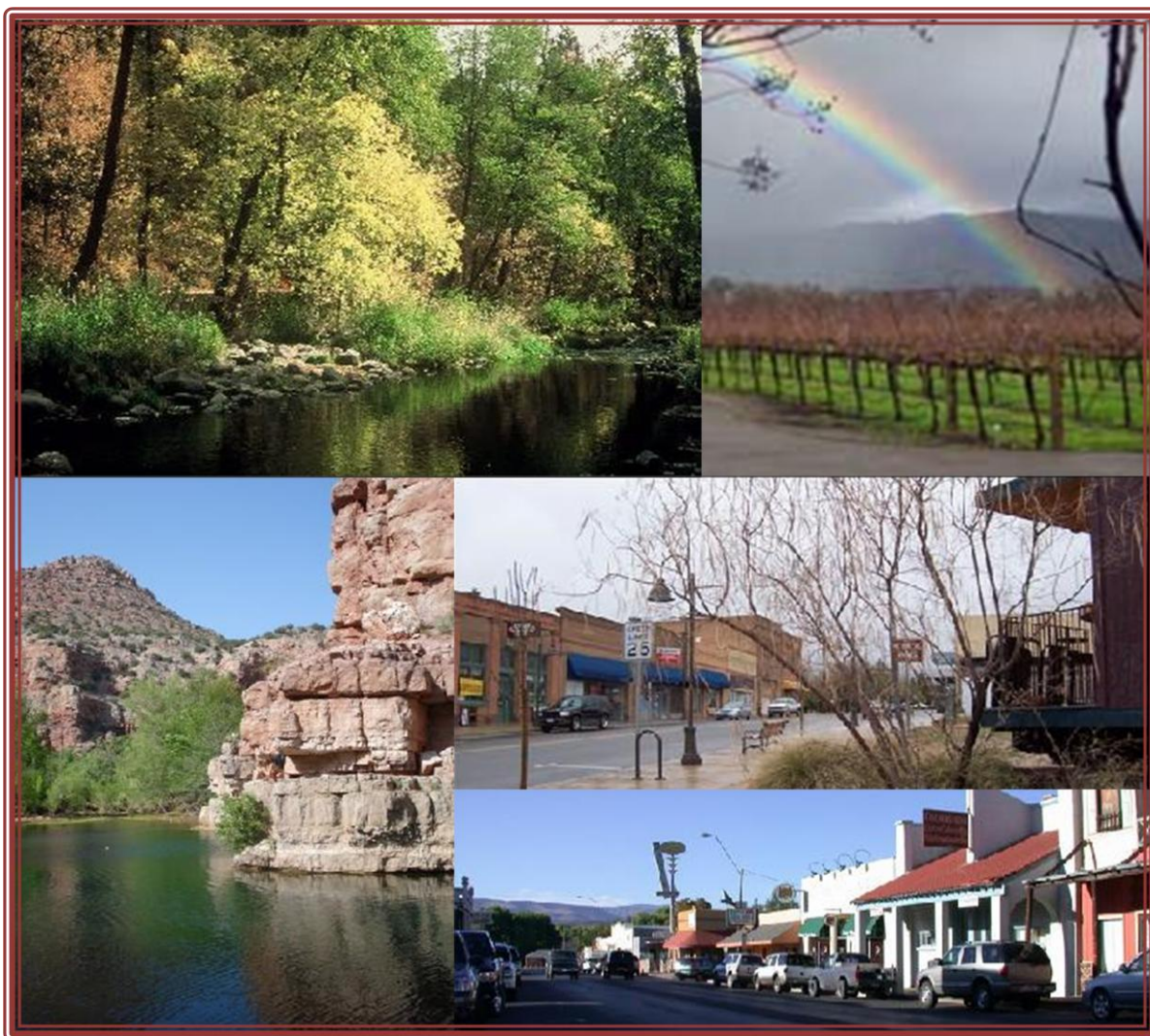


# **The Verde River – An Economy for a Sustainable Future**

## **A Community Conversation**



**May 19, 2011**

*Special thanks to the following individuals and sponsors for their support:*

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**Verde Valley Regional Economic Organization**

