

California State Water Resources Control Board

Testimony of Bill Karr Editor, Western Outdoor News

My name is Bill Karr, and I'm the editor of Western Outdoor News, California's largest weekly sportsmen's publication with a paid circulation base of 70,000 readers in the state. I am also the Redwood Empire editor of Western Outdoors magazine, circulation 100,000, and past director of the Inland Wetlands Coalition and past director of the Salton Sea Coordinating Council. I am also past member of the Youth Advisory Group for the California Waterfowl Association and past member of the Advisory Committee to the California State Department of Fish and Game Gamebird Heritage Program.

I don't intend to take up a lot of your time re-iterating what others have said, or will say, but what I do have to say comes from my close association in person and politically with the Salton Sea since 1959, some 43 years of intimate relationships with this body of water.

My family moved to the desert near Cathedral City in 1959, and I was raised fishing Salton Sea and hunting the surrounding area. My family's tie with Salton Sea goes back to the 1930's when my grandfather, the Reverend Lester P. Sund, was a Methodist Minister in Westmoreland. My first duck hunting experience was with him at the Salton Sea back in 1960 when I trudged out into the Sea, barefoot, to retrieve the ducks and geese that he shot.

I formed and headed up the Inland Wetlands Coalition in the early 80's to fight geothermal drilling inside the Wister State Wildlife Area, and afterwards, when I became aware of the problems confronting Salton Sea I formed the Salton Sea Coordinating Council, which brought the counties, state and federal agencies together in a cooperative program to work on solutions for the Salton Sea. As Executive Director of Salton Sea Coordinating Council, and working with numerous groups, we were directly instrumental in the formation of the County, State and Federal coalition of the Salton Sea Task Force.

I am also the author of the book **Fishing Salton Sea**, and have written numerous stories on Salton Sea in magazines, including "In Search of Salton Sea Corvina," in the August, 1983, issue of Western Outdoors magazine, and "Secrets of the Salton Sea," in Western Outdoors magazine in February of last year. There's much more about the fishing at Salton Sea in my book and articles than I can relate in my brief time here, but I would like to go over some facts and highlights that are frequently omitted about not only the history of Salton Sea, but also about the fishing there.

During the past few million years Salton Sink has been flooded with fresh water, salt water and water much more saline than the ocean . . . but there have always been fish.

Historically, the Salton Sea Basin was part of the Sea of Cortez and its upper reaches stretched into what is now Indio. I have found seashells and freshwater clam shells from the ancient Lake Cahuilla while hunting quail near the Thermal Airport.

Eventually the Colorado River built up a land bridge through its ever-growing, ever-moving alluvial fan--sometimes flowing into the Salton Sink and sometimes into the Sea of Cortez. At this point the inland lake, now cut off from the Sea of Cortez and known as Lake Cahuilla, filled the Imperial Valley and was far larger than the Salton Sea. Flows from the Colorado River kept it fresh enough to harbor freshwater fish. The Cahuilla Indians "netted" fish either while it was part of the Sea of Cortez, or while it was a huge inland sea, constructing rock enclosures that would fill with the incoming waters and strand fish on the outgoing, which they collected. These fish traps are still visible in the foothills above Salton Sea Beach, Salton City and Desert Shores.

Finally the Colorado River maintained a steady flow into the Sea of Cortez, away from the Salton Sink, and the vast body of water evaporated, leaving only widely scattered springs, ponds, meandering rivers that disappeared into marshland and a few lingering species such as the desert pupfish and some shorebird species. Lake Cahuilla, however, the predecessor of the Salton Sea, never went away entirely, and eventually, the Colorado River again began its swings into different river courses--now flowing into the Sea of Cortez, and now into the Salton Sink.

It was because of these periodic fluctuations of flow that the current Salton Sea came into being when, in 1905, construction workers trying to divert part of the Colorado River back into the Salton Sea Basin for irrigation actually blew out a levee and the Colorado River again did what it had been doing since pre-history: flowed into the Salton Sea Basin and again filled it with water. Because man was involved with this huge snafu of trying to harness Mother Nature it is widely believed that the Sea is "unnatural or "manmade." I think the nomenclature was wrong then and it's still wrong but for now, I want to repeat the point that the history of the Salton Sea precedes our very existence in California.

When man's attempt to harness the Colorado River failed and flood waters again poured into the Salton Sink, fresh water fish were once again introduced, but by 1929 the salinity of the sea had increased so that only the razorback sucker and striped mullet remained. The mullet provided a limited sport fishery and some were taken commercially. Mullet Island was the base for one of the commercial mullet canneries, and the foundations of the cannery can be seen to this day.

