

Saving an Oasis Amid a Once-Lush River Delta

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[By John Fleck](#)

A remarkable experiment is about to get under way at the northern end of the Gulf of California.

Beginning next year, a coalition of environmental groups and government agencies spanning the Mexican border will add water to the Colorado River delta to help preserve a 60-square-mile wetland.

In a region where water is almost invariably taken out of rivers for drinking, bathing and growing food, leaving water for the ecosystem is rare. Doing it voluntarily, without a legal mandate, is unprecedented, participants say.

"I think it's the first of its kind," Jennifer McCloskey, head of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Yuma office, said of the agreement to pump 30,000 acre-feet of water over the next two years into the Cienega de Santa Clara.

On the salt flats where the Colorado used to enter the sea, the Cienega is "an oasis," lush with wildlife in the middle of one of the driest places in North America, said Gregg Garfin, a University of Arizona water researcher.

The Colorado, which drains a quarter of a million square miles of western North America, used to dump enough water and silt into the delta every year to create a vast and rich habitat.

Since Hoover Dam was completed in 1936, seven Western states, New Mexico included, have been taking water out of the Colorado River. By the time we finish, there is none left for the once-lush delta, which spans the border of the states of Sonora and Baja California Norte in northern Mexico. Most years, no water reaches the gulf.

I know the collapse of the Colorado River delta ecosystem is not entirely my fault.

But I couldn't help but feel a little personally responsible as I had lunch in Isabella's in Downtown Albuquerque last month with Karl Flessa. I kept glancing uncomfortably at my cup of water.

Now that the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority is delivering San Juan-Chama water into our community's water system, I was in essence drinking water that once would have made the thousand-mile journey from the mountains of southern Colorado to the Colorado River delta.

Flessa is the self-proclaimed "El Jefe" of the Centro de Estudios de Almejas Muertas at the University of Arizona. That roughly translates as the "Center for the Study of Dead Clams."

The clams Flessa studies are dead because the annual flush of fresh water from the Colorado on which they depended for survival in the estuary's delicate ecosystem is gone.

But in the barren wasteland that remains, the 60 square miles of the Cienega de Santa Clara stands as a bright spot. Flessa and others dedicated to understanding and preserving as much of the delta as they can say saving the wetlands is an important first step.

The Cienega is an accidental bit of nature, created beginning in the 1970s with agricultural runoff water from the Yuma area. The water was too brackish to put into the river, so officials shunted it off in a drainage ditch into what was, at the time, just more barren salt flats.

But nature has a way of putting whatever water it gets to use, and that is what has happened at the Cienega. Its maze of waterways is now home to pelicans and an endangered bird known as the Yuma clapper rail.

"You add water," said Jennifer Pitt of the Environmental Defense Fund. "Things grow."

This being the West, the drought-plagued agencies that depend on Colorado River water — in Phoenix, Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Nev. — have long coveted the water now dumped into the Cienega.

But rather than take it away completely, a coalition of environmental groups and government agencies from both sides of the border came up with a compromise. As part of an experiment over the next two years, some of the water now headed to the Cienega will be cleaned up and put to other uses, but the coalition will come up with other water to keep the Cienega alive.

Where it will come from remains uncertain. The U.S. government hopes to create excesses by clever management of the Colorado's flow on the U.S. side. There is the possibility that some farmland in Mexico, which would otherwise be irrigated, will be temporarily left fallow. And environmental groups have been buying up water rights for just such a purpose.

The amount of water involved is small — less than a quarter of 1 percent of what used to flow into the delta in an average year. But it is a start. Ed Glenn, another University of Arizona faculty member who works on delta issues, has calculated that as little as 1 percent of the Colorado's flow, managed properly, could create a small but healthy riparian ecosystem through the delta.

If that were shared among users in the seven Colorado River Basin states, the average Albuquerque resident's contribution would be about a gallon and a half of water a day.