



A once-pristine environment

Is it too late to save California?

By Tom Knudson

T

he drive over Brockway Summit on Highway 267 to Lake Tahoe is routine enough. But every time I head over the pass, I hear a distant echo — a voice from long ago: Mark Twain recalling his first glimpse at the bold, blue lake in August 1861.

“As it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its still surface,” Twain wrote in “*Roughing It*,” “I thought it must surely be the fairest picture the whole earth affords.”

Today, Twain’s words evoke a strange magic: They soothe and they hurt. Celebration has turned to requiem. Lake Tahoe, as everyone knows, is a much different place nowadays. Its dirty air, clogged roads, algae blooms and dying forests have become legendary. But Tahoe’s travails are more than a tragedy. They are a parable for our times.

Once, California was the grandest citadel. Its beauty and bounty were beyond belief. Rivers were full of salmon. Skies were draped with waterfowl. Along the North Coast and in the Sierra Nevada, trees grew so huge they seemed extraterrestrial. Majesty was the heart of California. It rumbled through the Big Sur poems of Robinson Jeffers. It was etched onto panels at the State Capitol. It thundered in the prose of California’s most famous conservationist, John Muir.

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings,” Muir wrote of his beloved Sierra.

Tom Knudson is Sierra correspondent for The Sacramento Bee. In 1992, he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for meritorious public service for his series, “The Sierra in Peril.”

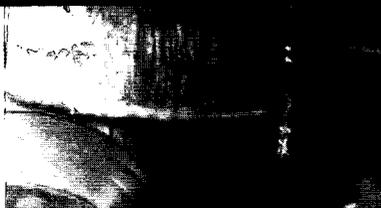
ravaged



disappearing. California cities have grown so huge that one prominent biologist — Michael Soule at the University of California, Santa Cruz — calls them “centers of extinction.”

Southern California is the prototype. Just 60 years ago, the air was scented with orange blossoms and the San Fernando Valley was mostly farmland. No more. Today, the region is growing so fast that, as author Marc Reisner put it, it may run out of air before it runs out of water.

“The fundamental problem,” Reisner said in a talk not long ago, “is the human race is devilishly clever but



criminally short-sighted when it comes to resources, ecology and especially sustainability.”

But somehow, there is good news, too. While much has been lost, much also remains. One hundred million acres is a lot of ground. California is not yet New Jersey West. On its good days, there is no place finer.

“Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.”

But majesty does not build civilizations. People do. Dollars do. Majesty gets lost along the way-side. It doesn’t have to but it does. Just look at California.

In the 19th Century, hydraulic miners got their gold but left the foothills scarred and bleeding. Eighty years ago, Los Angeles got water from Owens Valley but turned Owens Lake into a toxic dust bowl. San Francisco dammed the Tuolumne River and Hetch Hetchy canyon. California even killed its state symbol — the grizzly bear. The last one was shot in 1924.



Rich Pedroncelli

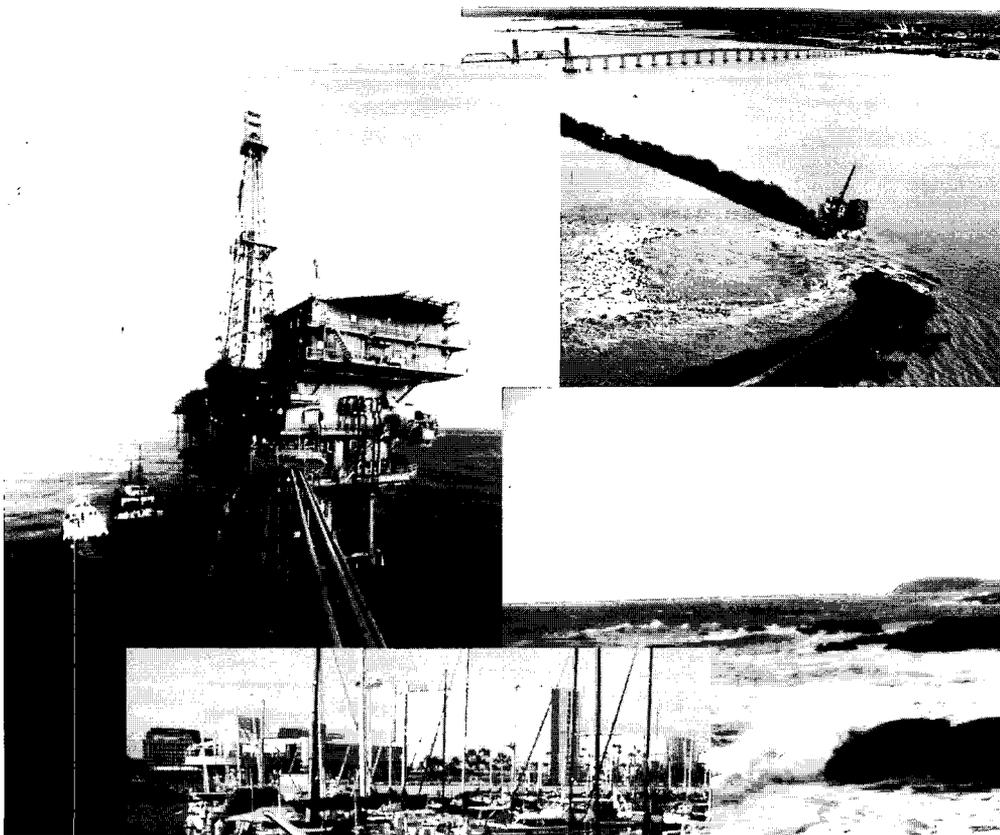
The slap of heavy surf on the northwest coast, the distant sparkle of the snowclad Sierra, the rose-tinted dawn over the Mojave desert — all are emblems of a greatness not yet gone.

