

COLLABORATION IN MEXICO: RENEWED HOPE FOR THE COLORADO RIVER DELTA

Francisco Zamora-Arroyo,* Osvel Hinojosa-Huerta,** Edith Santiago,*** Emily Brott,**** and Peter Culp*****

I. INTRODUCTION

A little more than thirty years ago, the Colorado River Delta (the “Delta”) was considered all but a dead ecosystem by scientists and environmental organizations alike. Once one of the largest wetland ecosystems in North America, a century of dam building, upstream water diversions, and agricultural development in the Mexicali Valley had reduced millions of acres of wetland ecosystem to just a few scattered areas of disconnected habitats by the 1970s. However, after flood flows in the 1980s and 1990s helped to revitalize important parts of this ecosystem, a collection of scientists, environmental organizations, public officials, and private business leaders began to take a renewed interest in this ecosystem—and began to explore the possibility that it could be restored.

With more than a decade of determined efforts now behind us, we think that there is renewed hope for the Colorado River Delta. International recognition of the Delta’s ecological and socioeconomic importance has never been higher, and people across all levels of society in both Mexico and the U.S. are deepening their commitment to protect and restore it. In an arid and often bleak landscape, the Delta’s biological wealth has inspired a renewed passion for nature among many of those who have interacted with it—and has helped to inspire a collaborative effort to preserve and restore this resource.

In an article published in these same proceedings,¹ Professor Bret Birdsong argues that without a legal framework that explicitly addresses environmental needs, collaboration alone will not guarantee dedication of water for the Colorado River Delta. Although we agree with this overall statement, we argue that in many instances the collaboration process has promoted the development of innovative legal and economic frameworks to advance the conservation and sustainable development of the Delta. In some cases, existing frameworks for conservation have only recently been explored and highlighted due to collaborative initiatives; one example of this is a current investigation by Pronatura² into the “environmental use” of water as defined by Mexico’s recently-amended National Water Law.

This Article focuses on how collaborative initiatives in Mexico have advanced conservation of the Delta.

* Dr. Francisco Zamora-Arroyo is Director of the Upper Gulf of California Legacy Program of the Sonoran Institute. Dr. Zamora has ten years of experience working in the Colorado River Delta during which he has developed an integrated analysis and view of the threats and opportunities for conservation and restoration of conservation priority areas. The Sonoran Institute is a not-for-profit organization that inspires and enables community decisions that respect the land and people of the West.

** Dr. Osvel Hinojosa-Huerta is the Director of the Water and Wetlands Program in Pronatura Noroeste. Dr. Hinojosa has coordinated several research and conservation projects in northwest Mexico, particularly about rivers and wetlands in the Sonoran Desert, including the Delta. He has elaborated on conservation and sustainable rural development plans, evaluated the status of endangered species, implemented restoration programs, and applied private and public mechanisms for securing water for instream flows.

*** Edith Santiago is the coordinator of the Sonoran Institute’s field office in Mexicali. She manages on-the-ground activities.

**** Emily Brott is the project manager of the Sonoran Institute for outreach activities in the Delta. She manages the Adopt-the-River Program and environmental education activities.

***** Peter W. Culp is an attorney with the Phoenix office of Squire, Sanders & Dempsey, L.L.P., with a practice focusing on environmental, water, and natural resources law. He has assisted the Sonoran Institute and other NGOs with Colorado River Delta restoration efforts and Colorado River policy matters since 1999.

¹ Bret C. Birdsong, *Séances, Ciénegas, and Slop: Can Collaboration Save the Delta?*, 8 NEV. L.J. ____ (2008).

² Pronatura (www.pronatura.org.mx) is a non-profit conservation organization funded in Mexico in 1983, and established in Sonora in 1993, conducting projects to protect nature and improve the relationship of people and the environment, combining scientific, policy, and legal tools. The organization, now as Pronatura Noroeste (www.pronatura-noroeste.org), has been working on the restoration of the Colorado River Delta since 1996.

The models highlighted here show that significant conservation progress has been made in Mexico by promoting collaboration across different levels of society, including local residents and users of the Colorado River, civic and conservation organizations, and local, regional, and federal government agencies. We have found that a key factor to maintaining momentum for collaborative conservation is to plan for short-term on-the-ground successes that stimulate continued participation and attract new supporters, while maintaining the course for a long-term, ecosystem-based vision that provides the framework for the actions.

Conservation of the Delta is a shared responsibility between Mexico and the United States, between governmental and non-governmental institutions, and between all water users; at a minimum, binational cooperation is needed to provide the legal framework required for collaborative efforts to succeed. As discussed further in this Article, we are optimistic that current efforts to improve binational cooperation in water management will ultimately lead to the legal changes necessary to make long-term restoration possible in the Delta. However, it is also evident that awareness-raising is urgently needed in Mexico to rally popular support for saving the Delta, a process that requires a significant investment of time and resources. The last examples in this Article show how Mexican domestic collaboration is a critical first step to successfully promoting binational cooperative initiatives that support the Delta.