

# AGUA CORRIENTE

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## THE LATINO CONNECTION TO WATERWAYS

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# INTRODUCTION

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Rivers and streams, the lifeblood of our planet, have sustained human civilization and ecosystems throughout history. These meandering currents, majestic flows, and interconnected networks shape the very essence of our natural world, including where and how we live. This report delves into the significance of rivers, their role in the water cycle, and the vital link between healthy rivers and the cultures that are sustained by them. In particular, we aim to explore the profound connections between Latino communities and two iconic rivers: the Colorado and Mississippi Rivers. Focusing on these waterways and their ties to Latino heritage highlights their cultural, historical, and environmental importance in shaping Latino communities and their relationship with running waters. We will explore the latest research, examining case studies, and analyzing successful conservation strategies.

Understanding rivers' unique place among other bodies of water is crucial to appreciating their invaluable contributions to life and culture. While lakes and oceans captivate us with their vastness,



*LATINOS MAY BE DISPROPORTIONATELY VULNERABLE TO NEGATIVE IMPACTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICES. AT THE SAME TIME, THEY MAY REPRESENT A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR CATALYZING SOLUTIONS THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION, BY MOBILIZING PARTICIPATION AND DESIGNING PROJECTS WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL AWARENESS.*

rivers possess a dynamic essence that is intimately connected to the communities along the shore. They embody a constant flow, connecting distant regions and, bringing life wherever they wander, sustaining human settlements, agriculture, and industry. Moreover, rivers support ecosystems, fostering biodiversity and nurturing delicate ecological balances.

The health of these aquatic ecosystems directly influences the well-being of individuals and populations, making river preservation imperative for current and future generations. The intricate water cycle interconnects various bodies of water, including lakes, oceans, and underground reservoirs. The movement of water through evaporation, condensation, and precipitation ensures the continuous circulation of this life-sustaining resource. As the driving force of this cycle, rivers transport water from its primary sources to the areas where water is most needed.

A critical aspect of this discussion is the intrinsic relationship between healthy rivers and clean drinking water. Rivers act as natural filtration systems, purifying water as it traverses their courses. They remove impurities, pollutants, and sediments, transforming once-contaminated water into a vital resource for human consumption. Protecting and preserving healthy river ecosystems directly translates into access to safe and clean drinking water for communities worldwide. The condition of rivers directly affects the quality of the drinking water they provide.

Today, most rivers and waterways, and the water cycle itself in many regions, face critical challenges. These may affect different communities in varying ways and to different degrees. As we explore in this paper, Latinos may be disproportionately vulnerable to negative impacts and environmental injustices. At the same time, they may represent a unique opportunity for catalyzing solutions through community engagement and collaboration, by mobilizing participation and designing projects with a high level of social and cultural awareness.





# THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

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The Mississippi River is an awe-inspiring testament to its size, abundant biodiversity, and immense economic significance. As a vital commercial waterway and a major migratory route for birds and fish, this majestic river has played a defining role in shaping historical events. Originally inhabited by Native Americans who relied on its waters for sustenance and transportation, the Mississippi River became a magnet for early European explorers and fur traders eager to venture into the heart of the future United States (Vernon Burton et al., n.d). The arrival of white settlers from Europe and the U.S., often accompanied by enslaved people, brought about transformative changes as they converted the landscape into fertile farmlands and bustling urban centers.

Even today, the Mississippi River continues to fuel the upper Midwest's economy, as barges transport an astonishing 165 million tons of freight yearly through its intricate system of 29 locks and dams (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2022). Additionally, it remains a cherished recreational haven, providing abundant opportunities for boating, canoeing, hunting, fishing, and birdwatching enthusiasts (National Park Service, 2022).

The Mississippi River boasts impressive dimensions. Stretching 2,350 miles from its source at Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico, it stands as North America's second-longest river, with only the Missouri River surpassing it by about 100 miles (Schaeztl et al., 2023). When considering the main stem along with the Missouri and Ohio Rivers, it's the world's third longest river system. At its headwaters in Lake Itasca, the Mississippi River is a mere 20 to 30 feet wide, but its width dramatically expands as it meanders along its course, reaching a width of over 11 miles at Lake Winnibigoshish near Bena, MN (O'Neal, 2012).

The Mississippi River's momentum varies throughout its journey, starting with an average surface speed of 1.2 miles per hour at its headwaters and gradually increasing to approximately 3 miles per hour as it flows toward the vibrant city of New Orleans. The water journey from Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico takes about 3 months to complete.

In terms of volume, the Mississippi River is the 15th largest river globally, discharging an astonishing 16,792 cubic meters (593,003 cubic feet) of water per second into the Gulf of Mexico (Kammerer, 1987). While this is remarkable, it pales in comparison to the Amazon River, which ranks first with a staggering 209,000 cubic meters (7,380,765 cubic feet) per second, emphasizing the magnitude of the Amazon's water flow (Liu et al., 2009).



Equally impressive is the vastness of the Mississippi River's watershed, which encompasses approximately 3.2 million square kilometers (1.2 million square miles) across 32 states and two Canadian provinces (Dempsey, 2018). Encompassing about 40% of the continental United States, the Mississippi River watershed ranks the fourth largest in the world, stretching from the Allegheny Mountains in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west. By comparison, the Amazon River's watershed covers approximately 7.1 million square kilometers (2.7 million square miles) (Priyadarshan, 2011).

