

L.A. mayor tours restored Lower Owens River

Antonio Villaraigosa touts the city's diverting water back to the waterway, which had been sucked dry by the aqueduct in 1913.

By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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A RIVER AGAIN: Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, front, and ecologist Mark Hill lead a canoe tour of the Lower Owens River. Since 2006, the city has been diverting water back to the waterway in order to restore habitat destroyed by the L.A. Aqueduct. (Brian Vander Brug / Los Angeles Times)
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Independence, California

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa toured the Lower Owens River by paddle-power Wednesday, leading half a dozen canoes and drift boats along a mile-long stretch of the rehabilitated waterway east of the High Sierra.

Under cloudy skies, local elected officials and environmentalists floated close behind Villaraigosa as he and a guide paddled their canoe through the tule-lined channel that began flowing again in 2006 as part of what is widely considered the most ambitious river restoration effort attempted in the West.

The 62-mile-long river was left nearly dry in 1913 when its water was redirected into the Los Angeles Aqueduct to help Los Angeles grow into a metropolis. The Department of Water and Power redirected some water back into the channel starting Dec. 6, 2006, and DWP General Manager and CEO David Nahai was among those floating on the river Wednesday.

It took the group about 40 minutes to complete the trip about 1:30 p.m. and disembark near a helicopter, which whisked Villaraigosa back to Los Angeles.

"This is a great opportunity to see and feel this restored habitat, which we had desecrated for 100 years," Villaraigosa said after stepping out of his canoe. "I feel gratified."

Before setting out on the river, Villaraigosa turned a valve at the aqueduct intake, releasing a pulse of water into the Lower Owens that biologists expect will artificially replicate a seasonal flood.

"Starting today, every year the Lower Owens will flow to the same rhythms as Mother Nature," Villaraigosa said. "In spring, the riverbanks will flood, nourishing seeds to begin the cycle of life for a new year in the largest river restoration project in America."

He mistakenly described the renewed river system as suddenly teeming with "countless trout," according to biologists at the event, who pointed out later that the Lower Owens is a warm-water fishery more hospitable to bass and catfish.