**Verde Watershed Association**

**Walton Family Foundation**

**Yavapai College Foundation**

A Community Conversation was held on May 19, 2011 from 2:00pm-5:00pm at Yavapai College in Clarkdale. The purpose for the event was to hear the communities perspectives, in a



discussion group format, regarding economic opportunities a healthy Verde River can provide to citizens of the Verde Valley. Over 60 individuals participated in small, facilitated discussion groups where the public's input was recorded and summarized (see attached) and used to form the basis for the following action plan. This call to action will

need further vetting before the Verde Valley Regional Economic Organization and is just the initial step in engaging stakeholders that have a vested business interest in the future of the Verde River.

## **Background**

The Verde Valley provides great opportunities to develop synergistic relationships for any individual, business, or government that wishes to benefit from the region's assets. There are numerous destination attractions to visit that are all in close proximity. Businesses enjoy the increased production related to these attractions, and the government enjoys increased sales tax revenues related to the industries, thus creating a "win/win" situation for all stakeholders. The challenge for these communities is to increase business activity while preserving the natural resource assets, especially the Verde River. One theme is consistent – all of the member communities' revenue streams are dependent on tourism but they lack a clear vision on how to promote each others' assets. Following is a brief synopsis of the Verde Valley communities and the importance of the sustainability of the Verde River.



## **Sedona**

Sedona is probably the most popular and nationally well-known community of the Valley communities. It is known for its scenic red rocks, high-end resorts, golf courses, and fine dining; however, a large part of why people enjoy the area is related to the community's commitment to outdoor recreation, including hiking, rafting, fishing, climbing, running, biking, and horseback riding. In addition, most of the community's marketing material highlight that Sedona is the home of the beautiful Oak Creek Canyon, a breathtaking chasm that even today, is wildly popular. The area also includes two of Arizona's State Parks (Slide Rock State Park and Red Rock State Park).

## **Cottonwood**



With a moderate climate and beautiful natural surroundings, and proximity to Sedona and Jerome, Cottonwood has much to gain from increasing their capacity to accommodate local tourism. Local recreation opportunities are plentiful, ranging from boating to mountain biking to hang gliding. Also, the emerging wine industry in the Verde Valley provides a potential draw for tourists. The downtown area is developing as a local draw for antique shopping and fine dining.

## **Camp Verde**

Camp Verde's 2005 Economic Development plan specifically states that Camp Verde capitalize, as a community, on the many tourism opportunities in and around Camp Verde. There are many historical events, activities, and destination points in Camp Verde, including walking tours, Fort Verde State Historic Park, Montezuma Castle, Montezuma Well, Cliff Castle Casino, Out of Africa Wildlife Park, fishing,





kayaking, canoeing, swimming, and festivals. The sustainability of the Verde River is critical to the economic viability of the town of Camp Verde.

### **Clarkdale**

Clarkdale, located contiguous to Cottonwood, is a dynamic community, and is way ahead of its time in terms of creativity relating to sustainability and renewable resources. Championed by Mayor Doug Von Gausig, Clarkdale has developed the “Clarkdale Sustainability Park.” This innovative development will include an intertwined renewable plant that uses the following



technologies: plasma conversion, photovoltaics, algal fuel, and biodiesel. Clarkdale clearly values sustainability and understands the value of preserving natural resources. The Verde Canyon Railroad brings approximately 100,000 people to Clarkdale each year and the beauty of the tour is contingent upon a healthy Verde River.

### **Jerome**

Jerome is open year round and offers visitors a wide variety of activities in which to indulge. A long weekend getaway at a local bed and breakfast or hotel, or a day trip to check out the shops and galleries and get a bite to eat at one of the many fine restaurants are both reasons to visit this small town. Jerome is home to the Jerome Art walk and houses the Gold King Mine Museum and the Douglas Mansion.

