

# WATERSHED

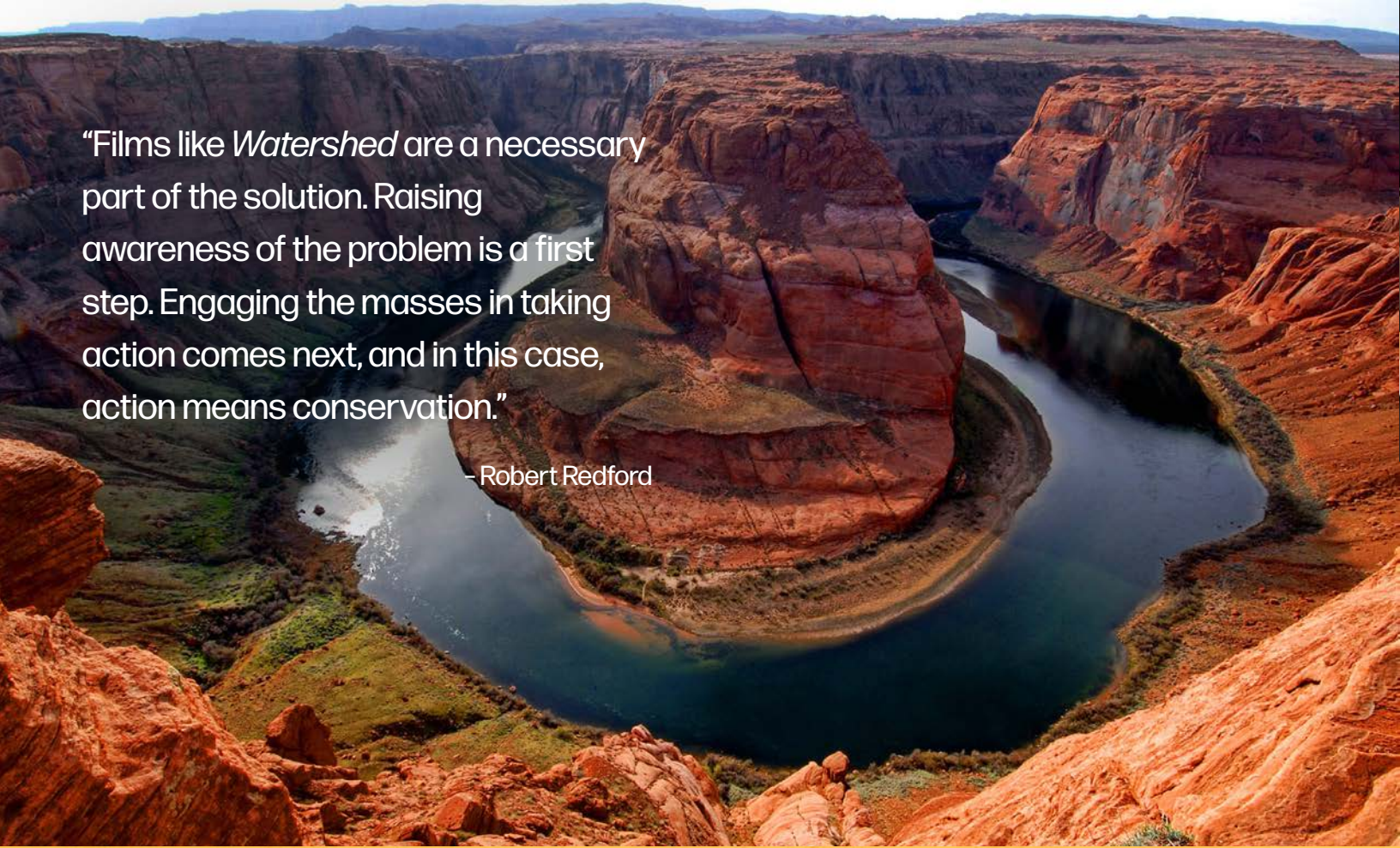
## Case Study Report

For  
THE REDFORD CENTER

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"Films like *Watershed* are a necessary part of the solution. Raising awareness of the problem is a first step. Engaging the masses in taking action comes next, and in this case, action means conservation."

— Robert Redford

# WATERSHED

A Documentary that Changed the Course of the Colorado River

## INTRODUCTION

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In 2012, The Redford Center (TRC) premiered [\*Watershed: Exploring a New Water Ethic for the New West\*](#). This 57-minute film put a spotlight on the seriously declining health of the Colorado River watershed and the urgent need for bi-national and multi-state regulations. The film garnered widespread attention, influenced major policies, and spurred the formation of Raise the River, a bi-national coalition of environmental organizations in the U.S. and Mexico.





