

FEATURED

Chip Norton: Turning river connection into conservation

By OLIVIA MAILLET The Verde Independent
Aug 22, 2026



Chip Norton walks through the vineyard at Salt Mine Wine in Camp Verde on Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2026. (VNN/Olivia Maillet)

Chip Norton believes protecting the Verde River is not only about conservation, but also inspiring the next generation to care about the river that flows in their backyards.

As a boy, Norton went on frequent fishing and camping trips on the east Verde River near Payson, where his father grew up. Decades later, after helping farmers conserve water, leading efforts to restore habitat, and turning a small river cleanup group into a conservation organization, Norton is now focused on getting local youth outside and connected to the river.

"It turned out to be a portal to stewardship," he said.

Norton is a supervisor on the Verde Natural Resource Conservation District, a group focused on integrating conservation practices into agriculture. During his time on the conservation district board, he has overseen grant allocations from the Walton Family Foundation and a partnership with the Nature Conservancy.

He's also helped local producers like Hauser and Hauser Farms implement efficient irrigation while conserving the Verde River's riparian area.

"If you help out with farms and ranches, I've noticed that they are more willing to preserve habitats and do more sustainable practices," he said.

One thing that Norton hopes the conservation district will improve on is its connection to Verde Valley youth. The conservation district used to run the Environmental Education Center in Cottonwood, showcasing water conservation exhibits, but now the district partners with youth-science organizations like the Science Vortex.



"I just want to have a strong youth outreach component," Norton said. "Not necessarily an education center, but I want us to have that connection. We have to get them excited about conservation."

He said that he realized early on that if people weren't aware of environmental issues, no action would be taken to solve them.

"I started seeing that there needed to be people speaking on the behalf of nature and the environment," Norton said. "I've always taken a practical approach to it rather than going to officials that may not have the best conservation record. It's an asset to be on the ground, whether you are improving stream flow or wildlife."

Norton and his wife, Kathy, built a house in Camp Verde in 1993. In 2012, Norton, his brother, Kevin, and Kevin's wife, Leann, started Salt Mine Wine.

Norton said Kathy, who was the superintendent of the Tuzigoot and Montezuma Castle national monuments, played a large role in his passion for conservation after his retirement in 2008. He said he immediately joined Camp Verde's sanitary district board after retiring because the town was having problems finishing construction at the wastewater plant.

From there, Norton was omnipresent in many conservation groups throughout the Verde Valley. He joined the Verde Watershed Association and the Yavapai County Water Advisory Committee.

"None of the local conservation groups had any money," he said. "I found a \$10,000 grant to apply for, and we got it. Then, I became treasurer."

Word spread fast that Norton could bring conservation visions to life by applying for grants. A small group called Friends of the Verde River Greenway reached out to him. This group, through Norton's leadership, would eventually become Friends of the Verde River.

"The river was a dumping ground," Norton said. "And so volunteers would bake cookies to raise money and do trash cleanups. I got with them and said that I thought we could get some money and expand the scope of their work. Ten years later, we had a revenue of a million dollars a year."

Norton was president of Friends of the Verde River for over a decade. He said the community stewardship that the group has fostered is one of its greatest accomplishments.

"Not a lot of value was placed on the river as a source of recreation with trails," he said. "So that was another point of collaboration with other groups in the community."

For Norton, the community's connection to the Verde River is what makes conservation work.

He found that connection as a boy, during fishing and camping trips with his father. Then he carried it into a lifetime of conservation work, from helping farmers use less water to restoring habitat along the Verde River.

Now, Norton wants local youth to find their own connection to the river like he did. Through different organizations creating opportunities for young people to experience the Verde River firsthand, Norton hopes that the next generation will find the same desire to protect the river's flows.

"When you've truly succeeded in conservation, your community becomes a legacy," he said.

 **Your Business Has a Story**

Do you own or manage a business?

  

Daybreak builds community through opportunity. [Learn more.](#)