

The Salton Sea Preservation Plan: A Preliminary Sketch

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Background: For over a century the Salton Sea has represented a win-win-win symbiosis of agriculture, wildlife and human recreation. Population growth, development and the fist of force majeure from coastal California are now destroying that symbiosis. This is the same population growth and development that long ago eliminated 90% of the wetlands in the rest of the state, making the Salton Sea even more critical to wildlife.

Objective: To maintain that symbiosis and shield it from destructive actions by The Outsiders.

Mechanisms and Benefits:

1. Maintain inflows at 1.2-1.3 mafa, and lake level high enough to keep Mullet Island an island. Eliminates potential dust problems.
2. Halt fallowing; maximize agricultural production.
3. Build a few simple dikes to create large (1-2 sq mile), low salinity (5-25 g/L), partially enclosed embayments off the mouths of the three entering rivers, as habitat for tilapia and other fish.
4. Forget the idea of restoring a marine sport fishery.
5. Salinity will increase gradually but probably not reach 100 g/L within the 21st century.
6. As fish disappear from lake there will be large increases in abundance of salinity-tolerant invertebrates (brine shrimp, brine flies, water boatmen) and food supplies for the dozens of bird species that feed on such critters will be better than any time in lake's history.
7. Lake will be even better than now for camping, swimming and boating. Swimming in the buoyant, dense water will be much more fun. No dead fish, fish bones or large barnacle shells on the beaches. A stable lake level will encourage some development.
8. Free lessons in assertiveness and spine-stiffening will be provided to SDCWA, SANDAG, SWRCB and MWD officials. They can then go to their masters (chambers of commerce, land speculators, building industry associations, developers, etc.) and tell them that more water cannot be taken from other regions without unacceptable environmental damage, that Southern California population growth should come to a halt, and that the regional authorities need to put pressure on Congress and the White House to implement population policies more rational than those now in place. Or the water bureaucrats of coastal California can put another half dozen desalination plants on the Pacific coast, raise water rates, and let the social, economic and environmental damage due to population growth take place in their own backyards.
9. Capital costs for all construction work: ca. \$400,000,000; annual maintenance costs: ca. \$0.

"To support cost effective and environmentally sound activities that will bring required additional water to southern California without adversely affecting the interests of the areas of origin." [San Diego and SDCWA have been violating this policy for 36 years. –S.H.]

– San Diego City Council Policy No. 400-09 (1985)

"Over the restoration project's long timeline, it is possible that continuing urban growth in Southern California will increase the economic and political pressure to transfer additional water from Imperial Valley to urban Southern California. The potential for such transfers is an issue that needs consideration before a specific restoration plan is adopted to ensure that future water inflows will be sufficient to support the plan's operation."

[Have planners considered the potential consequences of a doubling of the U.S. rate of population growth, which is roughly what the comprehensive immigration expansion legislation of 2006 would have done if it had passed? – S.H.]

– Restoring the Salton Sea: Report of the Legislative Analysts' Office, Sacramento (January 2008).

It's time to start undoing the damage caused by poor planning, political timidity, journalistic trashing of the Salton Sea, and catering to power elites. Irrational U.S. population policies are the problem, the invisible 800-lb gorilla in the living room. They need to be addressed without fear in any long-term planning activity by local, regional, state, and federal government agencies. The good technocrat, like the good soldier, is not always the most obedient one.

– Stuart H. Hurlbert, San Diego State University (November 2011)

Testimony of Dr. Stuart H. Hurlbert
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U.S. Department of Interior Public Hearing
Imperial Irrigation District Water Conservation and Transfer Project,
Draft Habitat Conservation Plan, California [INT-DES-01-44]

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I regret I am not able to appear in person this evening. My name is Stuart Hurlbert and I am a professor of Biology and Director of the Center for Inland Waters at San Diego State University, I have a doctoral degree in Ecology from Cornell University and have been at San Diego State University for 32 years. For 24 years I have taught a course on the ecology of the Salton Sea-Colorado delta region. For the past 12 years I have headed a research group that has been studying various facets of the ecology of the Salton Sea.

I also have advised many organizations on water-related ecological issues, and for eight years was a consultant to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power on Mono Lake issues and research programs.

My comments on the transfer project are personal, and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of other members of our Center or of San Diego State University.

The proposed water transfer is undesirable from many points of view, and the water agencies should immediately turn their attention to making other arrangements for water supply if they wish to continue taking an accomodationist stance toward population growth in southern California.

Among its negative aspects are:

- 1) It is based on the premise that the economic and environmental costs that would be incurred by the project should be borne primarily by people in the Coachella, Imperial and Mexicali valleys.
- 2) It would be growth-inducing for San Diego County and cause increased environmental degradation here.
- 3) There is no reasonable prospect that the damage it would cause to the Salton Sea, its wildlife, and the people in the inland valleys could be mitigated to a reasonable degree at a reasonable cost.
- 4) We have the technology to obtain all future water supplies needed for San Diego County by way of recycling, conservation, and desalination.
- 5) If the various economic and environmental costs associated with those technologies are regarded as too high, then local, state and federal governments should take steps to reduce population growth. It is not acceptable to simply pass the costs of water supply development on to other regions simply because they have less political power.