Beyond its crucial role in commerce and transportation, the Mississippi River supplies vital freshwater to thousands of communities in the Midwest, and supports diverse wildlife. Its waters are home to at least 260 fish species, representing 40% of North America's fish population (National Park Service, 2022). Additionally, the river basin provides a crucial migratory flyway for 60% of North American birds, with 326 species utilizing its fertile corridor.

The Mississippi River meanders through ten states: **Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana**. The Latino populations in these states have experienced significant growth over recent decades, contributing substantially to the overall demographics of each state.

- **Minnesota:** In 2020, the Latino population stood at 345,640, accounting for 6.1% of the state's total population.
- **Wisconsin:** In 2020, Latinos comprise 7.6% of the population and were the fastest-growing minority in the state.
- **Iowa:** Hispanics make up 6.8% of the population, reflecting a 161.9% increase in the Latino population from 2000 to 2020.
- **Illinois:** A substantial 18.3% of the entire state's population identifies as Latino.
- **Missouri:** Latinos constitute 4.8% of the population, marking a noteworthy 42.6% increase from 2010 to 2020.
- **Kentucky:** The Latino population stands at 3.9%.
- **Tennessee:** Hispanics account for 6.4% of the population, experiencing a 3.8% growth from 2020 to 2021.
- **Arkansas:** Latinos represent 8.5% of the population, positioning Arkansas among the fifteen states where the Hispanic population contributed to over half of the state's overall population growth.
- **Mississippi:** Latinos comprise 3.6% of the population.
- **Louisiana:** A considerable 18.7% of the population is of Latino descent.

## The Mississippi River has a rich history of fostering diverse communities, including Latino and Hispanic populations, particularly in the Twin Cities area.

In Saint Paul for example, the West Side Flats neighborhood along the Mississippi River became a cultural and economic hub for the Latino community, featuring notable establishments like Luis Garzón's grocery store and La Casa Coronado, the state's first Mexican restaurant. Although the community faced challenges such as displacement due to urban renewal projects in the 1960s, it has continued to thrive, now centered around District del Sol. This enduring connection to the river is also symbolized in public art, like the "Usumacinta Meets the Mississippi" sculpture, and community activities that engage Latinos in outdoor and environmental experiences (Mississippi Park Connection, n.d).

The Mississippi River's remarkable history, astounding dimensions, and ecological significance come together in a captivating narrative, showcasing the intricate interplay between humanity and nature. Notably, Latino populations along the river have been on the rise, suggesting that the river's future will have a direct bearing on these communities. As we continue to harness its resources, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to preserving its natural beauty and ecological equilibrium for future generations.





# THE COLORADO RIVER

The Colorado River originates high in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and stretches an impressive 1,450 miles, crossing 30 tribal nations, the United States, and Mexico, making it a vital international waterway in North America (Summit, 2012). A life-giving force in the Southwest, where one-third of the nation’s Latinos live and work, the Colorado River plays a crucial role in sustaining life. The Colorado River meets the water needs of 40 million people, irrigates 5.5 million acres of agricultural land, generates electricity through its dams, and drives the recreation and tourism industries in the region (Mullane, 2023). Its ecological significance is equally extraordinary, with the river nurturing vast landscapes, including the 277 miles within the Grand Canyon, supporting diverse species of fish, wildlife, birds, and plants and safeguarding numerous culturally significant sites (American Rivers, n.d.).

At its broadest point in Grand Junction, Colorado, the river spans 200 feet, and near Phantom Ranch in the Grand Canyon, it plunges to a profound depth of nearly 90 feet (Pelz, 2023). Beginning its journey from high-elevation forests across the Colorado Plateau, the river carves its path through deep canyons and vast deserts before reaching the Gulf of California. However, it now seldom arrives at the sea. Two factors have conspired to turn this once mighty river into a trickle: climate change and overuse by the very states that rely on its waters (Zielinski, 2010).

The landscape’s natural features define the Colorado River Basin as a vast expanse of 246,000 square miles, just slightly smaller than Texas (Maupin et al., 2018). It hosts rivers, streams, and washes across several U.S. and Mexico states, forming a unique and crucial ecosystem.

Numerous rivers merge to feed the Colorado River, with the Green River, originating in Wyoming’s Wind River Mountains, serving as its largest tributary. Other major contributors include the Gunnison, Dolores, San Juan, Little Colorado, Gila, Dirty Devil, Escalante, Kanab, Paria, and Virgin Rivers, each adding to the river’s grandeur along its course (Maupin et al., 2018).

## DID YOU KNOW? THE GILA RIVER IS A LATINO HERITAGE SITE



[Place, Story and Culture: An Inclusive Approach to Protecting Latino Heritage Sites](#)

Regulating the Colorado River’s waters is a complex undertaking governed by a web of laws, agreements, and court decisions known as the “Law of the River.” Key components include the 1908 Winters decision, the 1922 Colorado River Compact, and the 1944 treaty between the U.S. and Mexico (Gelt, 1997). To meet the growing water demands in the basin, a series of dams, reservoirs, and canals, such as the iconic Hoover Dam and Glen Canyon Dam, were constructed to store and transport water (Bsumek, 2022). These vital infrastructures facilitate water movement within and outside the basin, supporting urban centers and farmlands across the region.

