

# River: Interrupted

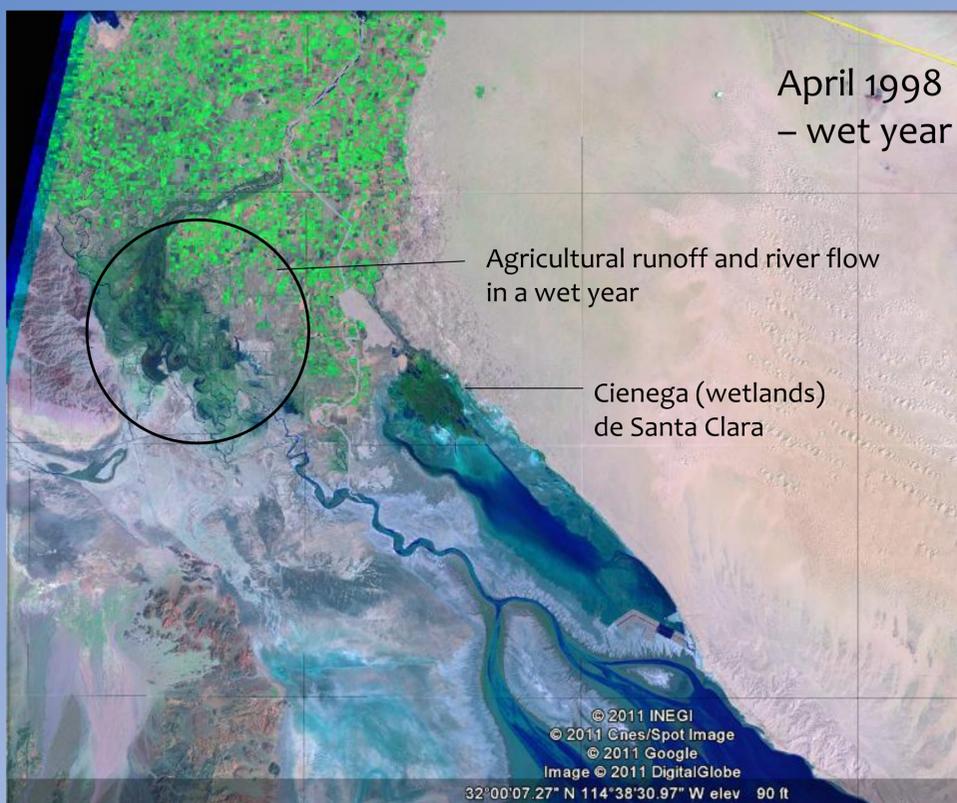
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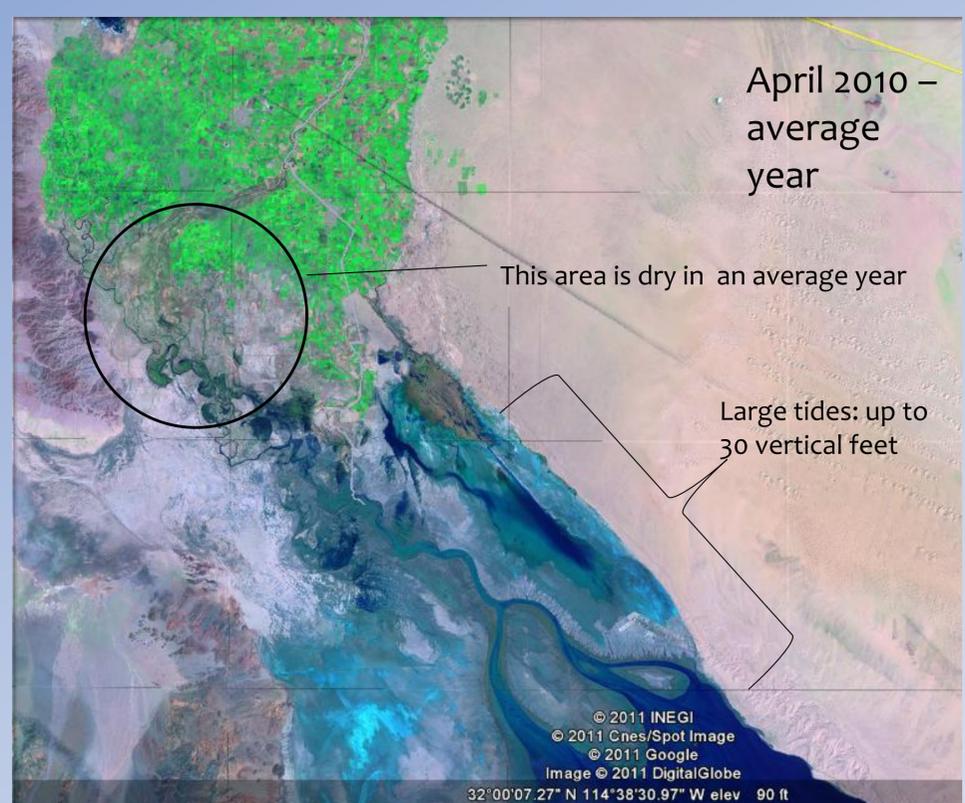
The  
Power of  
Perspective

Artist's view of a U.S. Landsat satellite. Credits: NASA.

Before the 1930's, the Colorado River flowed from its Rocky Mountain origins and emptied into the northern Sea of Cortez. In the last century, the river has been dispersed throughout the West for farms, cities and industries and it no longer reaches the sea, except in the wettest years. Depending on your perspective, this is a triumph of engineering, bolstering human prosperity, or an ecological tragedy, diminishing ecosystem health.



False color Landsat image of the Colorado River Delta in the northern Sea of Cortez. The bright green color highlights healthy vegetation in farmlands. 1998 was an unusually wet year, due to an El Nino event, and you can see more freshwater (dark blue) in the northern Delta (circle).



False color Landsat image of the Colorado River Delta in the northern Sea of Cortez. The bright green color highlights healthy vegetation in farmlands. 2010 was a normal rainfall year in the region. The bright blue in the tidal zone is shallow seawater.



Credit: Space Shuttle Image, NASA

Gulf of California

The construction of Hoover Dam in 1936 started a 30-year era of major dam construction on the Colorado River.

The river is currently completely consumed by the 30 million people that rely on it for water and electricity.

Before the dams, the delta of this mighty "American Nile" hosted the largest desert estuary in North America. The once diverse wetlands of the Colorado River Delta are now largely desiccated. About 95% of the fresh and brackish water wetland of the delta was wiped out in less than 70 years.

We can't show you what this region looked like from space before the dams were built, since the first remote sensing satellites were not launched until the 1970's.