



Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Headwaters' "Visioning Workshop" for the San Antonio River north of Hildebrand to the Blue Hole. We see this as a unique confluence of time and opportunity and we are grateful for your presence.

We have brought together nearly fifty people each wearing many different hats. Together we hope to achieve a creative visioning process that considers site appropriate connectivity with the rest of the San Antonio River; preservation and restoration of the Blue Hole area; and reflection on the natural, spiritual, historical, and cultural significance of this area to our collective stories. We hope this will be a consensus-building process with concrete outcomes, including a set of guidelines for any work in the so-called "spiritual" or "headwaters" reach of the River.

The Headwaters at Incarnate Word is situated in a larger "Headwaters Basin" that shares much of our same sense of mission and history. While there is much we could envision together within this larger context, our focus for Friday will be on the river corridor up from Hildebrand, the natural area surrounding the Blue Hole and its many smaller springs, and the sweep of hill side up to and including the historic Brackenridge Villa. This is not the first time citizens have attempted to do honor to this very historical place, nor will it be the last. But it is an important juncture in time, and it is the *right* time to begin such efforts anew.

This is a historic time in the life of the San Antonio River. The collaborative and complex San Antonio River Improvement Project (SARIP) is drawing people back to the river, arguably the lifeblood of this community. We know that Native American peoples have been drawn to this river – particularly the river at its source – for roughly 12,000 years. The river is where it started for San Antonio with the founding of the Spanish missions along its banks. And indeed, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word got their start in San Antonio because of the river: abuse of the river as a sewer gave rise to cholera epidemics that drew the Sisters here from France in 1869 in answer to that famous call from Bishop Dubuis: *"Our Lord Jesus Christ, suffering in the persons of a multitude of sick and infirm of every kind, seeks relief at your hands."*

How the Sisters ended up owning and occupying this treasured land at the "Head of the River" is itself a wonderful story, but the point here is that the Sisters have been in San Antonio giving life to many prominent ministries for 140 years, the most recent of which is the Headwaters, an environmental ministry that acknowledges their stewardship of the land and waters, and their custodianship of an historic treasure in the Blue Hole. After founding a hospital system, an orphanage, a high school, a major university, a transitional home for the homeless, and a host of international ministries abroad, they have, in a sense, circled back to our San Antonio River with the Headwaters. While the Sisters' story, presence and future are, like the river, ever changing, their commitment to the Incarnate Word and their sense of incarnational spirituality remains constant and is evolving to include not just humanity but all of God's creation.



Although the Incarnate Word Sisters are now an international congregation with ministries in Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, Zambia, and Ireland, their legacy is still very strongly tied to this sacred place at the Head of the River. And their commitment to the proper stewardship of this place is more evident now than ever. But they need your help: your creativity, your vision, your collaboration. We cannot and do not want to move on this alone. Thus, we hope and pray that together we can envision this final reach to the "headwaters" in a way that is unique to Incarnate Word, appropriate in mission and scale, and fitting in terms of the legacy of the founding Sisters. (Photos of CCVI Mothers Superior boating on the SAR, circa 1910 and 2010) **OVER PLEASE**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:



The Blue Hole (aka San Antonio Springs) was once the 6th largest springs in Texas (after Comal, San Marcos, Goodenough (now under Amistad Reservoir), San Felipe, and Barton Springs). It was once described as a “fountain spring” as it gushed up out of the ground under enormous artesian pressure. Over pumping from the Southern Edwards Aquifer has since caused it to run dry some of the time, but when it’s flowing as it is now, it is awesome and beautiful. To many, it remains a very sacred place.

The Incarnate Word Sisters have been on this central piece of San Antonio land for about 120 years, having purchased Col. George Brackenridge’s country estate (“Fernridge”) back in 1896. Much of the original 283-acre purchase has since been used to build the Chapel at Incarnate Word, the University of the Incarnate Word, the Village at Incarnate Word and the Incarnate Word Generalate, an international headquarters for the Congregation. Some of the land was carved off for the building of the Olmos Dam, some for Highway 281, and some for the high-rise condominiums at 200 Patterson when the Sisters needed cash for other ministries. But in 2008, with a growing sense of their/our obligation to care for God’s creation and with the urging and support of many in the community, the Sisters moved to save what was left of their original legacy and offer it up for nature preservation, spiritual reflection, historical interpretation, and the education and enjoyment of all. Title to this 53-acre parcel of land, which includes the Blue Hole at the “Head of the River,” was conveyed to the nonprofit Headwaters Coalition, Inc. Thus, the Headwaters ministry was officially born.



Since many springs and all of Olmos Creek contribute flow at or near the historic source of the San Antonio River, the Blue Hole can be thought of as the iconic head of the San Antonio River: a mainspring in a large “field of springs” that includes both sides of Olmos Dam; springs along Olmos Creek, the Headwaters Sanctuary itself; other properties immediately downstream of Olmos Dam, namely the Episcopal Diocese and 200 Patterson; residential areas of Alamo Heights; the University and Village; and even springs that emerge a bit downstream in Brackenridge Park. From the Blue Hole, the San Antonio River runs about 1/3 mile down into Brackenridge Park on the south side of Hildebrand.

North of Hildebrand on the Incarnate Word property are four separate but inter-related institutions: the Congregation of Sisters of the Incarnate Word, which is currently located in the Incarnate Word Generalate; the University of the Incarnate Word, the Village at Incarnate Word retirement center, and the Headwaters Coalition, Inc., which offices in the Generalate and oversees the management of the 53-acre Headwaters Sanctuary.

With the historic restoration and celebration of the San Antonio River from its source at the “headwaters” south to Mission Espada, a unique opportunity exists right now to “lift up” this particular stretch of the river and do honor to its natural, spiritual, cultural and historical presence and character. Whatever we do, we must preserve its sense of sacredness as well as the Sisters’ legacy, being sensitive as well to security and public access issues related to the University, Village retirement center, Congregation and Headwaters.