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Salton Sea's star has fallen

Once a playground for celebrities, more recently for anglers and birders, the Salton Sea recreation area is likely to become a victim of California's budget crisis.

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SALTON SEA STATE RECREATION AREA — During the heyday of the Salton Sea, when the Hollywood crowd and others came to play in large numbers, this strip of beaches, campsites and fishing spots along the sea's northern shore was one of California's most popular parks.

But that was years ago.

The popularity of the recreation area has plummeted in recent decades, and now the area is on a list of parks to be closed because of the state's financial woes. Unlike other parks slated for closure, this one may never come back, park officials said.

There was a time when droves of families camped here and a bumper crop of fishermen angled for tilapia and corvina. Boaters and water-ski enthusiasts sped along the tranquil waters. The sea's high salinity provided a reassuring buoyancy for neophyte swimmers.

The Chocolate Mountains to the east and the Santa Rosa and Coyote mountains to the west made it visually idyllic. And, of course, everybody could enjoy the warm sunshine in wintertime.

Frances Fiamengo, 68, remembers those halcyon days, when the Beach Boys performed at a now-defunct country club, the Marx brothers visited, and it was said Frank Sinatra and his Rat Pack came to the sea to party.

"You'd be in the desert and suddenly see a Rolls-Royce," she said.

But the decades have not been kind to the Salton Sea, hurt by headlines about the dangers of eating the fish, the repulsive smell of the water and the toxic stew of the New River, which empties into the sea. The sea's smell is generally attributed to the blooming and decomposition of algae, plus the profusion of plankton.

The carcasses of failed tourist-oriented businesses line the sea, victims of a decline in visits that some calculate at 80% from its peak of 400,000 people in 1981-82.

The fate of the Salton Sea State Recreation Area differs from that of other state parks because the federal government owns the land.

If it closes by July 1, as planned, the federal landlords will probably insist that the picnic benches be removed and other structures torn down, including the visitor center and museum, for liability reasons and to prevent the area from becoming a squatters' camp. Federal rules call for an area to be returned to its "natural state" once a lease is ended.

Riverside County, in turn, will insist that the septic tanks be filled with sand for environmental reasons, to prevent leaching into the sea.

"It's sad," said Howard Simmons, 73, a retired grocery manager from Compton, as he baited his hook with a fat worm in hopes of enticing a tilapia. "The people deserve better."

The tilapia were introduced into the Salton Sea and remain plentiful despite the rising salinity that has all but destroyed the corvina population.

The "accidental sea," 35 miles long, 15 miles wide and 227 feet below sea level, was created in 1905 when the Colorado River jumped its banks during a rainy season and gushed northward for months, filling an ancient salt sink.

The imminent closure of the recreation area was the talk of the fishermen on a recent morning, conversation that was more mournful than angry.

William Jefferson, 75, a retired aerospace worker from Moreno Valley, took a philosophic approach as he and his dog, a dachshund-Chihuahua mix named KeeKee, sat beneath a large beach umbrella and waited for the fish to bite.

"I hate to see it happen," he said of the closure. "But if there's no money, I guess it has to happen."

Edsel Horowitz, 39, a nurse from Duarte, has been coming to the Salton Sea since his father taught him to fish here. "It's like the good

things in California are disappearing so fast," he said.

A fundraising effort is underway in hopes of collecting \$250,000 needed to keep at least the main part of the recreation area and Mecca Beach open for a year, staffed with a mix of state employees and volunteers. There is also talk of a partnership between the state and federal government, but that could take congressional action.

"All options are being explored, but at this moment I would say the chances are bleak," said Ken Johnson, a spokesman for Rep. Mary Bono Mack (R-Palm Springs).

Bill Meister, 63, a retired Coachella Valley teacher, refuses to give up. As president of the Sea and Desert Interpretive Assn., he's leading the fundraising effort, taking his case to service groups, the media and local public agencies, among them the Imperial Irrigation District.

"We're a window to the Salton Sea," Meister said. "We're the one source in the area that provides education."

The association sponsors kayak tours, bird walks, ranger programs and other activities. School groups and tourists still come to the museum to learn about desert wildlife and the sea's role as a stopover and nesting spot for tens of thousands of migratory and wintering shoreline birds making their annual trek to warmer climes.

"It's a birders' paradise," Meister said.

As he sees it, the Salton Sea gets a bum rap. He's quick to dispel what he sees as pernicious misinformation about the sea.

The warning against eating its fish has long since been lifted, he notes. The fish die-offs here are from lack of oxygen, not from toxic poisoning, and are a natural phenomenon. And the sea, despite its rusty appearance from an abundance of algae, does not fit the scientific definition of polluted.

The recreation area is a 15-mile strip wedged between Highway 111 and the sea's edge. Parking is plentiful and the campsites are an easy walk to the water.

The headquarters area, with its boat ramp, fishing sites and camping hookups, has remained open year-round. So has nearby Mecca Beach. But Corvina and Salt Creek beaches have been closed during the summer in recent years for financial reasons. Bombay Beach has been closed for several years.

As recreation sites closer to the population centers of Southern California have increased in popularity, the Salton Sea State Recreation Area has been reduced to a kind of niche destination for people who like their recreation away from crowds.

"It's one of the best-kept secrets of the state parks," said Gail Sevrens, acting district superintendent for the parks system's Colorado Desert District.

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