

California State Water Resources Control Board Hearing Regarding Salton Sea

Testimony of Steve Horvitz, former Park Superintendent, Salton Sea Sector/Salton Sea State Recreation Area

My name is Steve Horvitz and I am the former California State Park Superintendent of the Salton Sea Sector. The Sector is comprised of several parks, including the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. As Superintendent, I had the overall responsibility for the operation of the parks in southeastern California.

I became involved with the Salton Sea in late 1989 when I accepted a promotion as Superintendent to Picacho State Recreation Area, which is located on the Colorado River about 20 miles north of Yuma Arizona. Picacho merged into the Salton Sea Sector by March of 1990 as the result of a Departmental reorganization. At that time, I was directed to assume the responsibility of several parks and areas within the Salton Sea Sector: the Salton Sea State Recreation Area, Indio Hills Palms and Indian Andreyes Canyon State Parks. From that time on, I had the functional responsibility of the Salton Sea operation.

For almost eleven years, I had the privilege of managing the Salton Sea State Recreation Area and being involved with recreation in the region and upon the Sea, the science of the desert and the Salton Sea, and with the economic trends of the two counties that the Sea rests within. I participated with numerous committees and entities during my tenure in the Salton Basin, including: the Salton Sea Task Force, the Salton Sea Single Entity Committee (that developed the Salton Sea Authority), the Salton Sea Authority, the Salton Sea Economic Development Task Force, the Riverside County Economic Development Committee, the Coachella Valley Empowerment Zone, the Coachella Valley Entertainment Zone, the Salton Sea Land Managers Association, the Coachella Valley Land Managers Association, the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, the Fringe-toed Lizard Preserve System, the Lower Colorado River Managers Association, the Yuma Area Law Enforcement Association, the Yuma Area Land Managers Association, the Yuma Area Governmental Alliance, the Riverside County Trails Council, the Salton Sea Recreational Providers Association the Indio Chamber of Commerce marketing and hospitality committees, the Coachella Chamber of Commerce, and the Dos Palmas Management Committee. In addition, I participated in several video informational pieces about the Sea including: "Saving the Salton Sea" produced by the Cabazon Indian Tribe, a Salton Sea educational video produced by the

Water Education Foundation, a segment of Huell Howser's Visiting at the Salton Sea program, and several other documentaries about the Sea that were shown in this country and in Europe. I was a featured presenter to numerous public news programs that spanned the nation including Nightline. I have given presentations about the Salton Sea from as far north as Monterey to as far south as Calexico. I have sat on discussion panels and radio/TV shows that discussed/debated issues surrounding the Salton Sea for the San Diego, L.A, and desert markets. During my assignment at the Salton Sea, I hosted dignitaries that included a large list of state and federal representatives, including Bruce Babbitt and Newt Gingrich. I wrote one small book and many articles about the Sea and surrounding deserts for miscellaneous nature and travel magazines. About eight months ago, with several others, I formed a grass-roots support organization for the Salton Sea that we call "Save Our Sea II [SOS II]". To date SOS II has a membership of over 100 people that span the nation.

Before coming to the Salton Sea, I worked at nine park units that reached from Mount Shasta to Malibu. I have worked for State Parks since 1974 and have held supervisory or management positions since 1985.

In December 2001, I accepted a double-step promotion to Superintendent of the Eel River Sector and currently serve in that capacity. The Eel River Sector includes 12 parks in southern Humboldt and northern Mendocino Counties; these hold the third largest park in the State, Humboldt Redwoods, on the Avenue of the Giants.

I don't believe that there is anyone currently more familiar with recreation patterns at the Salton Sea than myself. I come today to present that to you: the recreation patterns and human history of the Salton Sea and the Salton Basin. Before discussing the Sea, one must first understand the history of the basin, a history that includes multiple lakes and great human activity.