The commercial mullet fishery disappeared, but as recently as 40 years ago mullet were still in the sea. I remember hanging over the railing of the New River bridge, watching the spectacular sight of thousands of huge mullet jumping out of the water while heading up the New River. And sometimes, while hunting ducks in the shallows around Benson's landing, large fish would run into my legs, almost tripping me. To this day I'm not certain whether they were mullet or large corvina.

Salton Sea has been a subject of major interest as a fishery to the state of California since 1929. According to the **History and Status of introduced fishes in California, 1871-1996**, State of California Resources Agency, Department of Fish and Game, of which my book on Fishing Salton Sea is listed as a source, 74 species of fish numbering over 38,730 have been introduced to the Salton Sea since 1929. Between the years of 1951 and 1956 alone, 35 different species of

fish were planted in the sea, but only three were able to survive; the sargo, croaker and corvina. Interestingly enough, no fish have been purposely planted since 1956, and the millions, some say billions, of fish in the sea are descendants of the initial planting of only 65 sargo, 67 croaker and fewer than 300 corvina.

Results from the initial plant were not immediate, and many biologists and observers believed the transplant had been a failure, but by 1957 some corvina were being caught by anglers, and not many years later everyone was catching fish. The once barren waters began to thrive, and the Salton Sea gained a deserved reputation as a spectacularly productive fishery.

The next, and most recent, fish to gain a foothold in the sea was by accident. The African tilapia (meaning “fish”) was introduced to irrigation ditches and canals to control algae and aquatic growth, as 70 percent of their diet consists of vegetation. Surprisingly enough, the tilapia had a tremendous adaptability, and it wasn’t long before they worked their way into the drains around the sea, and then into the sea itself.

In my opinion, the Sea provides the best fishing of any body of water in California. But you don’t need to take just my word for it. In 1971, the California Department of Fish and Game recorded recreational fish catches at the Salton Sea at 1.88 fish per angler hour, one of the highest catch rates recorded in the state. (Ralph Riedel et al., “Final Report: Fish Biology and Fisheries Ecology of the Salton Sea, p. 3.) The 9-fish limit for corvina was frequently attained, and many times exceeded 100 pounds of fish, with corvina over 20 pounds common.

A scientific fisheries study released just this past year, said “The Salton Sea was observed to be a highly productive lake for tilapia and croaker. Contrary to the current public paradigm, the Salton Sea supports a large fish community and could support a commercial fishery.” (Riedel et al, p. 2.)

There are four species of fish in Salton Sea of interest to the angler, and all four are excellent eating. The corvina is the largest of the gamefish and has a limit of five per day, while the Gulf croaker or Bairdiella, sargo and tilapia have no limits.

The king of the sea, corvina, are tremendous fighters and attain weights in excess of 20 pounds, frequently and 30 pounds, occasionally. The sea record is 36 ½ pounds, and at the time my book was published in 1985, a few fish over 30 pounds were caught every year. In past decades, it was believed that corvina propagation would cease and eggs would not hatch and survive as salinity increased to 39,000 and 40,000 ppm, but apparently the corvina spawns have continued in recent years, although not every year. After going through some slow years and relatively slow fishing due to increased salinity that impacted spawning, the corvina population is now once again surging upwards and quality fish of 4 to 12 pounds are once again prevalent throughout the Salton Sea, with bigger fish in the 20-plus category caught frequently.

Corvina fishing is probably what the Sea is most famous for. I remember one day when I inflated a small rubber raft and paddled out into the flooded trees out of Redhill marina, casting

Thinfin lures and hooking corvina one after another, I ended up keeping 9 fish that weighed a total of 125 pounds—we had a quite a neighborhood fish fry that weekend! One of my stories shattered the myth that you couldn't catch corvina in the winter---we found they hung around the shallow water in the south end of the Sea, possibly attracted by warm geothermal springs under the Sea at that end.

Gulf croaker, also known as Bairdiella, look just like a miniature corvina, averaging about 10 inches in length and about 1/2-pound in weight. Anglers using multiple hook rigs can catch as many fish as there are hooks on their line as fast as the hooks can be re-baited.

These fish can be caught readily almost anywhere around Salton Sea during warm weather, but when winter months arrive and waters cool, the croaker seem to disappear. Seldom, if ever, does anyone catch a croaker in winter.

