





COURTESY SALT RIVER PROJECT

GO WITH THE FLOW

For hundreds of years, Arizona's canal system has sustained life in the parched desert. Now it also enriches the soul

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

Phoenix is known for its arid landscape and scorching temperatures. Yet, millions of people call the sunbaked terrain home. Much of this is thanks to the miles of waterways that fan out across the Valley like arteries and capillaries, delivering life-sustaining water to plants, animals, and humans alike. But the canals are more than just a source of irrigation. They're also a place for recreation, home to beautifying public art displays, and a connection to the Sonoran Desert's ancient inhabitants.

ANCIENT WATERWAYS

The Arizona canals date back to around 200 A.D., when the Hohokam people built more than 250 miles of trenches to irrigate their crops.

"They operated, maintained, and grew this system until about 1450 A.D.," says Marissa Sotomayor, team manager of Research, Archives and Heritage for Salt River Project (SRP), the electrical power and water utility provider for much of Arizona. SRP has managed the canals since the early 1900s. "At its peak, the system spanned about 500 miles and supported a population of as many as 50,000 people."



This page, from left: Water is delivered to the Valley through a series of canals; SRP is responsible for keeping its canal system in operating condition during normal water deliveries. Canal dry-ups allow SRP, as well as other utilities and municipalities, to perform construction and maintenance activities in and around the canals. ***Previous spread:*** SRP's Eastern Canal was built in 1909 by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

Using sticks and stones to dig, the Hohokam built the canals much as we would today.

"It's truly a testament to the really ingenious way that they engineered the system," Sotomayor explains. "The ancient system and the modern one are engineered in the exact same way, which is gravity fed. We don't pump any water. It's all gravity."

By the mid 1400s, the canals were abandoned. They remained so until the 1800s, when prospectors and pioneers began settling in the region. A former soldier, Jack Swilling, one of Phoenix's founding fathers, saw remnants of the irrigation channels and, realizing their importance to the desert's agriculture, began excavating modern-era canals over the ancient system. Soon, new communities were popping up along the waterways.

"Without the system that the Hohokam engineered, the settlers in the late 1800s would have had a really hard time coming up with all of that themselves if the remnants hadn't already been there," Sotomayor says.

MODERN-DAY INFRASTRUCTURE

The Hohokam's legacy lives on in the Valley's modern canals. One hundred and twenty-one miles of open-air waterways crisscross the landscape. That's more miles of canals

than Venice and Amsterdam combined. They stretch from Tolleson to Mesa and Chandler to Peoria.

"There is strong evidence to indicate that some of today's canals pretty closely and sometimes exactly follow that ancestral system," Sotomayor points out.

Two modern waterways in particular—the Arizona Canal and the Grand Canal—follow the pathways of the early canals. The Arizona Canal is the longest at about 50 miles. It's also the most conspicuous, cutting from Peoria and North Phoenix through Old Town Scottsdale and out past the far eastern edges of the Valley. It connects in Scottsdale to the Grand Canal, which runs parallel through Central Phoenix, connecting in Glendale to the New River.

They and seven other main canals, along with a network of more than 1,000 miles of ditches and underground pipelines, now bring water from the Salt and Verde rivers to the many apartment complexes, housing developments, office towers, and manufacturing sites that have replaced the verdant farmlands of the Valley's early dwellers. But today's canals are more than utilitarian.

COMMUNITY USE

"Historically, the canals have been a place for recreation," Sotomayor says. Since their modern development, swimming,



baptisms, and even waterskiing were common activities. Fishing is still allowed with a valid fishing license.

In 1964, the first recreational path was created. Today, more than 80 miles of paved ADA-compliant paths for walking, running, and biking extend alongside the canals. And the waters' impact can even be seen miles away.

Scottsdale's Indian Bend Wash Greenbelt is an 11-mile-long oasis that stretches from Shea Boulevard south to Tempe Town Lake along Hayden Road. It was developed in the 1960s and completed in 1985 to serve as a flood prevention zone. However, over the years, it has been transformed into a lush recreational paradise of parks, lakes, paved multi-use trails, sports fields, dog parks, and golf courses.

Multiple lakes and waterways in the grassy space are sustained by SRP's canal system—at its northern end, the Greenbelt is bisected by the Arizona Canal—as well as Colorado River water delivered by the Central Arizona Project (CAP). Like SRP, the CAP supplies water to Arizona, particularly to the northern and southern regions of the state.

The '90s saw the beginning of the addition of public art along the canals, ranging from murals and sculptures to large installations.

One of the biggest projects that came out of that era was the renovation of the hydroelectric power station at the

Arizona Falls. Built in 1902, the plant was restored in 2003 with a stunning concrete, stone, and steel structure where visitors can stroll beneath curtains of falling water. The rust-encrusted gears from the original power station are incorporated into the design, and poetry by the state's first poet laureate is carved into the concrete.

Also showcasing both the canals and public art is Canal Convergence. This free 10-day immersive event, held in November, illuminates the banks along the Scottsdale Waterfront with large-scale interactive installations by local and international artists.

"Canal Convergence is such a cool event," Sotomayor says. "People may not always understand or appreciate the origins of the canal system or where the water comes from, but that doesn't mean that we can't unite to create these phenomenal events where everyone can truly enjoy and recreate along the canal.

"People have always been drawn to water," she adds. "Having access to it freely is a nice perk of living here in the Valley."

Whether you want to connect with Arizona's past or peruse public art, or you're looking for a unique way to explore the greater Phoenix area, the Valley's canals offer plenty of interest points and recreational opportunities.

From left: A historical photo of children swimming in the Grand Canal; another historical photo shows a man standing on a canal bank.
