Cienega de Santa Clara, Colorado River Delta

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The Power of Perspective

The Cienega de Santa Clara is a small remnant of the vast wetlands which once occupied the delta of the Colorado River. Created in 1976 by human engineering, it is fed by drain water from California farmlands and is now the largest wetland in the Sonoran Desert! The Cienega supports rare and endangered bird and fish species and is a nesting and feeding site for shorebirds and marshbirds on the Pacific Flyway.

Cienega de Santa Clara

High tide

March 1985
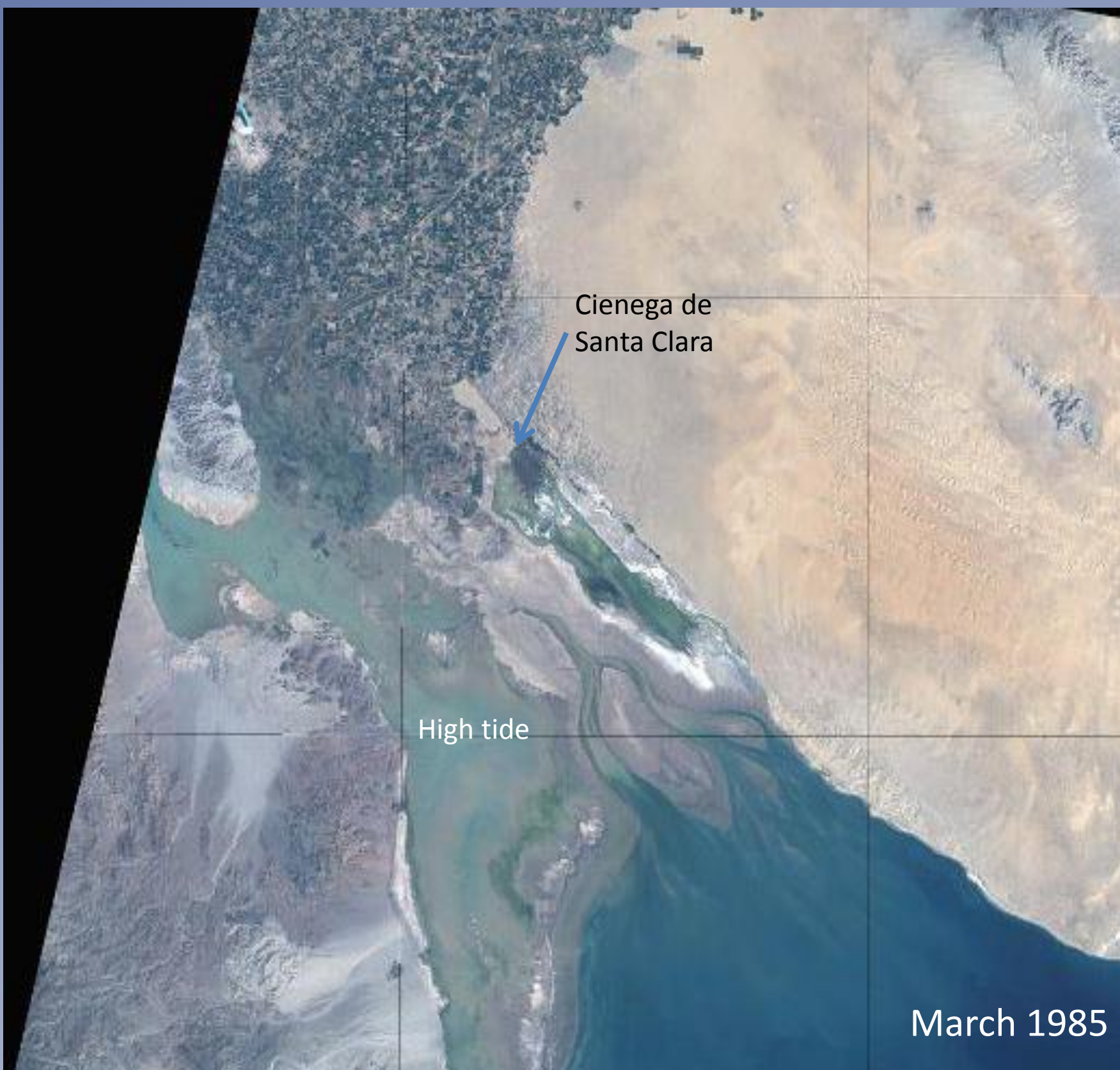
The Cienega de Santa Clara sits within the delta of the Colorado River at the northern end of the Gulf of California. The Cienega grows and shrinks based on the amount of water released from California agricultural fields.

