



The Need for a Next Generation of Sonoran Desert Researchers

It is recognized that meaningful international collaboration is needed to address the onslaught of conservation challenges facing societies across the globe (Medellín 1998). Although transboundary or cross-border conservation is not a new concept (Mittermeier et al. 2005), how does meaningful collaboration in an international setting, especially one of political unrest, begin? How is a cohesive community formed among a disparate group of individuals from different countries, who speak different languages, or are at the beginning of their careers and do not know of one another and their related efforts? Such issues are widely present in the modern world, especially along the 3200-km border shared by the United States and Mexico.

A new reality, dominated by fear and political motives, now grips this binational region. Of the multiple ramifications of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been a redefinition of life along the U.S.–Mexico border. Borderland realities were previously defined by a continuous intermixing of cultures. Today, these cultures are stuck in the middle of global-scale forces that have fundamentally changed the ways of life along an arbitrary line through a vast swath of desert terrain. This increasingly fortified barrier fragments species ranges and severs wildlife migrations (Flesh et al. 2010) and is a metaphor for what separates humanity. It is an obstacle between communities and cultures and a chasm across a singular region that eclipses new scientific ideas and discoveries.

The opportunities for conservation biologists in Mexico and the United States to work together have diminished significantly in recent years. Political tensions between the two countries, increased border controls, drug conflicts, and a growing cultural mistrust, among a litany of additional impediments, have led many universities and research centers in Mexico and the United States to reduce the profile of their cross-border collaborative projects (de la Peña et al. 2010). As a result, many researchers from both sides of the border are increasingly unaware of the work of their colleagues. The ability to work across borders and the cultural connections that arise from these collaborations has been severely hampered.

Conservation and research challenges require a cohesive bicultural community that will apply creativity and passion to the holistic understanding and betterment of the region. Against this backdrop of tensions along the border and in the face of a lack of comprehensive immigration reform in the United States, it is imperative that binational efforts by the scientific community move forward and that a safe haven for research is created. We strongly believe that meaningful international collaboration starts with dismantling the barriers that impede scientists from meeting one another. To overcome these challenges, a 3-day summit entitled The Next Generation Sonoran Desert Researchers (NextGenSDR) was held and a network of the same name was launched (www.nextgensd.com). This name signifies a renewed effort to create a binational community of investigators across disciplines. The NextGenSDR focuses on the collective work of researchers within academia and equally so on that of individuals outside traditional academic boundaries to implement the ideas generated together.

The 2012 inaugural summit was held at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, Arizona. Ninety individuals attended, 49 participants were from Mexico and 41 were from the United States. Sixteen distinct disciplines and 37 different institutions (11 from Mexico and 26 from the United States) were represented. The open-space-technology approach (Owen 2008) was used. This approach encourages spontaneous discourse and all-inclusive interaction driven by the participants and is thought to be far superior to the usual conference format.

The summit had 22 sessions focused on physical, social, and biological disciplines. A broad spectrum of important research and conservation issues currently facing the Sonoran Desert region were covered. Collective energies focused on topics from the geologic history of the desert to how to foster a sense of place within urban communities on both sides of the border. In the final hours of the summit, participants collectively crafted the following vision statement that articulates future directions:

The Next Generation Sonoran Desert Researchers is a network of individuals and institutions committed to the rich social and ecological landscape that spans the mainland Sonoran Desert, the Baja California Peninsula, the Gulf of California, and the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. This interdisciplinary network will address the research and conservation challenges of our time within this binational region. Deeply committed to the spirit of the Sonoran Desert, the NextGenSDR will (1) catalyze research and biocultural collaboration, (2) develop an innovative research and conservation agenda, and (3) influence decision makers in both countries to promote a conservation ethic that matches the grandeur of the landscape.

A unifying theme at every discussion was the need for cross-discipline and cross-cultural interaction and collaboration. It was clear that alliances between the social and ecological paradigms are no longer an option but a necessity if we aim to provide an account of and have a role in the shape of the new processes currently affecting the Gulf of California and the Sonoran Desert. To do so, it is necessary to go beyond the comfort zone of academia. Therefore, collaboration among the different disciplines to share the realities and wonders of living and working in this region is imperative. As international and intergovernmental attention becomes increasingly focused on conservation issues (Redford et al. 2012), it is the responsibility of communities of researchers such as NextGenSDR, as individuals and collectively, to provide transparent and relevant scientific information, identify priorities, and engage in the decision-making process.

The 2012 inaugural NextGenSDR Summit identified a need for a melding of worldviews. The resulting community of collaborators will help bridge the barriers created by a divisive borderland reality and connect science and conservation efforts to society and decision makers in the new era of accountability and demand for direction and answers. Such efforts can be applied to many other border areas to generate transboundary conservation and research. Political frontiers and literal or metaphoric walls should not limit a shared passion for understanding and conserving our natural heritage.

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