### **Tourism Survey Highlights**

The Arizona Office of Tourism conducted a survey in 2009 and some interesting observations emerged. The most popular places to visit in the Valley are Sedona and Jerome. Cottonwood receives the benefit of being a link between Jerome and Sedona. In terms of the importance of the river, over 40 percent of the visitors are coming to engage in activities directly linked to the Verde River. Excluding Arizona, most out-of-state visitors come from California to visit the

Verde Valley and the majority of international visitors come from Canada. In terms of demographics, the average/median ages are between 52 and 55 years. One of the more revealing statistics in the survey was that day visitors spend an average of \$116, while overnight visitors stayed an average of 3.7 days and spent \$163 per day. This seems to indicate that there is an opportunity to increase revenue substantially if the region can attract a higher percentage of overnight visitors. The study also showed that nearly 70% of visitors considered the Verde Valley their primary destination, and that over half of those trips were for vacation/leisure activities. So, the Verde Valley seems to have a destination reputation, but how does the community build upon that reputation to influence longer visits?

### **An Action Plan Going Forward**

It is clear from the responses during the discussion groups that all of the communities of the Verde Valley are dependent on the Verde River, either directly or indirectly, for the long-term sustainability of their respective communities and that they value the river both as a resource (water) and an economic engine. The following plan provides objectives and strategies culled from the discussion group responses to support a primary goal as follows:

***“to develop a plan that allows the Verde Valley business community and elected leadership to be proactive in the development of opportunities that are focused on the Verde River as a sustainable resource.”***

### **Objectives and Strategies**

- 1. Create a Verde River Institute that is focused on expanding and marketing a unified, sustainable plan for the benefit of the entire region. Recognize that this plan needs to include not only plans for branding and advertising, but also a signage plan that portrays a consistent message.**

#### **Strategies:**

- Research past plans for marketing and build/expand upon with a regional focus.

- Work with the relevant parties to determine who should be the “lead” for this process so that the entire region can benefit.
- Promote and utilize “volunteerism” in carrying out the Institute’s mission.
- Combine area activities and attractions for easy “one stop shopping”.
- Develop memorable tag lines/titles (e.g. “Banking on the Verde”, “Verde Fun Menu”)
- Commission local artists to provide art, photographs, etc. that promote the plan in local businesses.
- Encourage application of renewable energy technology to reduce footprint on the natural landscape.

## **2. Develop additional river access points and multi-use trails.**

### Strategies:

- Meet with organizations who have/are preparing trail plans to determine where they are in the process and coordinate river access points.
- Aid in completion of trail plans that identify river access points for hiking, biking, and equestrian trails (multi-modal).
- Identify sources of funds for construction of new multi-use trails.
- Work with communities to support public transportation shuttles to river access points.

## **3. Develop a brand for the Verde River within the Verde Valley that is recognizable and memorable.**

### Strategies:

- Meet with organizations that are already working on branding plans (SEDI) to develop a unified vision.

- Encourage local businesses to prominently display the brand logo.

**4. Promote the Verde Valley as a destination for outdoor recreation, including riparian activity, bird watching, hiking, boating, fishing, ballooning, etc.**

Strategies:

- Meet with local Chambers of Commerce to determine if a categorized inventory has been compiled showing available opportunities in the area.
- Make sure all activities are incorporated into marketing efforts.
- Create a “Verde Pass” that provides a “one stop shop” for local information and special pricing for attractions.

**5. Increase frequency of community activities which bring people into town, such as festivals, parades, farmer’s markets, and arts and entertainment events, and an attempt to link those events through social media.**

Strategies:

- All the communities along the Verde River currently have community events that are scheduled on a regular basis. Encouraging these programs to continue and expand will benefit the region.
- Develop a unified website and/or Community Event Calendar. Events should be planned to complement, not compete.
- Develop a map depicting various recreational interests, parks, hotels, casinos, etc. An online map could also be developed as an interactive tool with hot links to various websites of cooperators.



- 6. Expand the hospitality industry to include a conference center, boutique hotels, and theme Bed & Breakfast locations. This will enhance exposure for the Verde Valley and increase the potential for recreational uses of the river. This will involve a cooperative effort with the Yavapai-Apache Nation.**

Strategies:

- Determine whether or not a study has been commissioned for the area to evaluate to potential for a conference hotel in addition to the facilities at Cliff Castle Casino.
- Provide incentives/advertising assistance to active local farms that have “farmstead” bed & breakfast businesses that help offset farming expenses.

