Restoration of the Salton Sea
A stakeholder engagement model for sustainable development

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From Natural Oasis to Toxic Lake

The Salton Sea is a shallow highly saline water body that lies within the Salton Trough and stretches across Riverside and Imperial counties in southern California (Figure 1). Geological records suggest that for thousands of years seasonal flooding from the Colorado River produced multiple natural endorheic lakes in the area. Endorheic lakes have no outflows and because they lose water through evaporation, tend to be highly saline. In the late 1880s, canals were created to turn the area into farmland. Due to a breach in the Alamo Canal in 1905, spring flood waters from the Colorado River flowed into the basin for 18 months, creating the Salton Sea. By the 1940s and 50s, the Salton Sea was sustained by runoff from agricultural fields in the Imperial Coachella Valleys (CRS, 2021).

Estimates indicate that at its tourism peak, the Salton Sea attracted 1.5 million visitors annually, which was more than visited Yosemite park, at the time (Taylor, 2018). Large scale real estate developments emerged to accommodate tourists and those interested in living near the sea. Celebrities attracted to the area

Stakeholder Engagement for a Sustainable Salton Sea

Multiple plans have been proposed by federal, state, local and private sector organizations to restore the Salton Sea. These proposals share the common objectives of stabilizing water levels, controlling salinity, and restoring habitat. Scientific and technical expertise and strategies are critical to restoration efforts. However, for truly sustainable strategies to be identified for the restoration of Salton Sea, decision-making processes must engage stakeholders that represent all facets of sustainability: economic, environmental, and social justice.

Salton Sea stakeholder engagement models have emerged to address the multiple facets of sustainability. For example, AGRESS Inc., integrates scientific and technical expertise to implement a sea importation plan to restore the Salton Sea while simultaneously integrating the perspectives of those representing economic development, public health, and social justice. The State of California Salton Sea 10-Year Management Plan is similarly engaging a breadth of stakeholders representing interests in air quality, environment, environmental justice, public health, and water supply and management (Figure 3). These efforts not only focus on integrating the interests and perspectives of multiple stakeholders to address the complex and interrelated environmental, economic, and social issues related to restoration of the Salton Sea, but will contribute to inclusive implementation of restoration efforts.

Projected costs of inaction

| Impact on local health | $37 billion |
| Impact on land value | $7 billion |
| Impact on biodiversity | $21 billion |
| Up to $70 Billion |

“UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”

References


Washington DC. https://www.epa.gov/saltonsea


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