To do this we have to reach back about 5 million years to the time that the Salton Basin was formed and the first water began flowing into the great geologic rift called the Salton Basin, or Salton Sink. We know that the Basin was "created" at least that far back from the geologic formations that demonstrate its approximate age – some argue that it may in fact be as old as 10 million years, but there does not seem to be substantiating evidence of this, and most agree to the 5 million year figure. Fossil remains that exist within the basin give evidence that a series of fresh and saltwater lakes were in the Basin from the period when water first began to flow to an estimate of several hundred years ago. We know that water has existed within the Basin in one form or another for many thousands of years. The simple example of the great amount of silt that has been

deposited within the Imperial, Coachella and Borrego Valleys makes this very clear. In many areas, the valleys are comprised of up to 1,500 feet of silt deposits. These deposits were left primarily by the Colorado River as it would find its way into the Salton Basin. It was common for the river to change course over the years, sometimes flowing into Mexico and sometimes flowing into the Salton Sink. Dam construction and subsequent human control of the Colorado River's water flow has caused this natural process to cease. In fact, one can argue that the natural progression of the Sink was halted when engineers stopped the flow of water into the Basin in 1907 – had they not done that, had the river been allowed to flow freely, the Basin would most likely still be full of water well up to Bermuda Dunes if not further, and communities within the Coachella/Imperial Valleys would now be situated along the shore of a huge lake. One must ponder if life would be better or worse in the valley had the river been allowed to run free.

While working in the park, I would often point out to visitors that the silt that was once within the Grand Canyon now rests within the Salton Basin. I use this as an example of the numerous occurrences of water in the Salton Sink. The watershed of the Colorado River alone covers approximately 260,000 square miles. Over the years, much of the water carried by the river with its accompanying load of silt has been deposited into the Salton Basin. For many years the river deposited 150,000,000 tons of silt a year into the basin; borings at Holtville as early as 1913 demonstrate a sedimentary deposit of more than 1,000 feet in depth. This silt dramatically makes obvious the amount of water that flowed into the Salton Sink over the eons – the Salton Sea is not an unusual occurrence, it represents the normal course of events within this great basin. Associated with the lakes come recreation, or maybe in earlier years, survival, as one can find evidence of human activity along the shore of these lakes that include dwellings, gathering areas and fish traps.

Several wonderful examples of fish traps crafted by Native Americans exist on the west side of the Sea in the vicinity of Valerie Jean's, and a few can still be found on the east side by Dos Palmas. The Indians built traps that would collect water and fish during the tidal fluctuations of the large lake; as the tide receded water would move off leaving (hopefully) fish trapped for easy harvesting. In the vicinity of Dos Palmas, one can see the markings left by much larger lakes than the present day Sea, and the same can be seen on the hillsides to the west, particularly at Travertine Point just next to Hwy. 86. Humans have depended upon the aquatic nature of the Salton Sink for many years, as we still do today, if not for survival, then for enjoyment, recreation, and as a place to bathe in the soul soothing effect that only nature can provide.

This brings us to the Salton Sea and its creation. Unfortunately, it has become a popular statement to say that the Salton Sea was created by mistake, suggesting that it came into existence due to the installation of irrigation canals from the Colorado River to Imperial Valley, further suggesting that because of this “artificial creation” it is of limited natural value. Sadly, for whatever personal or professional rational, many strive to demonstrate the Sea as something of a mistake. The Sea may be an enigma, but is isn’t a mistake; it is supposed to be where it is.

Given the course of events that brought the Sea into existence it is understandable that many would make this assumption – I too once believed it was more the construction of irrigation canals that caused water to flow into the basin, then a natural event. The story goes like this: During the late 1800’s and early 1900’s the California Development Company was actively promoting development and agriculture in the Imperial Valley (which, by the way, was at that time referred to as the “Valley of the Dead,” the name Imperial Valley came into existence as a marketing technique). The California Development Company constructed a series of canals to carry water from the Colorado River to Imperial Valley to provide water for agriculture and development. They promoted the valley with the assurance that they would provide as much water as needed to support growth. It worked, people came, the population increased, farms and ranches were built and life was good – for a while. Eventually the Colorado River began to fill the canals with silt, so less water flowed. With less water and more people the water delivery system was stressed; soon residents began to petition the California Development Company to bring more water into the Valley. To do so the company sought permission to cut another canal into the Colorado River from the United States Government and were turned down. They then went to the Mexican Government seeking approval to take water from the river south of the boarder – Mexico didn’t grant approval, but they didn’t quite say no either. So, in 1904 the company made the cut and delivered more water to Imperial Valley. However, their timing was bad: that winter the Colorado River suffered three large flood events.

The river at this time ran unchecked by dams. Swelled by storms and full of water, the river made one of its many changes of course, running through old waterways that began where the canals had been constructed and continuing through old river beds to flow directly into the Salton Sink, creating the Salton Sea. Almost all of the water within the Colorado River flowed into the Salton Sink for about 18 months.