- 7. Educate our youth and business community regarding the cultural history of the Verde Valley and economic opportunity of a sustainable Verde River.**

Strategies:

- Assist the Yavapai Apache Nation in developing/marketing a cultural center and/or interpretive tour as another point of interest by visitors.
- Work with K-12 teachers to bring the Verde River into the classroom.

## **The Future**

It is clear that the communities within the Verde Valley value the Verde River for its beauty as well as its potential to enhance the quality of life through economic opportunity, as long as that opportunity does not come at the expense of the Verde River itself. The preceding objectives and strategies set forth the steps for moving forward. But a plan is only successful if put into action. With this in mind, the Verde Valley Regional Economic Organization (VVREO) has agreed to facilitate future progress but needs some “heavy lifters” to carry out the objectives. Several participants from the Community Conversation have volunteered to form a coalition committee within VVREO to move the plan forward. The planning committee and sponsors wish you the best of luck as you pursue the plan!

## **GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

## ● Red Group

1. How do you value the Verde River? How do visitors value the Verde River?
  - Personal Values - Historical, ecological habitat, scenery (adds to the backdrop), uniqueness, **recreational**, agricultural (one opinion is that it should be the first one since it is the basis of all value), **scenic/aesthetic**, economic/financial, quality of life, Cultural, creates a certain culture that would not be here if the river were not here, psychological/spiritual /inspirational value (it relaxes you), even if you don't go to the river you know it's there, real estate value (probably 10 times what it would be if the river is not there, Biodiversity, senses (people smell, see and hear it), rural setting.
  - Visitor's value - **Recreation, ecological** (Verde Valley Birding and Nature Festival), Biodiversity, scenery/aesthetic, history, Spiritual-Inspirational, Viticulture/Agriculture (Agra-tourism), Rural setting.
2. How can existing businesses incorporate the Verde River into their everyday experiences with their customers?
  - **Ties into Verde Compact (you can put in restaurants or hotels) in Truckee River ("a buck for open space"). They use the river as part of the way they advertise, they are river friendly, a café quadrupled business using this tool. The business values the river, and the visitors in turn visit the business. Some businesses exist because of the river, a birding business could be in the area (being encouraged). Direct and indirect strategies can be incorporated.**
  - Push to have everyone to have pictures of the river in business. Make a push to have as many people touch the river as possible. Water (not food) is being exported. The real worry for the future is water. Need to use the consciousness for conservation to increase awareness and support for the river. Stress water conservation efforts in business models (and using that as a marketing tool). Kayaking business exists because of the river.

- **There is a need for more info on river access at hubs and local businesses. Visitors want to know how to get to the river and what they can do at different locations (fishing, swimming, boating) maybe to be at the Chamber of Commerce. Bed and breakfasts would like to have the information. Help educate people in contact with visitors (gas stations, vineyards, chambers of commerce). There should be a “Day of Training” to let people know what opportunities exist.**
- Get businesses to develop new activities that have to do with the river. Businesses could sponsor more activities, and events. Partnerships should be encouraged that build capacity between birding and kayaking. Businesses could say “This is what we do to save the Verde River.”
- Develop a long-term vision for the river and educate how businesses can support that vision. Someone could provide businesses and offices with photos or a DVD that to be used for marketing the river and the Verde Valley.
- Camp Verde (and other surrounding communities)- good place to let people know about CW/Clarkdale/Jerome etc.
- Relocating water tanks that say things like “Welcome to the Verde Valley Wine...” Use social media, iphone aps, facebook, etc. “download our free ap...”

