

Summer 2021

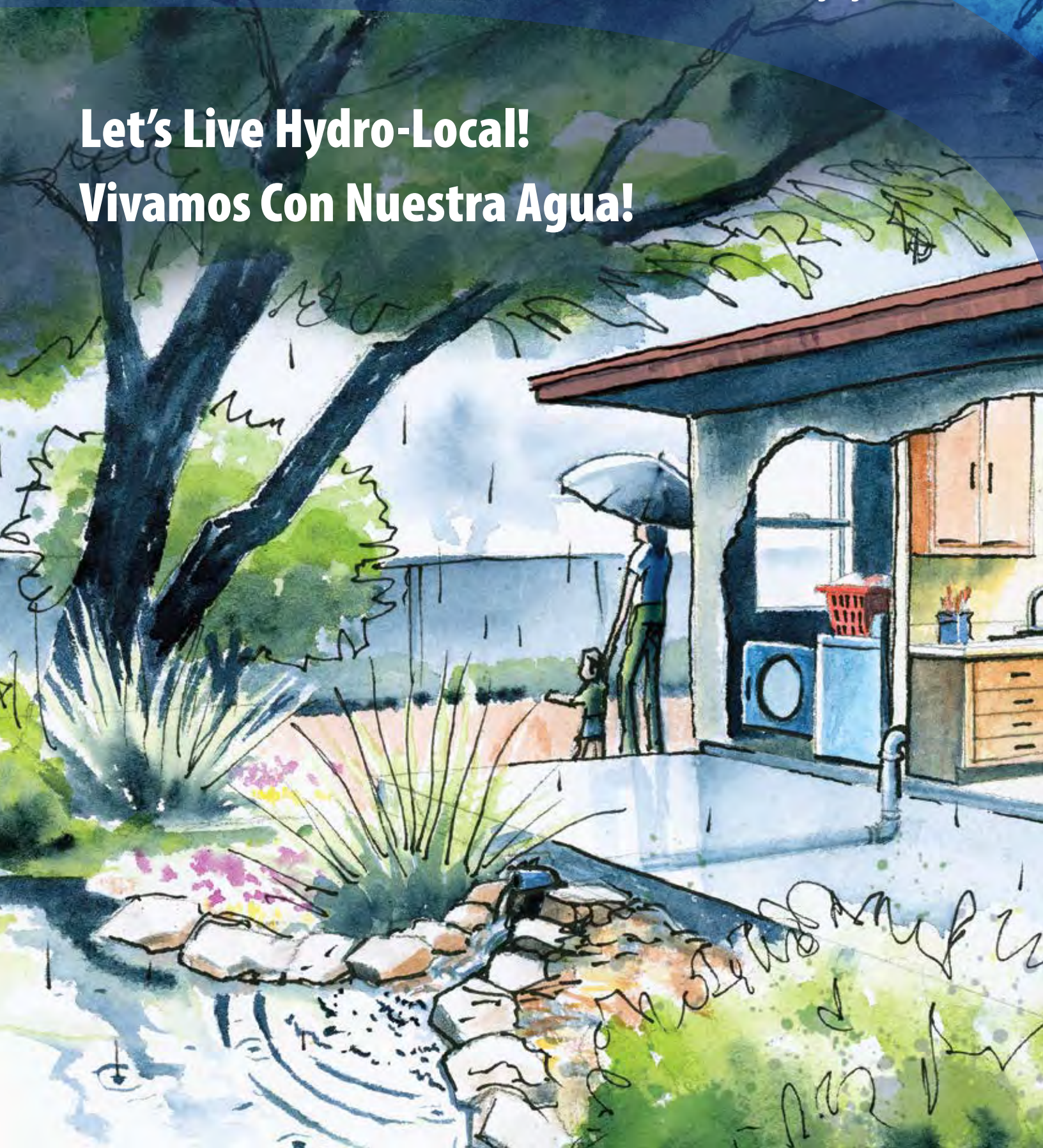


# A Watershed Moment

A NEWSLETTER OF WATERSHED MANAGEMENT GROUP

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**Vivamos Con Nuestra Agua!**



## Connecting to Place, from an Indigenous Perspective



Anthony Francisco Jr. of the Tohono O’odham Nation, and Dr. Lydia Jennings, who is both Huichol (Wixáritari) on her mother’s side and Pascua Yaqui (Yoeme) on her father’s, are both accomplished trail runners and Indigenous community organizers.



Just as there is groundwater underneath a permanent surface flow, active stewardship involves having a deep personal connection to the land and water. While each individual has their own way to connect to the natural world, we can all learn from the Indigenous stewards of our region, and from their communities, who have maintained reciprocal relationships with nature in the Sonoran Desert for millennia.

In early June, WMG hosted an online discussion through our River Run Network with two Indigenous stewards of our region and active members of Tucson’s running community—Anthony Francisco Jr., of the Tohono O’odham Nation, and Dr. Lydia Jennings, who is both Huichol (Wixáritari) on her mother’s side and Pascua Yaqui (Yoeme) on her father’s side and who grew up in New Mexico. In addition to being accomplished runners, Anthony is a community organizer, former Tribal Council Representative, and Communications Institute Fellow, and Lydia is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Community, Environment, and Policy at the University of Arizona. She is also an expert in soil health, environmental remediation, and mining policy.