While these man made canals may have eased the flow of water, it’s likely that with or without the canals the Colorado would have changed course, penetrating silt deposits and flowing into the Sink during the early 1900’s. In fact, as a result of an 1873

proposal to do exactly this and turn the Colorado River deliberately into the Sink in an attempt to flood it, it was observed by Dr. Widney that an overflow from the river in 1868 had emptied into the Salton Basin. Widney writes: "At first it has no definite channel, but after a few miles follows a well-marked river bed . . . If left to itself, probably a large portion of the flood of the Colorado would hardly refill the old basin; yet even now at flood season, a shallow lake is formed many miles in extent, but quickly dries up." So I think it's fair to say that the Sea was created more as a result of nature doing the business it does rather than by the hand of man. And it is perhaps more accurate to say that the unnatural act in this whole event was the "hand of man" that stopped the flow of water as engineers worked hard for 18 months to stem the flow and put the river back into the channel heading down to Mexico.

As a result of the belief that the canals made by the California Development Company caused the river to enter the Salton Basin, many argue that the Sea is artificial because it was created "artificially" and does not have a natural resource value. This is a handy argument to be used by those that may propose that the Sea is of little value, though I argue two points in response, 1) the creation of the Sea was more the result of nature than man, and 2) even if the Sea is the result of man's work, the nature that it supports is not artificial, it is very real. The 408 species of birds that exist at the Salton Sea depend upon its natural resource potential for survival, and it is this, at the very least, that makes the Salton Sea a viable natural resource with tremendous environmental value and potential. Come watch the pelicans paddle upon the Sea and then say the lake has little natural resource value, enjoy the arguing great blue herons at sunset and suggest the lake isn't worth preserving – regardless of how it was formed.

In addition to its environmental value, the Salton Sea has a huge recreational importance to California, particularly to Southern California, which has few recreational venues and a growing population demographic that favors aquatic recreation. Lakes and rivers in Southern California fill with boaters quickly. In fact Lake Perris, that rests a short hour and a half west of the Salton Sea, fills to capacity with boaters early each summer weekend day. It fills to the degree that park staff directs boaters to line up at the entrance gates waiting for room on the lake. The lower Colorado River is heavily and dangerously impacted by a huge number of boaters from California. Due to this compaction, many accidents, injuries, and deaths occur on the river each season. The number one cause of vessel accidents in California is compaction: boats operating in close proximity to each other. Southern California is in need of aquatic recreation venues and the Salton Sea can accommodate that need. It is the largest lake in the state with some 360 square miles of water surface. Because of its recreational potential,

from its creation through today and hopefully into the future the Sea has been, and will be, the site of human recreation and enjoyment.

This brings us to more recent events. The Salton Sea's recreational and development history goes like this: shortly after it was created, residents in the area pondered what to do with it. Now a large lake existed again in the Salton Basin, and if there is water in the desert people will come to enjoy it. One of the first to capitalize on the recreational opportunities of the Salton Sea was Charles "Captain" Davis who purchased what is now called Mullet Island and constructed a cabin. Later, when the water rose around him, he built a boat landing, café and a dance hall. He named his resort "Hell's Kitchen" and entertained his guests, caught and sold mullet, imported sea lions and "planted" them in the Sea, and sold smoked mullet in Los Angeles.

In 1926, Gus Eilers and John Goldthwaite purchased land from the Southern Pacific Railroad in the area where the small community of North Shore currently exists and planned for development. They named their new "community" Date Palm Beach; they started building by 1930, creating a pier and a few small cottages, and began promoting the Salton Sea as a motorboat-racing venue. They installed the first official electric timing clock for boat racing at Date Palm Beach. They hosted crowds of service men from Camp Young in the 40's, allowing these soldiers that trained with General Patton in the desert east of Indio, by Chiraco Summit, free swimming. On some days, they had up to 500 men at their facility, with a total of 150,000 "taking advantage of our offer". Eilers writes that Patton himself often visited the resort. During this period, a number of movies were filmed at Date Palm Beach, including "Five Graves to Cairo", parts of "They Were Expendable" and two Abbot and Costello pictures, including "In the Navy" and in 1942 "Wake Island." The "Road to Morocco," with Bob Hope, was also filmed here, with Bob Hope and company staying in the (now flooded) motel at Desert Beach. Al Jolson, Brian Aherne, Ronald Coleman all spent time with Goldthwaite and Eilers at the Salton Sea. And as a side note, a major Castle Rock motion picture is due for release by mid April, called "The Salton Sea".

