The Salton Sea: A Toxic Bed of Lies

By Paul Maillot-Singer and Diya Courty-Stephens
Pomona and Claremont McKenna College

Introduction

- The Salton Sea is located on Southern California's San Andreas Fault, 236 ft below sea level.
- Until 1500, the waters of Lake Cahuilla covered the current Salton Sink (see Figure 1).
- The flood of 1905 widened the Colorado River and gave birth to the Salton Sea.
- The *Salton Sea Atlas,* published by the University of Redlands in 2002, manipulates the lake's variegated history to appeal to stakeholders and politicians.

Research Objective & Methods

- We aim to expose the Atlas' self-serving approach by recentering the narratives of those who have suffered most from the greed and neglect wrought upon the region.
- There were two parts to our research process:
    1. Reading the Atlas and flagging misleading claims.
    2. Exploring credible literature to fact-check the Atlas.

Findings

- The Atlas creates a "resurgence" narrative, claiming the Salton Sea has a bright economic future (see Table 1 and Figure 3). Why?
    1. To exonerate themselves.
    2. To attract businesses to the region.
    3. To dissuade policy makers from diverting water away from the Salton sink.
- Through text size and images, the authors hide facts that clash with their ulterior motives (see Figure 2).

Erasure & Environmental Racism

- The Atlas does not properly acknowledge the role of settlers in erasing Cahuilla culture (see Table 2).
- The authors present the reader with a culturally-biased and inaccurate history of Cahuilla lives.
- The Atlas makes no mention of neighboring Latino communities suffering most from poor air conditions.

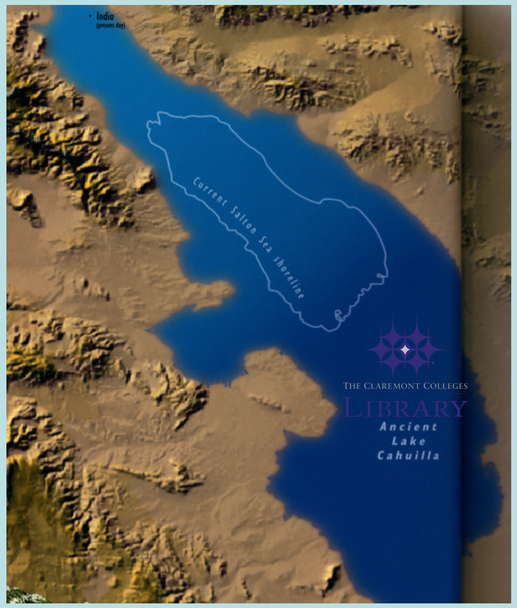

Figure 1. The Salton Sea sits on ancient Lake Cahuilla

Table 1. Resurgence Narrative

Atlas	Outside Research
"The Sea is full of life." (pg. 36) "The Salton Sea was not polluted." (preface)	"Dangerous levels of selenium, DDT, PCBs, toxaphene, and a smattering of other chemicals and heavy metals have contributed to massive fish and bird die offs since the 1990s" (Voyles)

Figure 3. In one day in August 1999, 7.6 million fish died.

Table 2. Burying Stories

Atlas	Outside Research
"Population estimates of the Cahuilla people before Spanish contact in 1774 were at 10,000 (…) Today, there are only about 1,000 Cahuilla in the Salton Basin." (21) "Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans each made contact the Cahuilla, exposing them to new people, new ways, and disease." (22)	"The Cahuilla (…) would not be able to support themselves if the theft of their land and water continued." (Bean, 91). "Miles of dusty shoreline are exposed to desert winds. This creates perilous respiratory health conditions for nearby communities, the majority of which are nonwhite, non-English speaking, and economically vulnerable." (Voyles)

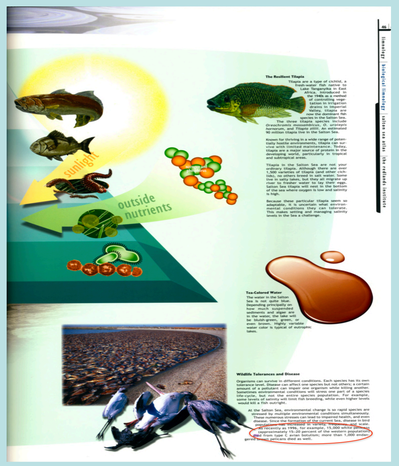

Figure 2. Burying facts with small fonts

Conclusion

- The Salton Sea is full of contradictions, from being a vital bird habitat to the site of massive die-offs, an unintentional creation to a popular tourist destination, and its future is imperilled.
- More perspectives are needed to reach appropriate solutions.
- Due to the Atlas' biases and misleading statements, we recommend that the Western Waters Archive diversify their collection of readings on the Salton Sea.

Recommended additions to the archive:

- Haven or Hazard: *The Ecology and Future of the Salton Sea* by Michael J. Cohen, Jason I. Morrison, and Edward P. Glenn
- *The Settler Sea: California's Salton Sea and the consequences of Colonialism* by Traci Brynne Voyles

Bibliography

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