The ongoing, multi-year impact campaign has:



raised more than  
\$33 million



led to major regulatory  
reform



implemented extensive  
community engagement



supported the  
restoration of over  
1,200 acres of river  
habitat

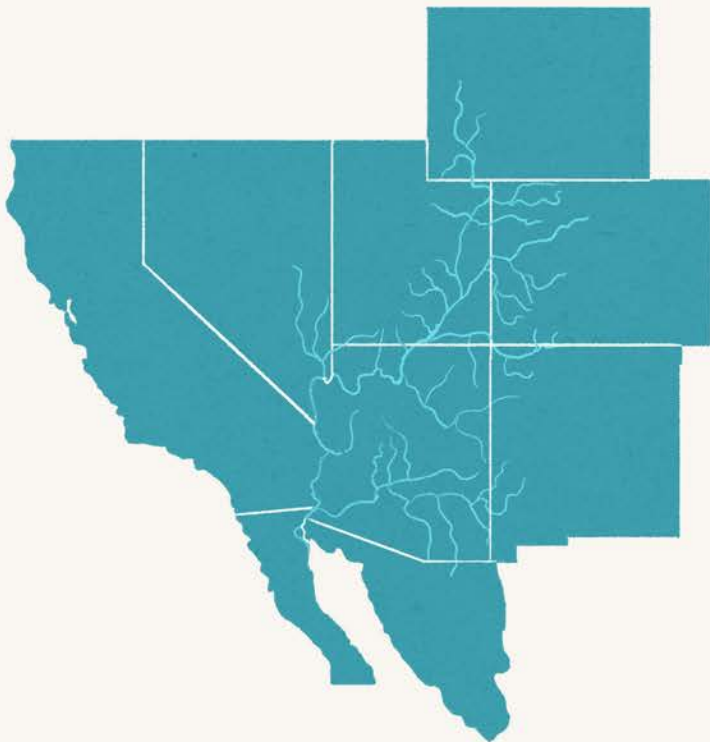
*Watershed* provides an outstanding longitudinal example of how the power of storytelling, strategic alliances, and visionary impact design can germinate an entire movement of public awareness and significant policy change. The film was inspired by both the threats to the river and the opportunities to augment existing restoration. It would provide a way to engage people in understanding the story of the watershed and the future that strong partnerships could build together. The Redford Center's initial Colorado River stakeholder summit and the film were catalysts for formalizing a bi-national coalition named "Raise the River." The coalition includes The Redford Center, National Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, Sonoran Institute, Pronatura Noroeste, and Restauremos el Colorado. This collaboration has resulted in widespread community engagement from the U.S. headwaters to the river's Delta in Baja. Screenings of *Watershed* (2012) and the shorter follow-up film *Renewal* (2016) with community organizations and state and local policymakers, have been instrumental in motivating significant policy regulations and substantial funding to restore the critical habitat in the Colorado River Delta.



“In the 80s, the Delta was considered a dead ecosystem. Small wins over time created enthusiasm and hope, energy and momentum.”

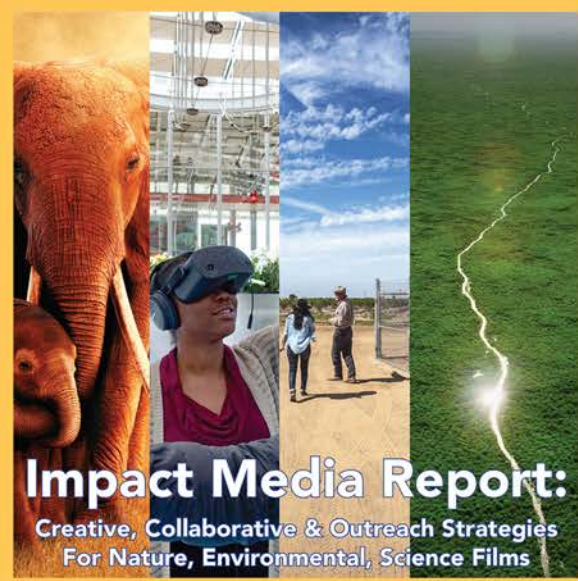
- Osvel M. Hinojosa Huerta,  
Pronatura Noroeste, México

## THE ISSUE



The Colorado River was once a vibrant watershed providing abundant sustenance to ecosystems across the U.S. and Mexico. But demands across seven states in the U.S., two states in Mexico, 20 major dams, energy extraction, urban development, and lack of comprehensive regulatory policies had dire consequences. For nearly fifty years, the Colorado River generally ran dry before it reached the Gulf of California, with serious outcomes for millions of people who rely on the river and the Delta's environmental health. In the early 2010s, The Redford Center and its partners hatched the idea of a seminal film called *Watershed* to tell the story of the ongoing threats of catastrophic failure to this iconic river of the American West.





