

2025 Impact Study Report of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project



Report Prepared for Roaring Fork Conservancy | December 2025

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Introduction

Roaring Fork Conservancy (RFC) seeks to inspire people to explore, value, and protect the Roaring Fork Watershed. RFC serves both residents and visitors of the Roaring Fork Valley through dynamic school and community-based Watershed Education Programs, as well as through Watershed Science and Policy initiatives. These efforts include regional watershed planning, development of water resource policies, stream management, and ecological restoration projects. Please refer to Appendix A for a Glossary of Key Terms.¹

The Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project was a collaborative effort between the Town of Carbondale, in partnership with RFC and Pitkin County Healthy Rivers, Aspen Valley Land Trust, American Rivers, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and Trout Unlimited. See Appendix B for before and after photos taken by RFC. The project focused on four main goals:

- 1) Restore the park's riparian zone while preserving bird and wildlife habitats. Key activities included streambank stabilization, floodplain reconnection, and replacing invasive weeds and monocultures with diverse native plants.
- 2) Enhance river channel stability and improve fish habitats and spawning areas in the Riverfront Park section of Crystal River. Key activities focused on creating conditions that support and strengthen instream biotic structure and diversity.
- 3) Develop a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure, which would allow the Weaver Ditch to function within the river system while enhancing water delivery for the Town of Carbondale.
- 4) Enhance public experiences at Crystal Riverfront Park. This involved installing and upgrading interpretive signs, trails, gathering spaces, and educational programs.



RFC worked with Research Evaluation Consulting LLC (REC) to evaluate the impact of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project on key partners, stakeholders, and invested members of the Carbondale community. Over a 12-month period, REC conducted a multi-method evaluation that included a data and document review, semi-structured stakeholder interviews, and the design and implementation of a community member survey supported by a communication campaign. The evaluation explored the overall effectiveness of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project, with a particular focus on areas of strength, the impact on partners and community members, and opportunities for improvement in the planning and implementation, and recommendations for short and long-term management. Specifically, REC examined the following three evaluation questions:

- 1) How effectively has the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project achieved its mission for partners and Carbondale community members?
- 2) What impact, if any, did the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project make on partners and Carbondale community members?
- 3) What worked well and what could be improved about the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project for partners and Carbondale community members?



¹ All photographs of the Crystal River and Riverfront Park were taken by staff members of REC, RFC, DHM Designs, and River Restoration.

The findings presented in this Impact Study Report reflect the voices and perspectives of both key partners and surveyed members of the public, offering evidence-informed insights. This report is intended to support RFC's and the Town of Carbondale's strategic planning efforts and guide the development and implementation of future projects. It addresses the key evaluation questions, assesses the effectiveness of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project, highlights strengths and opportunities for improvement, and offers actionable recommendations.

This report includes six sections. The Introduction provides the evaluation context and guiding questions. The Methodology summarizes the data collection methods and analysis approach. The Results section presents key findings from the partner and stakeholder interviews as well as the Community Member Survey. At the same time, the Discussion interprets these findings in relation to the evaluation questions. The Actionable Recommendations offer strategic guidance based on the results, and the Conclusion highlights key takeaways and considerations for future planning. Additional supporting materials are included in the Appendices.



Methodology

This section outlines the key methods used in the evaluation, including the development of the Partner and Key Stakeholder Interview Protocol, the Community Member Survey, the data collection process, and the techniques applied to analyze and interpret the survey data.

Kick-Off Meeting

On January 9, 2025, REC and RFC met to discuss the evaluation project, priorities, and next steps.

Data and Document Review

As part of the evaluation methodology, REC conducted a systematic review of documents and data to establish context and inform the design of evaluation tools. Eight key documents were reviewed, including the Crystal River Management Plan, restoration proposals, site assessments, and planning documents related to the Weaver Ditch diversion structure. In addition, a folder containing 23 drone comparison shots with before-and-after photographs was examined to visually document ecological and community changes over time. Collectively, these materials provided important background on project objectives, decision-making processes, and restoration outcomes. Insights from this review informed the Partner and Stakeholder Interview Protocol, shaped the Community Member Survey, and ensured that subsequent data collection and analysis were grounded in the project's history and goals.

Partner and Key Stakeholder Interviews

Between March 17 and April 25, 2025, REC conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with project partners and key stakeholders. Two REC staff members scheduled and facilitated all interviews, which lasted between 8 and 28 minutes, with an average duration of 15 minutes. The interview protocol included 14 questions and was finalized on March 12, 2025. It focused on key areas, including the project's goals, collaboration, and overall value. These interviews provided both quantitative ratings and qualitative insights into the effectiveness and impact of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project. A copy of the interview protocol is included in **Appendix C**.

Community Member Survey

Building on insights from Partner and Stakeholder Interviews and discussions with RFC, REC developed a Community Member Survey to evaluate community use of Riverfront Park and the impact of the restoration project on visitor experiences. The survey included 13 questions, designed to take 5 – 7 minutes to complete, and was administered through SurveyMonkey with both a link and QR code shared via a communication campaign.

Questions focused on eligibility and park use, including how often people visited before and after the summer 2023 restoration. Participants rated their overall experiences with the park, as well as specific features such as walking trails, fishing conditions, accessibility, gathering spaces, and opportunities for nature learning. Additional questions explored perceptions of the restoration's impact, such as whether the park had become more appealing, as well as open-ended feedback on what visitors valued most and what could be improved. Demographic details, including age and length of residency in Carbondale or the surrounding area, were also collected. Survey data were gathered between June 4 and August 24, 2025. Respondents took an average of 5 minutes and 38 seconds² to complete the survey. See **Appendix D** for a copy of the survey.

² Two respondents (4.1%) were excluded from the average calculation as outliers for unusually long completion times.

Data Analysis

The data included both quantitative and qualitative information. Quantitative data, or information that is easily represented through numbers, included rating statements (e.g., “How would you rate your recent experiences with Crystal Riverfront Park?”). REC also examined the overall characteristics of all data, focusing on frequencies,³ averages,⁴ and percentages.⁵ Qualitative data, or information not easily represented by numbers, came primarily from open-ended responses (e.g., “What positive or negative impacts have you or your family observed or experienced from the restoration project?”). Open-ended data explores complex phenomena, such as opinions and personal statements. REC analyzed all given responses, coded them for common themes and patterns, and grouped those themes using a Grounded Theory Approach.⁶ REC also included representative quotes to better capture the themes identified from the analyses.

Sample Size

In this report, a capitalized letter N reflects the overall or survey-specific number of participants.⁷ The lowercase n, or question sample size, represents the subset of individuals who provided an answer for a particular question. The sample size n varied throughout the data analysis, as not all participants answered each question.



Example of new signage installed in Riverfront Park

³ Frequencies: A count of data, such as the number of participants who answered a survey question.

⁴ Averages: A measure of central tendency that summarizes a set of numbers by calculating the total sum divided by the number of values. In survey data, averages are often used to represent the typical response on a numerical scale (e.g., the average agreement rating on a Likert-scale question).

⁵ Percentages: A proportion of the data expressed as a part of 100, such as the percentage of participants who selected a specific response to a survey question.

⁶ Grounded Theory Approach: A technique developed for analyzing qualitative data. Key steps include coding all responses for major categories/concepts, grouping those categories/concepts, and identifying relevant relationships between responses (Hallberg, 2006). See Appendix E for all references.

⁷ Of the 67 visitors who began the survey, 18 were excluded. Specifically, 11 individuals (16.4%) completed less than 30% of the survey, six visitors (9%) had not visited the park, and one individual (1.5%) lived outside of Carbondale and the surrounding area.

Stakeholder Interview Results

This section presents the findings from the stakeholder interviews. **Please note that interviewee perspectives varied based on their roles, expectations, and understanding of the project's goals and feasibility. Therefore, the findings in this section reflect individual viewpoints shaped by varying levels of involvement and familiarity with different stages of the project.**

Interview Participants

Twenty-five individuals representing 13 organizations⁸ participated in telephone interviews to share feedback on how effectively the Riverfront Park Restoration Project achieved its goals, reflect on project successes and challenges, and assess the extent to which the project is considered a worthwhile investment to date.

Interviewees represented a range of roles and were engaged at different stages of the restoration project. In particular, 10 stakeholders provided **External Advising and/or Funding Support** (e.g., n = 10, 40%), 9 interviewees (36%) were involved with the **Project Inception and Actualization**,⁹ 7 stakeholders supported (28%) **Technical Design and Implementation**,¹⁰ and 6 interviewees (24%) described their **Utilization of the Park** before and after the restoration. When asked about their familiarity with the project area, eighteen interviewees (72%) described themselves as familiar, and 7 interviewees (28%) stated that they were moderately familiar. Approximately 15 interviewees (60%) had either professional or personal experiences with Riverfront Park or the adjacent section of the Crystal River before the commencement of the restoration project.

Achieving Project Goals

Interviewees rated their level of agreement with statements about the project's success in achieving each of its four intended goals, using a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). They were also invited to explain the reasoning behind each rating. The following section summarizes both the ratings and stakeholders' explanations.

Goal 1: Restoring the park's riparian zone while preserving bird and wildlife habitats through streambank stabilization, floodplain reconnections, and replacing invasive weeds and monocultures with diverse native plants.

- Twenty-four interviewees (96%) provided ratings, and all 25 individuals (100%) provided explanations. The non-rating individual, plus five interviewees (n = 6, 24%), mentioned having limited knowledge about whether this goal was achieved due to the season or the time since their last visit.
- **Interviewees provided an average rating of 4.50 (between Agree and Strongly Agree) with 22 individuals (91.7%) strongly agreeing or agreeing**, one person (4.2%) being neutral, and one respondent (4.2%) strongly disagreeing that this goal was achieved.
- **Twenty-one respondents (84%) described one or more project successes**, specifically:"
 - o Positive impacts on area vegetation, including observations of native plants growing successfully or fewer invasive or noxious weeds (n = 16, 64%);
 - o Stabilized riverbanks, with less erosion occurring during runoffs (n = 7, 28%);
 - o Improved floodplain connectivity (n = 2, 8%); and
 - o Belief that the project was well-designed to achieve the goal and that execution was or should be successful, with or without direct observations of success (n = 8, 32%).

⁸ Interviewees represented the following organizations: American Rivers, Aspen Valley Land Trust, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, DHM Designs, Lotic Hydrological, Pitkin County Healthy Rivers, Proudline Guides, Redoubt Constructions, River Restoration, Roaring Fork Audubon, Roaring Fork Conservancy, Roaring Fork High School, and the Town of Carbondale.

⁹ Examples include stakeholder input/professional advice about impacts or benefits to fisheries, land and aquatic wildlife, and human users, tax- and grant-sourced financial support.

¹⁰ Examples include in-river and water diversion engineering, construction, and restoration, upland landscape design and restoration, and park amenities planning and installation.

