

Photo by DAVE GATLEY / Los Angeles Times

"It drives me crazy to see it so empty," state parks official Steve Horvitz says of the Salton Sea recreation area.

CALIFORNIA ALBUM

Lake Woebegone's Welcome Sign

■ A state park at the Salton Sea is largely unused, a casualty of pollution fears. But officials say the water is safe and urge fishers, campers, swimmers and everyone else to return.

By TONY PERRY
TIMES STAFF WRITER



SALTON SEA STATE RECREATION AREA, Calif.—Steve Horvitz walks along the beach while water laps gently at the shore.

The water is warm. It is good swimming water, great skiing water and super-great fishing water.

The water is shallow enough that children can wade out 50 yards and barely be chest high. The salt content provides a natural buoyancy for neophyte swimmers.

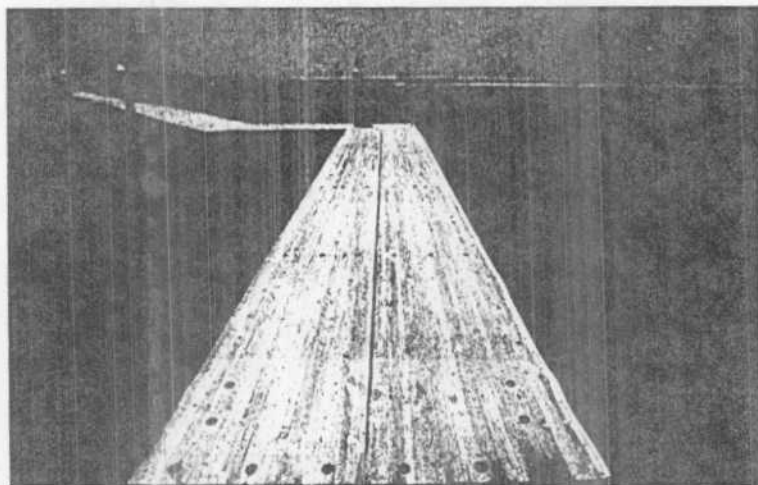
Boat ramps are close so fishers can launch quickly and speed off to the deeper water where the orangemouth corvina, sargo, tilapia and Gulf croaker await. Novice anglers can experience the thrill of catching their limit before lunchtime.

On shore are shaded picnic tables, barbecue pits and clean, graffiti-free bathrooms with showers. Parking is close and roomy enough for recreational vehicles. Palm trees add to the ambience.

In the far background to the west loom the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountains, as pretty a pair of mountains as any in Southern California. In the summer, the mountains are brown and shimmering; in the winter, they are adorned by a mantle of snow.

Except for journalists tagging along and three snowy egrets cooling their feet, Horvitz is alone at midday. Utterly alone. There is not a single swimmer, boater, fisher, camper, picnicker or sunbather to be seen on the land or the water. All 440 camping sites are empty.

Welcome to the loneliest park in California. Horvitz, an affable and low-key veteran of 20 years with the state park system, is the



Horvitz on deserted dock. Use of the park is down by two-thirds since early 1980s.

superintendent and he is not happy.

"It drives me crazy to see it so empty," Horvitz said.

It has not always been this way. As late as the early 1980s, the Salton Sea State Recreation Area, which straddles Riverside and Imperial counties, was one of the busiest parks in the state.

In 1981-82, 394,000 people came to play on beaches called Mecca, Corvina, Salt Creek and Bombay. Then the big decline started, and it has been all downhill for Salton Sea State Recreation Area.

For the fiscal year that ended last week, the tally was more like 130,000, and that was 20,000 above the nadir of the previous year.

The precipitous drop in use of the recreation area, a strip 15 miles long and several hundred yards wide on the Salton Sea's north shore, can be attributed to the ongoing environmental problems of the sea.

Created by catastrophe when the Colorado River broke free in 1905, the Salton Sea is the largest (35 miles long, 15 miles wide) body of water in California. Horvitz insists it is also one of the most misunderstood.