## Impact Media Report:

Creative, Collaborative & Outreach Strategies  
For Nature, Environmental, Science Films

## VISION & GOALS

In 2010, The Redford Center hosted a summit, “Water in the West,” that brought together key stakeholders to find common ground and new solutions to restore the Colorado River watershed. It was initiated by Robert Redford and his son James Redford, both of whom had deep personal connections to the river. The vision for the summit was to create a forum for discussion and action, and to uncover how storytelling through film could be used as a catalyst for driving engagement, strengthening policy and expanding restoration efforts. The challenge was how to align people who had widely varying perspectives. What emerged through the summit conversations was agreement that people are increasingly disconnected from their water sources and the health of their watersheds. The power of storytelling through film is a proven method, but could a film about one of the most complicated watersheds and water compacts be strategically designed to build bridges between different stakeholders, inspire hope, and motivate action? The Redford Center provided a clear vision for the film with its mission of “advancing environmental solutions through the power of stories that move.”

## Designing for Impact

The [Center For Environmental Filmmaking's media research](#) examines how environmental films can be a catalyst for change from the very inception of an idea (see [www.cefimpactmedia.org](#)). Using a framework built on three pillars (partnerships and alliances, creative strategies, and impact outreach), we explored how *Watershed* inspired a constellation of significant efforts that resulted in substantial change. These endeavors continue today with robust momentum to further the Colorado River Delta's restoration efforts, and to increase regional access to nature and water for local wildlife and community members. The following are highlights of how TRC and its partners implemented strategies across all three pillars.



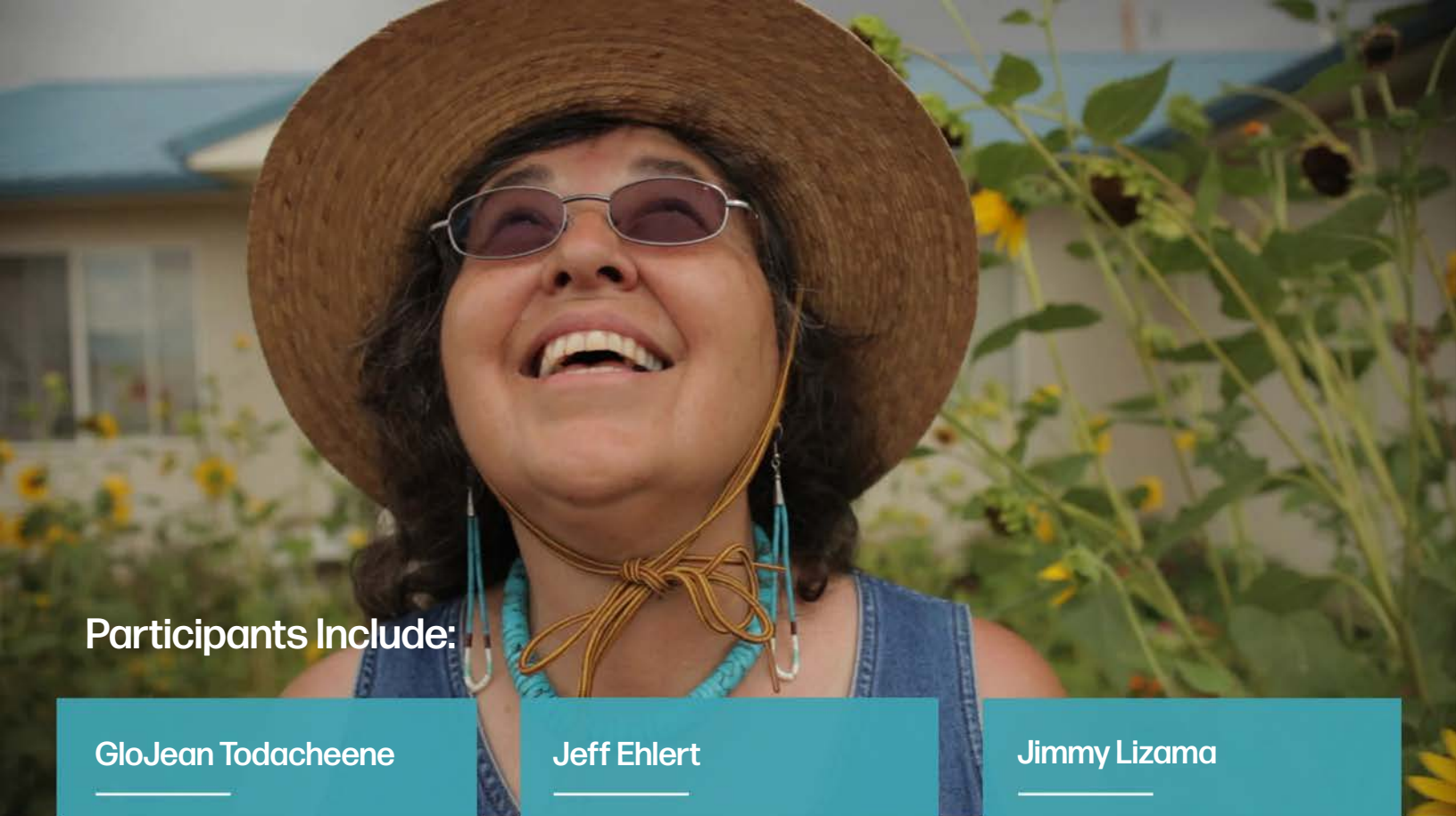
“Narrated by Robert Redford and directed by award-winning filmmaker, Mark Decena, *Watershed* tells the story of the threats to the once-mighty Colorado River through heartening character vignettes that reveal a new water ethic as well as 21st Century solutions.”