3. What new businesses should the Verde Valley attract that would complement the traditional tourism industry?

- Big 5- this is coming and would help with outdoor recreation, birding related, one going now
- Verde Valley Archaeological Center
- Sustainable businesses, could have sustainability tours, educational/sustainable ecotourism, young’s farm type of place, things to encourage agricultural businesses, Hydroponic green houses, general agriculture, better management of ditches.
- Wine-related businesses (processing , filtration, labeling, etc)
- Processing facility for poultry, Ag and dairy processing

- Research and development businesses related to water conservation (LL Bean testing kayaks on the river), testing prototypes on the river.
  - **Fishing, boating, birding, Potential for a summer boating area. Shuttle service for take-outs and put-ins (for boats).**
  - **Need more hotels (medium and high end), eco resort (like El Conquistador), Shuttle services**
  - Different themes in different seasons, Sustainability trail, ag trail, different themes, Driving tours and agritourism providers... the one online is a virtual trail. Festival promotion (food/drink).
4. How can business combine their services and maximize marketing opportunities to make for a more fulfilling regional experience?
- Sponsoring Festivals (combining efforts)
  - Virtual tour idea
  - 5K run in old town then wine
  - Recreational Events (adventure racing, combo of kayaking, mountain biking, orienteering, etc)
  - **Combine events (Rhythm and Ribs, water to wine, birding and boating, natural and cultural history, history and archaeology (river based), Verde Canyon Railroad (combine with discount for dinner or some other activity)**
  - Festivals (Native American, Birding, music, food, drink) and piggy-back on other events
  - National and State parks. Develop a passport for river activities.
  - Develop a list and map for agricultural businesses in the area (in the valley).
  - **“Banking on the Verde” (Value Savings). Broad concept, but focused on the river.**
  - Education of local community.
  - “Taste of the Region” (local Farmer’s markets).
  - Common branding, and help everyone see the benefit to them so everyone can participate.

5. What are the next steps to develop an action plan?

- Verde Valley Institute/Verde River Institute- Verde Valley focused, paid staff, to encourage people to be educated about the river and share that information.
  - Need a professional facilitator to guide the process. There will be many ideas. Someone needs to do the true collaborative process.
  - Identify a funding source.
  - Sustainable on-going process
  - Professional
- Verde River (Valley) Branding Campaign- common values. Focus needs to be on the River itself. Need to develop and then sell to organizations (marketing of the brand)

## ● Lime Green Group

1. How do you value the Verde River? How do visitors value the Verde River?
  - Personal - Increased value when we know it can be lost, property values (real estate), economic, ecological/riparian habitat, scenic, recreational, agricultural, **quality of life**, cultural, **water resource**, sand & gravel operations, ditch associations.
  - Visitors - Promote **recreation**, birding, fishing, boating, hiking, ATVs, drinking parties, wine tastings, nature viewing, painting/artists, equestrian, camping, fantasy land, hunting, **locally grown food**, b&bs.
  
2. How can existing businesses incorporate the Verde River into their everyday experiences with their customers?
  - **Education/Provide information to businesses**
  - Smart water management practices
  - Market “green” practices
  - Promote water restoration credit program to offset water intensive practices
  - Create brand awareness
  - Provide and promote river access
  - Enhance recreational flows
  - Social pressure on agriculture to improve water practices and reward/recognize good stewardship
  - **Create a “Verde Pass”**
  
3. What new businesses should the Verde Valley attract that would complement the traditional tourism industry?
  - Restaurants serve local produce
  - Cloud based commerce
  - **Health/medical/wellness**
  - **Agri-tourism (e.g. boutique food processing, mesquite grinding, native foods)**
  - Campgrounds



- Horse camping
  - Aquaculture
4. How can business combine their services and maximize marketing opportunities to make for a more fulfilling regional experience?
- **Packaged experiences - Verde Valley Fun Menu**
  - Need funding for marketing
  - Focus on families
  - Yavapai County Adventures
  - VOAZ (Volunteers for Outdoor Arizona)
  - LEAF (Leaders in Environmental Action for the Future)
  - **VVVC (Verde Valley Visitors Center/Complex)**
  - Fish hatchery
  - Develop “working” vacation packages
5. What are the next steps to develop an action plan?
- Branding/Education/Funding
  - Verde Valley Visitor Center
  - Visible
  - “Verde Pass” for everything (one stop)

## ● Blue Group

1. How do you value the Verde River? How do visitors value the Verde River?
  - Personal - economic, desire to live near a flowing river, **ecological/riparian habitat**, recreation, agricultural, **quality of life (peaceful, beauty, lifestyle)**, cultural, real estate/property value, irrigated lands, water availability allowed settlement, fertile lands, fish for food, small farms with irrigation water, flooding limitations.
  - Visitors - **recreation**, the ecosystem supported by the river, ecotourism.
  
