

# Arizona Water Innovation exhibit highlights 1,000 years of ingenuity, connection

**ASU exhibit uses art, science to explore state's water ingenuity, from ancient canals to today's community-driven solutions**

By Faith Kearns, ASU News  
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In Arizona, water and innovation are inseparable. From the ancestral O'odham [canal systems](#) that carried water from the Salt and Gila rivers to today's cutting-edge community projects that help bring water solutions to [rural homes](#), communities here have adapted and collaborated to sustain life in one of the driest regions in North America.

That long legacy of creativity and cooperation is at the heart of Arizona Water Innovation, a new exhibit led by [Arizona Water for All](#), a pillar of the [Arizona Water Innovation Initiative](#) at Arizona State University. The exhibit explores how people across generations have met water challenges through both technological and social ingenuity, and how those efforts continue through community-based research and partnerships today.

Housed in the [Innovation Gallery](#) at ASU's [School of Human Evolution and Social Change](#), the exhibit invites visitors to think about water innovation as something that has been ongoing and collective.

## Building the exhibit

The idea for Arizona Water Innovation grew out of the Arizona Water for All's desire to make their research, which is focused on [addressing water insecurity](#) with both social and technical infrastructure, more accessible to residents and communities.

[Anahi Yerman](#), a [graduate research fellow](#), led the project's implementation and sees it as a way to honor both ancient ingenuity and present-day community resilience.

“As anthropologists and scientists, it’s really important to give back to communities. They are giving us their knowledge, time and wisdom, and we are learning from them,” Yerman said. “It’s rare in academia to have an opportunity to reciprocate at this scale and create things that can communicate your research with everyone from children and parents to students to government leaders.”

While planning for the exhibit had been a couple of years in the making, implementing the idea became a large-scale, fast-moving collaboration.

“We started talking about it in earnest in May,” Yerman said, “and it opened in November. People at other museums told us an exhibit like this usually takes a year to a year and a half. We did it in five months.”

The team included freelance visual anthropologist Ashley Stinnett, graphic designer [Marco Albarran](#) and ASU user experience specialists [Claire Lauer](#) and [Amber Hedquist](#), who created interactive touch-screen elements, as well as a broad range of students and staff with specialties in everything from water quality engineering to psychology.

“We had engineers, social scientists and artists all working together,” Yerman said. “It was truly interdisciplinary.”

It was important to Yerman to show how and why a longer-term project like the Arizona Water Innovation Initiative — a multiyear effort supported by the state of Arizona — is important and why community-based research and community-based water innovation are necessary.

“As scientists, we need to communicate with other scientists, and we also have to communicate with the public,” she said. “If we fail in either of those domains, we’re not actually being successful scientists.”

## **Water innovation through time**

The exhibit’s narrative follows Arizona Water for All’s guiding principle: that water innovation has been happening in Arizona for a very long time and is as much social as it is technical.

“The world we live in today is a culmination of thousands of years of human history here in Arizona,” Yerman said. “When I learned about the ancestral O’odham canal systems, I was in awe. Those waterways are incredible engineering, and we still use them today.”

Yerman added that innovation isn’t always about the “next new shiny technology.”

“That can help, and it often does,” she said, “but it needs to be put into context that considers everything that has come before and what is currently happening and where we want to go. If we just look to the future and not the context in which we exist, then we’re not going to implement successful solutions.”

Part of that context, she said, is recognizing that water experiences differ dramatically even within the same community.

“You can be 10 miles from one another and have one household on municipal water, one on a private well and another hauling water,” Yerman said. “If you say, ‘We have one solution for this entire community,’ that’s not going to work. We need many different types of solutions, and the pieces in the exhibit reflect that.”

For Yerman, the most meaningful part of the exhibit is the two short films that play on a loop in the gallery. Yerman and Stinnett traveled the state and talked with dozens of people about their relationship with water.

“Whether people are going fishing or recreating, or are cattle ranchers feeding their herds with grass fed from the monsoons, or are research scientists working on water solutions, everyone has a unique relationship with water,” Yerman said. “We’re all also tied together in a larger (story) of the water that we share. ... Water connects us all.”

Quotes from those interviews line the gallery walls, inviting visitors to see themselves in Arizona’s shared water future.

## **Collective effort, lasting impact**

The rapid production of Arizona Water Innovation was possible only through collaboration. Despite a modest budget, dozens of people volunteered their time and expertise.

“Researchers get so few opportunities to do something like this,” Yerman said. “People were so excited to be part of a project that could immediately benefit the community.”

Even before opening, the exhibit was already having ripple effects. For example, the Arizona Water for All team used the filming process to expand its statewide network of collaborators.

“We added several dozen more people or organizations working toward water solutions to our [larger network](#),” Yerman said. “They’re now connecting with each other, learning from each other and creating more effective programs across the state.”

For Arizona Water for All Director and ASU Regents and President's Professor [Amber Wutich](#), the exhibit embodies the team’s vision of connecting research with real-world impact.

“I’m so hopeful about the future of water innovation because in the last 10 years, we’ve made enormous strides in understanding the problem of water insecurity and what sorts of things we can do to solve it,” Wutich said. “Projects like this one bring together sociotechnical solutions, linking technology and community knowledge, to create lasting change.”

## **Visit the exhibit**

Arizona Water Innovation is on display through March 25 at the [Innovation Gallery](#) in ASU’s School of Human Evolution and Social Change in Tempe. The exhibit is free and open to the public, with monthly events such as gallery talks and a story slam.

After its run at ASU, the exhibit will tour around Arizona during the summer and later be available online.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Visitors explore the Arizona Water Innovation exhibit at ASU's Innovation Gallery, which highlights more than 1,000 years of water ingenuity across the region. Photo by Anahi Yerman

## Text image(s)



Exhibit lead Anahi Yerman speaks about the importance of community-based research and public engagement in water innovation at the opening event for the exhibit. Photo by Faith Kearns





Visitors to the Arizona Water Innovation opening event experiencing water in varied ways ranging from virtual reality to sampling water from an atmospheric water harvester. Top right photo by Megan Martin, other photos by Faith Kearns







Visitors to the opening event for the Arizona Water Innovation exhibit enjoying the venue. Photo by Megan Martin