¹¹ Eight interviewees (32%) offered additional comments while explaining their ratings. These included benefits less directly tied to Goal 1, such as improved water flow management, enhanced river channel aesthetics, a functional and accessible public park, and opportunities for nature education. Additionally, concerns were raised about project timing and methods rather than the goals themselves.

“Just being present in the park both before and after, there's a significant difference as far as vegetation and connection to the river that just didn't exist before.”

“I feel like we've done a really fantastic job at maintaining the integrity of the park and keeping it as a special, natural place for people to visit, while also really enhancing the natural environment via the plant communities that we have integrated back in and then also in the actual physical structure of the river, it's a much more functioning system at this point.”

“I think the contractor and the landscaping subcontractor did a great job, they brought in the plants and did it with the least amount of disturbance as possible, I think it looks great down there.”

- **Ten interviewees (40%) felt that it was too soon** to assess goal achievement fully. These individuals felt that more time was needed (e.g., more years of growth, more flood or high-water events) to determine if the native plants would fully return, if soil disturbance, irrigation, and fencing off the area would cause weed problems, and if floodplain reconnection and erosion control would work as intended.
- **Eight interviewees (32%) mentioned additional ideas, considerations, and differing views** related to this goal. Examples included the need for continued weed management, trade-offs between recreation and habitat improvement, questions about the success of floodplain reconnection, and concerns about reduced habitat diversity and natural water flow despite efforts to limit erosion.

Goal 2: Enhancing river channel stability and improving fish habitats and spawning areas in this section of the Crystal River.

- All 25 interviewees (100%) provided ratings and provided explanations. However, seven interviewees (28%) felt that they lacked information around instream biodiversity, fishery changes, or before/after depth analyses, and therefore could not determine whether this goal was achieved.
- **Interviewees provided an average rating of 4.36 (above Agree), with 22 individuals (88%) strongly agreeing or agreeing,** two individuals (8%) being neutral, and one respondent (4%) strongly disagreeing that this goal was achieved.
- **Twenty-four respondents (96%) described one or more goal-related project successes,** specifically:
 - Enhanced river channel stability and more consistent flows across years, without as much human disruption (n = 15, 60%);
 - Specific instances of improved fish habitats or fishing, or better instream biotic structure or diversity (n = 13, 52%);
 - Belief that the project was well-designed to achieve the goal and that execution was or should be successful, with or without direct observations of success (n = 5, 20%).

“It definitely created [a] habitat that even at lower flows is going to carry water instead of being an over-wide channel; it has definitely helped in that respect.”

“...I think in the comparison before and after, we're seeing white fish in that stretch, we're seeing the macroinvertebrates in that stretch, in an area where you could walk across at low water. There wasn't space for there wasn't space for fish passage or habitat. And the project has created that space, and it's [been] maintained over the past two summers.

“... [Before] the river didn't have a lot of diversity, flow diversity, or depth diversity, it was pretty much as a long riffle, so we added some pools in and some boulders to create variations and velocities and depths, just kind of what the fish likes.”

- **Four interviewees (16%) mentioned concerns,** including perceptions that fish habitat had not improved or that structures were not performing as intended due to low observed fish presence. Another individual commented that some of the changes were “not entirely natural,” such as the fishers' access steps.
- **Two interviewees (8%) felt more time was needed** to tell how the fish population and aquatic ecosystem would rebound after the project disruptions.

Goal 3: Developing a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure to allow the Weaver Ditch to function within the river system while enhancing water delivery to the Town of Carbondale.

- Twenty-three interviewees (92%) provided ratings, and all 25 individuals (100%) provided explanations. The two who did not give ratings, along with eight others (n = 10, 40%), felt they lacked sufficient information to assess whether the goal was achieved. Reasons included limited expertise, low involvement or communication regarding these project activities, and lack of access to engineering analyses or monitoring data.
- **Interviewees provided an average rating of 4.43 (between Agree and Strongly Agree), with 18 individuals (78.3%) strongly agreeing or agreeing,** and five individuals (21.7%) being neutral, that this goal was achieved.
- **Twenty interviewees (80%) described project successes** related to the goal, including:
 - o Headgate and ditch diversion components are working well, allowing the Town of Carbondale to receive water as planned without as much maintenance labor or any equipment disrupting the river (n = 17, 68%); and
 - o Belief that the project was well-designed to achieve the goal and that execution was or should be successful, with or without direct observations of success (n = 4, 16%).

“The most evident [success] is before we did this project, we would have to get equipment into the river to divert enough water typically into our headgate structure particularly in the late summer and fall, and since we did the work, we have not had to have a piece of equipment in the river at all.”

“There has not been the need to bring heavy equipment into the into the diversion area in order to maintain that diversion in the last couple of years after that’s been installed, I think that alone is a huge success, and it appears to be kind of self-sustaining as it’s designed, between low, medium and high water, kind of events and situations. And I’ve been out there, kind of in the spring, summer, and fall, and witnessed each of those, those river conditions. And you can see the function as it was intended.”

“The diversion structure that was there previously was unsustainable and required regular maintenance, was a safety hazard for the town using it, and certainly an ecological issue with the maintenance and the way it needed to be done. And so at this point, that project has required no maintenance yet with a variety of flows, and has allowed the town to still receive the water that they’re due.”

- **Three interviewees (12%) felt more time was needed** to see how the system would operate during years with widely varying water conditions.
- **Two interviewees (8%) shared feedback not directly tied to this goal but related to the headgate component of the project.** Both noted that while improvements have been made to the delivery infrastructure, the intended ability to manage the headgate and optimize water diversion remotely has not yet been realized. One interviewee attributed this to technology still being in its early stages of development, while the other suggested that further adoption and operational changes by the Town may be needed to fully achieve this functionality and the associated river-flow benefits.

Goal 4: Enhance public experiences at Crystal Riverfront Park with installed or upgraded interpretive signs, trails, gathering spaces, and educational programs.

- Twenty-two interviewees (88%) provided ratings, and all 25 individuals (100%) provided explanations. Three individuals (12%) did not rate the goal because they had not seen the final project elements or had not visited the park recently.
- Interviewees provided an **average rating of 4.59 (between Agree and Strongly Agree), with 20 individuals (90.9%) strongly agreeing or agreeing that the goal was achieved**, and two individuals (9.1%) being neutral.
- **Twenty-one interviewees (84%) described one or more goal-related project successes**, specifically:
 - o Community benefits from better and safer river access, improved educational and recreational opportunities, and more functional and aesthetically pleasing public spaces, along with personal observations of increased public use and enjoyment (n = 20, 80%); and
 - o Belief that the project was well-designed to achieve the goal and that execution was or should be successful, with or without direct observations of success (n = 1, 4%).

“I think the impact was pretty immediate from my point of view, I saw as soon as it opened last year when we were done with the restoration part, I saw people using the park all the time so people of all ages, with kiddos, older folks using it to walk on the trail, young adults sitting in the sun having picnics and hanging with their friends, it just seemed like it was really welcomed by the community to have publicly accessible riverfront space. Also, with the signage, we are excited to engage with the school system here. Right across the street essentially, there’s the middle, high school, and elementary school, and we’ve already had a couple classes come out to the park and use it for their curriculum, and we think that will just continue now that we have the signs in the park. So I think it’s really used by a lot of the community now.”

“The area has been completely reprogrammed, and so we have modern, relevant signage that’s well designed and covers a lot of different aspects of the property, some hardscaping and intentional development of some areas, particularly a classroom area with some access to the river where there was no sort of previous planning, or if we want to go so far to call that infrastructure, there were a few old signs that were completely sun faded out and whatnot. So it was a great improvement in terms of the way that the public can now use and interact with that area.”

“The paths were previously overgrown signs were falling down, the access was difficult to get to, now we have a fully ADA entry way, updated signage, updated trail system and walkway. I think that as well as a classroom area that reaches the river, kind of a gathering space right at the river, all of those pieces come together to make a much more functional and usable space.”

- **Six interviewees (24%)¹² felt that more time was needed to assess this goal** and how the area would be utilized, noting that interpretive signage had only recently been installed and many project areas remained closed to the public due to fencing.
- **Three interviewees (12%) shared ecological and management considerations.** Two noted that increased public access may be affecting wildlife habitat and fish movement, and questioned whether greater use should be viewed as an improvement from a habitat perspective. One interviewee appreciated the educational signage but emphasized the need for clear communication and enforcement of seasonal access closures.

¹² Two of the three interviewees who did not provide a Goal 4 rating were among those who said that more time was needed to fully assess these project components.

Project Collaborations

All interviewees (n = 25, 100%) shared feedback on what worked well, challenges faced, or suggestions for improving project collaborations in the future. However, three individuals (12%) reported having no insights into project collaborations.

Regarding what had worked well, the following themes were most often mentioned:

- **Nineteen interviewees (76%) described ways in which project stakeholders had worked well together.** These included maintaining good communication, collaborative decision-making and actions, effective problem-solving, clear leadership and communication channels, and a common focus on project goals despite differing organizational priorities. They also appreciated opportunities for involvement, evolving roles, and that no single group claimed all the credit.
- **Nine interviewees (36%) felt that the project involved a strong combination of stakeholders.** Most often, stakeholders shared that the diversity brought in more funding sources and critical expertise for different project components or stages. Local partners were viewed as being invested in the project and the community, and were very accessible. Individuals noted that the project brought together organizations with a history of collaboration, while also creating new partnerships.
- **Two interviewees (8%) appreciated project efforts to get partners and the public onboard.** These individuals believed that dedicating time to community outreach, planning, and design increased awareness, helped identify issues and concerns that needed to be addressed, and informed the overarching goals.

Regarding project collaboration challenges, respondents most often mentioned the following:

- **Challenging collaborator(s)** (n = 5, 20%);
- **Construction timing challenges**, including aligning project activities with government requirements or grant cycles, and communicating timelines (n = 4, 16%);
- **Financial challenges** around raising sufficient funding and complex financial tracking (n = 3, 12%); and
- **Challenges with project formation** and generating community buy-in (n = 1, 4%).

Seven interviewees (28%) made suggestions for improving collaborations in the future:

- Provide earlier, better, and more consistent communication with all stakeholders, including those who have objections or differing perspectives (n = 3).
- Spend additional time understanding stakeholders and their priorities before proposing a specific project (n = 1).
- Identify and connect with stakeholders who bring diverse relationship and communication styles (n = 1).
- Discuss timing requirements and potential hurdles in advance, before finalizing paperwork (n = 1).
- Maintain clear written documentation of each stakeholder's commitments and expectations for project design, timing, and outcomes, along with records of implementation (n = 1).

Project as a Worthwhile Investment

All interviewees (n = 25, 100%) shared why they felt the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project was or was not a worthwhile investment.