In 1946, Eilers sold his resort to Roy Hunter who developed Desert Beach by present day North Shore. Many maps still carry the name Desert Beach, though the area is mostly underwater now. Hunter announced that the "Salton Sea is destined to become one of the nation's greatest play spots" and created the Desert Beach Yacht Club. However, by 1953, the Desert Beach facilities were flooded by raising water and Hunter died shortly thereafter.

In 1958, Ray Ryan and Trav Rogers bought land that later became the town of North Shore and constructed the North Shore Motel and the North Shore Beach and Yacht Club that opened in 1962 to great fanfare. The new Yacht Club was a popular place for the Hollywood crowds: the likes of the Beach Boys and Jerry Lewis kept boats at the harbor. The Yacht Club and motel were designed by famed architect Albert Frey. Accounts indicate that North Shore was to be an Albert Frey village, and at least a few other structures still exhibit his design characteristic in North Shore. But once again, high water in the 70's forced the closure of the facility.

In 1955, the Salton Sea State Park (as it was called during those times) was dedicated. At the time, it was the second largest state park in the department and was to be, "the greatest single spur to the development of the Salton Sea as a great inland recreational area."

For a while, that's exactly what happened. The Salton Sea State Park, later to become the Salton Sea State Recreation Area was formed at the request of the Riverside County Board of Supervisors in an attempt to address the increasing recreation trends at the Salton Sea. Riverside County saw the need to provide a controlled recreational experience, and rightly so. After many years of trying, the Board of Supervisors were finally able to convince the Department of Beaches and Parks, later to become the Department of Parks and Recreation, to purchase and operate a state park upon the north shore of the Salton Sea. The Department quickly constructed facilities that included campgrounds, fishing areas, boat ramps, marinas, day use areas and trails. Shortly thereafter, the Department of Parks and Recreation acquired additional properties by direct purchase or lease and increased the size of the park significantly. Currently, the Salton Sea State Recreation Area reaches from North Shore to Bombay Beach. It has 1,500 campsites in five campgrounds (almost ten percent of the total sites within the Department), hundreds of day use sites, a boat ramp and marina, parking areas, fishing jetty, visitor center and all associated infrastructure to support an active operation.

At about the same time that improvements and developments were being made on the east side of the Salton Sea, the west side began growing as well. Salton City was founded in the late 1950's by M. Penn Phillips, known for his involvement in Hesperia and for his participation with California's real-estate commission. According to the Indio Daily News, Salton City was designed to be a "wondrous playground of swimming pools, beaches, harbors and golf courses." Such well-known entertainers and golfers as Tony Bolt, Desi Arnas, Harry James, Johnny Weissmuller, Johnny Dawson, and Ellsworth Vines all golfed and spent time at Salton City.

Salton Sea's long time champion Helen Burns constructed Helen's Beach House at Salton Sea Beach and lived on the Sea's shore until her death in 94. Helen's was famous for its marina, parties, luaus, beauty contests, long-distance swimming contests, jam sessions and water skiing. Helen also started the local Salton Seafarer newspaper. Helen's Beach House was the center of activity for almost 50 years at the Salton Sea.

Desert Shores, a small community on the west side, was developed in the 50's with most of the other communities. Designed as a weekend getaway and gateway to water sports, the community, like the rest, suffered from fluctuating water levels. However, it still exists as a viable community where many good-hearted families live and depend upon the Sea for their livelihood or lifestyle.

And of final note is Bombay Beach, located on the east side of the Salton Sea, perhaps one of the most easily forgotten communities, but maybe one of the most notable because of who developed it. In the early 1900's the engineer (mechanic) of the Wrights Brother's aircraft found his passion in the Salton Sea, purchased numerous lots at Bombay Beach, and later developed some of them in an attempt to market the community.

So, from the time that the Salton Sea was created until the mid 1960's development took off and started to boom. Newspaper articles are replete with accounts of growth, new developments coming on line, visitor use at the park and a general euphoria over a newfound paradise in Southern California.