It is impossible to ignore the chronic problems of the Salton Sea: rising salinity, fluctuating water levels, mysterious bird die-offs, the lack of drainage, and the effects of the fetid New River flowing northward from Mexico.

However, it is possible to overstate the sea's problems.

For example, the two main unattractive attributes of the Salton Sea—its tea-like color and the occasional aroma—are natural phenomena. They are not caused by pollution and not considered harmful.

The sea is brownish because of a healthy crop of algae and plankton. The sea smells because algae and plankton, when deprived of oxygen, can emit a nontoxic variety of hydrogen sulfide gas, in the same manner as ocean seaweed.

Even Horvitz concedes that the average person may think the sea is polluted based on its smell and look. But, scientifically, the sea is not polluted, and the park system classifies it as "class-one recreational water."

The beaches of southern San Diego County
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PARK: Salton Sea Hangs Welcome Sign

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and San Diego's famed Mission Bay Aquatic Park are occasionally closed to swimmers because of raw sewage breaks. Yet tourists keep coming in ever greater numbers.

Salton Sea, subject to the same health laws, stays open for swimmers 365 days a year but cannot shake its reputation. It is a point that rankles Salton Sea loyalists such as Norm Niver, who writes for the monthly Salton Seafarer newspaper.

He often devotes his column to correcting errors about the Salton Sea that he spots in out-of-town newspapers. He wrote recently about a story he had seen in a San Diego paper.

"I read that article," Niver wrote, "and it was just as stupid as a lot of the other ones that I receive from all over."

Horvitz has a more tactful approach to errant journalists, but his message is basically the same: Don't confuse the Salton Sea's image with its environmental problems.

"We have to turn around the impression people have of the sea," Horvitz said. "I take it as a personal challenge."

Horvitz has been at Salton Sea for three years. His territory also includes the Indio Hills Palm recreation area and the Picacho recreation area on the Colorado River.

True, it is three-digit hot during the summer at Salton Sea, but

other hot weather recreation spots in California are doing fine. And it was just as hot in the days when Salton Sea State Recreation Area had 1,500 camping spots and could have used more.

Miki Jensen has been at Salton Sea for the parks agency for 16 years in several jobs. She remembers the boom years, when lines of cars streamed down California 111 from Riverside, Los Angeles, San Diego and Orange counties.

"Back then, the place was so loaded with people you could hardly stand it," she said wistfully. "It was great. To see it now, just sitting here, really upsets me."

The biggest drop in usage came the year state health inspectors posted signs warning that pregnant women and young children should beware of eating too much fish from the Salton Sea.

That was followed by a story on CBS' "60 Minutes" that branded the New River the most polluted river in America. Scientists say most of the river's nasty brew has been neutralized by the natural forces of flow and turbulence by the time it reaches the Salton Sea, but that is a hard sell.

The news stories of late have dealt with the die-off of a small bird called the eared grebe. As part of the Pacific Flyway, the Salton Sea and its marshes host millions of birds from an estimated 350 species on their migratory paths.

From mid-February to mid-April an estimated 20,000 grebes died in the southern portion of the sea. Two years earlier, a similar die-off claimed 250,000 grebes.

In both cases, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists did extensive necropsies but could not pinpoint a cause. One theory holds that it was not the Salton Sea that killed the grebes but something they picked up along their migratory path, possibly in the Sea of Cortez.

If the Salton Sea is in need of good news, possibly it will come today in Brawley when the year-old Salton Sea Authority hears a set of recommendations from consultant Pete Dangermond, former director of the state park system.

Dangermond says he has found a way to reduce salinity by creating salt brine ponds at one corner of the sea to produce energy. Salinity, which can kill fish and birds, comes from agricultural runoff and natural leeching from the salt sink at the bottom of the sea. Salton Sea is 15% saltier than the ocean.

Dangermond also thinks it is possible to stabilize the level of the sea. In the past, rising levels have wiped out beachfront businesses, and consumed several hundred camping spots.

It is time, Dangermond said, to think of the Salton Sea as a prospect, not a suspect. "It's an unused resource that deserves a better rap," he said.