## Latino voters in the West exhibit a profound dedication to environmental concerns, particularly regarding water resources.

An impressive 84% believe it is crucial to conserve land, water, and wildlife habitat to ensure the protection of drinking water sources. This emphasis on conservation is mirrored in their concerns about regional water bodies; 73% view low river water levels as a very or extremely serious issue. Specifically, the Colorado River emerges as a focal point of concern, with 84% believing it requires urgent action. Furthermore, 83% of these voters recognize the river as critical to their state’s economy, highlighting the intricate connection between environmental stewardship and economic well-being within the Latino community (Hispanic Access Foundation, 2023).

Nevertheless, the Colorado River faces significant challenges due to one of the driest periods in the past 1,200 years, intensified by climate change and drought (Zielinski, 2010). Ensuring the wise preservation of this water resource and equitable access for communities within the basin is essential for the river’s health and sustainability, as it benefits the people, wildlife, and lands that rely on its vital waters.

### WATCH OUR SHORT FILM “LECHE Y MIEL” ABOUT THE COLORADO RIVER





# THE LATINO STAKE IN HEALTHY WATERWAYS

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The Latino community has a significant stake in healthy waterways for several reasons. First and foremost, many Latino communities are located close to rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water. These waterways have served as gathering places, sources of sustenance, and sites for cultural and spiritual practices within Latino communities.

Furthermore, water is crucial in various facets of Latino livelihoods, such as agriculture, fishing, and recreational pursuits. A substantial number of Latinos are engaged in agriculture as farmers and farmworkers, relying on access to pristine water sources for irrigation and successful crop cultivation (Isaacs, 2020). Without healthy waterways, communities may lack abundant unpolluted water resources, which constitute a fundamental cornerstone for the practice of sustainable agricultural methods and the assurance of food security (McLaughlin & Kinzelbach, 2015).

In addition, industries anchored in the water, such as fishing and tourism, are vital sources of income and employment for many Latino communities. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d) highlights industries with significant concentrations of Hispanics and Latinos as follows: 23.1% of Latinos working in agriculture, forestry, or fishing, and 22.3% employed in leisure or hospitality.

This data accentuates the essential role of unspoiled and thriving rivers, lakes, and coastal regions in sustaining diverse ecosystems that foster healthy fish populations and attract visitors, thereby bolstering the local economy. Furthermore, the impact of water quality on public health is a crucial concern for Latino communities (Liddie et al., 2023).

## The Latino stake in healthy waterways integrates cultural, economic, and public health aspects, underscoring the importance of preserving and protecting water resources for maintaining cultural heritage, sustaining livelihoods, and promoting the well-being of Latino communities.

Moreover, Latino populations have a notable interest in understanding and preserving access to nature and water recreation. A recent poll conducted by the Hispanic Access Foundation, involving 70 participants, sheds light on this aspect. The survey showed that 89.7% of the respondents considered access to the river as a recreational space for themselves and their families to be highly or moderately important. This statistic reinforces the intrinsic connection between the Latino community and the waterways that provide economic opportunities and serve as spaces of leisure and bonding.

“THE SURVEY SHOWED THAT 89.7% OF THE RESPONDENTS CONSIDERED ACCESS TO THE RIVER AS A RECREATIONAL SPACE FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES TO BE HIGHLY OR MODERATELY IMPORTANT. THIS STATISTIC REINFORCES THE INTRINSIC CONNECTION BETWEEN THE LATINO COMMUNITY AND THE WATERWAYS THAT PROVIDE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND SERVE AS SPACES OF LEISURE AND BONDING.”





# LATINOS AND WATER QUALITY

Like many marginalized communities, Latinos frequently encounter specific challenges concerning water quality (Acquah & Allaire, 2023, Liddie et al., 2023)). Some of the issues faced by Latinos in this context include:

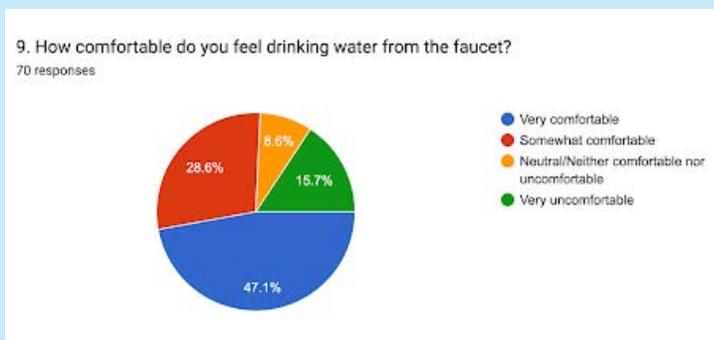
- **Access To Clean Drinking Water:** Latino communities may require increased access to safe and clean drinking water in certain regions due to insufficient regulatory oversight or a lack of infrastructure, including proper water treatment facilities or distribution systems (Acquah & Allaire, 2023). Consequently, Latinos are more likely to be exposed to harmful contaminants and pollutants that can jeopardize their health when compared to other communities in the United States (Liddie et al., 2023).
- **Environmental Injustice:** Environmental injustices disproportionately affect Latinos, particularly concerning water pollution and contamination (Balazs & Ray, 2014). Often, industries and waste disposal sites are situated near Latino communities, resulting in higher exposure to hazardous substances and pollutants (Carter-Pokras et al., 2007, Liddie et al., 2023). These environmental injustices contribute to adverse health outcomes, such as respiratory ailments, gastrointestinal problems, and heightened cancer risks. A poignant example of the struggle for safe water is observed in the unincorporated community of Tooleville (see case study: <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301664>).
- **Agricultural Run-Off:** Many Latinos work in agrarian settings, either as farm laborers or farmers. The use of pesticides, fertilizers, and other chemicals in agriculture can contaminate nearby water sources. Schaider et al. (2019) highlighted that over 5.6 million Americans currently consume water with elevated nitrate levels, which poses health risks. Alarmingly, Latinos are disproportionately affected by nitrates in public water systems. Two separate studies, one conducted by Balazs et

