

## CONSERVING COASTAL, MARINE AND ISLAND ECOSYSTEMS ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

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The common stereotype of the San Diego-Tijuana binational urban metropolis is that it is a polluted wasteland. But despite the combined population of over four million people, the border region that divides the U.S. from Mexico includes an amazing array of internationally important coastal, marine and island ecosystems.

The Tijuana River divides San Diego from Tijuana and empties into the Pacific Ocean in Imperial Beach, California. Ironically although there are significant solid-waste, air and water pollution problems here, protected areas in this border region provide critically needed wildlife habitat and access to open space for border residents.

NOAA manages the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (TRNERR) in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the State of California Department of Parks and Recreation. Located in Imperial Beach, this Ramsar Wetland of International is at the terminus of the Tijuana River and is the largest remaining intact coastal wetland in Southern California. It is adjacent to the newly created Tijuana River Mouth Marine Protected Area, a State of California underwater park that is a critical habitat for a number of species including leopard sharks and California spiny lobster.

Just north of Imperial Beach and the Tijuana Estuary is the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge. This protected



Photo: Ralph Lee Hopkins, with aerial support by Lighthawk

wetland area is also a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance due to its critical importance for tens of thousands of resident and migratory birds. It is adjacent to the Otay Valley Regional Park, a close to 9,000-acre urban park that is a migratory wildlife corridor for species such as bobcats and even mountain lions. All in all there are close to 15,000 acres of protected open space on the U.S. side of the border.

Just offshore from the Tijuana Estuary are Mexico's majestic Coronado Islands, a collection of four islands that are home to unique and critically important species of wildlife and plants. The islands are home to the world's largest known colony of Xantus's Murrelet as well as petrels, pelicans and sea ducks. Additionally the islands are home to a small population of harbor seals and elephant seals.

WILDCOAST is working with governmental agencies and stakeholders

on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border to preserve and restore these unique and special places. The Coronado Islands will hopefully be preserved as part of a larger Mexican Pacific Islands Biosphere Reserve that would stretch from the U.S.-Mexico border southward to the islands of Bahia Magdalena in Baja California Sur. There is hope that we can partner with resource agencies in California and Baja California to foster greater conservation efforts in this binational region. It is important that we improve efforts to coordinate the protection of commercially valuable fish and shellfish species, shark populations and marine mammals such as gray whales and blue whales in our shared border region.

These remarkable binational ecosystems reminds us that nature can be resilient and that with the strategic application of parks and conservation tools, we can help preserve the species and ecosystems that make our coast and ocean such a wonderful place despite the presence of man-made borders.



Photo: Ralph Lee Hopkins, with aerial support by Lighthawk