Anthony and Lydia’s running, research, and social work inspire gratitude for the natural world, and it is natural stewards like them who are helping our community heal, connect, and move forward towards a more hopeful and sustainable future. In the spirit of sharing knowledge, resources, and spaces with our region’s deeply-rooted Indigenous communities, we asked Anthony and Lydia a few follow-up questions.

***Lydia, you mentioned building on new programs like “Native Land Digital” – an online, Indigenous-led map of traditional lands – in order to help more people connect to land and Indigenous culture, past and present. How might this be done?***

Knowing where Indigenous lands are located is an important first step, but it’s also critical that we learn from traditional Indigenous stewards about how to respect and treat the land too. Ideas central to the field of conservation have been largely rooted in colonial practices, and have

disconnected Indigenous communities from their homelands and traditional ecological knowledge (check out the podcast “Parks,” or the book *Dispossessing the Wilderness*).

In addition, many parks and public land policies/regulations have not acknowledged the many ways in which Indigenous Peoples have long co-existed with their natural spaces. Ecosystems that are, to the average person, a natural playground, to many Indigenous Peoples are also our churches, food pantries, classrooms, medicine cabinets, and kin.

I feel that Indigenous-led codes of conduct that go along with platforms like Native Land Digital could help guide people visiting traditional lands, for example by requesting that people wear a face mask during a pandemic, avoid harvesting certain sacred plants, avoid certain areas out of respect for sacred sites and ceremonies, and take the opportunity to learn histories and traditional knowledge they might ordinarily miss. Essentially, when visitors would enter an Indigenous homeland they would be able to learn about how those peoples relate to their land, and how to respect this relationship. Autonomy of knowledge-sharing by Indigenous communities would also be an important protocol of data management, such that private/sacred information is only shared with consent from knowledge-keepers.

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— Dr. Lydia Jennings



Dr. Lydia Jennings peers into an abandoned mine shaft in the Santa Rita Mountains within the Coronado National Forest.

**Lydia, as an academic, you emphasized the importance of building relationships that co-inform, directly involve, and seek opportunities to benefit the Indigenous communities where science is taking place. Could you explain this in the context of your research?**

Indigenous communities, past and present, have largely been left out of the conversation when it comes to research. What is more, we have often been the topic of research without proper representation or decision-making power. It is critical that Indigenous peoples today lead the important conversations that pertain to, and directly impact, our land, soil, and water, including topics concerning resource extraction and regulatory policies. As scientists and

environmental professionals, we must also recognize the long-held expertise of Indigenous land stewards that exists outside of, and extends beyond, academic and colonial knowledge.

My project's reclaimed mine-site is an example for how Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), in this case of the Tohono O'odham Nation, can inform science and restoration practices moving forward. The tribal nation chose which plants would be used, and determined the depth of soil cap that would be applied – decisions based on cultural values and ecological expertise. As researchers, we studied the patterns of soil health that these decisions resulted in. Our work demonstrated specific soil health indicators that can potentially be applied when working with other reclaimed mine sites in the future.

**Anthony, you spoke of how when you run, you do so for your family and community, and of how running in the O'odham tradition is connected to carrying messages, natural resources (like salt and seashells), the celebration of life, and the carrying forward of purpose-giving creation stories. How does running connect you to these values?**

Our [Tohono O'odham] culture and traditional practices have faced many obstacles throughout history. Indeed, much of the culture, language, and identity of all Indigenous communities has been lost or forgotten due to colonization. Today, running—such as participating in a five or 10 km race—allows Indigenous people to reconnect with the land in a meaningful way. This connection, although it has changed through time, allows for a reignition of the cultural fire. Running creates a bond that spans across generations and brings about a common purpose: connecting to the past through movement. My role is to continue the work: creating opportunities for our Nation's members, and other communities, to connect to and move across the lands that we have all been blessed to be stewards of.

**Anthony & Lydia, how can we better protect of our biological, cultural, and historical treasures, while also being more inclusive of diverse peoples?**

Thank you for asking. We both feel that it is of utmost importance to:

- Make sure everyone feels safe and welcome in outdoor spaces, no matter their body type, skin color, experience, or how they choose to engage with outdoor spaces (provided it is respectful).
- Ensure that more Indigenous and historically marginalized voices are on Parks and Public Lands boards. Policies too need to be reviewed and

revised to ensure they are written in a manner that is inclusive of, and acknowledges the presence, rights, and values of the Indigenous communities that have long lived within protected natural areas.

- Have culturally-informed park signs and resources, including Indigenous names and other forms of acknowledgment, showing that communities other than white settlers have long existed in places like the Sonoran Desert, despite having been erased from many historical records. After all, how can people come to see themselves existing in, and wanting to protect, outdoor spaces if they are made invisible?
- Hold meaningful conversations around these topics, for example with organizations like WMG. This is a wonderful start to opening up larger conversations, such as the possibility of returning lands and rights to their traditional owners and stewards.

Dr. Lydia Jennings' research at the University of Arizona involves the remediation of mining areas on lands held sacred to our region's Indigenous stewards.



In solidarity, Anthony Francisco Jr. runs alongside other members of the Tohono O'odham Nation, and with visiting runners from southern Mexico, along the US-Mexico border.



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