives of companies looking to plunder the Amargosa, whether for gold, lithium, cheap energy or kitty litter. Those whose greed has created this dire state of our river, and who would exacerbate it, if they had their way, may be surprised at the resistance they will encounter here. I expect it will surprise them that they will not easily have their way.

This is because the people living along the Amargosa River Basin have a deep and sacred relationship to this place, especially its water. The long history of environmental injustice here is well known and often told. We, like the land, have long memories. When scientists come to Tecopa, where I live, to present their latest findings on the ecosystem, it's the social event of the season. We don't just care about this river, many of us worship it. We soak in its water and speak reverently of how it's healed us. We tell the stories of all the water protectors who've


We are continuing
a profound and important
tradition
of standing up for
our home

come before us, upon whose shoulders we stand. We are continuing a profound and important tradition of standing up for our home against those who would defile. This is a way of life for us.

When we gather to soak at the Borehole, or around one of the more figurative watering holes in town, the river is always on our lips. We keep tabs on our public land managers and the industrial interests trying to sway them. News of a new mining claim spreads through our towns like wildfire, and experienced activists spring into action. We are small but mighty, and we know our history. Among us are some of the most informed and well-organized environmentalists in the game. Some of my neighbors were once arrested protesting for peace at the gate of the Nevada Test Site, part of a global peace movement that eventually won. Some of my neighbors stood with members of the Five Tribes of the Colorado River, blocking bulldozers in Ward Valley, stopping nuclear waste from being dumped into unlined trenches there. Some of them banded together and stopped an industrial solar array on the scale of Ivanpah being built on critical desert tortoise habitat. Some of them made plans for blockades to stop nuclear waste from being put into Yucca Mountain, the would-be nuclear waste repository. Many of us marched with the Timbisha in Death Valley and cheered as they became the first tribe to get their land back from a national park. We gathered with them again earlier this year to support their objection to being erased from interpretative materials in the national parks.

> There is a long, repetitive history of attempted plunder along this river.

Just as there is a long, repetitive history of attempted plunder along this river, there is a rich history of rabid and effective conservation here. Collectively we have won national monuments and national parks. We have protected endangered species and brought them back from the brink of extinction. We have reduced groundwater pumping the adjacent basins. People here have special relationships to the water and all the life it supports. We rock pupfish merch, paint vole portraits, gather at springs to hike, work, and worship. We walk this land and understand ourselves to be part of it. We are grateful that life has landed us in this singularly beautiful place. Our

knowledge and commitment will likely surprise a mining company or would-be developer thinking our home is the middle of no where. What a rude awakening to learn they can't just swoop in and take what they want, leaving the Amargosa River drained and the surrounding land a postindustrial waste. I almost pity them.

We who live here carry responsibility for this watershed and all the life along it, including our own. We know when we turn on our taps, that water is that same water that Anglo Gold Ashanti would like to take to make its executives and shareholders even richer. It's a heavy weight, this knowledge. Luckily we carry it together, each in our own way and according to our abilities. The land ethic throughout these oasis communities is astounding, multi-generational, and driven by a genuine attachment to the place. The Amargosa nourishes us in body, mind and soul, and in gratitude we fight to protect it.

Claire Vaye Watkins is a novelist, a professor, and board member of the Amargosa Conservancy.

Sun dog at Salt Creek
PHOTO BY MASON VOEHL

Photo by Matt Crotty

More Than Just Lines on a Map

By Clare Throm

PHOTO BY CLARE THROM

The crunch of gravel underneath my boots filled my ears momentarily as I opened the door of my old Jeep wrangler. I walked around my car and stopped to look to the north, the sky had taken on a vibrant pink complexion ahead of the imminent dawn. I took a deep breath and heard precious little around me except for the sound of my exhale. The world woke up around me, allowing me to experience the complex quiet of the Mojave desert at the base of the Nopah mountain range before my hike.