- Twenty-three interviewees (92%) felt the project was worthwhile and shared why:¹³
 - o **Community benefits** (n = 11, 44%), including better and safer river access, diverse recreational opportunities, accessible educational opportunities, strengthened connections to nature, and a source of community pride, all while reducing humans' adverse ecological impacts;
 - o **Ecological benefits** (n = 10, 40%), including reduced sedimentation of the river from human disruption, improved fish habitat, and riparian improvements. Several interviewees explained that the project became a focal point for discussions of river health and served as a successful demonstration project for how to improve a degraded river ecosystem;
 - o **Water utility benefits** (n = 7, 28%) while also reducing adverse ecological impacts. Again, the project was mentioned as a successful model for how headgates and ditches can be designed and built to pull water while protecting river ecosystems;
 - o **General project benefits** (n = 5, 20%), especially for the amount of money invested; and
 - o **Unique funding and collaboration opportunities** (n = 5, 20%) involving partnerships between the city and nonprofits, pooled funding sources, and complementary projects united by a shared, non-competitive vision.

"I think it was really good investment for the community, there were some in the community that thought the cost was too high but I think the partnership did a good job securing outside funding from a wide range of sources, it was a good model, some of the design features like the head gate was going to function as a demo for other stretches of the Crystal [River].

"Yeah, absolutely, I think it was worthwhile. Socially and culturally, it created a valuable asset for our community and the environment. I think we really solved some problems that were existing that impacted not just this specific stretch of stream, but it will really have impacts for the Crystal River watershed, which is really great to know that we're making an impact, kind of regionally as well. So yeah, I think this project addressed a lot of different things and made a great impact."

"Yes, I think helping firm up structures that allow water users to use water while removing their impacts to the channel or mitigating them is helpful, there is still a concentration of flows that is productive for moving fish through in low flows, I don't think we have seen big runoffs to see if the structures will last over time, but generally I would say the reduction in maintenance required will reduce the amount of human [activity] in the river, improving access and having controlled access through the riparian zone. Maybe people will walk through that area with a light touch and less impact. It allows for better access that is generally safer with intentional access, and stabilizing the streambank is helpful [in] maintaining infrastructure and characteristics in the stream and riparian areas."

- Two interviewees (8%) did not fully view the project as worthwhile. One emphasized that its long-term value depends on future maintenance and balancing access with habitat protection. The other felt that the headgate work was necessary, but believed other project elements reduced the natural character of the river.

Final Comments

When asked if they had anything else to share about the project, interviewees offered a range of final comments. **Eleven interviewees (44%) emphasized that projects of this type require significant time, effort, and perseverance, even when worthwhile.** Ten individuals (40%) reiterated their support for the project, highlighting visible improvements to the park and river corridor, strong agency collaboration, and the project's value as a community and educational asset. Several also expressed pride in seeing the project implemented and viewed it as a model or catalyst for future restoration efforts. Seven interviewees (28%) had nothing further to add. Lastly, five individuals (20%) provided considerations for future work, including planning for maintenance, navigating different stakeholder priorities, and balancing public access with ecological protection. A couple of individuals emphasized more natural river approaches. Overall, these comments underscored broad appreciation for the project's successful delivery, visible improvements to the park and river corridor, and strong multi-agency collaboration, while also emphasizing the need to continue investing in long-term maintenance, monitor ecological outcomes as the site matures, and intentionally balance habitat protection with increased public access.

¹³ Two interviewees also mentioned that improvements did not extend to the privately owned side of the channel and described permitting and COVID-19 delays.



Community Member Survey Results

This section presents the findings from the Community Member Survey, which was completed by 49 visitors who met the eligibility criteria.

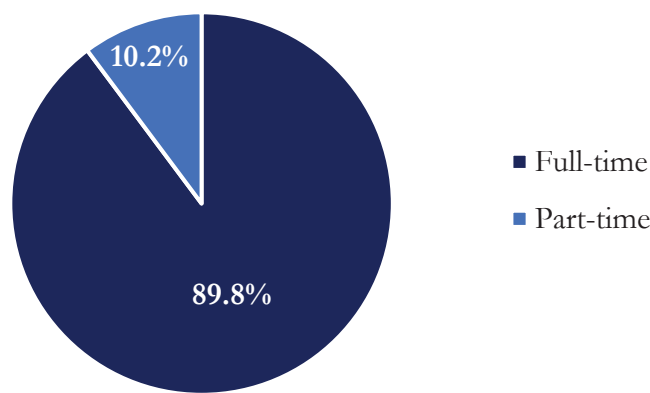
Part I. Survey Eligibility

Potential participants were asked two questions to determine their eligibility to complete the survey.

Residency in Carbondale and the Surrounding Area

First, visitors (N = 49, 100%) reported whether they lived in Carbondale or the surrounding area at the time of this survey.¹⁴ Forty-four visitors (89.8%) lived in the area full-time, and five individuals (10.2%) lived in the area part-time. See **Chart A**.

Chart A.
Carbondale Full-time or Part-Time Status (N = 49)



Visiting Riverfront Park

All 49 visitors (100%) also shared that they had visited Riverfront Park since the summer of 2023.¹⁵

¹⁴ One respondent indicated that they did not live in Carbondale or the surrounding area at the time of the study and were excluded from the evaluation due to ineligibility.
¹⁵ Six respondents reported they had not visited Crystal Riverfront Park since the Summer of 2023 and were excluded from the evaluation due to ineligibility.

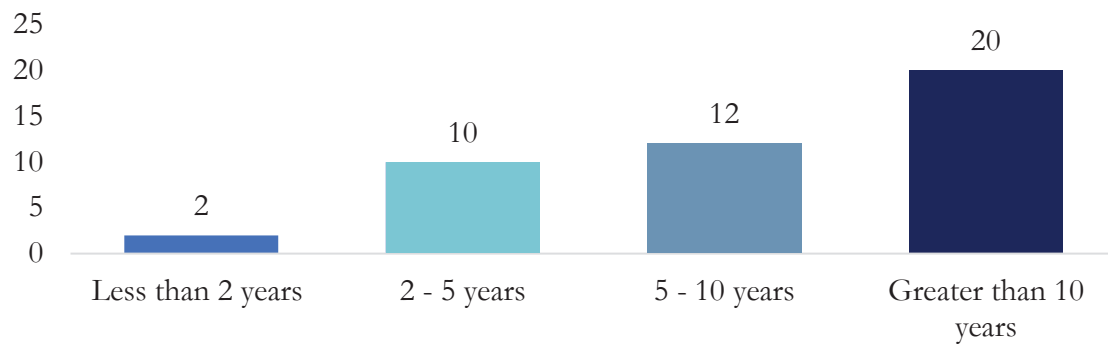
Part 2. About the Visitors

This section presents findings about visitors' demographics.

Length of Time in Carbondale or the Surrounding Areas

Forty-four visitors (89.8%) reported how long they had lived in Carbondale or the surrounding areas. Most often, visitors had lived there for Greater than 10 years (n = 20, 45.5%), 5 - 10 years (n = 12, 27.3%), or 2 - 5 years (n = 10, 22.7%). See **Chart B**.

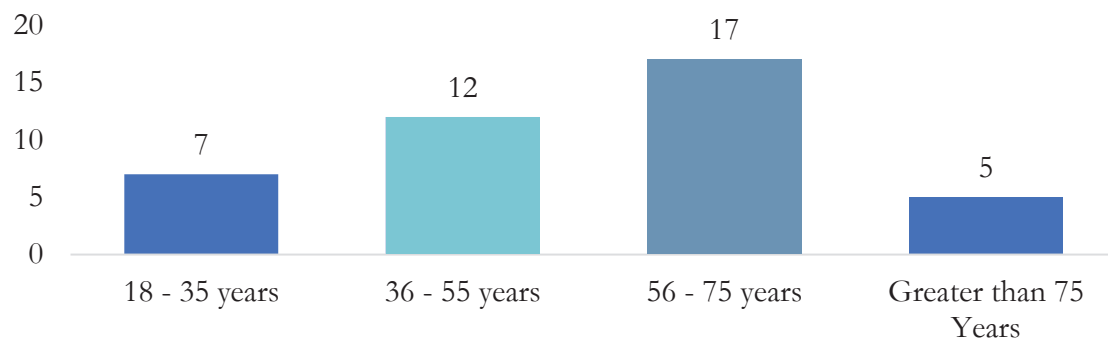
Chart B. Length of Time in Carbondale or the Surrounding Areas (n = 44)



Visitor Age

Forty-four visitors (89.8%) also chose a range that best described their age. Most often, visitors were between 56 - 75 years (n = 17, 38.6%), 36 - 55 years (n = 12, 27.3%), and 18 - 35 years (n = 7, 15.9%). See Chart C.¹⁶

Chart C. Visitor Age (n = 44)



¹⁶ Three visitors (6.1%) selected "Prefer not to answer." No participants selected "Less than 18 years," which would have disqualified them from the study.

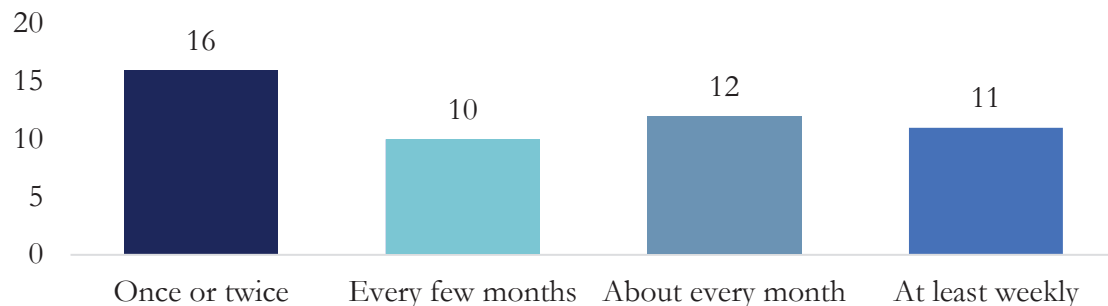
Part 3. Recent Crystal Riverfront Park Experiences

The following section highlights the experiences of Carbondale residents and nearby community members who have visited Crystal Riverfront Park since the Summer of 2023.

Visit Frequency

All 49 visitors (100%) shared how often they had visited Crystal Riverfront Park since the Summer of 2023. Individuals most often had visited Once or twice (n = 16, 32.7%), About every month (n = 12, 24.5%), or At least weekly (n = 11, 22.4%). See **Chart D**.