al. (2011) and the other by VanDerGeest et al. (2020), have revealed a significant trend: water systems serving Latino communities tend to display the highest concentrations of nitrates in their drinking water.

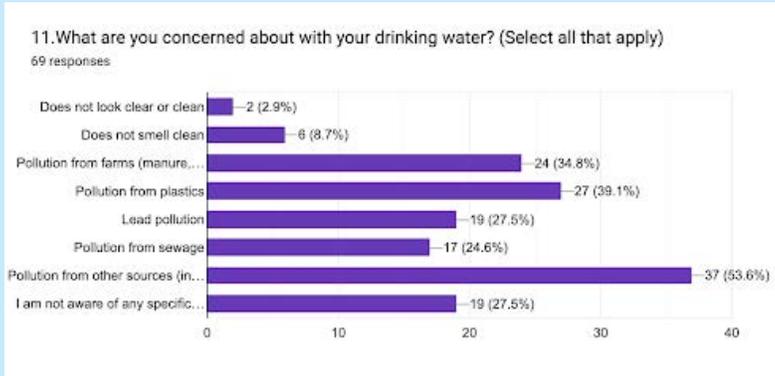
- Limited Information And Resources:** Limited information and resources due to language barriers can further exacerbate the disparities faced by Latino communities in accessing clean and safe drinking water (Schaidler et al., 2019). This challenge is compounded by additional factors, such as a lack of actionable information, economic limitations, and insufficient technical support, which collectively create burdens in the stewardship of wells and water sources for individuals. A notable study by VanDerGeest et al. (2020) revealed that many participants who face these obstacles resort to bottled water. Additionally, many participants relied on point-of-use or point-of-entry water treatment systems to address water quality concerns. Within this context, the lack of accessible and actionable information, coupled with economic constraints, underscores the complexities Latino communities encounter in their pursuit of clean water. These barriers hinder their capacity to make informed decisions, adopt effective water management practices, and fully engage in initiatives to safeguard their water sources. The findings from VanDerGeest et al. (2020) highlight that reliance on bottled water and water treatment systems is a prevalent coping strategy in the face of these challenges.
- Climate Change Impacts:** Climate change significantly compounds the water quality challenges confronting Latino communities. A survey conducted by Mora and Lopez (2021) reveals that climate change is already exerting its effects on local communities, as reported by about 7 in 10 Hispanic adults (71%)—a higher proportion compared to non-Hispanic adults (54%). The study indicates that a majority (56%) of U.S. Hispanics noted extreme weather events within their regions over the past year. The consequences of climate change, marked by elevated temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and an escalation in extreme weather events, directly affect water resources. These impacts manifest in the form of algal blooms (Cressey, 2017), droughts (Means, 2021), and intensified runoff of pollutants and sediments (Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, these alterations contribute to water scarcity, drought conditions, and flooding—all of which negatively influence water quality. This water system disruption elevates the vulnerability of Latino communities, and magnifies their exposure to the adverse impacts of climate-induced shifts.

It is crucial to highlight the perspectives of the Latino community themselves on these water quality challenges. According to a recent survey conducted by the Hispanic Access Foundation, a notable portion of participants have expressed concerns about the quality of their home’s drinking water, further emphasizing the significance of this issue. Specifically, 15.7% of participants felt very uncomfortable drinking the water in their homes, indicating a high level of apprehension. Additionally, 28.6% reported feeling somewhat uncomfortable with their home’s drinking water, demonstrating that a substantial proportion (44.3%) remains uneasy about water quality (Figure 1). Pollution was identified as the most significant barrier to accessing safe drinking water, with 53.6% of respondents citing pollution from sewage as a significant concern and 39.1% highlighting pollution from plastics as a notable issue (Figure 2). These findings illustrate

**FIGURE 1: PERCEPTIONS OF DRINKING WATER SAFETY: PARTICIPANTS' COMFORT LEVELS WITH FAUCET WATER CONSUMPTION**



**FIGURE 2: CONCERNS ABOUT DRINKING WATER QUALITY: LATINO COMMUNITY SURVEY RESPONSES**



Latino individuals' concerns regarding the safety and quality of their daily water. The fact that such a significant percentage of respondents expressed discomfort underscores the pressing need to address water quality issues in their communities. In parallel with these individual views, a broader perspective emerged from the survey, indicating that water quality is the primary concern when accessing waterways within their communities (Figure 3).