Sargo, have a flat, panfish shape and they hang around underwater structures where they feed on barnacles. They tend to congregate together in suitable habitat areas, although they are not known as schooling fish. Sargo are tremendous fighters, and an angler armed with an ultralight outfit can have loads of fun catching these excellent-eating fish.

One time Jimmy “Tex” Ritter, who used to be Chief Ranger at the State Park in North Shore, and I were fishing in my boat over the Sunken Hotel off North Shore, where the Road to Morocco with Bob Hope was filmed, and we were catching sargo from 1 to 3 pounds apiece using corn, and joking about how we must have found the dining room. These fish make great fish and chips.

Croaker suffered cyclical changes in population numbers as the tilapia populations rose and fell within the Sea, and sargo suffered the same fate. Sargo population levels were so low a decade ago that repeated efforts by good anglers to capture some for studies resulted in no fish at all. More recently, however, corvina anglers have reported sargo being caught at The Target and other areas in the sea, so they are still in existence and apparently rebounding.

Tilapia are a flat-sided pan fish, and their basic shape is similar to that of the sargo, although their coloration is completely different. The huge mouth of the tilapia, in addition to the darker coloration sets it apart. There are two species of tilapia in and around Salton Sea, the tilapia Mozambique, a mouth breeder that turns almost black with bright red fins while mating, and the tilapia Zillii, which is more silver in color and a nest breeder.

Once you locate an area with tilapia the action is constant. They're a good fighting fish in water that is warm enough to keep their metabolism moving, and they'll even put up a fair fight in cold water. During the summer, many an angler has thought he was hooked up with a big corvina, only to find out a big Mozambique male, with bright red fins, has latched onto his lure.

You can catch tilapia at the Sea in mind-boggling numbers. According to Department of Fish and Game biologist Terry Foreman "We don't know how many fish are in the Salton Sea, but with

the increase in the numbers of tilapia, which has provided a rebound for the corvina fishery, it's numbered in the billions of fish. The total numbers of tilapia are staggering, especially when you consider fish kills on the order of 8 million fish, after which it's hard to tell the difference in population levels."

Now you would think, that with fisheries of this abundance, the EIS/EIR for this transfer would provide some mitigation for anglers. The EIS/EIR acknowledges that as many as 400,000 anglers fish at the Salton Sea every year, but there is no mitigation at all for the impacts the transfer may have on sportfishing. Consider what those impacts could be. If the transfer speeds up the day when the Sea can no longer sustain fish by five years, less than most estimates, that's 2 million angler days lost - with no mitigation. If the transfer will speed up the day when the Sea can no longer support fish by approximately 10 years, which is a more common estimate, that is 4 million angler days lost - with no mitigation.

Which brings us to a point of omission in Imperial Irrigation District's Draft EIR/EIS: it does not give enough emphasis to the private facilities that anglers use at the Sea. In fact, there are days when hundreds of anglers line up alongside the Cleveland Street drain in North Shore catching tilapia. And exactly the same thing occurs at Red Hill, Black Rock, the Steam Wells, the Navy Base, The Keys, Salton City, Lido Palms, Salton Sea Beach, Desert Shores, Whitewater and the Johnson Street drain. Most boaters, in fact, launch from the private boat ramps--not at the State park.

Where will those millions of angler days be spent if the Sea is dead? Where will the additional millions of angler days be spent in the future if we lose the best fishing in the state, and lose what could be a huge playground only a few hours drive from Metropolitan Los Angeles and San Diego?

How would you replace the huge and thriving ecosystem that is Salton Sea after the devastating ecological loss of millions of fish and habitat that is host to over 400 species of birds in Southern California, threatened and endangered species, and a recreation area that can offer untold fishing, boating and recreation for the population masses in Southern California?

In closing, may I ask you here now, the same thing I asked at our very first meeting with these other sports and environmental groups before we joined forces: How many of you have actually been to Salton Sea and the surrounding habitat? If you have not yet been there and seen the existing beauties and outstanding potential of this area, please let me know, and I will arrange, personally, for a tour.

Salton Sea has so far withstood the ravages of nature and the reduction of freshwater inflows to maintain an incredible ecosystem of life that even astounds scientists and biologists to this day. Some say that with a body of water so full of life, it's a long way from death. Unfortunately, the inexorable increase in salinity, which could speed up if the transfer is approved as currently proposed, will eventually snuff out that spark of life. And once extinguished it will be too late to help.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

References:

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