

# Salton Sea: lost lakes and salt dreams

Exhibit dates: February 11—June 18, 2006 • Contact: Jennifer Reynolds, media specialist, (909) 307-2669 ext. 278

## Salton Sea: A Chronology

~7 million years ago: The Salton Trough forms the northern end of the Gulf of California.

~5 million years ago: The Colorado Delta begins to form in the Salton Trough, as sediment from the Colorado River is deposited.

~4 million years ago: The Colorado Delta cuts off inflow of sea water into the Salton Trough.

Pleistocene Epoch: Deposition of Colorado River sediments in the Salton Trough continues.

~6000 years ago: Oldest recorded high stand of ancient Lake Cahuilla.

- 700 AD Lake Cahuilla forms in the Salton Sink when the Colorado River swings northward through two overflow channels after its normal outlet to the Gulf of California is silted up. The resultant lake dries up and refills in cycles over the following centuries.
- ca. 1500 The lake is filled to 26 times its present-day volume by water from the Colorado River. The shoreline marks from this lake are still visible on the hills surrounding the valley.
- 1540 The delta area is first explored by the Spanish, as Melchior Diaz journeys up what is today called the Colorado River.
- 1604 Don Juan de Onate, the Spanish Governor of New Mexico, explores and names the Colorado River.
- 1774 Don Juan Bautista de Anza leads the first large European party through what is now the Imperial Valley. First contact is made with the Cahuilla people.
- ca. 1825 Trappers including Jedediah Smith, Kit Carson, and William Wolfskill make trips to the lower Colorado River and the Salton Sink.
- 1840 Flooding is reported in the Salton Sink; the New River possibly formed.
- 1853 The Imperial Valley is identified as a potential “garden spot” — if it can be irrigated.
- 1891 Although occasional flooding is reported from the 1840s, the 1891 flood formed a 100,000-acre lake. The lake later evaporates.
- 1901 The Imperial Valley is irrigated with water from the Colorado River, delivered by canal.
- 1904 The canal is blocked by silt, halting water deliver to the valley.
- 1905 A temporary diversion of the Colorado River is constructed to replace water from the blocked canal. It is breached by flood waters; the river changes course, and water flows into the Salton Sink. The Salton Sea is born.

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Chronology information extracted in part from [www.saltosea.ca.gov/facts](http://www.saltosea.ca.gov/facts)

## San Bernardino County Museum

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- 1906 Large concentrations of waterfowl, including pelicans and other birds, are reported from the Salton Sea area. Breeding colonies of cormorants, white pelicans and other birds are identified in 1908.
- 1909 Thinking the Salton Sea would have evaporated by 1920, the U.S. government reserves 10,000 acres of land under the sea for the benefit of the Torres Martinez Band.
- 1911 The Imperial Irrigation District is formed, and a new irrigation canal is promoted.
- ca. 1917 Seining of mullet becomes a profitable industry at the Salton Sea during World War I.
- ca. 1920 Mullet Island and the nearby mud pots become popular tourist attractions at the south end of the Salton Sea.
- 1928 Congress authorizes construction of Boulder (now Hoover) Dam, which will control the Colorado River and eliminate flooding.
- 1930 The Salton Sea Wildlife Refuge is established.
- 1941-45 Commercial fishermen supply mullet from the Salton Sea to coastal fish markets when the threat of German submarines makes ocean fishing hazardous.
- 1950 Orange mouth corvina becomes the first salt water game fish to be successfully established in the Salton Sea. Short fin corvina and gulf croaker and also successfully transplanted.
- 1951 Sixty-five sargo are introduced into the Salton Sea. They quickly multiply to become the most abundant fish caught in the sea until their numbers begin to decline, perhaps due to salinity.
- 1955 Salton Sea State Park is dedicated, at the time the 2nd largest state park in California.
- 1958 M. Penn Phillips maps out a community on the west shore of the Salton Sea called Salton City.
- 1960 North Shore Beach and Yacht Club Estates open on the north side of the sea.
- 1976 Tropical Storm Kathleen floods farmland and increases the level of the Salton Sea. Above-average rainfall for the next seven years, along with increased agricultural runoff and flows from Mexico, flood the shoreline resorts. By 1979 the Salton Sea's surface elevation is -228 feet (below sea level).
- 1986 Adults are advised to limit their intake of fish from the Salton Sea due to selenium threats.
- 1992 Tens of thousands of eared grebes die at the Salton Sea. Thousands more die in 1994.
- 1996 Type C avian botulism causes large-scale mortalities of white and brown pelicans. It is estimated that 15 to 20 percent of the western population of white pelicans and more than 1,000 endangered brown pelicans die—the largest reported die-off of an endangered species.
- 1997 Congressman Sonny Bono forms the Congressional Salton Sea Task Force. His widow, Mary Bono, is elected to congress in 1998 and continues these efforts.
- 1998 Congress passes the Salton Sea Reclamation Act. In August, 7.6 million tilapia and croakers die from oxygen being depleted due to algae in the Salton Sea. Nevertheless, studies show that the Salton Sea may have the most productive fishery in the world.
- 2000 Testing begins to determine the best way to reduce salinity in the Salton Sea. A wildlife disease program gets underway for early detection and response to disease outbreaks.