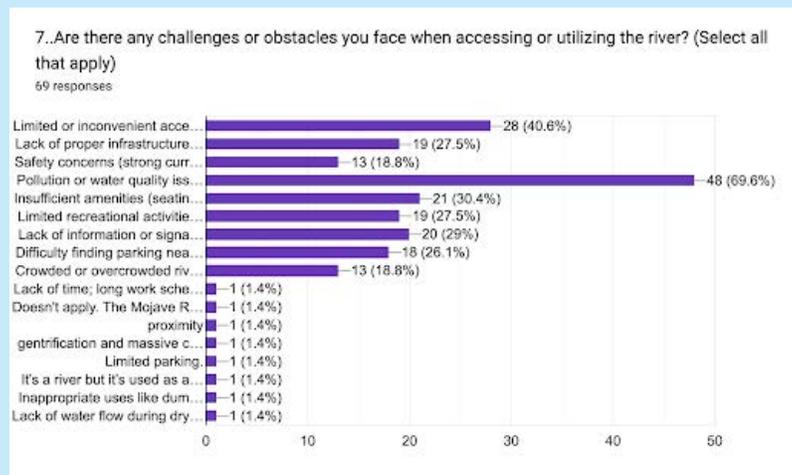
Access to clean drinking water is essential for the well-being of individuals

and communities. Poor water quality can harm health, leading to the spread of waterborne diseases and other health risks.

**By advocating for and ensuring the health of waterways, Latino communities strive for equitable access to safe and clean drinking water, a fundamental human right.**

Comprehensive efforts are needed to bridge language gaps and provide targeted resources and technical assistance to address these multifaceted obstacles. By enhancing communication channels in languages spoken by Latinos, policymakers and community stakeholders can empower individuals to make informed choices and take proactive steps toward ensuring clean and safe drinking water. Additionally, initiatives to mitigate economic limitations and offer technical support can reduce the burdens associated with good stewardship, ultimately fostering more equitable access to reliable and healthy water sources for all community members.

**FIGURE 3: LATINO PERSPECTIVES: CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES IN ACCESSING AND UTILIZING RIVERS**



These findings underscore the direct experiences and perceptions of Latinos regarding the quality and safety of their water sources, emphasizing the urgency of addressing these issues to ensure healthy and equitable water for all. Addressing these water quality problems requires comprehensive and equitable approaches that involve community engagement, policy advocacy, and investment in infrastructure and resources. Recognizing and addressing Latinos' specific challenges with water quality is essential for achieving environmental justice and ensuring access to clean and safe water for all communities.



# DROUGHTS AND FLOODING

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Droughts and flooding, seemingly opposing yet inherently intertwined meteorological occurrences, can significantly alter the relationship between Latinos and the water resources critical to their way of life.

Rivers and streams experience flooding due to large rain storms or spring snowmelt that quickly drains into streams and rivers (Kattelman, 1997). Although the risk for flooding varies across the United States, most areas are susceptible to floods, even in dry and mountainous regions (Wing et al., 2022). The size, or magnitude, of flood events is influenced by how much water enters the waterway upstream—and how quickly. Flood frequency largely depends on the frequency of weather events. On the other hand, drought is a period of unusually persistent dry weather long enough to cause serious problems such as crop damage and water supply shortages. The severity of the drought depends upon the degree of lack of rainfall, manifesting itself in abnormally low streamflow in rivers and abnormally low levels in lakes, reservoirs, and groundwater (Van Loon, 2015). Periods of drought can actually exacerbate the risk of floods, as extremely dry soil is less able to absorb water, which then pools on the surface rather than draining into the soil.

Given the relationship between floods, droughts, and weather events, it is evident that a changing climate shapes the occurrence and intensity of droughts and flooding. Alterations in rainfall patterns and more extreme weather events caused by climate change increase the risk of droughts and floods, amplifying Latino communities' challenges with water availability. A recent study conducted by Wing et al. (2022) revealed significant findings regarding annual exposure to flooding. The study identified that Florida, California, New York, and Texas populations are the most susceptible to flooding every year under current conditions. It is significant to emphasize that nearly seven out of ten Latinos in the United States reside in these four states (Pew Center, 2004). The study also forecasts an increase in average annual exposure

due to climate change, particularly along the East Coast. For instance, residents of Texas and Florida are projected to witness a substantial increase of around 50% in flood exposure by 2050 (Wing et al., 2022).

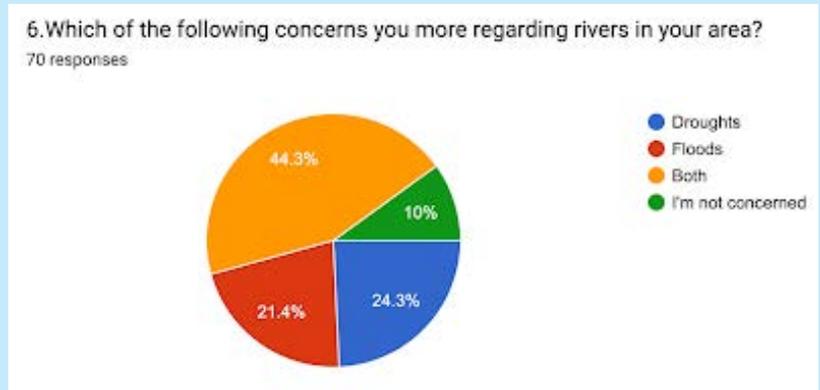
## Increases in flood exposure are likely to disproportionately harm communities of color.

