

CASE STUDY

DIVERSITY OF PARTNERS PROTECTS CIENEGA CREEK WATERSHED

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.

- Congressman Jim Kolbe



Pronghorn and native grasslands



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.

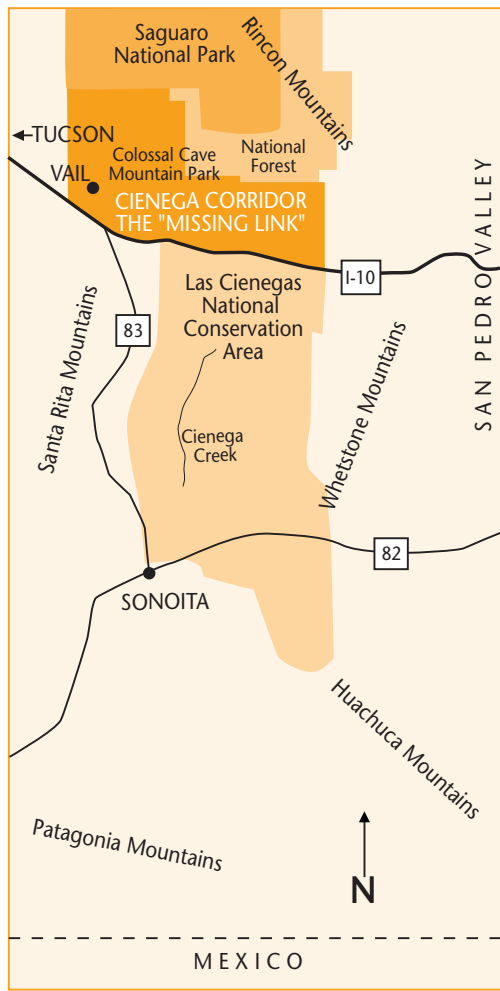
There is also one major piece of unfinished work: about 50,000 acres at the north end of the watershed that links the heart of Las Cienegas NCA to the Rincon Wilderness and Saguaro National Park were removed from the final bill. In 2002, Rincon Valley residents asked the Sonoran Institute to spearhead 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.”

Sonoran Institute



Mustang Mountains and riparian area at sunset



Cienega Corridor Arizona

Different People—
Same Love for the Land

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 *continued ...*



Photo by Jonathan Hanson

John Donaldson accepts an appreciation award from BLM planner Karen Simms.

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

- Karen Simms, Bureau of Land Management



Soaptree yucca (yucca elata) in grasslands of Las Cienegas NCA



Tour of Las Cienegas with Sonoita area stakeholders



Historic Empire Ranch

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 Sonoita Valley Acquisition Planning District. With unanimous votes in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, all the sweat and toil of the Sonoita 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 Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. Raccoons forage along the banks, and an alert hiker can often spot cougar tracks near the creek or the twisted stick-nests of coatimundis high in the trees.

The permanent water and the thousands of surrounding acres of high desert grassland in the Sonoita Valley lured Walter Vail here in 1876. His Empire Ranch eventually expanded to encompass over 1,000 square miles. But in 1969 the ranch, reduced to 47,000 acres surrounding Cienega Creek, was sold to the Gulf America Corporation, which planned a huge real estate development. Although the plan failed, it was an early warning to residents of the area, who enjoyed the seclusion and wide open views across the valley, which was still largely ranching country dotted with homes of retirees.

In 1988 a series of land exchanges brought the ranch, which was then owned by Anamax mining company,

under the management of the BLM. Longtime Arizona ranchers John and Mac Donaldson, a father-son team, held the grazing lease with Anamax and continued to manage livestock grazing on the ranch when it transferred to BLM management.

After several unsuccessful attempts to develop a land use plan for the area using traditional BLM planning approaches, in 1995 BLM field manager Jesse Juen worked to try a new, collaborative approach to managing the ranch and the creek. The goal of the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership, the ad hoc citizen group that evolved from this collaborative approach, is to protect the open spaces and natural resources of the area, while offering access and recreational opportunities to the public and providing for compatible levels of grazing and other land uses. The Donaldsons support the collaborative planning process, and are part of the glue that kept the process together.

Core Vision is Key to Success

While the disparate nature of the Sonoita 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 all agreed on, to which we could return whenever disputes over details threatened to get out of hand.”

The vision was to “work together to perpetuate naturally functioning ecosystems while preserving the rural, grassland character of the Sonoita Valley for future generations.”

Although the focus was on public land, private land development issues were also crucial—the partnership turned to the Sonoran Institute, already well-known for its work in community conservation projects. In March, 1996, the Sonoran Institute hosted one of its trademark “Successful Communities” workshops for over 200 people in Sonoita, which helped solidify the framework of

the partnership's future efforts. In fact, an additional group grew out of this workshop: the Sonoita Crossroads Community Forum. With assistance from a Sonoran Institute land use planner, the Forum worked with the Santa Cruz County board of supervisors to create a comprehensive land use plan for northeastern Santa Cruz County, which encompasses the Sonoita Valley.

For the next three years the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership wrestled with such contentious issues as motorized versus non-motorized access, an ecosystem monitoring plan, and the possible need for a permit system to keep visitation numbers manageable. By early 1999, it was clear that the area needed something beyond just a new land use plan: designation as a national conservation area was proposed.

The Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership sent four representatives back to Washington to testify for establishing 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 Sonoita Valley as a place where ranchers, hikers,

continued ...