– The Redford Center

## CREATIVE CHOICES

*Watershed* reveals environmental and societal consequences through six stories that span the river’s headwaters in Idaho to the Colorado River Aqueduct in Los Angeles to the Mexicali/Delta region. The film interweaves personal stories that transcend political divisions and find common ground around shared values. *Watershed* producer and TRC executive director Jill Tidman and *Watershed* director Mark Decena knew that to attract broad audiences, the film needed to provide a mix of urgency, entertainment and hope. They worked closely with TRC’s conservation partners to identify film participants. The choices aligned with a strategic approach to represent different perspectives and facets of the Colorado River issues, particularly around sustainable and equitable water usage. The stories are relatable to diverse constituencies and address a range of key issues. These disparate viewpoints provide a successful launchpad for community discussion and problem solving.





Participants Include:

**GloJean Todacheene**

San Juan County Commissioner, is a member of the Navajo Nation and fierce advocate for the water needs of her marginalized community.

**Jeff Ehlert**

Local Fly-Fishing Guide in Granby, Colorado, is a climate change skeptic working to change his immediate community's relationship with water.

**Jimmy Lizama**

Founder of Bicycle Kitchen in Los Angeles, is radically committed to water conservation and promotes a green commuting culture in his hyper urban environment.

**Keith Lambert**

Mayor of Rifle, Colorado, is concerned about U.S. overreliance on fossil fuel, which requires an immense amount of water for extraction, and is leading his city's transition to renewable energy.

**Steve Sommer & Greg Bunn**

Field instructors for Outward Bound's youth outdoor education organization, are committed to instilling environmental stewardship in future generations.

**Edith Santiago**

Associate director of the Sonoran Institute, leads community efforts to restore the Colorado River delta in Mexicali.

The film highlights how these community leaders are implementing solutions locally. Throughout the film, animations and compelling footage of the river draw a line between each local community's plight. The message is clear: we are all connected, particularly when it comes to water. The film ends on a hopeful note that inspires audiences to take action in their own regions and become part of a new water ethic for a new West.



“There was collaboration since the beginning. It’s amazing what we have been able to do.”