California is a funny sort of place. It can sadden you one day with its concrete and gridlock. The next day there is a black bear shuffling through your campsite, a bald

eagle in your binoculars.

During my eight years here, California has revealed many such surprises. Shorebirds in Death Valley. Salamanders in the Sierra Nevada. A tarantula big enough to stop traffic. A Pacific fisher, one of the rarest, most elusive mammals in North America, 90 miles southeast of Fresno.

Still, as California heads into the 21st Century, there’s no denying its problems are enormous. But so is its potential.

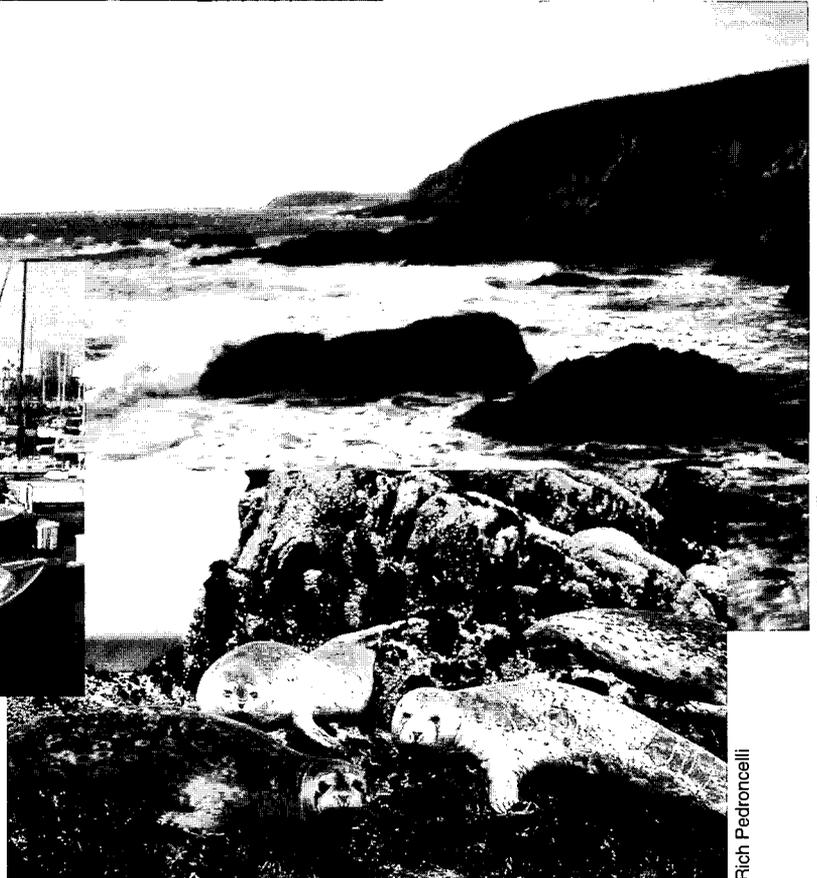


forests.' We buy it for our homes. Let's buy it for national forests."

One of the biggest challenges will be safeguarding California's spectacular biotic warehouse. California, even after 150 years of exploitation, is one of the richest biological regions on earth. There are coastal gnatcatchers, delta smelt, fringe-toed lizards, kangaroo



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The challenge is not just to hang on to what remains but to bring back some of the old magic. Get rid of air pollution and California could have the cleanest skies in the nation. The reason? There are no factories or power plants upwind — only the wide blue Pacific and its vast cushion of fresh, clean air.

