

RIPARIAN AREAS

WHAT DOES RIPARIAN MEAN?

The vegetated area before you is a riparian area of the Colorado River. The word “riparian” derives from the Latin *ripa*, meaning the bank of a stream. Riparian refers to the plant communities that lie between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. There are many definitions of “riparian,” yet all suggest that unique soils, plants and water movement characterize these zones.



The 'Ahakhav Backwater

WHY ARE RIPARIAN AREAS IMPORTANT?

Riparian areas perform many critical functions for wildlife, waterways and humans! These ecosystems enhance local and global biodiversity. They provide food and shelter, seasonal migration and breeding corridors for a variety of wildlife, such as birds, insects and mammals. Sensitive species that depend on Arizona riparian areas include beavers, Yuma clapper rails and Southwestern willow flycatchers.

Healthy waterways need healthy riparian areas. Riparian vegetation stabilizes banks and encourages a winding flow of the waterway, which recharges groundwater and maintains the water table. Water quality is improved because vegetation acts as a filter, trapping sediment, nutrients and pollutants.



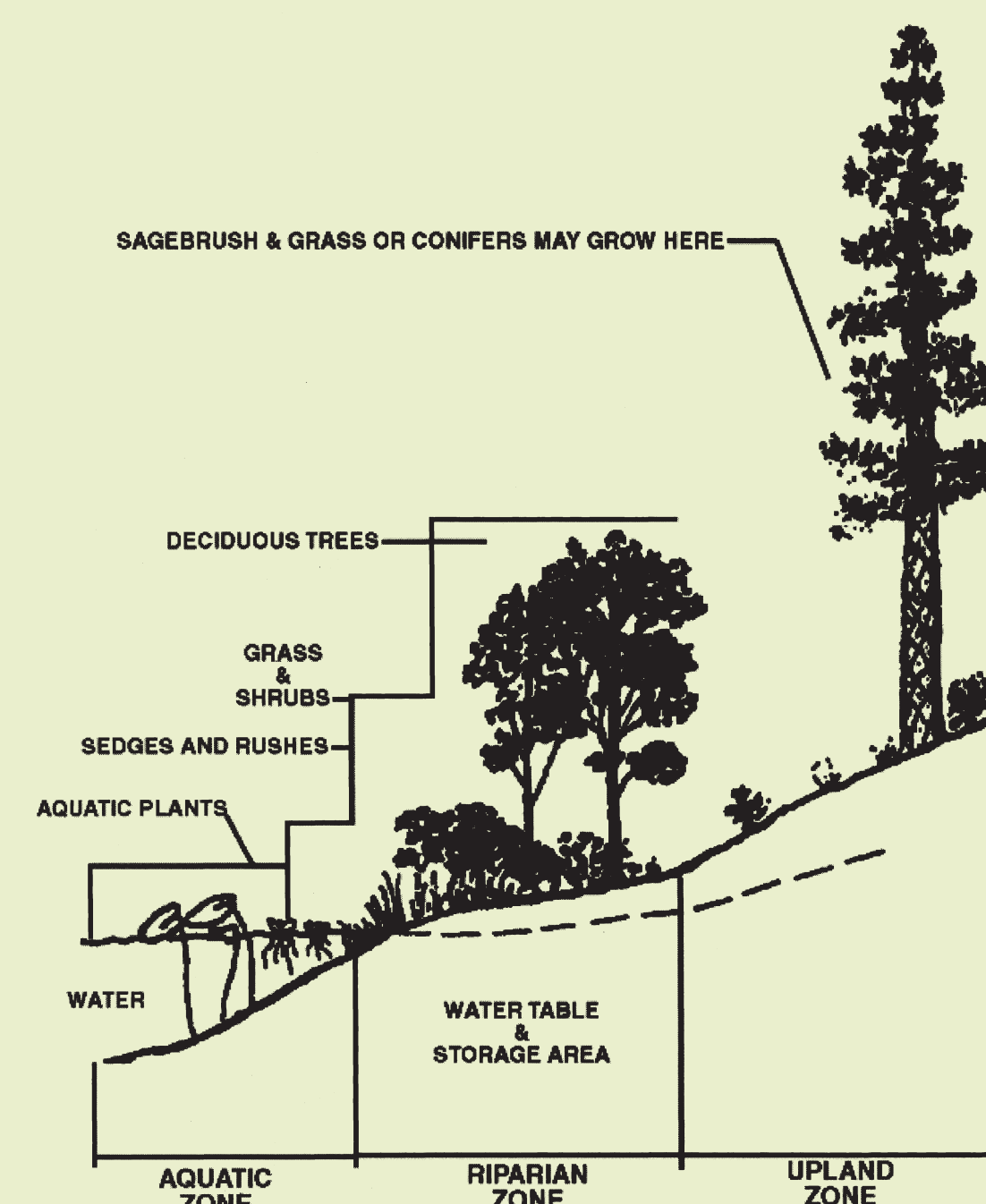
Yuma clapper rail



Southwestern willow flycatcher

WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR RIPARIAN AREAS?

Human activities have drastically altered riparian areas, damaging native plant communities and polluting waterways. Urbanization, industrialization, agriculture and recreation threaten the health and longevity of these vital ecosystems.



To protect riparian areas, the general public and resource managers must work together. Many laws and programs already exist to protect and restore fragile ecosystems, yet scientists and land managers must continue to develop planning and protection measures. As an individual, you can learn! Educate yourself about your local waterway and how your behaviors impact it. Change behaviors that have negative impacts and encourage those around you to do the same.