Cienega de Santa Clara

Low tide

May 2010
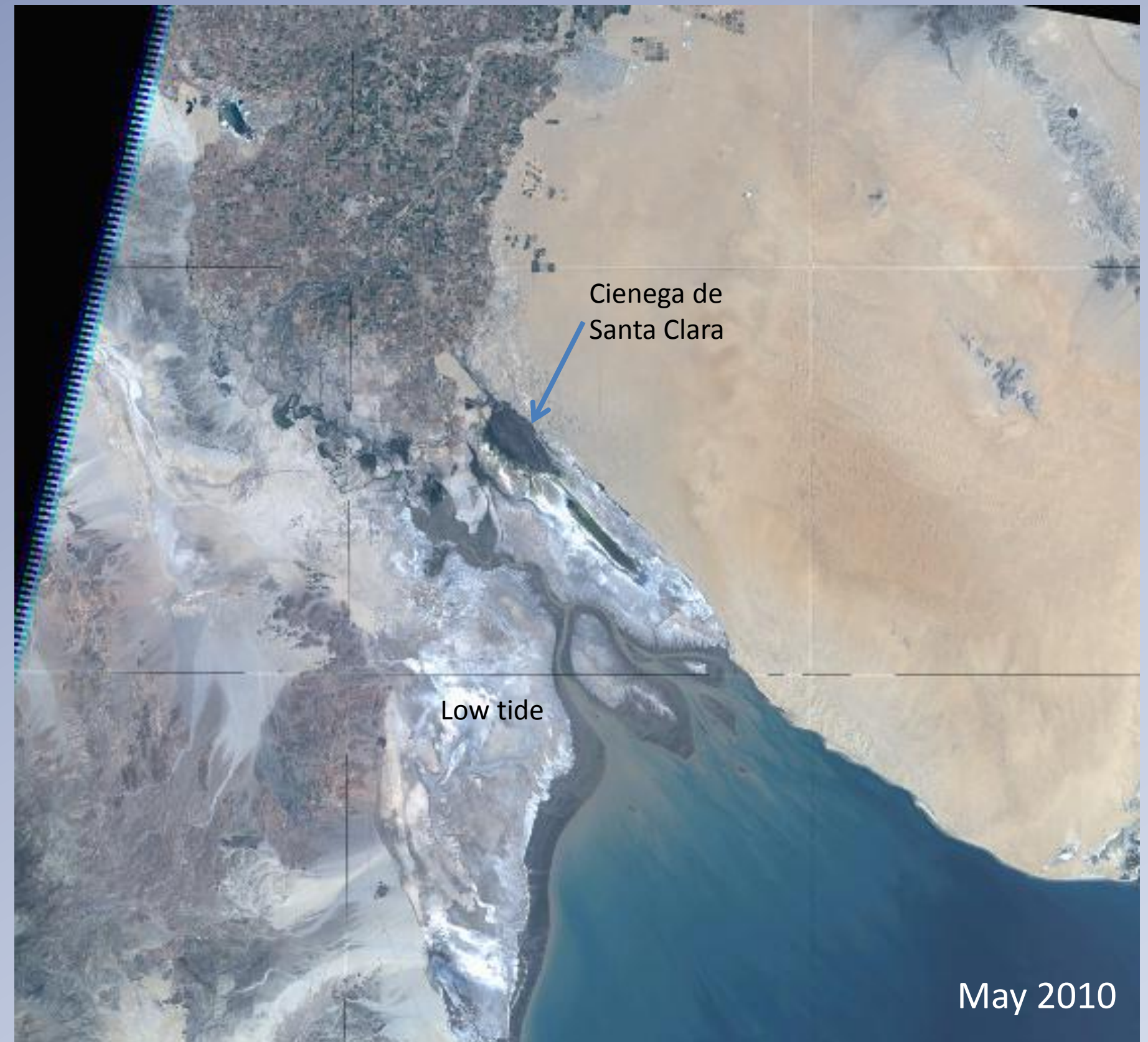
The Delta is a very dynamic place as the long narrow Gulf of California produces 30 foot tides.

Photo credits: Sonoran Institute

Before the completion of Hoover Dam in 1936, the Colorado River nourished a vast wetland at the Northern end of the Gulf of California. Subsequent diversion of water from the river for farms and cities reduced the flow of water to just a trickle in most years. Most of the water that crosses the border from the US to Mexico is brackish agricultural drain water.

Under treaty obligations to maintain a flow of fresh Colorado River water to Mexico, the US government built a desalinization facility in Yuma, completing it in 1992. Recently, the Yuma Desalinization Plant has been running on a trial basis, though it has never operated at full capacity. Were this to happen, reclaimed water would be delivered to Mexican farms and towns, and the flow to the Cienega would be greatly reduced. Scientists and policy makers are working to balance the needs of this unintended, but world-class wetland with other water needs in Mexico.

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