Invite two ranchers to a meeting with a few vegetarians, a bunch of hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians. Then introduce some ATV and motorcycle enthusiasts, and several bird watchers along with a group of bird hunters. Blend with eight government agencies, and sprinkle with four conservation organizations. The mix sounds like the makings of a soccer riot, and although not quite that contentious, the first few meetings of the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership were, according to Karen Simms of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), “lively.”

But this group, who shared little in common except an enthusiasm and concern for a unique southern Sonoran Institute birdwatchers, hunters, cyclists, and wildlife could coexist became reality.

Seeing the Future

Is the job finished? Not by a long shot. The Sonoran Institute continues to work with the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership and a newly forming affiliate, the Cienega Watershed Partnership, to fine-tune the management plan for the NCA. Many challenges remain—such as dealing with increased visitor use and maintaining funds for conservation work. But the Cienegas partnership process has been so successful that the Bureau of Land Management is using it as a pilot for similar efforts around the country.

There is also one major piece of unfinished work: about 50,000 acres at the north end of the watershed that links the heart of Las Cienegas NCA to the Rincon Wilderness and Saguaro National Park were removed from the final bill. In 2002, Rincon Valley residents asked the Sonoran Institute to spearhead formation of the Cienega Corridor Conservation Council, whose goal is to extend to this “missing link” the same cultural and biological protection now ensured in the NCA.

Even with the final link in place, the future of the Cienega Creek watershed will require significant work. Thanks to the partnership of the Sonoran Institute, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership, that future includes conservation planning. When Las Cienegas National Conservation Area Act passed through Congress, Representative Jim Kolbe summed up the feelings of everyone involved when he said, “Hundreds of people whose destinies are tied to this parcel of the earth got together, time and time again, and hashed out a pact that is responsible to the environment, ranchers, businessmen, tourists, and our children.”

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- Congressman Jim Kolbe

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Arizona landscape, did something extraordinary: they persevered. And with the help of the Sonoran Institute, five years and over 100 meetings later, they have become a paradigm of community-based, collaborative conservation. The proof lies in the results: in December, 2000, Congress passed an act creating Las Cienegas National Conservation Area and the Sonora Valley Acquisition Planning District. With unanimous votes in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, all the sweat and toil of the Sonora Valley Planning Partnership was justified—the biological treasures, cultural resources, and recreational opportunities across 143,000 acres were safeguarded for generations to come.

A Ribbon of Water Ties an Historical Landscape

Most days you don’t even need to get your feet wet to cross Cienega Creek. Just pick a narrow spot and jump. But that narrow ribbon of water is just the tip of an underground flow that nourishes a lush riparian corridor, one of the most endangered habitats in the Southwest. Enormous cottonwood, willow, and velvet ash trees arch over the creek, providing habitat for nearly 200 species of birds, including the endangered Southwest. Enormous cottonwood, willow, and velvet ash trees arch over the creek, providing habitat for nearly 200 species of birds, including the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. Raccoons forage nearly 200 species of birds, including the endangered Soaptree yucca (yucca elata) in grasslands of Las Cienegas NCA.

Core Vision is Key to Success

While the disparate nature of the Sonora Valley Planning Partnership made for frequent arguments, it also worked in their favor. Mac Donaldson says, “The diversity kept us from degenerating into one faction against another. If one group lobbied for something unreasonable, four or five other groups could combine and convince them to settle down.”

“The key,” says Karen Simms, “that kept us together through everything, was the core vision—the shared goal. We agreed on, to which we could return whenever disputes over details threatened to get out of hand.”

- Karen Simms, Bureau of Land Management

24 Congressman Jim Kolbe introduced the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area (NCA). At that point, says Mac Donaldson, “We were totally out of our league, and the Sonoran Institute really helped us.” The Institute organized a technical workshop attended by 50 scientists and other professionals, at which the most important cultural and natural resources in the proposed NCA were identified. The workshop was followed by several open houses to solicit public input.

In March of 1999, the Sonoran Institute presented a comprehensive report to the BLM, and on September 24 Congressman Jim Kolbe introduced the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area Act (HR2941). With some revisions, Kolbe reintroduced the bill in September 2000, while Senator John McCain introduced an identical bill in the Senate (S3044).

The bill passed both houses unanimously. The vision of the Sonora Valley as a place where ranchers, hikers,