Prior to arriving at the turnoff, I had already driven through, what felt like, several different worlds. The terrain changed quickly despite the vast expanse stretching far into the distance. Only the surrounding mountain ranges dusted with distant snow could provide any sense of scale for how far one would have to travel to traverse the desert. I wondered about the details of this expansive landscape.

At first glance, the land seemed largely homogenous. I quickly looked around and saw valleys and mountains. After stepping out of my car I focused on the diversity of life and rock that surrounded me. The land was anything but uniform. Each section contains its own complexities and secrets, waiting to be revealed by a careful eye. We categorize these differences in our minds, let them speak to our experience in the area and store the pockets of the land that we love and want to return to. In addition to these personal ways of remembering the unique facets of the land, there are also more delineated biological distinctions to help us understand the variability we see.

The land was anything but uniform. Each section contains its own complexities and secrets, waiting to be revealed by a careful eye.

The United States has been categorized into EcoRegions by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Ecoregions are areas of land that are similar in type and quality of resources and in ecological composition. The efforts behind these mapped

regions have come together through decades of collaboration among various federal agencies. A wide variety of interconnected factors are considered to define an ecoregion, including but not limited to geology, landforms, soil, vegetation, climate, land use, wildlife and hydrology. These are similar to the elements we study in the region through restoration efforts with our partners. These ecoregions start quite large, with 12 level I eco regions that encompass the United States. As the levels increase (I-IV), so does the detail with which the ecoregion is categorized.

Level I — 12 ecoregions in the continental U.S.

Level II — 25 ecoregions in the continental U.S.

Level III — 105 ecoregions in the continental U.S.

Level IV — 967 ecoregions in the conterminous U.S.

KINGSTON GAZE, PATRICK DONNELLY

Under the third category of ecoregions, the Amargosa River Basin falls under the Mojave Basin and Range. Ecoregion 14. Upon first visual inspection of these ecoregions, I was in awe of the beauty the various colors convey as they are splotched across the terrain on the map. These colors all represent a unique space on the landscape. As someone with a collection and fascination with physical maps, I promptly printed these ecoregions to paste on my wall for further inspection.

The beautiful swatches of color that comprise the Mojave Basin and Range ecoregion provide insight into the complexity of life in the area. This ecoregion spans California, southern Nevada, and even expands to northwest Arizona and southwest Utah. This spectacular ecoregion lends itself to large basin areas and scattered mountain ranges. It is known for being drier and warmer than many of its desert counterparts. The magnificent landscapes are varied, with Joshua tree, creosote and yucca scattered throughout. Other parts of the region are dotted with ponderosa pine, white

A Quiet Sunrise

PHOTO BY CLARE THROM

Solitary Desert Fivespot at Dunmont Dunes, CA. Eremalche rotundifolia are native to the Sonoran and Mojave Deserts.
CLARE THROM

fir, and bristlecone pine at high elevations. Most of this vast region of extremes is federally owned land. While these distinctions may appear abstract at first, their intricacies inform our understanding of the land and how we approach conservation management.

The USGS is not the only entity to provide reporting into how we can use these ecoregions to increase our understanding of the land. In the summer of 2013, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), with a team of partner organizations, produced the Mojave Basin and Range Rapid Ecological Assessment. This 174 page document delves into a variety of scientific assessments to identify areas of highest ecological concern, identification of ecological resource status, and potential for change in the area. These documents, along with others, provide us with some measurement of invisible ecological boundaries.