As early as 1929, the Department of Fish and Game stocked the Sea with sports fish in an attempt to promote fishing, the species and dates of their stocking follow: Stripped Bass, 1929 Longjaw Mud sucker, 1930 Silver Salmon, 1934 Anchovy, 1948 Green Jack, 1948 Bonfish, 1950 Halibut, 1950 Sportfin Mojarra, 1950 Paloma Pom Pano, 1950 Orangemouth Corvina, 1950 Shortfin Corvina, 1950 Totuava, 1950 California Corvina, 1950 Croaker, 1950 Bairdiella, 1950 Monterey Span Macerel, 1950 Striped Mullet, 1950 Roosterfish, 1950 Grunion, 1951 Anchoveta, 1951 Flounder, 1951 Sargo, 1951 Opaley, 1951 Wrasse, 1951 Pacific Thread Herring, 1953. Those species that found a niche in the Sea include corvina, sargo and now tilapia, some mullet, a type of striped bass and menhaden still exist in the Sea.

In addition to fishing, boat racing began at the Salton Sea in 1929 and continued through the mid-nineties.

Given the unique qualities of the development around the Sea the area is culturally significant, representing a cultural landscape in its own right. We strive to protect such landscapes throughout the state.

But coming closer to my tenure at the Sea, going by media accounts that are maintained in the area's historical society archives and at the State Park, the greatest period of use and visitation at the Salton Sea was in the late 50's and early 60's. It was in 1961/62 when the park saw a visitation of over 600,000; stories from park staff tell of long lines at the entrance stations, so long in fact that cars would back up onto Hwy. 111 and block traffic. Rangers that worked in the park during those days tell me that it was so busy that they could not register campers, so they opened the gates and allowed them to flow in. Some have told me they hated working at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area simply because of the crowds of visitors that they had to manage. So many people were coming to the park that traffic would stop on the highways and local residents were complaining to the state trying to convince Cal Trans to build a four-lane highway to accommodate all the traffic. The recreation area at that time was the second busiest park in the Department, having a visitation just below Folsom Lake, located north of Sacramento. During this period, long distance boat races were staged at the Sea. Some of the races went for a total of 500 miles and were viewed by 5 million people on CBS's Sunday Sports Spectacular.

Visitation at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area and general area peaked in the early 60's, but stayed strong through the mid 70's and even to a degree until the 80's. For many years, more people visited the Salton Sea than went to Yosemite National Park, but this trend was broken by the mid-80's when Yosemite's visitation overtook that of the Salton Sea. The Sea's visitation had begun to drop in the 70's.

I spoke with many people who "grew up recreating upon the Sea", I asked them about the impact that large-scale fish die-offs had on their recreation. They told me that fish die-offs did occur in the 50's and 60's, but they understood that the events didn't involve the entire lake. When boaters were faced with die off conditions they "simply skied somewhere else on the lake". I asked them why the die-offs occurred, they said because the Sea "ran out of oxygen." I mention this because I find it somewhat ironic that today's fish mortality events are labeled as the reason fewer people visit the Sea. These events have been occurring as far back as 1909, yet the Sea has been a popular recreational venue through the worst of the die-offs. I also want to note that 40 and 50 years ago, those who used the Sea suggested that the fish died because of oxygen depletion, yet just a few years ago, we struggled to determine why these events were occurring. Again, it turned out that the same effect is taking place at the Sea: reduced

oxygen causing fish to suffocate. During the time the Sea was the site of fish and bird die-offs, it did suffer from periods of strong smell as alga decomposed, yet recreation was strong and people didn't seem to mind.

So one must ask, what became of those "heyday" days at the Salton Sea, where did all the people go, why have the towns failed? Many will put forth that it's because of conditions at the Salton Sea: that it's an undesirable place to build, to recreate upon, that one can no longer enjoy the natural resources at California's largest lake. But I don't agree.

Recreation began to taper off at the Salton Sea as a result of large floods in the 70's that inundated many of the facilities. Even the State Recreation Area was half underwater. The North Shore Yacht Club was damaged and never totally recovered, Helen's was flooded and suffered, and the state park lost half of its facilities to the flood. Developers began to realize that, with no method to control the water level of the Sea, they had jeopardized their investment by placing facilities close to the water's edge – and development funds were no longer available for the Salton Sea. "Eye witness" presentations to the water district boards suggest that local residents speculated that the floods, at least to a degree, were caused by the release of excess water into the Sea by water districts. In fairness, however, there were also large storm events that dropped a great amount of water into the Sea's watershed during this time. The rising of the water within the Sea coupled with the beginning of a bad reputation caused recreation to slow down and almost come to a standstill at the lake. It was a downward spiral, with fewer recreational venues leading to less people around to encourage more venues and so forth.

