

January 12, 2008
Independence Journal

A Long-Dry California River Gets, and Gives, New Life

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INDEPENDENCE, Calif. — What Los Angeles took a century ago — a 62-mile stretch of river here in the parched Owens Valley — it is now giving back.

One of the largest river-restoration projects in the country has sent a gentle current of water meandering through what just a year ago was largely a sandy, rocky bed best used as a horse trail and barely distinguishable from the surrounding high desert scrub.

Mud hens dive for food. A blue heron sweeps overhead. Bass, carp and catfish patrol deep below. Some local residents swear they have even seen river otters.

So much reedy tule has sprouted along the banks, like bushy tufts of hair, that officials have called in a huge floating weed whacker, nicknamed the Terminator, to cut through it and help keep the water flowing — a problem inconceivable in years past.

The river, 2 to 3 feet deep and 15 to 20 feet across, will not be mistaken for the mighty Mississippi. And an economic boon promised to accompany the restoration has yet to materialize.

Yet the mere fact that water is present and flowing in the Lower Owens River entralls residents nearly 100 years after Los Angeles diverted the river into an aqueduct and sent it 200 miles south to slake its growing thirst.

“This is infinitely better than before,” said Keith Franson, a kayaker pumping up his boat on the banks this week and preparing to explore a stretch of the renewed river. “You got birds, herons, terns, all sorts of wildlife coming back in because life is coming back in the river.”

Francis Pedneau, a lifelong Owens Valley resident who had sparred with Los Angeles city officials over access to fishing sites, said word was spreading among fishing enthusiasts about new spots along the river. Mr. Pedneau said he had actually caught fewer bass this past season, “probably because the

schools are more spread out now.”

But Mr. Pedneau, 69, has praise for the project, even though he, like many old-timers, is generally suspicious of Los Angeles, given the tension-filled history behind its acquiring water and land here (the inspiration for the 1974 movie “Chinatown”).

“The river didn’t look anything like it does now,” he said. “I never thought I would live long enough to see this.”

Los Angeles officials are in a celebratory mood. Mayor [Antonio R. Villaraigosa](#) plans to come here next month when engineers temporarily step up the flow as part of regular maintenance.

The flow is carefully controlled, kept at a minimum of 40 cubic feet per second, well above the 5 cubic feet per second in the parts that had still managed to have something of a stream after the river was diverted.

Los Angeles agreed to restore the river as part of a settlement of a lawsuit filed by the Owens Valley Committee, a local group, and the [Sierra Club](#) over what it called the excessive pumping of groundwater in the valley in the 1970s and 1980s to increase drinking water supplies beyond what the city was taking from the river.

Under the settlement, Los Angeles, working with Inyo County on the \$24 million project, has also taken steps to restore the cottonwoods, willows and wetlands that flourished along the river decades ago and drew an array of wildlife.

Near the river’s delta, the released water is recaptured, with most of it used to control dust on Owens Lake, which the diversion had dried up, and the rest sent back into the aqueduct and on to Los Angeles.

The city still gets about 50 percent of its water, including groundwater, from the valley, down about a third in the past several years because of environmental obligations like the river restoration.

Mr. Villaraigosa, who has promised to patch up relations with the Owens Valley, said ending litigation and reviving the river sent an important message.

“By releasing this water, we are demonstrating our commitment to environmental stewardship and a new era in terms of our relationship with Owens River residents,” he said. “We can’t claim the mantle of the cleanest, greenest big city in America if we continue to degradate the environment in places like the Owens Valley.”

Not all disputes are settled.

The Owens Valley Committee and the Sierra Club, while largely pleased so far, said they would like to see Los Angeles more closely monitor the wildlife and habitat making a comeback. Better management of the burgeoning ecosystem, they say, will ensure its success.

“We will have concerns if certain species that should be here are not returning,” said Mike Prather, a birder and a committee member.

Brian Tillemans, who manages the project for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, said it was working on a plan. But the department generally prefers a “build a habitat and they will come” approach, Mr. Tillemans said, which costs less and allows nature to take the lead.

“The best we can do is optimize the habitat, and nature will take its course,” Mr. Tillemans said. Within three years, he said, trees will line the banks, drawing more wildlife and naturally controlling weeds and underbrush.

One species locals hope to see more of is humans.

Some businesses have noticed a slight increase in people coming to see or play on the river, and the Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce, one of the larger business development groups here, plans to revise its tourist guide to play up the restoration.

“People are starting to come at odd times of the year, like now, to visit, but what we look forward to is it making a great deal of difference in the long term,” said Kathleen New, the chamber president and a lifelong resident.

“Right now, it’s a lot of local people going out and getting wet and acting foolish,” Ms. New said. “It’s marvelous.”

Mr. Franson, the kayaker, prepared to launch his inflated boat. Some forays have been long, he said, and others cut short by the tule, but they were all a pleasure.

“I may just get around the corner and I’m stuck,” he said. “But, look, this was completely dry not long ago and now it is not.”