Ecoregion 14 is broken down into subcategories in which even more variation is explained across these unique habitats. These smaller classifications provide more detailed information about the natural features of the landscape. To name a few in the Amargosa River Basin, we have:

14a Eastern Mojave Basin

14b Eastern Mojave Low Ranges and Arid Footslopes

14c Eastern Mojave Mountain Woodland and Shrubland

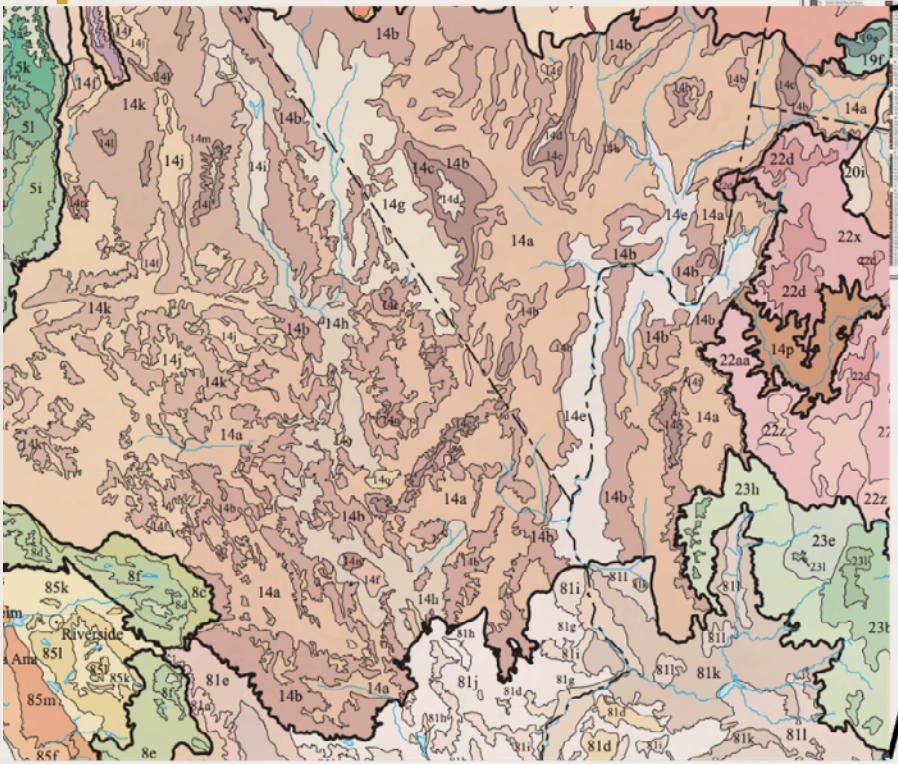
14h Death Valley Mojave Central Trough

14g Amargosa Desert

14o Mojave Sand Dunes

Through our work on the landscape in the Amargosa Conservancy, we traverse these many levels of the ecoregions to work with the land and the people. Developing an understanding of the smaller ecological and hydrological details provides us with insight for ongoing restoration efforts with our partners and our overall interpretation of the land.

Level III and IV EcoRegions of the Continental United States



14 Mojave Basin and Range

- 14a Eastern Mojave Basins
- 14b Eastern Mojave Low Ranges and Arid Footslopes
- 14c Eastern Mojave Mountain Woodland and Shrubland
- 14d Eastern Mojave High Elevation Mountains
- 14e Arid Valleys and Canyonlands
- 14f Mojave Playas
- 14g Amargosa Desert
- 14h Death Valley/Mojave Central Trough
- 14i Mesquite Flat/Badwater Basin
- 14j Western Mojave Basins
- 14k Western Mojave Low Ranges and Arid Footslopes
- 14l Western Mojave Mountain Woodland and Shrubland
- 14m Western Mojave High Elevation Mountains
- 14n Mojave Lava Fields
- 14o Mojave Sand Dunes
- 14p Lower Grand Canyon

Salt grass perspective in the Carson Slough CLARE THROM

As we work on the ground to develop our restoration plans, these landscape differences provide information for what efforts may benefit a majority of native species in a specific area of the Amargosa River Basin. Developing an intimate connection with the landscape and its variations grants us and our partners a more informed understanding of the challenges and opportunities unfolding before us.