For example, in Miami and Houston, it was found that Hispanic immigrants are more likely to live in flood zones (Maldonado et al., 2016). These findings underscore the pressing need for proactive measures to address the escalating flooding risks, particularly in regions with large Latinos populations.

Climate change has also significantly reshaped the dynamics of droughts, resulting in increased frequency, prolonged durations, and heightened severity. The onset of the 21st century has witnessed the western United States grappling with some of the most parched conditions ever recorded (Karl et al., 2009). The southwestern region, in particular, is confronting an unprecedented phase of extreme drought, which has detrimental effects on ecosystems and Latino communities (Wahl et al., 2022). The repercussions of such conditions were evident during the drought of 2021, which hit rural, low-income Latino communities across California particularly hard. As the state grapples with extreme drought, these communities face ongoing drinking water shortages, as summarized in a report by non-partisan advisors to California’s lawmakers (Petek, 2021).

In a recent survey by the Hispanic Access Foundation, 44.3% of participants expressed concerns about flooding and droughts (Figure 4), further underscoring the growing apprehensions surrounding these climatic-dependent events. As floods and droughts become more frequent and severe, Latino populations’ vulnerability in flood-prone or drought-affected regions is further accentuated. The disparities in exposure and impacts underscore the urgency for comprehensive strategies encompassing community engagement, policy reform, and infrastructure enhancements. Addressing these challenges requires scientific research, policy action, and a deep understanding of the cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental factors that shape Latinos’ relationships with water.

**FIGURE 4: LATINO COMMUNITY CONCERNS REGARDING RIVER ISSUES: BREAKDOWN OF RESPONSES ON DROUGHTS, FLOODS, OR BOTH.**





# POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

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As climate change advances, the health of our rivers and their surrounding ecosystems are increasingly at risk due to factors like extreme weather events and altered water cycles. Addressing these challenges requires a focused effort on climate mitigation. To safeguard our rivers for future generations, it is imperative to enact a just climate transition within the next 10-15 years. This involves phasing out the use of coal, oil, and gas, transitioning U.S. energy sources to 100% renewable options like solar and wind, and ensuring a just transition for communities that are dependent on fossil fuel industries.

While transitioning to renewable energy is critical for mitigating the larger impacts of climate change, targeted management and ecological strategies are also needed to address Latino environmental injustice, water quality, drought, and flooding concerns in our vulnerable waterways.

## RIPARIAN RESTORATION AND REFORESTATION

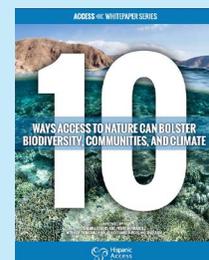
Riparian restoration and reforestation in river areas are specific ecological practices aimed at rehabilitating and enhancing the health of riparian zones, which are the areas adjacent to rivers, streams, and other bodies of water. These areas are crucial for maintaining water quality, supporting diverse ecosystems, and providing habitats for various plant and animal species (Yochum & Reynolds, 2018). Some of the key benefits of riparian restoration are as follows:

- **Water Quality Improvement:** Riparian zones serve as natural filters for water, removing pollutants, sediments, and nutrients before they reach the main water body. Restoring and maintaining healthy riparian vegetation can improve water quality and protect aquatic ecosystems from contamination.

- **Erosion and Flood Control:** Riparian vegetation, including trees and shrubs with extensive root systems, helps stabilize riverbanks and prevent erosion, which reduces sedimentation and minimizes the risk of flooding, safeguarding nearby communities and infrastructure.
- **Biodiversity Conservation:** Riparian areas are rich in biodiversity, providing habitats for various plant and animal species. Restoring these zones ensures that native wildlife can thrive, supporting ecological balance and promoting the survival of threatened or endangered species.
- **Climate Change Mitigation:** Reforestation and healthy riparian zones contribute to climate change mitigation by sequestering atmospheric carbon dioxide. Trees act as carbon sinks, helping to offset greenhouse gas emissions and combat climate change.
- **Habitat Connectivity:** Riparian corridors act as natural wildlife corridors, enabling the movement and dispersal of species between fragmented habitats. This connectivity is essential for wildlife populations to adapt to changing environmental conditions and maintain genetic diversity.
- **Sustainable Resource Management:** River areas provide valuable resources for human societies, such as freshwater for drinking, agriculture, and industry. By restoring riparian zones and reforesting adjacent lands, we can ensure the sustainable use of these resources for present and future generations.
- **Climate Resilience:** Healthy riparian ecosystems enhance the resilience of river areas and communities to withstand extreme weather events, disasters, and climate change impacts like extreme heat. They contribute to the overall health and stability of the entire river ecosystem.
- **Cultural and Recreational Value:** River areas hold cultural and recreational significance for local communities. Restoring these ecosystems allows people to reconnect with nature, engage in outdoor activities, and appreciate the beauty and benefits of natural landscapes.
- **Access to Nature:** Throughout the United States, Latinos and other communities of color are over three times more likely than white communities to live somewhere that is “nature deprived,” lacking forests, streams, wetlands, and other natural places (Hispanic Access Foundation and Center for American Progress, 2020). Riparian restoration has the potential to remediate this injustice and bring mental health, physical health, economic development, and many other benefits to communities that have historically lacked them (Hispanic Access Foundation, 2022).

