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Letters to the Editor

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir:

Last fall, you ran an article entitled, "Two Nations, One River: Managing Ecosystem Conservation in the Colorado River Delta." The article is a review of contemporary challenges and options facing the Colorado River Delta in Mexico. However, it overlooks some key aspects of restoring the Delta to some semblance of health.

The article paints a picture of a historic, "undisturbed delta" located in present day Mexico and flowing into the upper Gulf of California. The natural history of the region suggests something much more complex and fluid. The Gulf of California once extended to Indio in California and the delta of the Colorado River was located just below Yuma, Arizona. Eventually sediments built up between Yuma and the Cocopah Mountains, dividing the upper and lower Gulf. Countless times the river would change course, emptying first into the present day Gulf and then swinging north and emptying into the Salton Basin. Over the past 1300 years, the Colorado River may have swung north into the Salton Basin more often than it headed south into present day Mexico. During these times, little or no Colorado River water reached the "delta" described in the article. In fact, many of the lakes that preceded the present Salton Sea were far larger than the Salton Sea, and lasted for centuries.

Over time, the lakes would become saline and eventually dry up. At that time, it didn't matter to the Flyway or ecosystem; there were many alternate lakes and wetlands available in the region. Today's Salton Sea is a different story. Its size is relatively stable because evaporation is balanced by inflows coming primarily from agricultural return flows.

But more importantly, over 95 percent of the historic inland lakes and wetlands in this part of the world have disappeared due to development. The Salton Sea, an unplanned mitigation wetland, has become critical for water birds—there are millions of them at certain times of the year. The Delta has no areas like the Salton Sea with its combination of fish in the Sea (perhaps the most productive inland fishery in the world) and associated wetlands and farm fields. The Delta, of course, offers miles of tidal flats for shorebirds and some riparian forests and shallow wetlands for other birds. Together, the Delta and the Sea offer a rich mosaic of critically important habitat.

The discussion of the Salton Sea in your article is inadequate as well as inaccurate. Although it was offered by the public as an option, discharge into the Gulf or the ocean is not being considered for a preferred project. Nor are we considering the Colorado River as a source for additional flows for the Sea. Our challenge is to stabilize salinity levels and provide healthy habitat at the same time that coastal cities are looking to the Imperial Valley as a source for water to support their growth.

If the Salton Sea restoration project is unsuccessful, the cost to the bird population of North America will be enormous.

Rather than proposing to take water away from the Sea for the lower Delta, the authors might better consider ways to argue for all of the pieces of the greater Delta ecosystem; a greater Delta ecosystem that the authors fail to acknowledge.

The Salton Sea and the Mexican portion of the Delta face the same challenges. Both are runoff areas with no official right to the water that sustains them. Both get by on whatever water remains after cities and agricultural fields have used what they can—water that is very high in various salts and nutrients. Both face stiff competition for water from municipal and industrial growth. Both have been largely overlooked by burgeoning coastal cities eager to augment their water supplies. Both have small, often overlooked human populations. And neither can turn back the clock on the changes that have taken place—the landscape of the green lagoons or historic Lake Cahuilla is gone forever, thanks to the control and diversions of the Colorado River.

Figuring out how to proceed in the face of growth and its demand for scarce water resources, dealing with elevated levels of salts and other constituents in river water, and restoring habitat which is critical to the Pacific Flyway call for joint research and cooperative management. These areas can provide a "classroom" for learning lessons that are becoming more and more important for global diversity—managing for wildlife using water that is left after "beneficial uses" have had first call.

While many argue that wildlife is a beneficial use, if we don't act while that argument rages on, the birds may be gone by the time the argument is settled.

Tom Kirk
Executive Director
Salton Sea Authority

RESPONSE

Mr. Kirk's vision of an ecologically-healthy and sustainable Salton Sea is commendable; the preservation and enhancement of wetland habitat around the Sea would benefit resident and migratory species. Linking Salton Sea and delta restoration efforts is appealing ecologically, though the issues in the delta and the Sea are different: the major challenges facing delta restoration are institutional, while the challenges facing the restoration of the Sea are largely physical and technical.

In commenting on the treatment of Salton Sea restoration options in our article, Mr. Kirk seems to have ignored the January 2000 draft EIS/EIR for the Salton Sea Restoration Project (the most recent document available for public review), which included both discharge of Salton Sea effluent into the upper Gulf (at 2-43, 6-27 to 6-34) and diversion of Colorado

River flood flows (2-27, 4-27 to 4-29). We welcome Mr. Kirk's removal of these objectionable elements from a new preferred alternative, and look forward to reviewing these proposals when they become available. The Sea is certainly part of the historic delta, but to date we have not encountered any research supporting his claim that the Colorado River "may have" discharged into the Salton Sea sub-basin more frequently than into the Gulf of California.

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