

International Collaboration Promotes Delta Awareness

Renee Robichaud – Outdoor Research Planner, Imperial National Wildlife Refuge

A group of workers toils quietly in an area where a vast mud flat collides with a lush wetland. Often, they look up as one pantomimes the next step: pouring concrete from a wheelbarrow, or welding two pieces of metal together. They work silently and seamlessly. In the end, a twenty foot tower stands, marked with the following inscription: “Constructed in May 1999 as a symbol of friendship between the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta Biosphere Reserve and Imperial National Wildlife Refuge.”

The tower was erected in relative silence because the workers do not share a common spoken language. They are resident-owners of the Ejido Encinas B. Johnson and employees of La Reserva de la Biósfera Alto Golfo y Delta del Río Colorado (AGDRC, the Upper Gulf of California and Colorado River Delta Biosphere Reserve) in Mexico, and staff from the Imperial National Wildlife Refuge (INWR) in the United States. The “friendship tower” will serve visitors to the

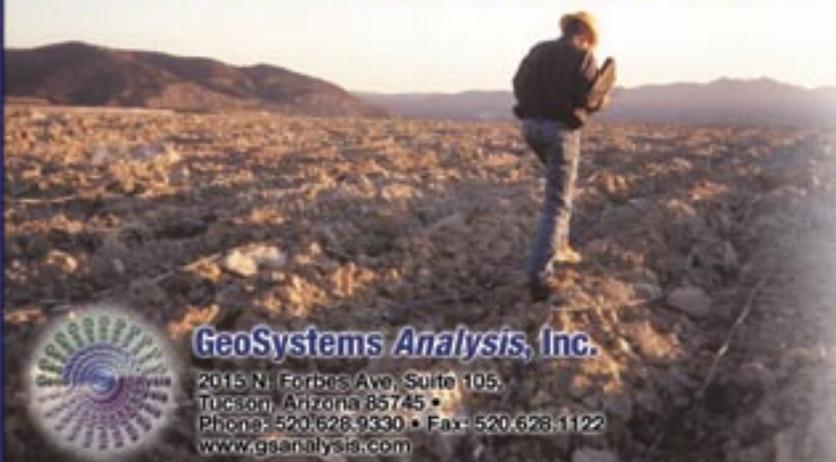


Biosphere Reserve, and is but one project that the groups have joined forces to complete.

The artificial boundaries that overlie habitats along the border are not recognized by the wildlife. Every day, fish and other animals cross borders between towns, states, and countries. Biologists and wildlife enthusiasts in Mexico and the United States have long known this, but it was not until May 1997, when a landmark Letter of Intent was signed, that cooperation between federal wildlife managers and biologists on both sides of the border was formalized.

The Letter of Intent is an international agreement signed by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Secretary of Environment, Natural Resources, and Fisheries in Mexico. The agreement formally acknowledges and extends a long history of cooperation regarding natural protected areas along the international border. It also identifies “sister” protected areas in the United States and

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Mexico for expanded cooperative efforts. INWR and the AGDRC were partnered in the Sonora/Baja California and Arizona/California regions along the lower Colorado River.

The two protected areas both have Sonoran Desert uplands, exotic invasives such as salt cedar, rich wetland complexes, and enormous potential for riparian restoration. Both areas are dependent on Colorado River flows, both provide habitat for endangered species such as the Yuma clapper rail and Southwestern willow flycatcher, and both are of course subject to the laws and political realities of their respective countries and communities. INWR protects the lowest 30 miles of unchanneled Colorado River above the Mexico/United States border. The refuge is impacted by more than 100,000 human visitors annually, but does not allow any human residence, not even overnight camping. Across the border, AGDRC includes freshwater, brackish, estuary, and marine habitats. The reserve's largest freshwater wetland is dependent on water provided by the terminal end of an agricultural canal. Within the borders of the AGDRC are communities such as the Ejido Encinas B. Johnson, and it is part of the reserve's mission to work with these communities to ensure sustainable development.

Many wildlife and habitat projects have been completed in the protected areas. Yuma clapper rail surveys have been standardized so that data can be shared, and biologists from both areas have assisted one another with on-the-ground surveys. Together, staffs have completed aerial winter waterfowl surveys in both countries. Native pupfish habitats and outreach exhibits have been created. Riparian restoration efforts have included planting native trees and protecting existing habitats.

Outreach and staff coordination/training projects have been numerous and successful. A permanent binational exhibit on the cooperative restoration efforts is on display in the Yuma International Airport, and portable exhibits have been shown at events such as the San Luis Rio Colorado Lettuce Festival and the Yuma County Fair. Miriam Lara Flores, now a biologist with



Pronatura Sonora, volunteered at INWR, other NWRs, and at the Arizona Game and Fish Department to assist with wildlife surveys, habitat restoration, and outreach activities.

INWR and AGDRC plan to work together in the next year on projects to control water flow on both sides of the border, enhance wildlife habitats, and improve visitor facilities. New visitor facilities will be constructed near the friendship tower; the site is one of the stops on a popular eco-tour conducted by La Ruta de Sonora, a nonprofit organization that strives to promote the Sonoran Desert/Colorado River and Delta region and raise awareness of the ecological challenges that it faces.

The true success of these cooperative efforts depends on the sharing of ideas, staff, customs, and equipment across international borders. Each protected area is but a small and fragile part of the larger ecosystem. Working together, we expand our knowledge and broaden our impact on wildlife, habitat, and education in ways that cannot possibly be achieved alone.

For more information, visit southwest.fws.gov/refuges/arizona/imperial.html or contact Ken Edwards at ken_edwards@fws.gov. Photos provided by Renee Robichaud.





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