- Francisco Zamora,  
The Sonoran Institute

## PARTNERSHIPS & ALLIANCES

In the early 2010s, it became clear that the river was dying – the southern riverbed was completely dry, its ecosystem had collapsed, biodiversity was severely impacted, and the flow into Mexico was nonexistent due to heavy water extraction in the U.S. With increasing impacts of climate change, the need for critical action was growing rapidly. Robert Redford and his son James Redford brought together a group of stakeholders to help shape the story and messages for *Watershed*. In 2012, The Redford Center convened a second summit, using the film as a storytelling catalyst for conversations and action. Many of the conservation organizations had done some work together but this was the first opportunity to forge a comprehensive plan for collaboration. The Raise the River coalition was formalized with The Redford Center, National Audubon Society,





The Nature Conservancy, Sonoran Institute, Pronatura Noroeste, and Restauremos el Colorado. Together, through a shared narrative, they would find common ground, be a stronger voice for better regulations, and implement holistic community engagement efforts. Importantly, by forming the Raise the River coalition and combining their networks, they were able to support widespread outreach that was essential to effecting meaningful regulatory policies. The Redford Center's role as a coalition member continues to leverage the power of storytelling to support Raise the River's vision and goals.





# IMPACT TIMELINE

## 2010

- “Water in the West” Summit

## 2012

- *Watershed* premieres
- Minute 319 signed
- 2nd RC Summit, Nov 2012, which formed the RtR Coalition

## 2013

- Raise the River Coalition established

## 2014

- 105,392 acre-feet of pulse flow water released from Morelos Dam
- *Renewal* premieres

## 2015

- Initial \$10 million raised

## 2017

- 245,000 trees planted
- 1,000 acres restored
- Minute 323 signed

## 2017 - 2022

- 115,000 acre-feet of strategic water deliveries
- Cumulative \$33 million raised



“We like to say the environment is our mission and film is our medium. So we approach the work with an impact first lens, we focus on the project’s capacity to move people into action or educate in an important way.

– Jill Tidman, Executive Director,

## IMPACT, OUTREACH, DISTRIBUTION

*Watershed* became a wide-ranging impact tool to raise awareness and offer pathways for action across seven states in the U.S. and two in Mexico. Its goal was two-fold: 1) to spark community engagement and 2) to raise funds that would support bi-national water agreements and water management measures that would allow water to flow into the southern regions of the Colorado River water basin.

In 2012, *Watershed* premiered at the prominent Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital (also known as the [DC Environmental Film Festival](#)) and was officially selected by over 50 other film



“Being able to tell good stories has become central to our advocacy, to our ability to raise money, to present a compelling case.”

– Jennifer Pitt, The Audubon Society



festivals, winning accolades and several awards. It has since screened in over 500 community settings, including the largest Colorado River water-using cities in all seven U.S. states. It broadcast on Participant Media’s Pivot TV and streamed on Netflix.

Soon after the film was released, a bi-national water sharing agreement, Minute 319, was signed between the U.S. and Mexico. These regulations defined a goal of restoring 680 acres of the dried-up riverbed in the Colorado River Delta. Achieving this would require a handful of non-governmental organizations to collectively raise \$10 million within three and a half years. The Redford Center was inspired by this goal and convened the organizations at the Sundance Mountain Resort, along with pro-bono support from the creative firm Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners, to devise a shared narrative, brand, and campaign for the groups, and to catalyze the fundraising and leverage *Watershed* as a support to the effort. The campaign was named Raise the River and continues its work today under the management of a coalition of six organizations, including The Redford Center. Other coalition organizations include:

- **Pronatura Noroeste**, which is part of Mexico’s largest conservation organization that works both at the policy and grassroots levels
- **The Sonoran Institute**, which works to empower communities to make their voices heard during the environmental policy making process
- **Restauramos el Colorado**, which manages the regional water deliveries as well as three active habitat restoration sites in the delta and conducts extensive native trees plantings.
- **The Nature Conservancy**, which has been working for over half a century to protect land and water nationally and internationally.
- In 2016, the **National Audubon Society** joined the grassroots efforts to raise awareness and promote conservation efforts focusing on birds that depend on access to healthy ecosystems along the Colorado River for their survival.

Each of these organizations provide unique expertise and networks to address the challenge.



The efforts of Raise the River's impact campaign continue to be an outstanding success. The original campaign exceeded its fundraising goal of \$10 million in just two years. When Minute 319 expired in 2017, a successor bi-national water sharing agreement, Minute 323, was approved. It will continue until 2026 and plans are underway for a subsequent regulatory effort. As of this year, the Raise the River coalition has raised **over \$33 million** in federal and private funds to scale up and maintain restoration efforts in the Delta. And, over this past decade, the strategic water deliveries allocated to restore the Colorado River have more than doubled.