If, like me, you are interested in the secrets revealed by maps, these resources and the nested levels of the land may provide you with a helpful place to learn more about the pieces that comprise the region as a whole. In between my readings and time spent examining the map for new ecological insights, you'll find me out on the landscape enjoying small, quiet moments in the desert. Next time you're out in the Mojave Basin and Range Ecoregion III, see if you can identify these invisible ecological boundaries. Spending time with the land will teach us quite as much about life in the Amargosa River Basin as any map or report.

See you out there in 14a-14o.

Clare Throm is the Deputy Director of Amargosa Conservancy.

Burros spotted in Beatty

PHOTO BY MATT CROTTY

One Salty, Muddy Step at a Time:

Restoration in Motion Across the Amargosa River Basin

By Holly Fischer

Out here, restoration doesn't begin in a lab or a meeting room. It begins with boots on the earth, eyes on the horizon, and the quiet knowledge that water in the desert is never guaranteed.

Throughout 2025, the Amargosa Conservancy launched work on two major restoration efforts in the California portion of the Amargosa River Basin. These projects are supported by planning and implementation grants from the California Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB), and they represent one of the most ambitious restoration efforts these riverlands have seen in years.

The planning grant spans an impressive range of priorities, from expanding viable habitat for endangered species like the Amargosa vole, to restoring riparian habitats that sustain wildlife and offer refuge to those who explore this remarkable desert landscape. It also includes critical hydrological analysis to better understand how water moves through this fragile watershed, knowledge that will guide restoration decisions for years to come.

The Amargosa River Basin is one of the most biodiverse desert landscapes in North America, and the potential for meaningful restoration here feels both vast and urgent.

Collaboration is at the heart of this work. Restoring a watershed of this scale takes more than one organization. It takes scientists, restoration practitioners, and community members working together toward the shared goal of healthy, diverse, and resilient ecosystems. The Amargosa River Basin is one of the most biodiverse desert landscapes in North America, and the potential for meaningful restoration here feels both vast and urgent.

I joined the Amargosa Conservancy in October 2025, well after the WCB planning grant was already underway. Like stepping into a fast-moving current, I had to catch up quickly. The only way to truly understand this work was to get into the field and experience the landscape firsthand.

One of my first field days was with our hydrologist consultants from Roux Inc., led by Rachel Maxwell. We traveled to Scofield Springs, named after our Board President, Russell Scofield. The walk out to the spring began across open desert, creosote bushes stretching in every direction beneath a wide sky.

Then, almost unexpectedly, a palm tree rose from the stream channel

Rio Grande Joint Ventures Habitat Restoration Hydrologist Jeff Bennett, River Partners Restoration Ecologist Laurel Sebastian, and American Bird Conservancy Southwest Riparian Bird Recovery Coordinator Chris McCreaty look across Tecopa, CA while discussing discuss water, plants and their connectivity in the ecosystem as part of the Amargosa Restoration Working Group. Photo by Holly Fischer

In the Phragmites
HOLLY FISCHER

ahead, a living marker that water still flows here. That single palm stood like a signal of life in an otherwise dry landscape.

The data collected during these spring monitoring sessions are more than numbers on a clipboard. It feeds directly into scientific reports that describe the state of the basin, and helps us track the steady groundwater decline we have observed in "downriver" springs throughout California. In a place where life depends on water, every measurement matters.

That first visit was only the beginning. Since then, fieldwork has taken us across springs, creeks, slot canyons, and date farms. Each visit has revealed new pieces of the puzzle and sharpened our understanding of where restoration can make the greatest difference.

Today, the planning grant focuses heavily on collecting the data needed to guide a future implementation proposal. In partnership with River Partners, drones have flown over Amargosa Canyon to capture high-resolution vegetation data. On the ground, we've spent long days collecting wetland plant seeds for future replanting along the river channel.

We've gathered soil samples from Shoshone to China Ranch, measuring salinity to understand the current health of the land. We've walked routes both well-known and nearly forgotten, discovering new access points that could one day support restoration crews.