"If I lived in Ohio, I wouldn't be nearly as enthusiastic," says Tom Cahill, a veteran air-pollution specialist at the University of California, Davis. "Unless we pollute every day, all day, the state would get clean. California is in control of its own destiny."

Our forests could once again be the great cathedrals Muir described a century ago — not the sickly fire-prone thickets they are today. And it need not cost jobs. It could create them. But it will take new thinking, new action. Every year, we spend a king's ransom to put out fire, a pittance to prevent it. Preventative medicine works for our health. Why not for forests?

Preventative medicine means more fire — under controlled conditions — to clear out underbrush and make forests more spacious. It also means biomass harvesting and other kinds of logging and fuels reduction where fire isn't practical.

"It's serious business," says Larry Caplinger, fire management officer on the Stanislaus National Forest. "What we're saying is 'Let's buy some fire insurance for our national

rats, yellow-billed cuckoos, limestone salamanders, giant garter snakes and several thousand other native plants and animals. No other state has such an inventory.

They are survivors. Native Californians. They have outlasted miners, loggers and dam builders. You might think they would be safe today. You would be wrong. They face new and growing dangers. One of the biggest is close at hand. With 32 million people in the state, native species are simply being shoved aside. Habitat is divided and subdivided until only small islands of open ground remains. Such patches might look pretty but they are prison cells for many species. Cut off from outside populations, they exist in a doomed world — a landscape of the "living dead," says Reed Noss, editor of *Conservation Biology*, a scientific journal.

California's population growth shows no sign of stopping. During most of the 1980s, we grew at the rate of 2000 people a day, a new San Francisco each year. In 1990, a whopping one million newcomers showed up. By 2020,

California is expected to have 60 million residents.

"We are losing species and habitats so fast it is almost mind-boggling," says Peter Moyle, a professor at the University of California, Davis, in a remarkable new book about California wildlife, "Life on the Edge" (Biosystems Books). "Southern California seems to have an especially uncontrollable problem. Essentially every species of native fish in Southern California belongs on the endangered species list."

People aren't the only problem. "Alien" species are causing major trauma, too. A Chinese clam brought here inadvertently on a cargo boat is reshaping the ecology of San Francisco Bay. Non-native grasses are pushing out native plants in the Mojave Desert, depriving the desert tortoise of nutrition.

"We are a weed species," the late Wallace Stegner once wrote. "Wherever we go, we crowd out natives and carry with us domesticated species that may become weeds in the new environment. What we destroy we often do not intend to harm. What we import, we import with the best intentions."

Let's say for a moment that you don't care for blunt-nosed leopard lizards or Alameda whipsnakes. You've never seen such things. You may not want to. What good are they anyway?

A fair question. And a tough one. Phil Pister of Bishop has a response. Pister, a retired biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game, has devoted his career to saving little-known creatures, such as the Devil's Hole pupfish. He has heard the "what-good-are-they" question many times. Each time, he answers the same way: "What good are you?" he says.

There's another response: Because we can.

California, even in a recession, is an economic powerhouse, a super state. We are part of the world's greatest nation. We send people to outer space, design Star Wars defense systems, watch satellite television. Why not safeguard life on earth?

This shadow world of nematodes and gnatcatchers, diatoms and delta smelt is more important than we realize. They are rivets on an airplane. Lose too many, and you crash. As Paul Ehrlich, professor of biological sciences at Stanford University, says: "When we destroy biodiversity, we're sawing off the limb we sitting on."

Saving biodiversity won't bankrupt us. It will enrich us. You say government doesn't have the money? Well, it seems to have the money for other things. How about those \$90,000-a-year do-nothing jobs the State Legislature hands out? Why not cut some of that stuff, and put the money to work restoring watersheds? Why not award tax credits to ranchers who protect streams, who help save condor habitat? Why not put armies of young people, homeless people, welfare recipients to work cleaning beaches, fixing forests, mending ecosystems? What better place to begin than California, with its history as a social innovator, a national trend-setter? The time is right, too, with federal power shifting back to the states.

But alas, these are bleak times for the environment. The talk these days is about gutting conservation laws, not expanding them. Politicians, commodity groups, conservation organizations, all have daggers sharpened and poison in their press releases.

Still, you can find encouraging signs.

Last year, after 15 years of legal wrangling between the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and environ-

mentalists, Mono Lake was saved by the simplest of solutions: Just add water.

California's Resources Secretary Doug Wheeler is bringing developers and conservationists together to avoid the legal minefield of the federal Endangered Species Act. The centerpiece of the effort, the Natural Communities Conservation Planning Program, is aimed at preserving the once-unknown, now-famous California coastal gnatcatcher.

The Bank of America has joined with the Resources Agency, the Greenbelt Alliance and the Low Income Housing Fund to issue an ambitious state-wide growth-management blueprint for California.