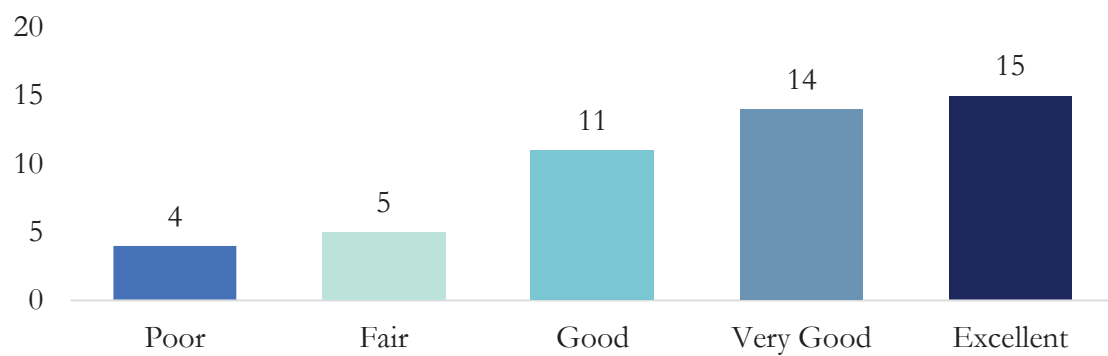
Chart D. Current Park Visit Frequency (N = 49)



Quality of Recent Park Experiences

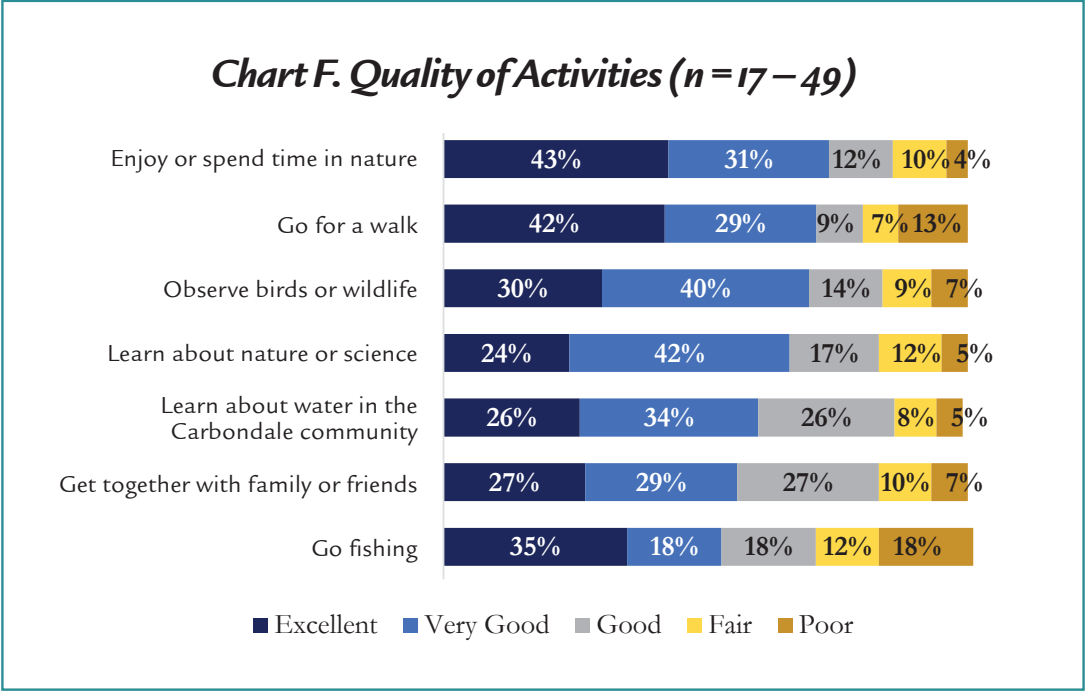
All 49 visitors (100%) rated their recent experiences with Crystal Riverfront Park on a scale from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent). Most often, visitors rated their experience as Excellent (n = 15, 30.6%), Very Good (n = 14, 28.6%), or Good (n = 11, 22.4%). On average, visitors gave the park a rating of 3.63 out of 5 for the quality of their recent experiences. Notably, more than 80% of visitors rated their experience at Crystal Riverfront Park as Good or better. See **Chart E**.

Chart E. Quality of Park Experiences (N = 49)



Quality of Activities

Next, visitors were asked to rate the current quality of Crystal Riverfront Park as a place to engage in specific activities on a scale from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent). Between 17 and 49 visitors (34.7% – 100%) of the people surveyed provided ratings. All activities received average ratings between Good and Very Good, with Enjoy or spend time in nature (3.98), Go for a walk (3.80), and Observe birds or wildlife (3.77) having the most favorable ratings. See **Chart F**.¹⁷



Park Satisfaction and Improvements

Visitors were also asked what they liked most about the park and what could be improved. In total, 41 visitors (83.7%) provided feedback. Of these, 19 visitors (46.3%) mentioned only positive feedback, 15 visitors (36.6%) offered suggestions for improvement, and 7 visitors (17.1%) described both positive feedback and suggestions for improvement.

¹⁷ Because “N/A” was an available response option, the sample size for this question varied more than it did for others.

Positive Feedback

From the 41 responses, 26 visitors (63.4%) provided positive feedback. Most often, this feedback reflected positive views of the River Access (n = 14, 34.1%), Positive Impressions of the Park (n = 12, 29.3%), and enjoyed the Boulder and Rock Work (n = 4, 9.8%). See **Table A**.

Table A. What Visitors Liked Most (n = 41)

Theme	n(%)	Definition	Representative Quotes
River Access	14 (34.1%)	Fifteen visitors enjoyed the river access the most. These visitors shared that they enjoyed utilizing the current access by walking the river trail, wading in the water, utilizing the river to practice search and rescue, and sitting by the river. Some visitors requested more river access on the other side or with deeper eddies.	“We love to go down and either sit by the river and/or dip in the river during the summer months.” “I plunge in the cold water about four times a week.” “I love the rock seating by the river so you can relax by the water and be comfortable.”
Positive Impressions of the Park	12 (29.3%)	Twelve visitors left positive comments about the restoration or the park overall. They highlighted the park’s peaceful and serene atmosphere, noted their enjoyment of spending time there, appreciated the benefits of the native riparian vegetation, expressed gratitude for the work that went into the project, and suggested expanding similar efforts to other parts of the river.	“I am so appreciative that effort and money was put into develop a park along the river.” “The native riparian vegetation is a joy to meander through. I have enjoyed watching the restoration efforts evolve, what takes, what doesn’t make it.” “The times I walk the park it’s extremely peaceful...”
Boulder and Rock Work	4 (9.8%)	Four visitors shared how they enjoyed the boulder and rock work completed during the restoration. They reported they were lovely, improved aesthetics, and kept a natural feel.	“The rock work is lovely as is the fact that you kept a natural feel.” “... real improvements are some boulders added to the channel to improve its aesthetics.”
Ease of Access	2 (4.9%)	Two visitors reported they felt the parking was close to the park and it was safer to access to the park from the road.	“Getting to the park from the road is safer and easier now.” “Reasonably close to parking.”
Signage and Exhibit Improvements	2 (4.9%)	Two visitors felt that the signage and exhibits were fun and informative.	“...I also enjoy all of the info signs to learn.” “...the exhibits are fun...”

Suggestions for Improvement

Of the 41 responses, 23 visitors (56.1%) suggested ideas for improvement or shared concerns. The most common suggestions were to Improve Weed and Pest Management (n = 6, 14.6%), Address Issues Regarding Park Design and Accessibility (n = 6, 14.6%), and Provide Additional Seating and Gathering Spaces (n = 5, 12.2%). See **Table B.**¹⁸

Table B. Areas for Improvement (n = 41)

Theme	n(%)	Definition	Representative Quotes
Improve Weed and Pest Management	6 (14.6%)	Six visitors commented on the presence of weeds and bugs in the park. These visitors want to see the weeds and foliage maintained and better control of the bugs that are present.	“...start controlling the weeds that are predictably emerging.” “I would hope more effort could be spent on manual pulling, perhaps a public weed ID and weed pull.” “[The park] is too buggy many times [and] foliage [is] overgrown.”
Address Issues Regarding Park Design and Accessibility	6 (14.6%)	Six visitors also noted additional concerns, including feeling that the park was becoming overdeveloped, potential safety issues related to increased visitation, overcrowded parking, and limited access due to temporary equipment and fencing.	“Money used to create it could have been used for bike paths, better crosswalks, city walkable safety issues, or made in a place with easier accessibility.” “I live in Thompson Corner and there is not adequate parking for this river park.” “To improve it, remove the fencing and irrigation equipment...”
Provide Additional Gathering Areas	5 (12.2%)	Five visitors requested additions to the park such as additional seating, gathering, and shaded areas, to spend time in the park alone or with friends.	“...perhaps I am missing something in the park, but I do not recall a seating area for gathering.” “More seating along the way.” “Shade structures or shading via trees.”
Consider Changes or Additions to Signage	4 (9.8%)	Four visitors requested changes or additions to the current signage in the park. Visitors wanted additional explanations on the wildlife populations with less information about the project and more interactive tools.	“The signage contains too much self-serving [information]....” “I think there could be more interactive science tools.”

¹⁸ Beyond the themes summarized in Table B, seven visitors raised dog-related concerns (e.g., being unable to bring their dog, noting the presence of dogs in restricted area). As these concerns were unrelated to the restoration itself, they were not included in the table but were counted in the overall total.

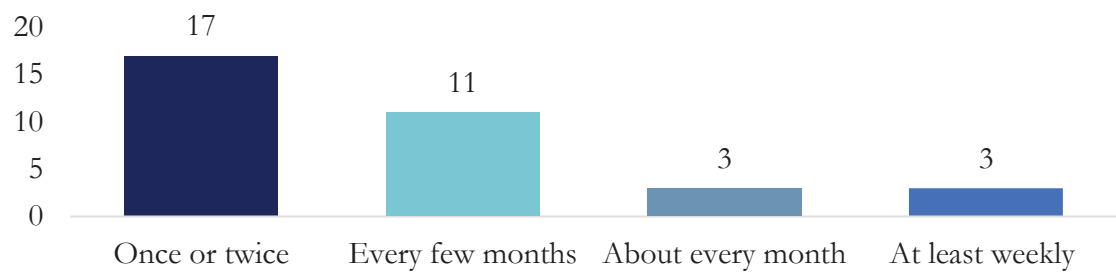
Part 4. Past Experiences with Crystal Riverfront Park

The following section summarizes the experiences of 34 visitors (69.4%) who had visited Riverfront Park prior to the restoration project.

Visit Frequency

Thirty-four visitors (69.4%) reported how often they visited Riverfront Park before the summer of 2023. Visitors most often responded Once or twice (n = 17, 50%) or Every few months (n = 13, 32.4%). See **Chart G.**¹⁹

Chart G. Past Park Visit Frequency (N = 34)



Riverfront Park Restoration Project Impressions

Thirty-two visitors (94.1%) compared their personal experiences with the park before and after the restoration project.²⁰ Of these, 21 visitors (65.6%)²¹ Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the Crystal Riverfront Park is a valuable part of living in or visiting Carbondale, and 22 visitors (68.8%) Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the park is a more appealing place to visit due to the improvements made during the restoration project. See **Table C.**

Table C. Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project Impressions (n = 32)

Statements	n	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Average
The current Crystal Riverfront Park is a valuable part of living in, or visiting, Carbondale.	32	2 (6.3%)	2 (6.3%)	7 (21.9%)	11 (34.4%)	10 (31.3%)	3.78
Crystal Riverfront Park is a more appealing place to visit due to the improvements made during the restoration project.	32	6 (18.8%)	2 (6.3%)	2 (6.3%)	7 (21.9%)	15 (46.9%)	3.72

¹⁹ Thirteen visitors (26.5%) selected “Never” and were excluded from this section of the analysis.