This kind of work can feel methodical, but it carries a deeper urgency. Every dataset collected now helps ensure that restoration actions later are both strategic and successful.

Our first major challenge surfaced in December 2025. During surveys, we discovered that the population of Tecopa bird's beak near the Borehole Spring — a popular soaking spot near Tecopa, CA — represented one of the most important remaining populations of this rare and sensitive plant.

The problem was that this location overlapped with where we had planned Amargosa vole habitat restoration.

For a moment, it felt like the entire effort might stall. Everyone held their

Pondside at China Ranch
HOLLY FISCHER

breath, wondering whether this discovery would unravel months of planning.

Instead, it forced us to adapt.

The vole workgroup quickly pivoted, identifying alternative restoration sites in Tecopa. What began as a moment of uncertainty became an unexpected breakthrough. The newly identified location offers even greater potential for a large-scale "megamarsh" habitat, one that could significantly strengthen the future of the critically endangered Amargosa vole.

Sometimes, in restoration work, setbacks reveal better paths forward. We walk those paths one salty, muddy step at a time towards a more biodiverse, vibrant, and resilient future for the Amargosa River Basin.

As we look ahead, field visits continue. Surveys expand. Data accumulates. With each trip into the basin, we learn something new about how this desert functions, and how we can help sustain it.

The WCB planning grant has opened doors that might otherwise have remained closed. It has given us the tools to think bigger, act smarter, and move restoration forward in a coordinated way.

From the birds to the voles, from hidden springs to the winding river through the canyon, this work is about more than restoration alone. It is about protecting the living systems that make life possible in the desert.

And in a place where water defines survival, restoration is not optional. It is essential.

It is an honor to be part of this effort, and to help shape a future where the Amargosa River Basin continues to support the extraordinary web of life that depends on it.

Holly Fischer is the Restoration Project Manager for Amargosa Conservancy

Rights For The River

By Patrick Donnelly

The Amargosa Wild and Scenic River is the centerpiece of one of the most protected landscapes in the world, the northern Mojave Desert.

While nearby areas like the Kingston Range Wilderness dwarf the River in terms of protected acreage, the effects of Wild and Scenic River protections are far-reaching, touching the entire watershed.

The Wild and Scenic River (WSR) designation is part of a long-term plan, begun by the founders of the Amargosa Conservancy in the early 2000s, to secure a permanent future for the Amargosa River. The organization spent its first five years working fervently to achieve designation, and since then has continued putting the pieces in place to ensure those protections are meaningful and durable.

Congress passed the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968, offering permanent protection to designated waterways across the country. Designation as a Wild and Scenic River protects a ½-mile-wide river corridor, an average of 320 acres per river mile. The exact boundaries of the corridor can be adjusted to protect key resources, as outlined in a Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP), an essential component of the designation.

In addition to protecting the river corridor, Wild and Scenic designation offers another critical protection. It provides an implied federal reserved water right as of the date of designation. A federal reserved water right is held by the government to meet the purposes of a reservation, broadly defined as a federal land designation that requires water to fulfill its purposes.

What are the purposes of a Wild and Scenic River? The Act and its regulations define that a WSR is intended to protect Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs), including scenic, recreational, biological, historical, and cultural values. As such, the federal reserved water right must be sufficient to protect those ORVs.

That may sound abstract, but in practice it is a powerful tool. On March 30, 2009, the Amargosa Wild and Scenic River was designated when President Obama signed the 2009 Public Lands Omnibus bill. The Amargosa River is legally entitled to flows sufficient to pro-

The Waterfall
PHOTO BY MASON VOEHL

tect the ORVs for which it was designated, based on conditions at the time of designation.

Think of it: the Amargosa River has rights. A right to exist. A right to flow. Rights sufficient to sustain the rich biological, cultural, recreational, scenic, and aesthetic values for which we love it so. This is both a powerful legal tool and a powerful symbol of the work that has gone into conserving this fragile watershed.

