



OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

The Otherworldly California Waterway That Keeps Exploding Into Politics



Listen to this article · 6:11 min [Learn more](#)

Photographs and Text by Ryan Christopher Jones

Mr. Jones is a photojournalist and doctoral student in anthropology at Harvard studying the local politics of water transfers in the California Delta.

March 10, 2025

The sprawling estuary about 70 miles inland from San Francisco feels distinctly out of place — more like the swampy Florida Everglades than arid California. But from that confluence of two great rivers, the Sacramento and the San Joaquin, 1,100 miles of webbed waterways and levees send upward of six million acre-feet of freshwater a year to thirstier parts of the state, from farms in the San Joaquin Valley to the Southern California megalopolis. Known as the California Delta, the estuary is among the state's most important sources of water — and most consistent flash points over environmental protection.

Donald Trump first saw the political utility of the estuary in 2016 on the campaign trail, when he denied the existence of a drought in California, claiming that the state had wasted its precious freshwater by sending it into the ocean. He was referring to a fight over diverting water from the Delta to protect a native fish species

called the delta smelt, and he was implicitly siding with farmers who argued they were more deserving of the water than the federally threatened species. He revisited this battle in his first term as president, but environmentalists stopped him in the courts from redirecting more water to farmers.

This January, he waded back into the issue, accusing California Democrats of prioritizing the delta smelt over helping Los Angeles fight out-of-control wildfires, even though water from the estuary would most likely not have made a difference for firefighters. He used the fires to implicitly challenge legal protections of endangered species and in a memo gave the secretaries of commerce and the interior 90 days to find ways to divert more Delta water for cities and farms that he claimed “desperately need” it.

For Mr. Trump and some conservatives, the California Delta is a potent symbol of environmentalism's overreach and the incompatibility of farming and conservation. And by meddling in California's water debates, he stokes a host of tensions: between state and federal water management, urban Los Angeles and the rural Delta, and agricultural and residential uses.

But the so-called war over California's water is a dangerous, flawed trope that reduces certain water uses to right or wrong, and turns the Delta into a place with no local stakes. Faced with threats of drought, climate change and water scarcity, we should not reduce this place to a warring of two — or even many — sides.

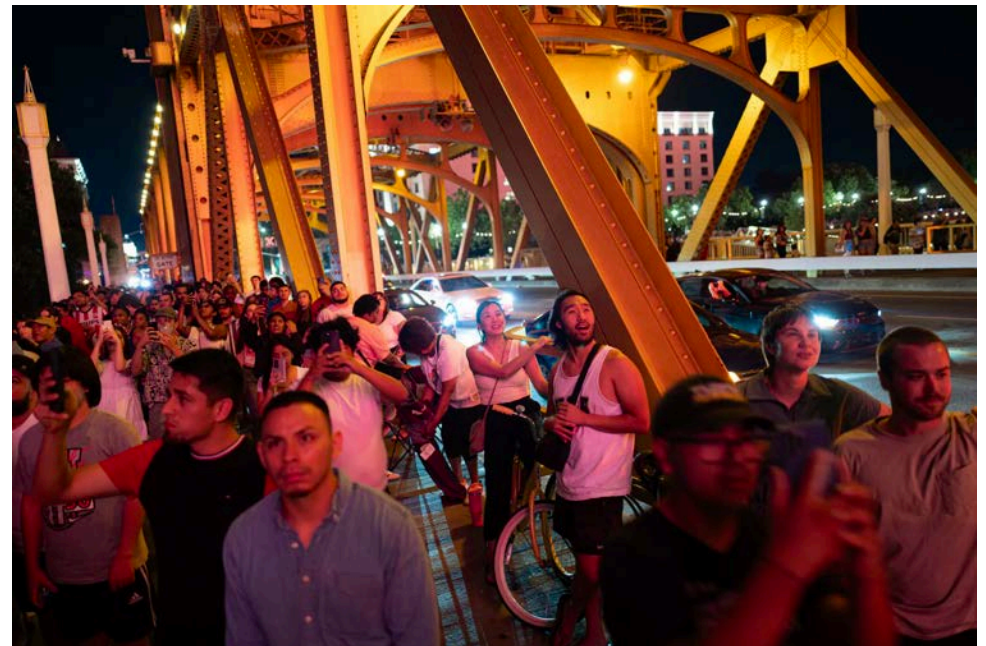
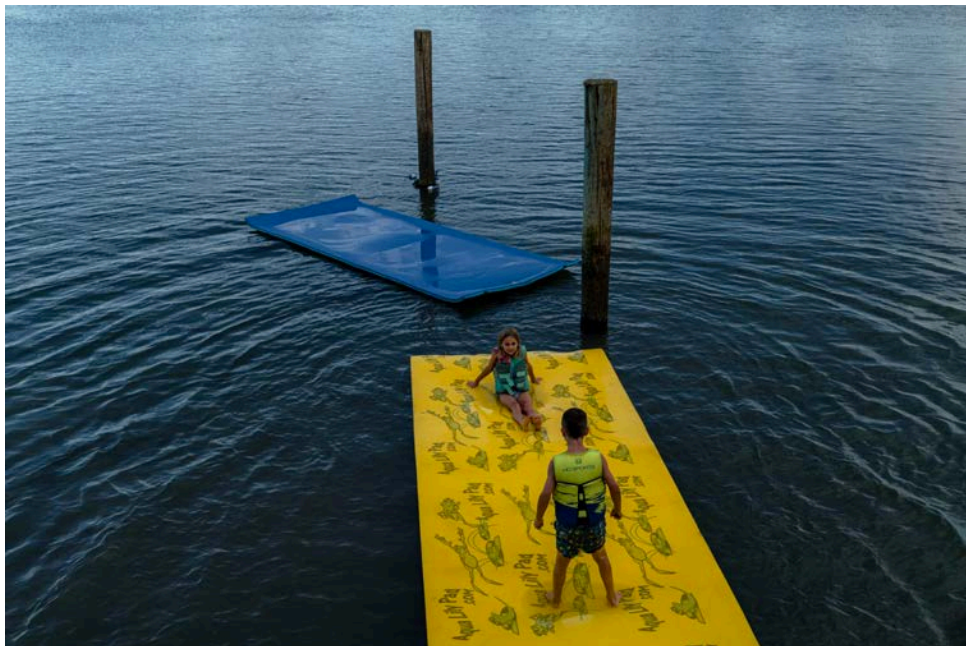
I was born and raised in Fresno, two hours south of the California Delta but close enough to feel its iconic breeze. Growing up there meant that drought touched everything, which eventually led me to document the ways that water — or its absence — has shaped the cultural identity of inland Californians.