Conducting riparian restoration and reforestation practices is crucial for maintaining the ecological integrity of the Mississippi and the Colorado River basins and improving the conditions of these ecosystems for Latinos. These efforts contribute to water quality improvement, biodiversity conservation, climate change resilience, and the sustainable management of natural resources. Local communities often possess intimate knowledge of the local ecosystems and a vested interest in preserving ecosystem services. However, these communities need to

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[The Nature Gap: Confronting Racial and Economic Disparities in the Destruction and Protection of Nature in America](#)



engaged in land restoration, the practices are more likely to achieve long-term sustainable restoration success (Santini & Miquelajauregui, 2022). Hispanics are a rapidly growing segment of the United States population.

They will play an increasingly important role in the future allocation and management of natural resources, including water and wildlife (Lopez et al., 2010).

A significant majority, 94% of Latinos, prioritize outdoor activities, underscoring the importance they attribute to nature. Furthermore, a substantial 79% of this demographic shows robust support for clean water regulations (Sierra Club & Green Latinos, 2016). Therefore, considering Latino demographics, interests, and culture is crucial when developing restoration programs. Recognizing and respecting differences among Spanish-speaking cultures is equally

important. Understanding these cultural characteristics will enable wildlife advocates to effectively address natural resource issues in a manner that resonates with Latino communities nationwide.

**Given their growing political and economic influence, encouraging Hispanic participation in the planning process is in the best interest of natural resources, wildlife, and wildlife professionals.**

## MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Nature-based solutions for the water crisis involve using what we already have to improve our water management. Wetlands restoration is crucial as they provide a natural shield against excessive rain and storms (Day et al., 2003). Adequate water storage during the rainy season can better equip communities for dry seasons or episodes of droughts. Climate-smart agriculture, like drip irrigation or seasonal harvesting planning, allows less water usage since it considers the natural rain patterns for their crop plantation.

Precise predictions are crucial to prepare for streamflows of both floods and droughts.

**Social justice should be at the center of water management strategies to visualize the communities that most urgently need solutions, given that socioeconomic disparities hinder water availability (Calderon et al., 1993).**

When discussing drought and flood management, there must be a balance between storing water long-term for drought prediction and controlling floods in a short-term manner (Yang & Liu., 2020).

Droughts contingency plans have been put in motion by the multiple states for which the Colorado River provides water: Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and, of course, California and submitted to Congress. Working with Lake Powell, the Glen Canyon Dam, and the Colorado River to allow for better water retention by adjusting monthly water releases (NOAA, 2019). The Colorado River is a significant water source that flows down to Lake Mead, supplying water to 25 million people and five states. Therefore, pilot programs like the National Water Reuse Action Plan aim to improve water management while prioritizing urban communities for water equity (Furneaux, 2021).



# CONCLUSION

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Rivers are not merely waterways; they are the lifeblood of our planet, connecting ecosystems, cultures, and communities in intricate ways. The profound connections between rivers and Latino communities, exemplified by the Colorado and Mississippi Rivers, underscore the complex interplay between nature and humanity. The significance of these rivers transcends their physical dimensions, reaching deep into the hearts and lives of those who depend on their waters.

The Latino community's investment in healthy waterways comprises an intricate blend of cultural heritage, economic vitality, and public health significance. Their proximity to rivers, lakes, and coastal regions underscores the indispensable role of water in their lives. From agriculture to fishing, industries anchored in these water bodies are sources of income and sustenance. Yet, water quality concerns dominate Latino communities, with challenges ranging from inadequate access to safe drinking water to environmental injustices and climate-induced shifts. The Hispanic Access Foundation's survey results laid bare the unease and mistrust experienced by many Latinos in their relationship with water, urging us to engage these issues with urgency and resolve.

A comprehensive approach is required to address these challenges and preserve the invaluable bond between Latino communities and water resources. Riparian restoration and reforestation are potential strategies to safeguard ecological balance, water quality, and biodiversity. Nevertheless, the success of these endeavors hinges on inclusive community engagement, recognizing and respecting the significance of these waterways within the Latino population. Collaborative efforts between policymakers, scientists, community leaders, and individuals are essential for creating lasting solutions.

The path forward becomes clearer as we reflect on the journey through rivers and their intricate connections.

**This journey is not just about conserving water but about preserving traditions, livelihoods, and the essence of nature that sustains us.**

By nurturing rivers, we promote our future—ensuring that clean and safe water flows for us and future

generations. As we face the challenges of a changing climate, inequitable access to resources, and the delicate balance of ecosystems, let us unite in our commitment to protect the rivers that bind us to each other. We can ensure a future where rivers flow freely, nurturing Latino communities' life, culture, and well-being through collective action, cultural appreciation, and sustainable practices.