Many facilities flooded, and at about this time speculation about the Sea's reduced recreational value continued. It is interesting that concern over the rising salt levels of the Sea were expressed as far back as the late 40's with predictions of the lake's demise as early as the 60's and certainly by the 70's. Then, as seems to be the cycle in the Sea, as the lake's fish populations increased we saw the system stressed, and experienced an increase of fish mortality events. Finally, the media investigated the degree that the Sea may or may not be recreationally viable through a misunderstood link between the New River and the pollution that it carries to the issues of the Sea; this caused many Salton Sea users to worry over its viability. Truly, there seemed to be a period of time in the media when the holidays when one would expect heavy recreation at the Sea would be preceded by very negative characterizations of the Sea as not recreationally practical. By the late 70's, and unquestionably by the mid 80's, reports of the struggle that the Sea was involved in became common in local and distant media – after

awhile it was widespread to read in newspapers that the Salton Sea was “the most polluted lake in California,” and that “400,000 gallons of raw sewage flows into it each day from the New River,” that it is unhealthy to swim in, that fish can’t be safely eaten from the lake, that it’s a place to be avoided. Even some politicians began claiming that it is a place where no one should go, where signs are posted telling swimmers to stay out. This, however, was untrue.

It was almost like a media feeding frenzy singling out the negative of the lake, fueled by the misunderstanding of the lake’s natural events.

By the mid 80’s the California Health Department, Imperial County Health Department and the California Fish and Game advised that eating the fish in the Sea might expose one to unhealthy levels of selenium. In the years after the selenium advisory was put forth, visitation at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area dropped by around 110,000 people. Fishers became afraid to fish the Sea.

For twenty some years, Californians have heard how bad the Salton Sea is – they believed it, came to avoid it, even fear it, and certainly did not support it. Visitation plummeted: first because facilities were flooded, then because we, collectively, told a generation that they couldn’t safely use the Sea for fishing, swimming, boating, or simply enjoying. Who will eat fish from or swim in a lake that’s believed to be full of pollution. No wonder people stopped coming to the Salton Sea . . . we scared them away from it!

I once asked a well-known Congressperson about comments he had made to media that the Sea was unfit to swim in. I challenged him, saying that it is well suited for recreation, and he said he understood that the Sea is safe for human contact but felt the best way to bring money to the issue of the Sea is to demonstrate that it is in as bad a possible condition – thinking the worse it is, the more money will be spent to “fix it”. I disagreed and suggested he was doing us a disservice by scaring away those that would support it.

I challenged a newspaper reporter once, asking him how he knows that the Sea is the “most polluted lake in California,” and he said that that’s what everyone says I pointed out to him that in fact the Salton Sea is considered safer for human contact than the Colorado River, than Lake Perris, than many areas of L.A. and Orange County beaches. He subsequently researched this and wrote an article about the most “Misunderstood Lake in California” and a lonely (for want of visitation) park superintendent.

I had often said that we had done well at scaring people away from the Salton Sea; and we've done a lousy job at educating them about it.

When I first became involved with the Salton Sea State Recreation Area, I quickly reviewed our visitation statistics. It is common for a new Superintendent to review past operations in an attempt to become familiar with local trends. It alarmed me to see how much the visitation had dropped at the park over the years. I asked my staff why visitation was so low, and they said it was due to reduced fishing success and the Sea's bad reputation. I became more aware of media reports that called the Sea polluted, that described it as a wasteland and characterized it as something of little value, recreationally or naturally.

Yet, I would stand on the shore and see people in the water, I'd watch as boaters launched, I'd see huge amounts of birds and I'd wonder at the contrast of what was being presented in media to what I saw on the shore. Something wasn't right; here was a huge lake full of life that wasn't being used for recreation. Therefore, I decided to challenge what was becoming the norm for the Sea and address its image.

By 1994, the State Recreation Area statistics showed an all time low visitation of 87,000 people. In slightly over thirty years, the park dropped from a one time high of almost 700,000 to 87,000.

In 1994, we began aggressive marketing activity for the Salton Sea, and by 1995, our visitation went up by about 300 people.

