

Community voices guide what they see in new traveling Arizona water education exhibit

By Faith Kearns, ASU News
February 23, 2026

Along Interstate 17 at the northern edge of the Phoenix metro area sits Black Canyon City, a rural community where water has always been central to life in the desert. The unincorporated area lies within the Agua Fria River watershed, where longtime residents have witnessed dramatic changes in rainfall, river flows and groundwater levels.

“When we moved out here, it was raining almost every day,” one Black Canyon City [resident said](#). “Over the last two years, the impact of the drought has really kicked in. You see it in the flora and fauna, and even in the water tables. The pumps are running harder because there’s not as much water to pull from.”

Those lived experiences anchor a [new immersive museum exhibit](#) developed by the User Experience team of ASU’s [Arizona Water Innovation Initiative](#), a statewide project led by ASU’s Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory in collaboration with the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering, with support from the National Science Foundation via the [WaterSIMmersive](#) project.

Installed at Cañon Elementary School, in partnership with [Black Canyon Heritage Park](#), the exhibit invites visitors to explore where their water comes from and how it moves through the watershed. The exhibit expands beyond town boundaries to reflect the interconnected nature of water systems, incorporating surrounding communities such as Mayer and Cordes Junction.

Arizona’s water story, told locally

Across Arizona, communities experience water in ways shaped by local histories and infrastructure. While public agencies and researchers have invested heavily in water planning and conservation, much of that work remains largely invisible to the public.

By collaborating directly with communities to co-develop localized, immersive museum exhibits that reflect specific lived experiences and priorities, WaterSIM is designed to bridge that gap.

A big part of what sets WaterSIM apart is how the exhibit was created. The Arizona Water Innovation Initiative's UX team conducted more than 40 interviews in Black Canyon City, many led by residents themselves as paid community researchers. Insights from community interviews directly shaped the exhibit.

"It was an absolute pleasure interviewing so many local residents from various economic, social and educational backgrounds," said Paula Albin, a Black Canyon City community researcher.

"Although these people were so different, one concern echoed in many of the interviews: the lack of water through the years."

Another community researcher, Monica Callen, said the experience reshaped her own relationship with water.

"Like many people, I rarely thought about the water coming from my tap before this experience," Callen said. "Being part of this project helped me connect more deeply with my community and work with an incredible team at ASU."

The exhibit

Visitors to the exhibit can explore a community story map layered with local narratives and infrastructure, interact with games that reveal how water is treated and reused, and step into immersive experiences that make complex systems visible and understandable.

This approach reflects ASU's commitment to leveraging the university as a public enterprise that strengthens Arizona's network of learning and discovery. Rather than extracting information, the project positions community members as co-creators of knowledge and solutions.

"Working with Black Canyon Heritage Park and Agua Fria communities has been invaluable," said [Claire Lauer](#), ASU professor of technical communication and the project lead. "Their insights helped ensure the exhibit speaks to real local water challenges and opportunities."

Visitors to the Black Canyon City exhibit say the approach resonates.

"I learned so much about the community- and state-level plans to conserve water," one visitor said, while another reflected, "I didn't know enough about where my water comes from — the exhibit really opened my eyes."

For many residents, the exhibit helps frame long-standing concerns in a broader regional context.

"Arizona has done a lot more than I realized to conserve water," one museum visitor shared.

Looking forward

Black Canyon City represents one chapter in WaterSIM's growing statewide effort. Following an earlier installation in [south Phoenix](#), future exhibits are planned for communities including Mayer, Bisbee and tribal partner sites across Arizona.

Each new site will begin the same way: with listening.

For ASU researchers and community partners alike, the goal is not simply to teach facts about water, but to strengthen understanding, trust and shared responsibility — ensuring Arizona's communities are better equipped to understand and adapt to a changing water future.

Access the games online

Want to try the games yourself? Visit [the website](#) to play WaterSIM's interactive experiences, explore immersive virtual tours and test your water knowledge. Many of the exhibit's digital elements are available online, making it easy to dive in from anywhere.

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

Main image



An assortment of tech and no-tech experiences make up the WaterSIM exhibit. Photos by Amber Hedquist and Poorva Ketkar/ASU

Text image(s)



Schoolchildren interact with exhibit water chatbots and educational games. Photos by Amber Hedquist and Poorva Ketkar/ASU



Fifth graders and their teacher experience the Flow Forward VR experience. Photo by Amber Hedquist/ASU



An ASU team member explains the layers of rock in the Agua Fria basin and aquifer to kindergartners. Photo by Poorva Ketkar/ASU