²⁰ Only visitors who had visited the park before the summer of 2023 were asked to compare their personal experiences with the park before and after the restoration project.

²¹ It should be noted that the percentages presented in the text may differ slightly from those in Table D due to rounding.

Feature Improvements

Visitors were asked to rate the extent to which specific features of Riverfront Park had improved, using a scale from 1 (Not at All Improved) to 5 (Strongly Improved), with Unsure provided as an additional response option. Between 30 and 31 visitors (88.2% – 91.2%) responded. The features most frequently rated as Improved or Strongly Improved were Signage in the Park (n = 22, 73.3%), Park Accessibility (n = 22, 71%), Gathering Spaces (n = 21, 70%), and Educational Opportunities (n = 20, 66.6%). See **Table D**.

Table D. Feature Improvements (n = 30 – 31)

Features	n	Unsure	Not at All Improved	Slightly Improved	Somewhat Improved	Improved	Strongly Improved	Average
Gathering spaces	30	3 (10%)	2 (6.7%)	2 (6.7%)	2 (6.7%)	9 (30%)	12 (40%)	4.00
Educational opportunities	30	4 (31.3%)	1 (3.3%)	4 (14.3%)	7 (21.9%)	15 (46.9%)	10 (33.3%)	3.92
Park accessibility	31	2 (6.5%)	3 (9.7%)	2 (6.5%)	2 (6.5%)	10 (32.3%)	12 (38.7%)	3.90
Signage in the park	30	2 (6.7%)	3 (10%)	3 (10%)		13 (43.3%)	9 (30%)	3.79
River Access	31	3 (9.7%)	3 (9.7%)	2 (6.5%)	4 (12.9%)	11 (35.5%)	8 (25.8%)	3.68
Walking Trails	31	2 (6.5%)	5 (16.1%)	3 (9.7%)	2 (6.5%)	11 (35.5%)	8 (25.8%)	3.48
Quality of the natural areas along the river	31	7 (22.6%)	7 (22.6%)	1 (3.2%)	2 (6.5%)	6 (19.4%)	8 (25.8%)	3.29
Fishing conditions	30	18 (60%)	5 (16.7%)		1 (3.3%)	2 (6.7%)	4 (13.3%)	3.00
Bird-watching conditions	31	10 (32.3%)	5 (16.1%)	4 (12.9%)	3 (9.7%)	6 (19.4%)	3 (9.7%)	2.90
Wildlife (nonbird) watching conditions	31	13 (41.9%)	6 (19.4%)	3 (9.7%)	4 (12.9%)	3 (9.7%)	2 (6.5%)	2.56

Riverfront Park Restoration Project Park Impacts

Next, visitors were asked what positive or negative impacts they or their families had observed or experienced from the restoration project. In total, 18 visitors (52.9%) responded. Of these, five visitors (27.8%) described only positive impacts, nine visitors (50%) mentioned only negative impacts, four visitors (22.2%) described both positive and negative impacts, and one visitor (5.6%) responded “None,” which was neither positive or negative.

Positive Impacts

From these responses, nine individuals (50%) reported positive impacts from the restoration. The most frequently mentioned theme was Increased Use and Access ($n = 5$, 27.8%) both for themselves and others. For example, as one visitor noted, “This is definitely a new destination for me to visit and can definitely see coming once a month throughout the year to enjoy.” Another visitor explained, “[The project] makes access to the river much better.” Two visitors (11.1%) highlighted the Improved Visual Appeal of the park, with one visitor sharing, “One positive impact I have observed is the visual aspect of the park.” Another two visitors (11.1%) commented on the Improved Signage stating they appreciated the “...interpretive signage highlighting the benefits and importance of the plant communities. Lastly, one visitor (5.6%) reflected on the Improved Vegetation, noting, “I appreciate that the vegetation quality has been improved.”²² Overall, these responses suggest that visitors most often experienced the restoration as expanding access and use, enhancing the park’s visual and natural features, and creating new opportunities to enjoy the space.

Negative Impacts

Among the 18 responses, 13 visitors (72.2%) identified negative impacts associated with the restoration. The most common concern was Increased Use Impacts ($n = 4$, 22.2%), with visitors noting issues such as more trash, unfamiliar people, and graffiti. Three visitors (16.7%) reported they Did Not Support the Restoration Project as they felt it makes the park unnatural and the funds should have been allocated elsewhere. Three other visitors (16.7%) raised Parking Concerns, particularly that visitors park by the bridge or into surrounding neighborhoods. Another two visitors (11.1%) had Fencing Concerns sharing that they disliked the fencing and had observed more wildlife before it was installed.²³ Lastly, one visitor (5.6%) stated they Disliked the Signage.²⁴

Part 5. Final Thoughts

This section presents final thoughts and reflections on Riverfront Park and its restoration.

Final Thoughts

At the end of the survey, visitors were invited to share any final thoughts regarding Riverfront Park or its restoration. In total, 17 visitors (34.7%) shared their feedback. Over half of these visitors (58.8%) provided Additional Positive Comments expressing gratitude toward RFC, appreciation for the restoration project, and hope for the creation of similar spaces in the future. As one visitor noted, “Thanks for doing this! The signage really does look beautiful, quite impressive,” while another visitor shared, “I think it’s so cool and would love to see more spots like this in Carbondale if possible!” Four visitors (23.5%) provided Suggestions for Improvement such as addressing drainage issues on the golf cart path, managing the weeds, making the river deeper and narrower, and making the area look more natural. Lastly, three visitors (17.6%) provided Constructive Feedback, suggesting that project funds could have been allocated differently and expressed concern that the park was less supportive of wildlife and nature after the restoration. Overall, these final comments convey both enthusiasm and appreciation for the restoration project with some suggestions for improvements and constructive feedback.

²² One visitor (5.6%) reported they enjoyed the nature experience without dogs.

²³ It should be noted that the purpose of the fencing is to keep wildlife away and protect the new vegetation.

²⁴ Two visitors (11.1%) expressed frustration with off-leash dogs.

Discussion

In January 2025, RFC worked with REC to evaluate the impact of the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project on partners and Carbondale community members. As part of the evaluation, 25 stakeholders representing 13 organizations were interviewed, and 49 community members completed the survey, providing valuable insights and feedback on their experiences. All community members lived in Carbondale or the surrounding areas either full-time (90%) or part-time (10%), with 46% residing there for over 10 years. Most community members were between the ages of 56 and 75 or 36 and 55 (39% and 27%, respectively). The following discussion addresses the three key evaluation questions and describes the limitations of this project.

How effectively has the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project achieved its mission for partners and Carbondale community members?

To assess effectiveness, REC collected and analyzed data through stakeholder interviews and community surveys. These methods were designed to evaluate progress toward the project's four main goals and to capture multiple perspectives on successes, challenges, and areas for improvement.

Goal 1: Restoring the park's riparian zone while preserving bird and wildlife habitats through streambank stabilization, floodplain reconnections, and replacing invasive weeds and monocultures with diverse native plants

Stakeholders and community members alike recognized meaningful benefits from the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project, particularly in the areas of vegetation and natural habitat preservation. Stakeholders provided a positive rating (4.50), indicating that they agreed to strongly agree that the project accomplished this goal. A large majority (84%) pointed to specific successes, including healthier vegetation (64%), well-designed and effective project strategies to accomplish the goal (32%), stabilized riverbanks with less erosion (28%), and improved floodplain connectivity (8%). Similarly, community members reported positive experiences tied to vegetation. Nearly half of the visitors (45%) also felt the quality of the natural areas along the rivers had improved or strongly improved with 6% noting that the improved vegetation was a positive impact of the restoration. Refer to Appendix B for before and after photos.

Both groups also raised concerns about non-native vegetation or weed management. Stakeholders (32%) identified ongoing weed control as a challenge, and community members (15%) requested improved weed and pest management, indicating that invasive species may still be an issue. Wildlife outcomes presented a more mixed picture. Stakeholders emphasized broader ecological benefits such as reduced sedimentation, improved fish habitat, and riparian enhancements (40%), whereas community members focused more on visible wildlife. Additionally, 70% of visitors rated overall bird and wildlife viewing as very good or excellent and the improvement in bird ($M = 2.90$) and wildlife ($M = 2.56$) opportunities as slightly to somewhat improved. A few visitors (11%) felt that the temporary fencing has affected the wildlife. Finally, there was some uncertainty about the timeline of results. Some stakeholders (40%) indicated that it was premature to assess whether the goal had been fully achieved. Likewise, the varied community perceptions of wildlife point to outcomes that are still emerging and will likely continue to evolve over the long term.

Overall, most stakeholders and community members perceive the project as successful in restoring vegetation and stabilizing the riparian zone, with benefits already evident. Yet, challenges with weed control and wildlife presence remain, and these types of ecological changes generally take time. Continued monitoring will clarify whether the project reaches its long-term habitat preservation goals.

Goal 2: Enhancing river channel stability and improving fish habitats and spawning areas in this section of the Crystal River

Stakeholders and community members both recognized benefits to the fish habitat and fishing quality, although they varied in the extent of these improvements. Stakeholders agreed that this goal was accomplished (4.36), with 96% identifying successes related to the goal. These included opinions of enhanced river channel stability and more consistent river flows (60%), improved fish habitats or fishing and better instream biotic structure (52%), and a well-designed project expected to succeed over the long term (20%). Additionally, 40% recognized the ecological benefits of this project such as improved fish habitat and riparian environment. Similarly, 17 visitors (42%) rated the fishing quality giving it an average of 3.41 suggesting good to very good.

Some uncertainty was expressed by both groups as well. Most stakeholders believed the project was successful, though a small portion (8%) noted that more time was needed to assess outcomes. Four stakeholders (16%) also raised concerns, including uncertainty about improvements to fish habitats and perceptions that some changes were unnatural. Some community members shared similar reservations. In addition, 20% felt conditions had improved or strongly improved, whereas 60% were uncertain at this time.

These findings suggest general stakeholder agreement that the project achieved this goal, and many community members noted early improvements in fishing quality. As the restoration is still recent, continued long-term monitoring will help confirm the project's lasting impact.

Goal 3: Developing a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure to allow the Weaver Ditch to function within the river system while enhancing water delivery to the Town of Carbondale

Stakeholders strongly agreed that this goal was accomplished ($M = 4.43$). Most stakeholders (80%) described successes related to this goal, noting that the headgate and ditch diversion components are functioning well (68%) and expressing confidence that the project is well-designed and positioned to be successful (16%). Some stakeholders (28%) also pointed to water utility benefits, such as the system designed to function while protecting river ecosystems as a reason the project was a worthwhile investment and three interviewees (12%) reported it was too soon to tell but it could be successful. This goal was not directly assessed in the community survey and it was not referenced by community members when discussing impacts or improvements. Overall, stakeholders strongly believed the goal for this project was achieved. In contrast, community members did not reference this goal, suggesting limited awareness or understanding of it.