2. How can existing businesses incorporate the Verde River into their everyday experiences with their customers?
  - Structured downtime dedicated to promoting the river
  - Education/stewardship
  - Menu of topics
  - Non-profit tours/events
  - **Create awareness through river photo contests/display winners in businesses**
  - Educate realtors
  - Encourage ethnobotany and cultural history with the Yavapai Apache Nation
  - **Encourage use of local foods**
  
3. What new businesses should the Verde Valley attract that would complement the traditional tourism industry?
  - Wine industry
  - Destination hotels/B&Bs
  - Businesses should work together to provide mutually beneficial experiences
  - “Life’s a Beach” concept
  - **Environmental education for kids/adults**
  - Photo workshops/nature photography
  - Promote astronomy (clear/ dark skies)
  - Ag Tourism (sustainable organic, ranching)

- Biking/hiking
  - Brew fest/breweries/cafés/roaster (e.g. Moab, Utah)
  - Running - marathons e.g. Brian Michelson
  - Theaters/film/storytelling
  - Cultural experiences with the Yavapai Apache Nation
  - **Develop amenity marketing campaign to attract new businesses**
4. How can business combine their services and maximize marketing opportunities to make for a more fulfilling regional experience?
- Use local food in restaurants
  - Buy local
  - **Use social networking**
  - Develop regional website
  - Share resources between business to get economy of scale
  - Educate business of available resources/tools
  - **“Destination Drivers” used to combine experiences to create value**
  - Local Chambers of Commerce should engage
5. What are the next steps to develop an action plan?
- Talk to business owners, get buy in
  - Create a task force to get input, compile data and develop the elements of an action plan
  - **Fund staff that is organized, competent, responsible, and accountable**
  - **Seek funding grants (Walton Family Foundation, APS, Non-profits, SRMG, Walmart, RAC (Forest Service))**
  - ID obstacles through SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)

## Pink Group

1. How do you value the Verde River? How do visitors value the Verde River?
  - Personal – **connects everything**, aesthetic beauty, habitat, **economic value and services**, some values hard to quantify but irreplaceable, recreation, education, tourism. Factors that contribute to value: financial, scenic, social, accessibility, visibility, positive cost/benefit, open space/land, improve maintenance of public lands, improve water/ecological integrity.
  - Visitors – depends on why they are here (family, recreation, shopping, passing through, birding/hiking/boating, day use, gambling at casino). **Beauty/aesthetics**, close to Phoenix, increased demands (Are we ready?), **multiple uses**, integrated/diverse experiences, river is central, visitors need to be educated as good stewards, manage access/designate uses, escape/adventure, businesses need to promote special nature of the river and ensure sustainability, market river.
  
2. How can existing businesses incorporate the Verde River into their everyday experiences with their customers?
  - **Create partnerships that connect the river**
  - Extend “events” to include the river
  - Market “off-season”, year around activities
  
3. What new businesses should the Verde Valley attract that would complement the traditional tourism industry?
  - Iconic images in stores/businesses
  - **Develop “Verde” brand**
  - Develop a “Verde Guide Book”
  - Connect people with nature
  - Volunteer/service tourism fits with sustainability theme
  - **Outfitter/Adventure**
    - ATVs (trail connections)

- Zip-lines, climbing
- Canyoneering
- Trolley system
- backpacking

4. How can business combine their services and maximize marketing opportunities to make for a more fulfilling regional experience?

- **Bed & Breakfast, funky, boutique hotels, cool places to stay**
- More venues needed
- Identify business holes/gaps
- Capture Grand Canyon visitors
- Increase marketing through websites/branding
- RV community should be linked to services
- Visible Chamber and tourism offices
- Engage youth
- Verde – Water and Wine run through it

5. What are the next steps to develop an action plan?

- **Bundle/package activities by demographics**
- **Seek venture capital/grants**
- Engage business leaders
- Government/business forums
- Public/Private Partnerships

## ● Yellow Group

1. How do you value the Verde River? How do visitors value the Verde River?
  - Personal – water for drinking, water quality, wildlife, aesthetic/experience rare commodity, recreation/birding/boating, cultural history, products used, agriculture, property values, groundwater/river connections, shade, cooling, biodiversity, swimming (physical and spiritual), employment, obvious hydrologic system, educator.
  - Visitors –visual/aesthetics, escape heat, recreation, calming, water experience, connect with nature, connection with ancient people and how the river affected life.
  