"It is clear sprawl has created enormous costs that California can no longer afford," the groups say in a February report. "Ironically, unchecked sprawl has shifted from an engine of California's growth to a force that now threatens to inhibit growth and degrade the quality of life."

In the north end of the Central Valley, there's more good news: Rice farmers, working with conservationists, have changed farming practices to provide 90,000 acres of winter habitat for waterfowl such as sandhill cranes and snow geese.

Such measures deserve standing ovations. Unfortunately, they don't often get them. Cooperation doesn't grab headlines. But it should. It is getting some attention right here. Right now. Let's see some more of it. 🏠

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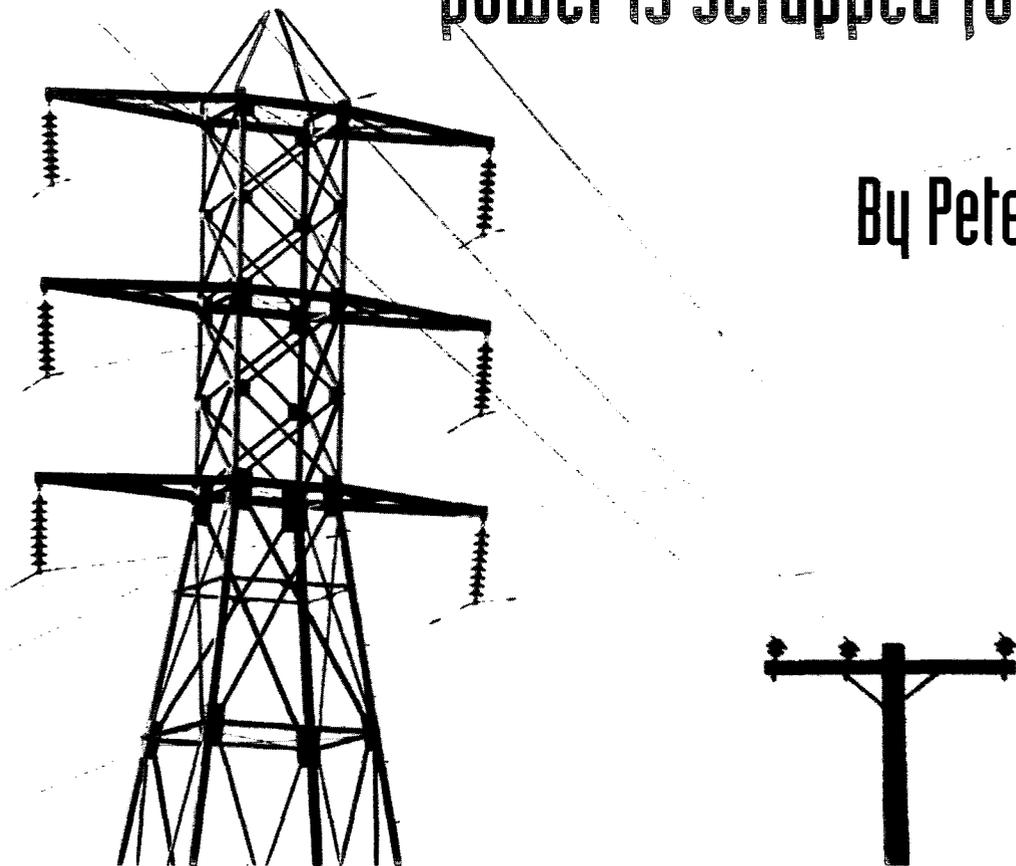
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Retail wheeling



California plans a grand experiment in electricity reform, but will it mean that clean power is scrapped for dirty?



By Peter Asmus

Photograph by Nancy Cohen, Journal archives

California has always prided itself in moving ahead of the pack. Over a decade ago, the Golden State pushed resources such as the sun to help develop a renewable energy industry that is now widely heralded as an international success story.

But progress has its price. As a result, California's electric rates are, on average, 50 percent higher than those in the rest of the nation. Though innovative utility energy conservation

efforts have helped reduce the actual bills paid by both small and large consumers of electricity, a lingering economic recession in this troubled paradise has taken its toll. Now, however, California is poised to become an energy policy leader once again — this time by deregulating electricity. But unlike past energy innovations, the beneficiary this time won't likely be the environment. It will be large industrial concerns, some of them notorious polluters, which consume

Peter Asmus is a Sacramento-based co-author of "In Search of Environmental Excellence" (Simon & Schuster, 1990) and is currently working on a book about reforms in the electric utility industry for Island Press. Research Assistance provided by Linda Dailey Paulson, a Sacramento-based researcher and reporter.