

RIVERSIDE STORIES

RON SQUIRE

Cattle Rancher on the Gila River, AZ

EVERY DAY, WHEN Ron Squire crosses the Gila River to go into town, he watches it ebb and flow. In particular, he's watched the water level continually recede for years, due to the encroachment of invasive plant species, such as tamarisk (salt cedar), and overdevelopment along the river banks. In fact, the river's water level has fallen so dramatically in recent years, it's becoming hard to distinguish river from dry land. Yet, Ron, who has lived in this area for over seven decades, remembers a time when the river carried more water - a time before the riparian zones, the riverside lands home to cottonwoods, willows and other river-loving plants, were choked out due to invasive plant species, and before the current period of drought.

*“Becoming
Self-Sufficient”*

My father was born in Douglas, Arizona, and he used to tell me about when he went to his place west of Phoenix; the river was always open and full of water, with large cottonwood trees. He thought of it as a nice place. The Southwest area in particular, where the Gila River flows, is not what most people think about when they think of river lands. In a lot of places, the river runs underground,” Ron explains. “It wasn’t always like this.”

Ron Squire is a third generation cattle rancher, and although his modest ranch is considerably smaller than his father’s or his grandfather’s, he’s had plenty of time to learn the correct way to manage cows. “I’ve followed the cow all of my life,” he



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laughs. He doesn’t quite think of it as an occupation though, as he’s now 73 and retired, but rather just his role to play. “My occupation is a lifestyle,” he says. “It’s not just something that I do. Whether I’m sick, or feeling on top of the world, I have to take care of the farm.”

For him, the balance between being a good cattle rancher, and also providing a sustainable and healthy lifestyle for the living souls on his ranch, is his main concern. “People are getting away from the basics of life,” he explains. “They don’t know where their food comes from, and they’re not in tune with nature, so to speak. Our plan and our ideal is to become totally self-sufficient, and be able to not just take care of my family, but also the people that live around me.”

Yet, it’s not as simple as it sounds, and Ron knows first hand just how much this

area of the country depends on the health of the Colorado River riparian zones, and how important it is to clear out non-native species that are threatening the natural ecosystems there. “This area where I live has an abundance of sustainable feed for people, if you know where to look, and how to harvest it. This old nasty tamarisk,” he says, shifting gears, “There’s nothing good about it.”

Although he’s located on a part of the river where the native cottonwood trees are continuing to hold the tamarisk at bay, he’s still worried. Ron is an optimist, though, as he’s happy with the way tamarisk removal has been going so far, and pledges to continue his support for the Gila Watershed Partnership’s efforts to protect and improve water quality and quantity, and the condition of the Upper Gila Watershed of Arizona. With hard work, he believes that tamarisk can finally be cleared out of the rivers that he’s been living off of his entire life.

“You have to look pretty close at this desert land. When you get out of your car, and you look around, you’ll see that there’s a lot going on in this semi-arid area. There’s a lot of little animals, and there’s a lot that doesn’t meet the eye,



until you get down close and look at all of the stuff that’s happening,” he suggests, adding, “the majority of people are so busy making money or earning a living, that a lot of them just don’t know what’s going on. There are people that produce, and people that consume. The people that are producers, I think they’re the ones who are looking a little closer. People that live in town don’t really have any idea of how dependent we are upon nature. We have to have rain, water, and healthy rivers to live. That’s all there is to it.” ■

This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with Gila Watershed Partnership, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

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Photography Credit: Zach Mahone