The component of this initiative is the development of the Campo Ecologico Rio Hardy, described above. The Ruta del Rio Hardy will also include two new centers. The first is the Villa Cucapá, an extension of the museum in El Mayor into a living-history museum with exhibits and demonstrations of arts and crafts, Cucapá cultural traditions, and the day-to-day use of natural resources in traditional Cucapá society. The second is a visitor’s center to serve as a central information point for Mexican and American tourists and to educate them about fishing and hunting opportunities and the importance of water to wildlife.

Why Your Support Is Important

When the Sonoran Institute initiated the Colorado River Delta project 10 years ago, we knew it would take a long time to reverse the damage caused by decades of indifference on both sides of the border. Through strong partnerships with non-governmental organizations, research institutions, government officials, and Mexican and U.S. community leaders, and with the support of generous, visionary funders, the Institute has laid the groundwork for comprehensive restoration that integrates environmental research, policy and community development. The next decade offers the opportunity to greatly expand on these successes and realize the ambitious vision of a renewed Delta with healthy ecosystems and vibrant communities.

“The Sonoran Institute’s conservation vision in the Delta includes the human element and is therefore effective in inspiring partnerships and real action.”

Enrique Villegas
Secretary of Environmental Protection for Baja California

Why the Delta is Important

While less than 10 percent of its original size, the Colorado River Delta is crucial to several threatened and endangered species and is a key stopover for birds along the Pacific Flyway. It is also crucial to the cultural survival of indigenous communities on both sides of the border, particularly the Cocopah in the U.S. and their brethren the Cucapá in Mexico.

Conservation efforts hold special promise for the Delta. It is possible that relatively modest flows of freshwater and appropriately managed brackish water could stimulate ecological recovery and conserve existing priority areas. The Colorado River remains the most important freshwater input into the Upper Gulf of California and is key to the health of its nurseries, particularly for totoaba, shrimp and corvina. This promise and potential spur the Sonoran Institute’s work with our partner non-governmental organizations, research institutions, government officials, and local residents in Mexico and the U.S. to protect and restore conservation priority areas in the Delta.

These waters flooded hundreds of homes and businesses, but they also brought back to life a portion of the formerly defunct Delta. While devastating to some people’s lives, the floods brought hope for a brighter future. The Delta was not dead after all.

Looking south into the Gulf of California, Isla Montague lies at the mouth of the Colorado River. Ocean tides now flood the area because freshwater from the river rarely reaches the sea.

Great blue herons and egrets in the Ciénega de Santa Clara.

E.L. Kelty, Through the Grand Canyon from Wyoming to Mexico, 1915

So ended the Colorado. Two thousand miles above, it was a beautiful river, born of a hundred snow-capped peaks and a thousand crystal streams; gathering strength, it became the masterful river which had carved the hearts of mountains and slashed the rocky plateaus, draining a kingdom and giving but little in return. Now it was going under, but it was fighting to the end. Waves of yellow struggled up through waves of green and were beaten down again…The last vestige of day was swallowed in the gloom, just as the Colorado was buried ‘neath the blue.
A Decade of Accomplishments
Florentino Flores, president of the local fishermen's association in the Colorado River Delta, was one of the first community leaders that the Sonoran Institute and Pronatura Northwest met in 1996 when they began holding workshops to bring local people together to promote restoration of the Delta. The organization that emerged from these initial meetings is the Asociación Ecológica de Usuarios del Río Hardy y Colorado (Ecological Association of Hardy and Colorado River Users) or AEURHYC, which includes fishermen, farmers, small-scale tourism operators, and members of the Cucapá tribe. Flores, now the president of AEURHYC, longingly recalls the wet years after the big floods: “You wouldn’t believe how many animals [fish, turtles] were in the water. All you had to do to earn your supper was throw out a net!” Nowadays, much of the Colorado River Delta is too dry to support fishing, but areas where the Sonoran Institute, Pronatura and AEURHYC have been working are making a comeback.

Most of the work to date and thus the majority of habitats are evident along the Río Hardy. Where marsh wetlands were previously dry and reed-choked, inhibiting the passage of even small fishing boats and kayaks, the creation of a small check-dam has augmented water levels significantly. Current water levels in the Río Hardy now support fishing, hunting, and an historic, small-scale tourism industry, but the presence of this water is naturally restoring about 2,500 acres of marsh wetlands. These 10 years have also seen the successful restoration of seven small sites in the Delta totaling about 36 acres. A brigade of volunteers, school groups and scientists from the U.S., Canada and Mexico have donated hundreds of hours to help with restoration plans, recreation site designs, tree plantings and clean up. Capitalizing on these restored resources, AEURHYC and the Sonoran Institute are fashioning Campo Ecológico Río Hardy out of an abandoned hunting camp. The Campo will be a recreation, environmental education and restoration research area that will highlight the importance of protecting and restoring the Delta. The 2.5 acre eco-camp will include a small visitor’s center, shade structures with barbecues, interpretive trails, observation and boat docks, an amphitheater, a fountain, restoration areas and a greenhouse. It will welcome Mexicali families on weekends, school groups during the week and American tourists throughout the fall, winter and spring. Proceeds generated will be reinvested into conservation and restoration efforts.

The best ways to protect and restore the Delta are identified in the Conservation Priorities for the Colorado River Delta report, which includes input from 55 scientific experts and resource managers, together representing more than 400 years of Delta experience. The U.S. and Mexican governments, through an international working group, adopted the report in 2006 as the official “game plan” for protecting the Delta. (A PDF of Conservation Priorities for the Colorado River Delta is available at sonoran.org/reports, or contact the Sonoran Institute for a print copy.)

Scientists now know enough about the hydrology, soils, plants and animals of the region to create detailed restoration and monitoring plans at various scales. Any successful restoration plan for the Delta requires a minimum base flow of fresh water. Mexico’s first water trust, which holds water rights for environmental purposes, is nearing completion, and 320 acre-feet of water have already been secured. The partnership of AEURHYC, Sonoran Institute and Pronatura is a successful model for community-based conservation that integrates applied science, local knowledge and values, and community stewardship to restore a key to the success of any large-scale restoration strategy in the Delta is the acquisition of water for environmental purposes. Pronatura and the Institute are working to secure 50,000 acre-feet for instream flows and 260,000 acre-feet for pulse flows every four years (320 acre-feet are already secured). These amounts will likely come from water acquisitions, win-win partnerships with the agricultural