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It's morning for a living river

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Posted: Sunday, March 1, 2015 5:00 am

Nate Downey

“Should I call 9-1-1?” former Santa Fe city planner Marian Shirin called down. From a pedestrian bridge near Alto Park, a quizzical concern infused her face.

“Naw, it’s probably not a dead body,” I shouted up from the Santa Fe River’s dry bed. “It would smell. Wouldn’t it?”

“Why don’t you open it, honey, and see?” my wife asked, standing safely next to Marian.

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“Yeah, Daddy! Open it!” my boys screamed.

My wife, our two boys, Marian, and I had just spent two hours participating in the Santa Fe Watershed Association’s event, Love Your River Day. Scores of volunteers had been deployed to various sections of the river to pick up trash. We’d filled our bags and were done.

But when we regrouped with Marian, she said she’d discovered a bulky bag protruding from the bottom of a retaining wall. “Maybe you can get it out, Nate. It’s down there,” she pointed from the bridge. “You can’t miss it.”

My boys and I scrambled down the steep slope, found it, and yanked. And pulled. We yanked again. As we dragged the clunky, six-foot sausage out, for a second I thought we might all soon be heaving violently at the sight of a zombie-faced corpse. I haven’t watched cop shows in decades, but suddenly I thought I’d be calling in a murder.

According to lore, no one knows when the Santa Fe River stopped flowing, but it’s pretty hard to imagine the Acequia Madre and all of her relations being built for any purpose but to irrigate from a wet river. Did the Santa Fe croak with the destruction of the last beaver dam? Was the river’s death a gradual choking process spawned by ever-encroaching asphalt roads, concrete sidewalks, and tar-and-gravel roofs? Perhaps it was killed with the construction of our city’s essential reservoirs.

In a sense, our river died for all three reasons, but we can bring it back to life. It will be a long process, but if we see stormwater runoff as a resource that can be directed into the ground to the root zones of appropriate plant material, we can recreate the conditions that made the river healthy in its antebellum state.

When we consider our intense precipitation, our goal must be to “slow it, flow it, and grow it.” Slow runoff and flow it into the soil where it can be grown into

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healthy vegetation. This vegetation then helps slow more stormwater. Instead of running off into a dead river carrying sediment that destroys riparian areas, the water will make it to these areas at a more steady and gradual pace similar to what happened to the watershed during the preceding millennia.

“It might be easier if we keep the bag closed while we drag whatever it is up!” I proclaimed.

“You don’t want to move a dead body, Nate!”



“Okay, boy. Open it.”

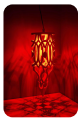
Fortunately, it was just a weird bag full of old couch parts. We knew we couldn’t rebuild the couch, but we were glad we could begin to bring our river back to life.

Nate Downey, the author of Harvest the Rain, has been a local landscape consultant, designer, and contractor since 1992. He can be reached at 505-690-7939 or via www.permadesign.com.

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