Sometime thereafter, I was at the park office that overlooked Varner Harbor and the fishing jetty, and I watched as a sole fisherman was actively pulling tilapia from the Sea. I was curious because I had been told by staff and locals that while fishing had once been very good at the Sea, it was now quite poor. I walked over to the fisherman and asked him how he was doing, he replied that fishing was excellent – he was the only person fishing, but he was catching a lot of fish. I called Jim Mathews, a well known outdoors reporter, and told him fishing was very good at the Sea. He printed a short article about improved fishing at California's largest lake. The next weekend several people were fishing from the jetty, all catching large amounts of fish.

We began promoting the good fishing at the Salton Sea and soon our beaches and jetties were full of fishers, all catching fish with great vigor.

And the next year visitation peaked over 100,000 people, the first time it had been that high for many years.

We continued our marketing at the Salton Sea and soon began purchasing ads in RV magazines, promoting large 300-mile jet-ski races, and releasing news releases/public service announcements about the quality of recreation at the Salton Sea. More people came. Soon campgrounds would fill and staff would tell me that visitation was starting to “be like the old days”. Eventually the park’s visitation increased to almost 250,000 people each year; we went from an all time low of 87,000 to close to 250,000 in about five years. Since then visitation has varied at the Salton Sea but ranges in the 200,000 level, similar to the visitation of the 70’s. It remains lower than it should be, lower than the facilities at the park are designed for, but people do currently enjoy the Salton Sea: they fish, swim, boat, ski, sun themselves, hike trails, or simply sit and watch birds at this great lake.

This demonstrates that people will come to the Salton Sea, they will fish, they will camp, hike, picnic, swim, boat and water-ski if they understand that the Sea will not harm them and if they are provided recreational opportunities. We developed kayak tours, jet boat trips, seminars, special events, fishing and fish cooking seminars all in an attempt to demonstrate that the Sea makes a viable recreational venue.

So, in the early days of recreation at the Salton Sea things boomed, then they tapered off as people began to fear the resource, but when we demonstrated that the Sea was viable people returned, visitation increased and families once again enjoyed the Salton Sea.

The recreation potential that exists at the Sea is without parallel in California. People simply need to understand that there is nothing to fear from using the lake and they will enjoy it today.

Visitation trends suggest that the number one reason that people come to the Sea is for the fish. When fishing is good, fishers will line the shore, shoulder to shoulder catching hundreds of tilapia, or large corvina. After fishing, the second greatest draw are the birds. The Sea’s huge bird population brings thousands of visitors to the lake. After birding, general recreation, such as camping, hiking, and simply enjoying sunsets bring people to the lake.

A simple evaluation of the location from where people come from to visit the Sea demonstrates that most come from outside of Imperial and Coachella Valley, and the

greatest percent of visitors for the Sea come from the Los Angeles County area. Some 80% of the people that visit the Salton Sea State Recreation Area come from L.A. County. This is significant when one understands that if the Sea fails it will be the huge southern California population base of L.A. County that will be affected most.

The recreation trends at the Sea are based on fishing success and image. When people understand the Sea doesn't represent a human health hazard, they will return. When they know that the fishing is good, they will come.

The Sea's recreation boomed, busted then boomed again. You may hear many people tell you that no recreation exists at this great lake. They are wrong. You may hear people tell you that recreation at the Sea is undesirable, but I don't agree. I swim in the Sea, fish from a boat upon the Sea, and enjoy it as do hundreds of thousands of other people each year. The Sea serves a huge recreation population and fills a need for Southern California.

Representatives of MWD once told me that they would take all of the water that flows into the Sea, admonishing, "you can't stop us". They might be able to do this, but if they do, the Sea fails, recreation stops and the state loses one more precious natural and recreational resource and gains one more Owens Dry Lake.

Over 100 years ago, John C. Van Dyke, who traveled widely throughout the California desert, was awed by the beauty of the Salton Sink. In 1901, reacting to the construction of the irrigation canals that would convert his beloved desert to farmland, he wrote:

The "practical men," who seem forever on the throne, know very well that beauty is only meant for lovers and young persons – stuff to suckle fools withal. The main affair of life is to get the dollar, and if there is any money in cutting the throat of Beauty, why, by all means, cut her throat. That is what the "practical men" have been doing ever since the world began.

As you make your decision, consider these words. Many, many people cherish the Salton Sea. Its loss will be felt far and wide.