Goal 4: Enhance public experiences at Crystal Riverfront Park with installed or upgraded interpretive signs, trails, gathering spaces, and educational programs

Stakeholders largely agreed (4.59) that this goal was accomplished. Most stakeholders (84%) reported goal-related successes, such as community benefits (e.g., river access, educational and recreational opportunities, functional and aesthetically pleasing public space, increased use; 80%) and the belief that the project was well-designed to achieve this goal (4%). Further, 24% of stakeholders felt that more time was needed to assess the goal and 12% shared ecological and management considerations including environmental issues from increased public access and overfishing, as well as a need for greater enforcement of park closures. From the community perspective, REC examined interpretive signs, trails, gathering spaces, and educational programs as metrics for this goal.

Interpretive Signs. Most community members (73%) felt signs were improved or strongly improved (3.79). Additionally, some community members (11%) described the signs and related improvements as a positive impact, while 5% identified the new signage as what they liked most. Some visitors (10%) wanted further improvements in the signs, such as more interactive tools and additional information about the habitats. Overall, most visitors responded positively to the updated interpretive signs with a few improvements suggested.

Trails. Most community members rated trails and access improvements positively. In particular, 71% rated the walking quality as very good or excellent (3.80), and 61% felt that the walking trails were improved or strongly improved (3.48). Park accessibility (71%) and river access (61%) were also widely seen as improved or strongly improved. Additionally, 34% reported that the river access, including the river trail, was what they liked most about the park, with 28% reporting the increased use and access to the river as a positive impact. Overall, visitors responded overwhelmingly positive to the updated trails especially the trail by the river. See Appendix E. for before and after photos.

Gathering Spaces. Many community members (70%) felt that the gathering areas had improved or strongly improved (4.00), and 56% rated their ability to get together with friends or family as very good or excellent (3.59). Some community members (12%) suggested adding more seating and gathering areas as a way to further enhance the park and their experiences. Overall, visitors responded positively to the gathering areas that were created with a few requesting additional areas.

Educational Programs. Two-thirds of visitors (67%) reported that educational opportunities were improved or strongly improved (3.92). Additionally, 66% rated their ability to learn about nature or science as very good or excellent (3.68), and 61% reported the same level of satisfaction for learning about water in Carbondale (3.68). Overall, visitors rated the educational opportunities positively.

Overall, these findings suggest the project enhanced public experiences by improving signage, trails, gathering areas, and educational opportunities. Both stakeholders and community members identified clear benefits from the project. At the same time, a smaller number of community members expressed desire for changes to signs (e.g., additional educational information, less project information) and additional gathering spaces.

What impact, if any, did the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project make on partners and Carbondale community members?

Both stakeholders and community members recognized the positive impacts of the project. Almost all stakeholders (92%) considered the project a worthwhile investment. For example, 44% recognized the community benefits such as increased and safer river access, more recreation and education opportunities, stronger connections to nature, and increased community pride.

Additionally, 20% recognized the unique funding and collaboration opportunities for RFC, the Town of Carbondale, and its partners. Findings from the Community Survey also suggests that the frequency of park visitation may have increased after the summer of 2023. Before the restoration, only 8% of visitors reported visiting weekly, whereas afterward 22% reported visiting weekly.

Among the 18 community members who reported any impacts from the restoration, half (50%) described positive experiences. These included visiting the park more often due to easier river access (28%), appreciating visual improvements (11%), noting better signage (11%), and observing improved vegetation (6%). Others visitors (72%) reported areas where the restoration created new challenges, such as increased park use (22%; e.g., more trash, unfamiliar visitors, graffiti), general reservations about the project (17%), parking challenges (17%), the presence of temporary fencing (11%), and mixed opinions about the signage (6%).

Taken together, the findings indicate that the project improved access to the park and contributed to increased recreational use among partners and community members. A few community members also identified areas for enhancement such as parking and trash management that could further improve the overall visitor environment.

What worked well and what could be improved about the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project for partners and Carbondale community members?

Stakeholders and community members both reported ways the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project worked well, while also identifying areas for improvement. Most stakeholders (76%) felt that partners had worked well together, describing good communication, collaborative decision-making, and effective problem-solving. Some stakeholders (36%) felt that the project's diverse partnerships helped increase funding, and 8% appreciated the project's efforts to engage both partners and the public. Similarly, many community members (66%) agreed or strongly agreed that Riverfront Park is a valuable part of living in or visiting Carbondale (3.78), and 69% agreed or strongly agreed it has become a more appealing place to visit after the restoration (3.72). Most community members (74%) also rated the quality of spending time in nature as very good or excellent (3.98). Additionally, 27% mentioned Positive Impressions of the Park describing its overall peaceful feel, reporting the enjoy spending time there, and even requesting an expansion.

Some stakeholders (20%) noted some difficulty with certain collaborators, construction timing (16%), financial concerns (12%), and challenges during project formation, including generating community buy-in (4%). About 28% of stakeholders also suggested ways to strengthen the project (e.g., improving communication, understanding of stakeholder priorities, stronger connections). Community members (56%) also offered suggestions for improvement such as improving weed and insect management²⁵, providing additional gathering areas, and sharing ideas for signage improvements.

Overall, the findings suggest that strong collaboration supported a restoration that enhanced the park's community value and appeal. While most stakeholders and community members recognized its successes, some also identified some areas for improvement, such as better communication and targeted enhancement, that could help to sustain long-term benefits.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted in this evaluation. First, not all stakeholders participated in the stakeholder interview, and only 49 visitors completed a community survey. As a result, the findings reflect the perspectives of a subset of visitors rather than the entire community. The survey respondents may not fully represent the demographic diversity or the full range of park uses (e.g., age, income, cultural background), which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the data collection occurred at a single point in time, which may not capture seasonal variations in park use, visitor experiences, or wildlife presence. The small sample raises the possibility of self-selection bias²⁶, as visitors with particularly strong positive or negative views may have been more motivated to respond. In addition, because the evaluation relied solely on self-reported data and asked visitors to recall from more than 2 years ago, responses may be influenced by social desirability bias,²⁷ recall errors, or individual differences in how participants interpreted the questions and rating scales.

²⁵ The Town of Carbondale does not allow the use of sprayed herbicides or pesticides in their parks.

²⁶ Self-selection bias. A sampling bias that arises when individuals who choose to participate differ systematically from those who do not, which can skew results and limit how well findings generalize.

²⁷ Social desirability bias. A type of response bias that occurs when participants answer questions in a way they believe will be viewed favorably by others, rather than providing completely accurate or honest responses (e.g., overstating positive behaviors or underreporting negative ones).

Actionable Recommendations

Based on the findings of this Impact Study, REC offers the following six recommendations to support RFC, the Town of Carbondale, and their environmental, governmental, and community partners in shaping future restoration and engagement efforts.

1 Celebrate the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Projects' Successes

There is much to celebrate for RFC, the Town of Carbondale, Pitkin County Healthy Rivers, and the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project. This evaluation demonstrates that the majority of stakeholders, along with many community members, view the project as a success and acknowledge meaningful improvements to both the Crystal River and Riverfront Park. These achievements, reflected in the positive feedback and outcomes, deserve to be highlighted and shared with RFC staff, partners, and the Town of Carbondale. RFC can showcase these successes through a variety of channels, including community town halls, the Town of Carbondale newsletter, social media (RFC's Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as the Town's Facebook), and local press outlets such as the Sopris Sun, the Aspen Times and Aspen Public Radio.

2 Continue Monitoring Project Progress

Stakeholders noted that it is too early to determine whether all project goals have been achieved,

particularly regarding fish habitats, vegetation growth, and headgate performance. REC recommends that RFC and the Town of Carbondale continue to implement ongoing monitoring and periodic evaluations to assess long-term outcomes. They could also report findings to stakeholders and community members to maintain transparency and demonstrate progress.

3 Address Capacity and Maintenance Needs

Community members noted that park upgrades brought more visitors, which led to increased trash, graffiti, and parking overflow. REC recommends that future projects plan for the additional demands that come with higher visitation. RFC, in partnership with the Town of Carbondale, can enhance the use of the park by offering additional gathering space and collaborating with the Town to ensure adequate trash receptacles, consistent weed management, and routine park cleanup.

4 Increase Community Education

Community members did not mention the goal of creating a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure, even though information about it is

included on current park signage. This suggests that the community may not be fully aware of this component of the project or its significance. Several community members also expressed interest in enhanced signage and additional educational opportunities about the park and its wildlife. RFC could expand education efforts by adding temporary QR codes to signs that link to short videos, sharing project updates through the Town of Carbondale's monthly newsletters, and partnering with Roaring Forks High School's Riverwatch team to create short informative videos.

5 Continue to Gather Community Feedback

While feedback from 49 community members provided meaningful insight, continued engagement would help capture a broader range of perspectives. As the long-term project goals evolve, community views may also shift. REC recommends that RFC establish ongoing feedback collection including short 1-2-minute pulse surveys and simple tools such as a comment box or digital suggestion forms to gather real-time input. These surveys could also be

available in Spanish. REC recommends new data be collected in three years to allow key project outcomes (e.g., vegetation growth, fish habitat development) to fully develop. To reach a wider audience, RFC could expand outreach through online surveys, social media campaigns, and in-person feedback stations at the park or at local events.

