
“Being A Good Ancestor”

RIVERSIDE STORIES

JIM BRYCE

Landowner on the Gila River, AZ —

FROM JIM BRYCE'S 400-acre farm in southeastern Arizona, he has a perfect view of some of the most naturally rich land in the Southwest. As a sixth generation farmer, his family has had stakes in the West going back to the 1870s, when his great great grandfather Ebenezer Bryce pioneered this region. Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah, which is named after Ebenezer, stands testament to how deep this family's roots go in this part of the country. Jim and his family have also had a front row seat to the progressive degradation of the Colorado River systems due to invasive plant species. His land in Arizona, which the Gila River runs through, has endured extensive damage over the years from tamarisk (salt cedar) and other non-native plants.



At the peak of flood season, Jim has seen more than 60 acres of his crops drowned in water. A normal process in riparian (riverside) ecosystems, this flooding hasn't been a problem until recent years. Now when the water rises, tamarisk spreads like wildfire, ultimately choking out the river and destroying the cropland. So for the past three years, Jim Bryce has been working with the Army Corps of Engineers to remove the tamarisk infestation and repair the natural river systems.

Using heavy machinery and quite a bit of elbow grease, he and his teams have made a positive effect on the land, and witnessed the fruits of their labor. Jim isn't the only one in his community to be in favor of the work either.

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"There are always skeptics, but anything you can do to get rid of the tamarisk and enhance the river, most everybody's happy about that. It makes salt, and takes water, and you can't really recreate on the river with it in the way."

For now, he's content with the progress he's made, and looks forward to continuing the work to restore the riparian areas to what they once were.

Jim's inspiration for repairing the land stems from his family's longstanding dedication to the land. "My dad says it's better to be a good ancestor than to have one. My great great grandfather had a mill on this river, and it's really just amazing to me how much he did on this river," he says. "If they did it, we can do it too. It just gives you a sense of who you are and what you can do. Whatever you want to do, you can do it."

Looking forward, Jim is hopeful, citing the release of the tamarisk beetle - a natural predator of tamarisk - into the surrounding areas as a long-awaited advent. By repeatedly eating/defoliating the leaves of tamarisk, the beetle helps to control the spread of the invasive plant by reducing its reproductive viability and as a result gives native plants a chance to recover. "I think if the beetle comes, then you'll see the change," he explains. "We're hoping for it." In the meantime, others in Jim's community are working together to take a stand against invasive plants, including the 20-year-old Gila Watershed Partnership, which is working with Jim and others to coordinate river restoration efforts.

More than just an asset to the ecosystem here, the Gila River is also a mainstay in Jim's affection for the land. "I even go a little further than respect, I go to reverence. It's a beautiful thing, and to me it's a God-given thing. We need to respect it, for future generations. There's something in you when you live by a river. It doesn't wait," he

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expounds. "You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy. That's the same way with the river. You can take us away from the river, but you can't take the river out of us." ■

This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with the Gila Watershed Partnership, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

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