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## Grand Canyon News Release

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### Sister Park Relationships Overcome Boundaries

**Grand Canyon, Ariz.** – On Thursday, February 28, the first United States/Mexico Sister Parks conference to be held in over four years ended with the presentation of action plans by existing, new and potential sister parks. Many of the animated discussions at the three-day workshop shared a common theme. How do we streamline cross-border communication and coordination?

It is a dilemma that goes far beyond the obvious human construct of territorial boundaries. How do parks and protected areas with different languages, regulations, governmental responsibilities and cultural norms, overcome all of the barriers that stand in the way of coordinating efforts to manage and protect similar, often related, natural and cultural resources?

The conference abounded with examples of why parks and protected areas from different countries would want to work together. Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and El Pinacate/Gran Desierto del Altar Biosphere Reserve share a cultural heritage that goes back for centuries, but was separated and gradually forgotten after the creation of international boundaries. Today, Organ Pipe and El Pinacate are pooling their knowledge of the area's cultural history and of two languages to help local descendents of these ancient peoples reconnect with their heritage in ways as simple, and as meaningful, as helping them rediscover place names in their original language.

Padre Island and Laguna Madre de Tamaulipas, like many sister parks, each manage portions of one rare and fragile ecosystem, the Laguna Madre. These two protected areas, along with the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, are just developing their partnership, and would like to start by creating a regional identity program so that managers and visitors alike are thinking in terms of one Laguna Madre with one set of resources and needs rather than two distinct protected areas. They are also making plans to share resources, information and personnel to better manage their collective natural resources and to assure a healthy, productive ecosystem.

Even parks more distant from the border, like Grand Canyon National Park, where the conference was held, have an interest in establishing these sister park relationships. Perhaps, Grand Canyon and San Pedro Martir National Parks could share information and observations on

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their reintroductions of the endangered California Condor to gain a better understanding of how best to assure the success of their reintroduction programs and the survival of a unique species.

As the Chief of the National Park Service's (NPS) Office of International Affairs (OIA), Stephen Morris, put it, everyone present seemed to "understand clearly that conservation issues cannot be adequately addressed without the cooperation of partners and managers of other areas that share the same species or types of resources even if they cross an international border." He also noted that, "It was very clear from the high level of engagement of all the participants that they had been yearning for an opportunity to get together and make plans to work more closely together." All of which makes sense, private companies often streamline by ensuring that multiple divisions aren't duplicating work. Why shouldn't parks and agencies, even those in different countries, do the same thing?

While the group was not able to resolve all of the issues facing cross-border sister parks, they did accomplish a great deal. Each of the existing sister park participants left with draft action plans and specific potential projects identified for implementation. And at the agency level NPS and Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (CONANP) are developing a framework, or umbrella action plan, that will incorporate both system-wide collaborative activities and the individual sister park proposals and projects.

In the end, though, perhaps the biggest achievement was overcoming the barriers of distance, border crossings, politics, language and culture just to stand face-to-face, in one place, and talk—to shake hands, look each other in the eye and acknowledge that, in spite of everything that separates us, only if we strive to overcome these barriers and work together can we hope to fulfill our missions to protect resources that know no boundaries.



Conference participants at the rim of the Grand Canyon.

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