



La Ciénega de Santa Clara

In 1993, the Ciénega de Santa Clara was designated a Biosphere Reserve and declared a federally protected area in Mexico, with 85% of the reserve included in the Core Zone, where human activities and extractive uses are limited. In 2002, the Sonoran Institute began work in the region to impact binational conservation policies; in 2009, they were invited by the University of Arizona and other partners to participate in on-the-ground ecological monitoring of the wetlands.

The Ciénega de Santa Clara is located in the southeastern section of the Colorado River Delta, within the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta Biosphere Reserve. As the most important wetland in the Delta, it provides habitat for over 150,000 migratory waterbirds and 75% of the total population of Yuma clapper rails. In the upper portion, the Ciénega encompasses 13,500 acres of marshlands, with dense cattail stands interspersed with lagoons. The lower portion consists of shallow pools and mudflats extending over 27,000 acres. The Ciénega is maintained by agricultural drainage from the Welton and Mohawk valleys in Arizona (via the MODE canal) and the San Luis Valley. Groundwater flows from the Gran Desierto Mesa reach the Ciénega on the eastern edge, forming a corridor with El Doctor wetlands.



Aerial View of La Ciénega de Santa Clara

The conservation efforts in the Ciénega focus on the preservation of size and quality of this wetland, and particularly the flows that maintain it. The Sonoran Institute and its partners work with local communities in the upper portion to promote the sustainable use of wetland resources, including the development of ecotourism enterprises and the establishment of conservation easements to protect key wetland areas.



Juan Butron, a local expert on La Ciénega, leads a tour of the wetland

Successes Up-to-Date

- Formation of the Colorado River Water Trust through the partnership of the Sonoran Institute, Pronatura, and Environmental Defense Fund.
- In 2009, an historic agreement between Mexico, the United States, and the Colorado River Delta Trust was made to dedicate 10,000 acre-feet each to the Ciénega.
- Initiation of binational monitoring efforts to understand the dynamics in the Ciénega and its relationship with the MODE canal flows.
- Local development of tourism infrastructure at upper portion of the wetland.

2011 Objectives

- Secure long-term funding for the dedication of additional water to La Ciénega.
- Continue the binational monitoring program of the Ciénega water quality and quantity, flora, and fauna.
- Initiate the process to define binational agreements to guarantee water flows for the Ciénega in the long-term.