## Community Engagement & Reach

**Award winner** at Bend Film Festival, Barcelona International Film Festival, Red Rock Film Festival and Colorado Environmental Film Festival.

More than **43,000 film downloads** from watershedmovie.com

*Watershed* has been picked up for distribution by **Netflix, iTunes, and Amazon.**

*Watershed* has been featured in more than **500 screenings** in a dozen countries.

Watershedmovie.com attracted **82,000 site visitors** while active.

Raise the River on average reached over **3,000 participants** every year through various educational programs between 2015-2017.

More than **100 local jobs** were created by the end of 2017.

"Adopt a River" allows an average of **300 students** every year to go on field trips to learn about the Colorado River Delta in Mexico.

During 2022, community engagement totaled **4,234 participants** across **146 events**, organized by Pronatura Noroeste and Sonoran Institute.





## Environmental Impact Statistics



**\$33 million**

collective funds raised  
between the US, Mexico &  
Raise the River.



**115,018**

acre-feet of water released  
into the delta .



**230,000**

native cottonwoods and  
willow trees planted.



**69%**

overall increase in bird  
population. 42% increase in  
bird diversity.

## EVALUATION

After decades of neglect, the Colorado River Delta is now home to an ever-recuperating ecosystem and is providing critical biodiversity and nature access for neighboring communities. From 2017 to 2023, there was a 42% increase in the diversity of birds and an overall 69% more bird abundance. Tens of thousands of trees have been planted by community groups. In Laguna Grande alone, 21,507 trees were planted in 2022, and beaver families are once again thriving in the area. Future goals include creating an endowment fund to support the river restoration and to continue to increase the amount of water permitted for the restoration. The longer-term vision is to create a State Park that would encompass 49,000 acres of complete and complex habitat for native fauna surrounding the final 70 miles of the Colorado River. The Park would include riparian woodlands, mesquite forests, shrublands, and marshlands that are home to mammals, reptiles, migratory birds, and shorebirds.

“The biggest success from a science perspective is that the restoration sites are doing well. The Coalition was able to acquire enough water rights.”

- Eloise Kendy, The Nature Conservancy

The Colorado River has come a long way from its 50 years of neglect. *Watershed* provided an alarming picture of how historical water extraction of the Colorado River was literally running the river dry. Using animations created by over a dozen top animators across the country and narrated by Robert Redford, the film provided science and technical information in an entertaining, informative way. It drew audiences into the communities along the river with highly-skilled interviews, and inspired awe with beautiful cinematography. Using compelling storytelling, the film made a powerful case for the urgent need for new regulations to address equitable usage, the growing demands for and climate pressures on water, and the steady decline in fishing, farming, and other livelihoods dependent on the river. With the pressures of today's climate crisis, the film and coalition efforts are more relevant than ever. *Watershed*, the Raise the River coalition, and an exceptional impact campaign have been – and continue to be – critical to restoring the river's delta ecosystem, helping to forge a new water ethic for the many people and wildlife that depend on it, and demonstrating that no place is beyond







## METHODOLOGY

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This report is based on the [case study framework](http://www.cefiimpactmedia.org/) developed by the Center For Environmental Filmmaking to analyze and assess the impact of environmental films. [See <http://www.cefiimpactmedia.org/>] Using our Impact Spiral Framework, we examined three primary facets of The Redford Center's *Watershed: Exploring a New Water Ethic for the New West* (2012): Creative Design, Partnerships & Alliances, and Impact Outreach. The film is an outstanding longitudinal example of designing for impact. The creative vision, foundational alliances that form the Raise the River coalition, and policy and community engagement have and continue to have significant success in restoring the Colorado River Delta. With the assistance of Lynne Bairstow, we received and examined prior documents, statistics, and outcomes. We gained further insights by conducting seven interviews including The Redford Center Executive Director and *Watershed* producer Jill Tidman, *Watershed* director Mark Decena, and representatives from Raise the River coalition. It has been an honor to conduct this case study and I thank The Redford Center Executive Director Jill Tidman and Senior Program Director Heather Fipps for inviting me to do so, and many thanks to all who contributed their time, knowledge, and wisdom.

Photos courtesy of The Redford Center and Raise the River Coalition

Layout design by Marissa Woods

THE  
REDFORD  
CENTER

RAISE  
THE  
RIVER  
RECONNECT THE COLORADO

RESTAUREMOS  
EL COLORADO



Audubon

The Nature  
Conservancy



pro  
natura  
noroeste