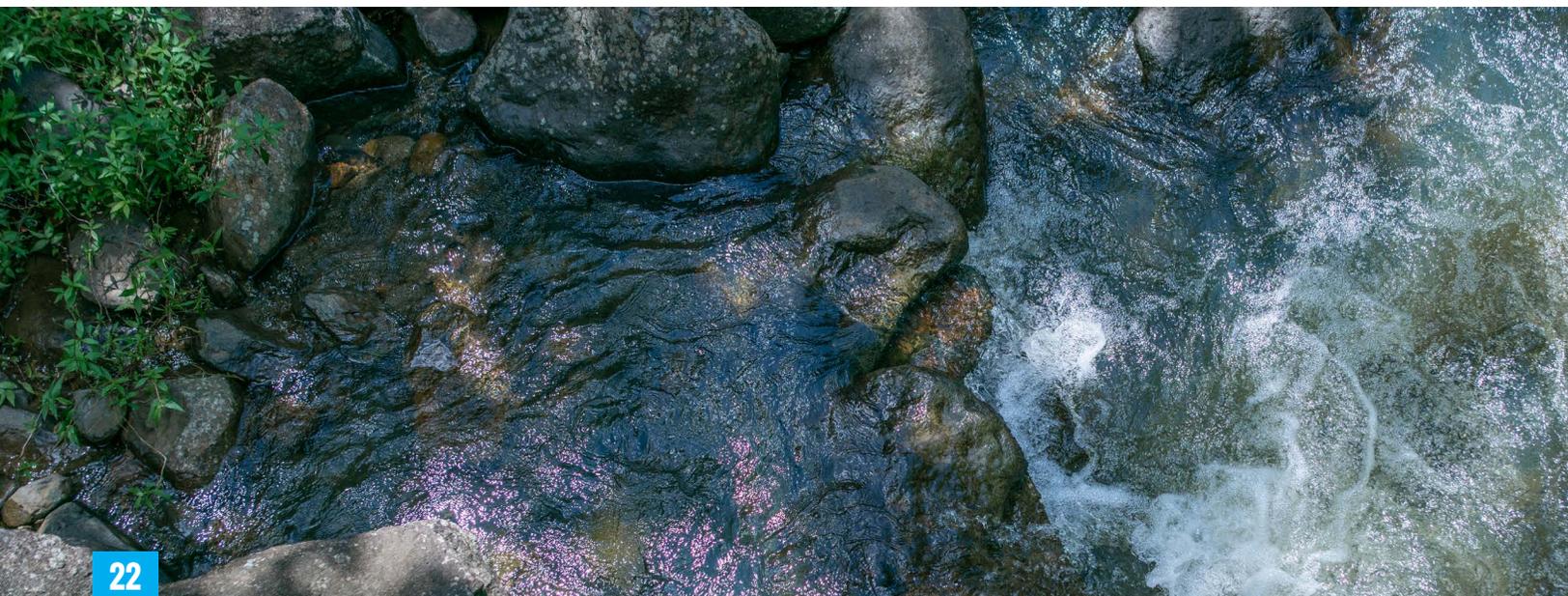
In addition to the considerations outlined above, the future implications for building upon this work extend to conducting further surveys that explore the interactions of communities residing in the Colorado and Mississippi watersheds. It becomes essential to delve into a nuanced understanding of how restoration and reforestation of riparian zones benefit community members, viewing it through social justice and health equity lenses. Such insights will prove invaluable for policymakers and officials responsible for maintaining the ecological integrity, safety, and accessibility of these ecosystems.

Linking engagement with waterways for recreational purposes with other social determinants of health takes on paramount significance as the climate crisis escalates and environmental degradation becomes more pervasive. The intricate web of relationships between nature, human well-being, and community resilience highlights the need to examine how access to water resources can influence broader aspects of individuals' lives. By comprehensively exploring these linkages, we can lay the groundwork for informed decision-making and holistic policy approaches.

Collaborative initiatives based on culturally informed and participatory methods increase the potential of communities to develop sustainable solutions. Ideally, these solutions resonate with the diverse needs and aspirations of local populations and recognize the deep ties between cultural heritage, community identity, and waterways.

## **In the face of mounting challenges, our collective responsibility is to preserve rivers as lifelines for the Latino community and society.**

We have an opportunity at a critical time. We can lay the foundations for a future where nature and humanity thrive in harmony by fostering dialogue, engagement, and collaboration ... or we can slip farther down the slope of environmental damage and community risk. Through our combined efforts, we can shape a legacy of vibrant waterways that enrich the lives of current and future generations, serving as a testament to the enduring relationship between Latinos and their rivers.



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# ABOUT US

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Hispanic Access Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that connects Latinos with partners and opportunities improving lives and creating an equitable society. Our vision is that all Hispanics throughout the U.S. enjoy good physical health, a healthy natural environment, a quality education, economic success and civic engagement in their communities with the sum improving the future of America. For more information, visit [www.hispanicaccess.org](http://www.hispanicaccess.org).

Hispanic Access Foundation was actively involved in elevating the Latino community's voice around the Browns Canyon, San Gabriel Mountains, Boulder-White Clouds, Sand to Snow, Mojave Trails, Castle Mountains National Monument, and Castner Range National Monument efforts. Additionally, Hispanic Access has launched the initiatives Por la Creacion Faith Based Alliance, which unites Latino faith leaders around the protection of God's creation and creating tomorrow's environmental stewards, and Latino Conservation Week, which includes dozens of conservation and outdoor-related events across the country.



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