

RIVERSIDE STORIES

SARA VAN MAREL

Field Supervisor in Cottonwood, AZ

*“More Than
a Job”*

SARA VAN MAREL IS no stranger to the Tamarisk Coalition and their actions to remove invasive plants from Southwestern riparian zones. As the Field Supervisor for Friends of Verde River Greenway, she leads plant removal crews of young adults and veterans all throughout the Verde Valley, clearing out tamarisk (salt cedar), Russian olive, tree of heaven, and more, in the daily effort to restore the river systems. A few short years ago, Sara herself was a member on one of those crews, and learned first hand the grueling nature of the work.





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For six months out of the year, the Friends of Verde River Greenway, along with the Arizona Conservation Corps and Vetraplex, coordinate invasive plant removal crews along the riparian (riverside) systems of the Verde Valley. The process includes using chainsaws to clear out plants, spraying herbicide, mulching, and revegetating the area with native plants. Although most would consider the brutal work of chainsawing plants for eight hours a day in the desert sun a little too much, Sara savors the physical labor. “It’s rewarding,” Sara says. “When you’ve been running your chainsaw all day, and you’re sweating through your chaps, you look behind you, and you’re like, ‘Yes, I helped get rid of all of the tamarisk in this 8th of a mile.’ It’s really great to have this super visible accomplishment.”

It’s this sense of satisfaction that originally attracted her



Photography Credit: Zach Mahone

to the job. When she first started working in the Verde Valley as an Arizona Conservation Corps crew member, she was immediately enthralled with having a personal effect on such a beautiful place. This drive instilled a passion within her. “This is really something I can come back to in ten years, and know that this was the tree I cut down, and that I was doing something that was making a difference and having an impact.”

So for the last few years, Sara has been diligently focused on encouraging this same passion in her crew members on the ground. “I’m getting to learn so many new skills and face new challenges. I get to work with the Arizona Conservation Corps crews, and all the staff members that I used to work with,” Sara says. Her efforts have been fruitful, as her once-peers now look up to her. “It didn’t really hit me until last year, when everyone was telling me they wanted to work for me,” she recalls. She attributes this to how much she cares about inspiring the members on her crews, stating, “it’s not just a job, it’s also about personal development. A lot of times it’s about helping people work through whatever challenge they’re facing in life.”

When Sara isn’t working to make sure her crews have everything they need, she spends a great deal of time working with local landowners to educate them on the efforts of the clean up crews, and how they can work together. “We work really hard to get out in the community and introduce ourselves to everyone that we can. There is this understanding that if we don’t do something about the invasive plants now, it could potentially be a much bigger problem. Generally people are on board with that,” she said.

Recently, however, the fight has moved past the here-and-now. “We’re looking more at monitoring and the long term sustainability in protecting the work we’ve already done,” she says. “We’re looking into the future and trying to figure out how to make this sustainable, and not just hire 30 people every year indefinitely. Eventually, hopefully it would just be volunteers. We’re working on figuring out the best and most efficient way to do that. If only tamarisk just didn’t grow back,” she laughs. ■

This is part of the Riverside Stories series, brought to you by the Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with Friends of Verde River Greenway with the Verde Watershed Restoration Coalition, and funded by the Walton Family Foundation.

To learn more about other individuals doing great work along rivers, visit <http://tamariskcoalition.org/about-us/riverside-stories>.



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