However, the 2009 Public Lands Omnibus bill is silent on the specific ORVs. It delineated the stretches of river to be designated, but the ORVs themselves must be identified and quantified through the CRMP, a management plan that defines how the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will protect and manage the WSR. Welcome to the realm of acronyms.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act requires agencies to complete a CRMP within three years of designation. Yet as of the publication of this newsletter, the Amargosa WSR still does not have a management plan, some 17 years after designation.

In response to this delay, the Center for Biological Diversity (the Center) sued the BLM Barstow Field Office in 2018 for failing to complete the CRMP within the statutory deadline. Later that year, the parties settled the lawsuit, agreeing to a completion deadline of September 30, 2024. Personnel challenges led BLM to request a one-year extension, which the Center granted. A second extension followed due to staffing reductions during the Trump 2.0 era, and that request was also granted. As of now, the deadline for completion of the CRMP is September 17, 2026.

The CRMP is intended to accomplish several key goals. Among them are to:

1. delineate the exact boundaries of the WSR corridor
2. identify and quantify the ORVs
3. determine the quantity of water necessary to sustain those ORVs

That third point raises an important question: how will BLM determine the quantity of water needed to sustain the ORVs? This is where the Amargosa Conservancy's long history of supporting hydrologic science comes into play.

Floating on a Resurrected Lake

BY PATRICK DONNELLY

Since the early 2000s, the Amargosa Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, and numerous partners have supported hydrologic science led by hydrogeologist Andy Zdon, P.E. This ambitious effort has included drilling monitoring wells throughout the Shoshone-Tecopa area; analyzing physical and geochemical groundwater properties to understand flow patterns and trends; conducting repeated monitoring of springs and wells to detect long-term changes in groundwater levels; and providing public education about the basin's hydrology.

This body of work has produced three State of the Basin Reports, released in 2014, 2020, and 2026. These reports survey existing research, document monitoring results, and connect the dots between data sources to present important conclusions about the River's condition and trajectory.

Other scientific work will also inform the CRMP. Amargosa Conservancy Board member Dr. Naomi Fraga of the California Botanic Garden led a project to document plant communities and rare species within the WSR corridor. Because biodiversity is one of the primary ORVs, this information will help guide management of the river and its federal reserved water rights.

What happens once the federal reserved water right is quantified? That

VIEW OF ASH MEADOWS, BOB WICK

remains an open question. We know that groundwater pumping in Amargosa Valley and Pahrump Valley in Nevada is causing regional aquifer drawdown and affecting springs on the California side of the basin. The challenge ahead is determining how this federal reserved water right can be applied to encourage meaningful action across state lines.

The founders of the Amargosa Conservancy envisioned a bi-state water compact, allowing Nevada and California to negotiate a fair allocation of groundwater and ensure that pumping in Nevada does not ultimately dry up the River in California. This is a long-term vision, one that will take decades to achieve. It's already taken decades to get this far. But with a completed CRMP, we will move closer to that goal.

We expect a Draft CRMP for public review sometime this spring or early summer. BLM will need to move quickly to meet the September 17 deadline. The Amargosa Conservancy will engage our members and local communities to ensure that public voices are heard loud and clear: we want to protect the Amargosa Wild and Scenic River for generations to come.

Patrick Donnelly is Vice President of the Amargosa Conservancy and the Great Basin director at the Center for Biological Diversity. He lives in Shoshone, California.

RHYOLITE AT NIGHT BY MASON VOEHL

LAVA DUNE AT NIGHT

Amargosa Conservancy
PO Box 63
Shoshone, CA 92384

AMARGOSA CONSERVANCY

EMAIL: INFO@AMARGOSACONSERVANCY.ORG
WEBSITE: WWW.AMARGOSACONSERVANCY.ORG