6 Maintain Collaboration Among Stakeholders and Community Members

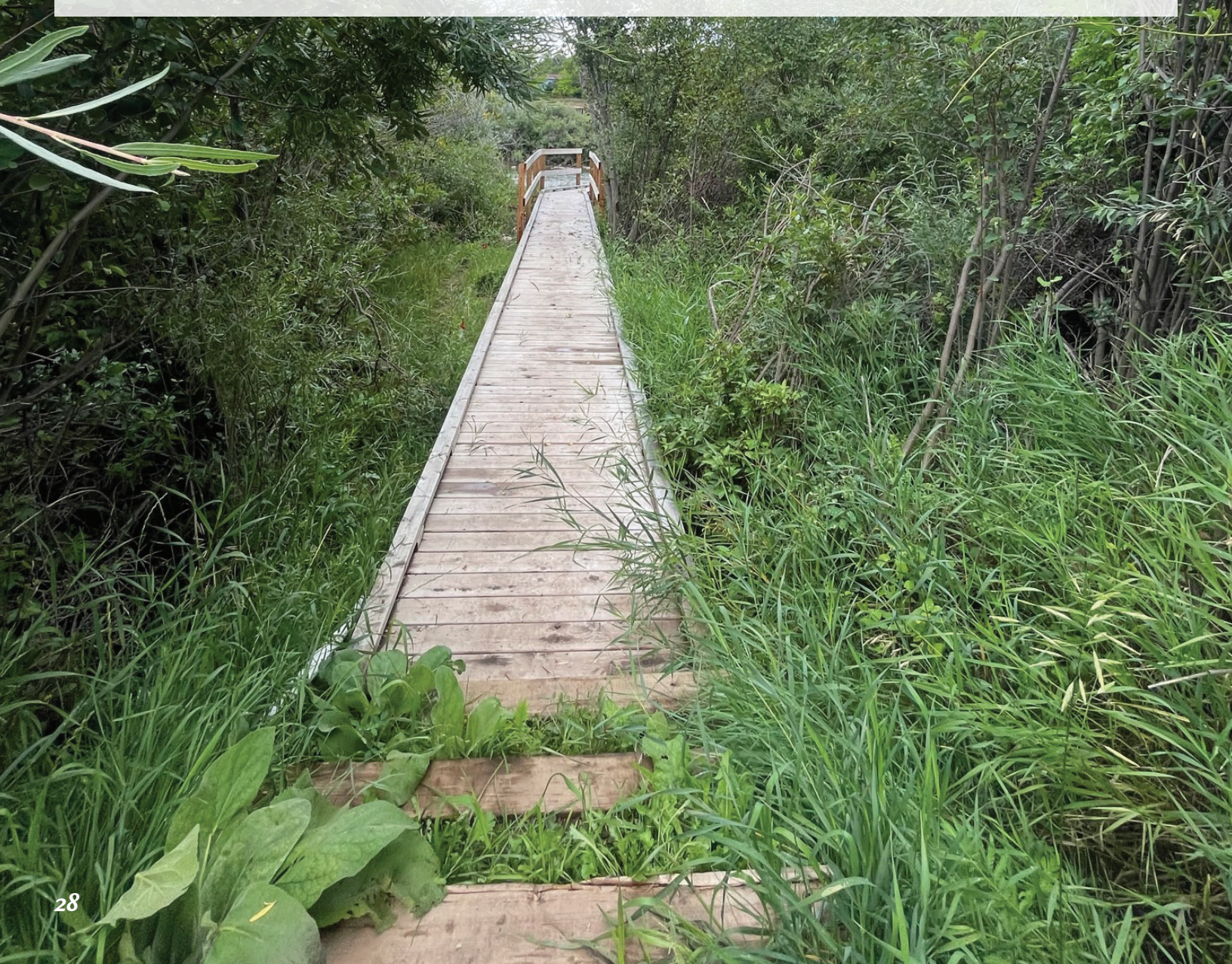
Stakeholders widely agreed that collaboration throughout the eight years leading up to the restoration was strong. Now that the project is complete, maintaining this momentum will be important to support long-term stewardship, address emerging needs, and keep community members engaged. REC recommends that RFC in partnership with the Town of Carbondale continue nurturing collaboration by periodically hosting town halls or community forums, maintaining a communication plan with clear points of contact and expectations, and considering a small community advisory group to provide ongoing input.

Conclusion

Findings from the stakeholder interviews and community survey show that the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project has meaningfully advanced RFC's mission to inspire people to explore, value, and protect the Roaring Fork Watershed. Stakeholders agreed that the project has successfully met, or is on track to meet, its four primary goals: restoring riparian habitats, enhancing fish and river stability, developing a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure, and improving public access and educational opportunities. Community members also reported visiting the park more often, gaining a deeper appreciation for its natural and recreational features, and feeling more connected to the river environment.

At the same time, several ecological outcomes, such as vegetation establishment, wildlife recovery, and fish habitat stabilization, will continue to develop over the coming years. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of ongoing monitoring to assess long-term progress, particularly for vegetation, fish habitats, and the headgate system. Community feedback also surfaced opportunities to refine future efforts, including expanding seating and gathering areas, enriching signage and educational offerings, and ensuring the park maintains its natural character. As with any project of this scale, it is not possible to address every preference; however, these diverse perspectives highlight the value of continued dialogue and adaptive management to balance ecological integrity with community use and enjoyment.

The recommendations in this report offer a practical roadmap for sustaining and building upon the project accomplishments. By implementing these strategies, RFC can continue to demonstrate leadership in watershed stewardship, expand public appreciation for natural spaces, and strengthen collaborative partnerships that contribute to the ongoing stewardship and vitality of the Roaring Fork Watershed.



Appendix A. Glossary of Key Terms

Diversion

The removal of water from its natural course of flow by means of ditches, headgates, reservoirs, pipeline, conduit, well, pump or other structure or device (Colorado River District, 2025).

Ecosystem

All the living things in an area and the way they affect each other and the environment (Cambridge, 2025).

Erosion Control

Practices aimed at preventing the movement of soil or rock by wind or water, thereby protecting environmental quality and stability of land (EBSCO, 2025).

Floodplain

Lowlands bordering a stream which are subject to recurrent flooding. Floodplains are composed of sediments carried by rivers and deposited on land during flooding (RFC, 2021).

Floodplain Reconnection

The process of restoring or enhancing the connectivity between a river and its adjacent floodplain (Nordic Guidance for Nature-Based Solutions, 2025).

Headgate

A structure that controls the amount of water entering a diversion. A headgate can completely shut off a diversion, reduce the flow of water to a measured amount or permit the free flow of water. Headgates can be located at the top of a diversion or along a ditch or canal that serves multiple diversions (Colorado River District, 2025).

Biological Diversity

The full variety of life in an area, including the ecosystem, plant and animal communities, species and genes, and the processes through which individual organisms interact with one another and with the environment (USDA Forest Service, 1992).

Biotic Structure

The amount and diversity of organisms that live in the stream reach for all or part of their life history (RFC, 2021).

Monocultures

The cultivation or growth of a single crop or organism especially on agricultural or forest land (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

Riparian Areas

Ecosystems that occur along watercourses and water bodies. These areas have high water tables and support plants that require saturated soils during all or part of the year. Riparian areas include both wetland and upland zones (RFC, 2021).

Riparian Improvements

Enhancements made to the riparian areas such as removing invasive species while retaining endemic vegetation in functional habitat areas (Colorado River District, 2025).

Riparian Vegetation

The plant life that exists along riverbanks and serves multiple socio-ecological functions, including altering flow conditions, supporting biogeochemical cycles, increasing biodiversity and providing

ecosystem services like water quality improvement and recreational areas (Dufour, Rodríguez-González, & Laslier, 2019).

Sediment

Fragmented material that originates from weathering and erosion of rock or unconsolidated deposits and is transported by, suspended in, or deposited by water. Certain contaminants, including bacteria, tend to collect on and adhere to sediment particles (RFC, 2021).

Streambank Stabilization

The intentional process of protecting or reinforcing the bed and banks of a stream, river, or other water body to prevent erosion. The primary goal is to maintain the natural course and stability of the waterway, protecting land, infrastructure, and water quality (PennState Extension, 2025).

Watershed

The geographic region within which water drains into a particular river, stream or body of water. A watershed includes hills, lowlands, and the body of water into which the land drains (RFC, 2021).

Appendix B. Before and After Photos

Before and After Overhead View of Weaver Ditch Diversion



Pre-Construction Summer, 2018

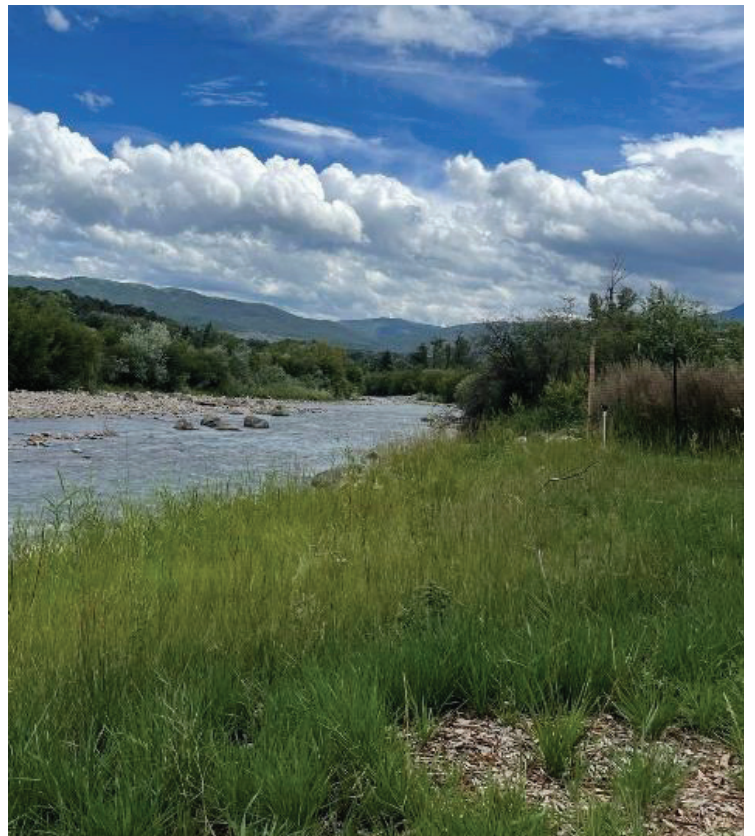


Post-Construction Summer, 2023

Before and After Accessible Park Entrance



Pre-Construction, Summer 2018



Post-Construction, Summer 2024

Before and After Upstream View from Crystal Bridge Drive



Pre-Construction Summer, 2018



Post-Construction Summer, 2023

Before and After Accessible Park Entrance

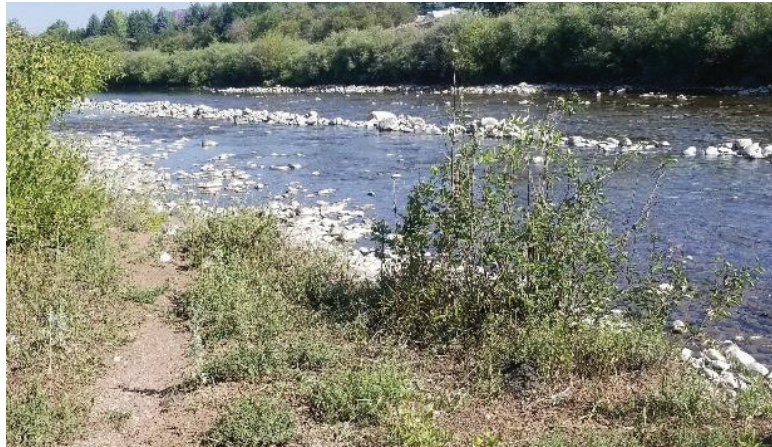


Pre-Construction, Summer 2018



Post-Construction, Summer 2024

Before and After Wetland Boardwalk



Pre-Construction, Summer 2018



Post-Construction, Summer 2024

Appendix C. Partner and Key Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello, this is (REC Team Member Name) with Research Evaluation Consulting or REC. Thank you for speaking with me today! We are evaluating the Crystal River Riverfront Park Restoration Project in collaboration with Roaring Fork Conservancy, and your insights will help us understand its impact. We want to know how the project has affected Crystal River Riverfront Park, its partners, and the community. Your responses are confidential and anonymous. This interview should take about 20–30 minutes, and you can skip any questions if needed. Does that sound good to you? [Wait for response] Great, thank you.