2. How can existing businesses incorporate the Verde River into their everyday experiences with their customers?
  - Eating experience/home grown
  - Reading material on restaurant tables
  - Educate customers/where food comes from
  - Include river in business logos
  - Brand the river into products
  - River tours
  - State and National should provide river interpretations
  - Emphasis on regional river events
  - Cooperation between communities/businesses in region
  - Regional thinking on water supply and disposal (sewer) infrastructure
  - Promote Verde River Greenway and other river connections
  - Promote local art work/photography depicting the river/special places
  - Encourage more “sense of place”
  - Involve schools in local natural history
  
3. What new businesses should the Verde Valley attract that would complement the traditional tourism industry?
  - Ecotourism (controlled to limit impacts/pollution)

- Collaboration to plan events around a theme (renewable/sustainable)
- Demonstration projects
- Agri-tourism (wild food and herbs tours)
- Vineyards
- Farmers markets
- Provide choices of activities (variety)
- B&Bs on farms/orchards, hostels
- Eco-forestry/riparian
- Trails (along river) and public access
- Forest Service planning should incorporate tourism to expand visitor services and create a “destination”
- Special tour guides for elderly
- Develop a visitor contact center
- Education activity on farms
- Trails on irrigation ditches
- Local participation in managing open spaces

4. How can business combine their services and maximize marketing opportunities to make for a more fulfilling regional experience?

- Link concepts of Red Rocks and the Verde Valley
- Reduce barriers between consumption/production (e.g. tasting rooms at wineries)
- Regional Chamber of Commerce
- Family based tours
- Increased signage to historic places/“Old Town”
- Private bars/restaurants
- Public transportation
- Bike/horse trail links
- Nodes for alternate transportation
- Provide maps with points of interest



- Think holistically

5. What are the next steps to develop an action plan?

- Create a multi-modal trail system
- Improve access points to the river and facilities, remove barriers
- Regional branding, increase brand exposure through Chambers of Commerce, AZ Dept of Tourism, local communities
- Increase public transportation/shuttles
- Identify opportunities for ecotourism, get the word out
- Mini grants/incentives to promote neighborhood businesses

## Green Group

1. How do you value the Verde River? How do visitors value the Verde River?
  - **Free flowing river (rarity)**, unique (marketing opportunity), barometer of water supply, **lifeblood of Verde Valley**, need balance (stewardship of place), tourists.
  
2. How can existing businesses incorporate the Verde River into their everyday experiences with their customers?
  - **virtuous cycle (take care of place and attract tourism (\$))**
  - Educate customers of local attractions/history
  - **Create “Culture of Connection” with river as overarching theme**
  - Brand the river into products
  - More involvement in community
  
3. What new businesses should the Verde Valley attract that would complement the traditional tourism industry?
  - **Sustainable/clean energy projects**
  - Manufacturing/shipping
  - Small businesses to support tourism
  - **Sustainable agriculture (local foods, micro-climate appropriate crops, high value for essential ag)**
  - Slag reprocessing
  - Television/cinema
  - Communications
  - **Healthcare**
  
4. How can business combine their services and maximize marketing opportunities to make for a more fulfilling regional experience?
  - Leverage birding resources
  - Work together to promote local businesses

5. What are the next steps to develop an action plan?

- Develop more infrastructure to access the river
- Challenge business community to lead effort and work with authorities to generate necessary revenue (e.g. taxes)
- Enhance signage
- Work closely with elected officials
- **More education, such as creating an ambassador program for service sector employees and others that interact with visitors**
- Sense of place education for children in the schools
- Familiarization tours (e.g. What Verde Valley has to offer)
- **Brand the river, develop strong message**