A woman picks leaves from wild corn growing on the riverbanks of the Sacramento River.



The Ebony Boat Club hosts a Caribbean-themed party on a converted barge in a downtown Stockton marina in the Delta.



Many families visit the Delta from throughout California to vacation along its rivers.

People gather along the Tower Bridge in Sacramento, the northernmost boundary of the Delta, on the Fourth of July.

When I first visited the Delta in 2023, I was shocked at how otherworldly it felt compared to the arid flatlands of my hometown. At a marina in the city of Isleton, I watched herons and egrets nest atop eucalyptus trees along the riverbank. I saw cargo vessels chug through the Delta's deep water channel while fishermen cast lines from its shoreline. In this ecosystem of tidal marshes, wildlife and lush vegetation, water is a livelihood, not just a resource.

But I also saw signs of decline: long-abandoned boats and deserted marinas suggested something significant had been lost. And pipes, tunnels, aqueducts and canals across the wetland landscape reminded me that the water from this place is not just for this place. How much can be taken before it's gone?



Remnants of the abandoned Herman and Helen's Marina on 8 Mile Road outside of Stockton.



The dried-up Mormon Slough channel in Stockton.



A “ditch rider,” a person who inspects irrigation systems and distributes water to farmers, adjusts the return flow to a Delta waterway.



A father and daughter at a former fishing spot across from the Port of Stockton.

Two enormous infrastructure projects, the federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project, already divert the Delta water to nearly 30 million people in Central and Southern California. Gov. Gavin Newsom supports a third proposed initiative, the Delta Conveyance Project. If approved, it would divert about 900,000 acre-feet more of Delta water south. Locals fear that would be more water than the Delta can afford to lose.

This practice of draining one place to sustain another has had consequences across the West. The Colorado River is shrinking from decades of overuse and drought. The Owens Valley in eastern California, once a lush landscape, became a dry lake bed nearly a century ago because of the voracious demands of Los Angeles. The water supply of the Rio Grande continues to be at the center of a legal standoff between the federal government and Texas, Colorado and New Mexico.

The communities in these places are often seen as expendable or unimportant compared to the needs of larger, distant cities. This is the true cost of thinking about California water as a war: It turns communities into abstract pawns.

On one of my last mornings in the Delta last summer, I toured the Jones Pumping Plant in Byron, at the Delta's southernmost edge. Standing atop a giant crane on the plant's roof, from the north I saw water flowing slowly through an intake channel and into the plant. To the south, the diverted water disappeared via underground channels toward the Delta-Mendota Canal and on to irrigate Central Valley farmers' fields.



A view of water entering the Jones Pumping Plant in Byron. The plant takes water from the Delta and sends it into the Delta-Mendota Canal.

On top of that crane I felt that I was on California's 50-yard line, watching watersheds in perpetual competition. This supposed rivalry was set in motion long before Mr. Trump got into politics, but his administration's hostility toward environmentalists will only intensify the pressures on an already fragile ecosystem. In the long-running conflict over water in the arid West, the "water wars" narrative ensures that no side really ever wins — only that some lose more than others.

Call it a bellwether, an indicator or a harbinger, what happens to the Delta is always a warning. We should all be paying attention to what comes next.

Ryan Christopher Jones is a photojournalist and anthropology doctoral student at Harvard studying the local politics of water transfers in the California Delta.

Photography for this essay was supported by the Center for Contemporary Documentation.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, WhatsApp and Threads.