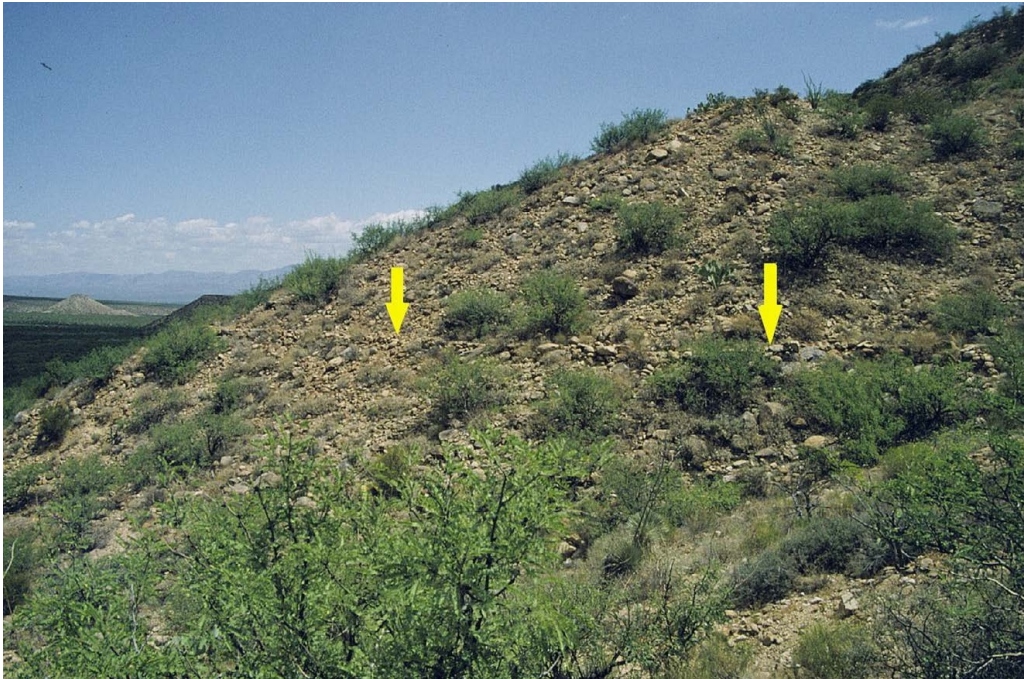


Excerpted from <https://www.gcasnm.org/news/2020/08/hanging-canals-az.html>

## Hanging Canals of Southeastern Arizona



**A**ncient hydrological engineering in what is now the US Southwest was not confined to Arizona's Salt River basin. Archaeologists have studied a complex network of prehistoric bajada canals, aka hanging canals, located around the Upper Gila River in southeastern Arizona's Safford Basin. They estimate that Native inhabitants developed this water management system during the period from about 1250 CE - 1450 CE. Photo of hanging canal, via Don Lancaster, [tinaja.com](http://tinaja.com).

Native tribes engineered these canals to carry water not from rivers, but from mountain drainage sources to lower-elevation habitation sites and agricultural fields. By "hanging" the canals along the sides of steep mesas - sometimes placed as high as 200 feet above the valley floor - the builders achieved maximum water-carrying efficiency by avoiding the undulations of ridges and arroyos along the basin floor.

Much of the bajada canal system is located on public land; due to the steep and rocky terrain access is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, certain individual bajada canals are over 13 miles long, and archaeologists estimate the entire bajada canal system to extend well over 150 miles. The changes in elevation along the length of these canals is as much as 2950 feet from mountain source to valley floor. Some sections of these ancient canals carry water to this day.

Co-researchers James A. Neely, PhD, and Don Lancaster concluded, "...The canals suggest that the basin was a prehistoric population center and a major supplier of cultivated crops." Furthermore, investigation of archaeological sites throughout the canal system revealed that "...tradeware from contemporary habitation sites imply a major trading activity with Hohokam, Mimbres, Salado, Mogollon and Ancient Pueblo regional cultures..."

For further explanations, read Neely's article in [Archaeology Southwest](#), and the more detailed Neely/Lancaster research reports curated at [tinaja.com](http://tinaja.com) do include [Bajada "Hanging" Canals of the Safford Basin, Southeastern Arizona: Excellence in Prehistoric Engineering](#); and [Prehistoric Bajada Hanging Canals](#). The latest image directory can be found [here](#).