[Optional] Before we start, I will type your responses as we talk so that you may hear some background noise. Also, would you be comfortable letting me record our conversation to improve the accuracy of my transcription? If not, we can interview without recording it. [Wait for response] Thank you.

Experiences with the Crystal River Riverfront Park Restoration Project

First, we would like to understand your connection to the project. [If currently affiliated] Our records indicate that you were affiliated with [Organization Name] when the project was launched.

- 1) Could you briefly describe [Your Organization]’s involvement with the project? Probes: Were others besides yourself involved in additional ways in the organization? Or Would you describe your involvement in a little more detail?
- 2) How familiar are you with the Crystal River Riverfront Park? What motivated you to get involved? Could you briefly explain?

Evaluating the Goals of the Project

Next, we’ll discuss the project’s four main goals. Please evaluate each goal based on today’s progress.

The first goal was to restore the park’s riparian zone while preserving bird and wildlife habitats. Key activities included streambank stabilization, floodplain reconnection, and replacing invasive weeds and monocultures with diverse native plants.

- 3) How much do you agree with the statement, “The project achieved this goal.”

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

- 4) Could you explain your rating? Follow-up: What positive or negative impacts have you observed or experienced from these project activities?

The second project goal was to enhance river channel stability and improve fish habitats and spawning areas in the Riverfront Park section of Crystal River. Activities focused on creating conditions that support and strengthen instream biotic structure and diversity.

5) How much do you agree with the statement, “The project achieved this goal.”

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

6) Could you explain your rating? Follow-up: What positive or negative impacts have you observed or experienced from these project activities?

The third project goal was to develop a self-sustaining diversion and headgate structure, which would allow the Weaver Ditch to function within the river system while enhancing water delivery for the Town of Carbondale.

7) How much do you agree with the statement, “The project fully achieved this goal.”

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

8) Could you explain your rating? Follow-up: What positive or negative impacts have you observed or experienced from these project activities?

The fourth project goal was to enhance public experiences at Riverfront Park. This involved installing or upgrading interpretive signs, trails, gathering spaces, and educational programs.

9) How much do you agree with the statement, “The project fully achieved this goal.”

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

10) Could you explain your rating? Follow-up: What positive or negative impacts have you observed or experienced from these project activities?

Project Partnerships

Since the project involved multiple organizations and spanned several years, the next question explores how the stakeholders worked together.

11) What worked well in the collaboration among stakeholders? Are there any challenges or improvements you would suggest for future projects?

Final Questions

For context, projects of this scale require significant time and funding, which can be challenging to secure. Organizations often juggle multiple projects and priorities, competing for resources.

12) Considering the resources required, do you believe the Crystal Riverfront Park Restoration Project was a worthwhile investment? Why or why not? Probe: Could you elaborate on your perspective?

13) Is there anything else you want to share about the project, from planning to the present day?

Thank you. That brings us to our last question.

14) Are there any additional individuals you recommend we interview to obtain a more comprehensive evaluation of the project? If so, please provide their names, organization, and contact information.

Thank you for your time and valuable insights! If anything else comes to mind later, please let me know. Have a great day!

Appendix D. Community Member Survey

Introduction

Roaring Fork Conservancy (RFC) and partners recently completed a restoration project at Riverfront Park in Carbondale, Colorado. This anonymous survey will take about 5–7 minutes and helps us understand how the park is used and how the restoration has affected visitors' experiences. RFC hired Research Evaluation Consulting (REC) to evaluate this project. Please contact Heather Tattersall Lewin (heather@roaringfork.org) with any questions. We appreciate your participation and look forward to receiving your feedback.

Survey Eligibility

The first two questions will determine whether you are eligible to continue with the survey. This first eligibility question asks about your connections to the Carbondale region.

1) Do you live in Carbondale or the surrounding area? (Select one) *Required*

- ☐ Yes, full-time (e.g., year-round resident)
- ☐ Yes, part-time (e.g., summer- or winter-only resident)
- ☐ No → Skip to [No Further Questions Page](#)

Survey Eligibility (continued)

This second eligibility question asks about your recent connections to Riverfront Park.

2) Have you visited Riverfront Park since the Summer of 2023? (Select one) *Required*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No → Skip to [No Further Questions Page](#)

Your Recent Experiences with the Park

This next section asks about your experiences with Riverfront Park in its current condition, meaning after the restoration project was completed in Summer 2023.

3) How often have you visited the park since the Summer of 2023? (Select one)

- ☐ Once or twice
- ☐ Every few months
- ☐ About every month
- ☐ At least weekly

4) Overall, how would you rate your recent experiences with Riverfront Park? (Select one)

- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Fair
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Very Good
- ☐ Excellent

5) Please rate the current quality of Riverfront Park as a place to... (Select one response for each row)

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	N/A
Enjoy or spend time in nature	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Get together with family or friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Go fishing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Go for a walk	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Learn about nature or science	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Learn about water in the Carbondale community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Observe birds or wildlife	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6) What do you like most about the park, and what could be improved? (Open-ended)

Past Connections to the Park

This next question asks about your past visits to Riverfront Park.

7) How often did you visit Riverfront Park before Summer 2023? (Select one) *Required*

- ☐ Never → Skip to [About You Page](#)
- ☐ Once or twice
- ☐ Every few months
- ☐ About every month
- ☐ At least weekly

Impressions of the Restoration

Please compare your personal experiences with the park before and after the restoration project.

8) How much do you agree with each of these statements? (Select one response for each row)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The current Riverfront Park is a valuable part of living in , or visiting, Carbondale.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Riverfront Park is a more appealing place to visit due to the improvements made during the restoration project.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

There is temporary fencing in the park right now to protect the vegetation, which might affect your experience of the space. As you answer the following question, try to imagine what it will be like once the fencing is removed.

9) To what extent has each Riverfront Park or river feature improved because of the restoration project? Select “Unsure” if you are unsure or do not have an opinion about a specific feature. (Select one response for each row)

	Not at All Improved	Slightly Improved	Somewhat Improved	Improved	Strongly Improved	Unsure
Bird-watching conditions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Educational opportunities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Fishing conditions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Gathering spaces	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Park accessibility	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Quality of the natural areas along the river	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
River access	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Signage in the park	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Walking trails	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wildlife (non-bird) watching conditions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10) What positive or negative impacts have you or your family observed or experienced from the restoration project? (Open-ended)

About You

Lastly, we can better interpret the survey results if we know a bit about our survey participants.

11) How old are you? (Select one)

- ☐ Less than 18 years
- ☐ 18-35 years
- ☐ 36-55 years
- ☐ 56-75 years
- ☐ Greater than 75 years
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

12) How long have you lived in Carbondale or the surrounding area?

- ☐ Less than 2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ 5-10 years
- ☐ Greater than 10 years
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

ALTERNATIVE ENDING 1: Thank You!

Roaring Fork Conservancy and its partners will use these survey responses to inform future conservation projects.

13) Is there anything else you would like to share about Riverfront Park or its restoration? (Open-ended)

Thank you very much for your time and thoughtful feedback!

ALTERNATIVE ENDING 2: No Further Questions

You are not eligible to continue with the survey. However, thank you very much for your willingness to participate!

Appendix E. References

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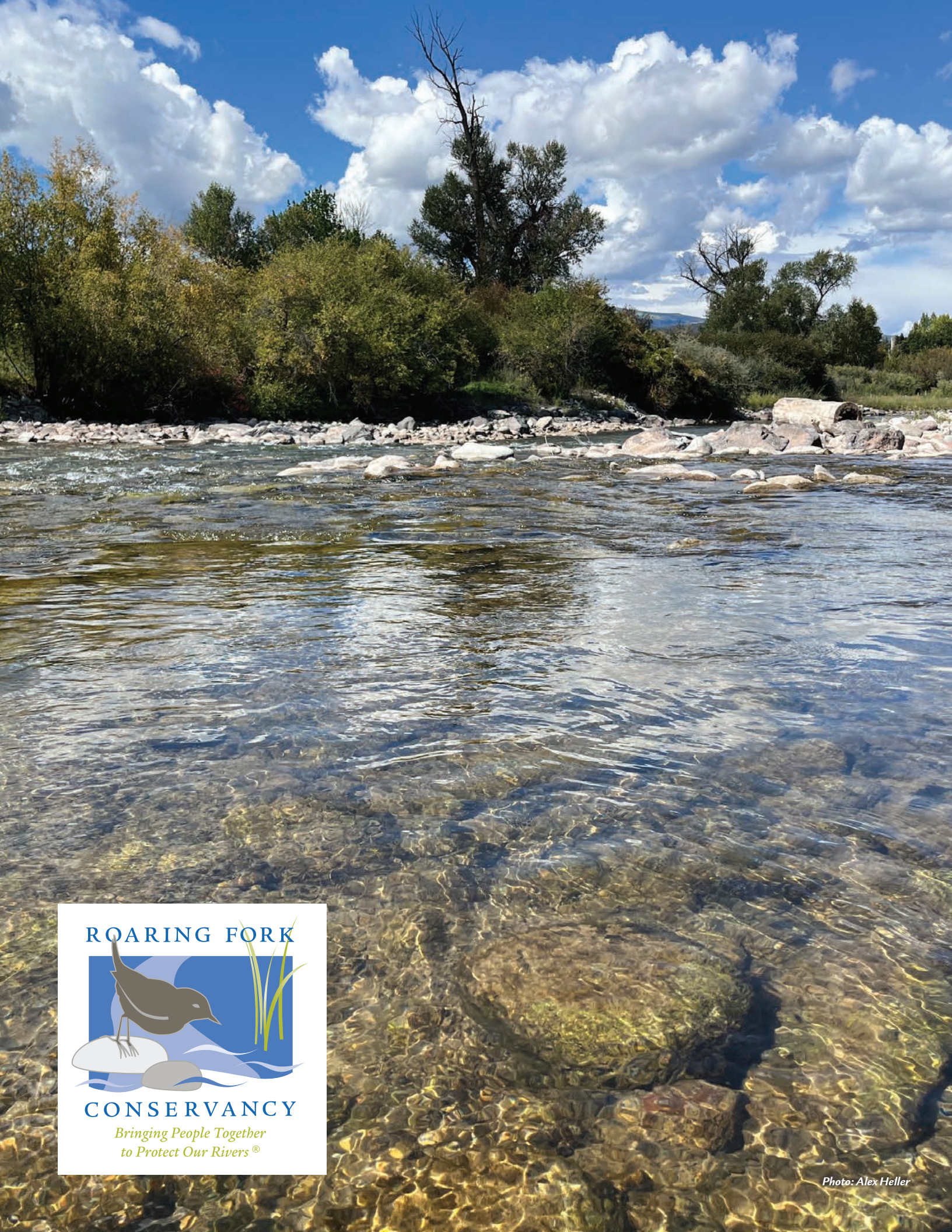


Photo: Alex Heller