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CALIFORNIA DESERT

Part of Salton Sea's desolate shore made into a lush oasis

One woman created a wetlands Eden with more than 135 bird species. Officials hope it's a microcosm of what will happen when state's restoration plan gets off the drawing board.

By David Kelly
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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THERMAL, CALIFORNIA -- A few careless words, the snap of a branch and a scene of bucolic splendor became utter chaos. Clouds of great blue herons exploded from trees and swaying cattails. Egrets erupted from watery redoubts. Ducks quacked furiously overhead.

Debi Livesay observed the frenzy from a windy bank.

"Wait a moment; they'll settle down," she said. "It's hard to sneak up on them."

Finally, the birds swung around in a tight circle and made splash landings in this patchwork of wetlands stretching out to the Salton [Sea](#).

Livesay, 59, seemed pleased by the performance, as if she'd choreographed the whole thing.

And in a way she had -- or at least helped set the stage. For decades this 85-acre stretch of the Torres Martinez Indian [Reservation](#) lay beneath the Salton Sea. As the lake receded, it left behind a salt-encrusted wasteland worthy of Death Valley. Dead trees jutted like bleached skeletons from petrified mud. Even hardy creosote struggled to survive.

Now, thanks to Livesay's seven-year effort to bring back water, it's a lush Eden of wetlands, plants, fish and more than 135 species of birds.

And state officials -- who have their own \$8.9-billion, 75-year plan to rescue the dying sea and restore bird habitats -- are eagerly watching what happens.

The Salton Sea, California's biggest lake, is saltier than the ocean and getting saltier all the time. Water agreements reached in 2003 mean Imperial Valley farmers will stop sending their runoff into the sea, causing it to shrink further and grow ever more saline. Scientists predict that, without drastic action, by 2015 the last of the sport fish will have died off. The 400 species of birds that nest there, including endangered species such as the [Reservation](#) California least tern and Yuma clapper [rail](#), will leave soon after.

But while the state's plan is still on the drawing board, Livesay's is up and running.

"This is the first microcosm of what all of the rest of the plans call for around the sea," said Dan Parks, coordinator for the Salton Sea [Authority](#). "Scientists have an idea of what they need, but there is a lot of stuff they can't get out of a textbook so you need to get in there and experiment."

Livesay is no scientist. She's a former journalist with a gift for big ideas, a talent for securing grants and total self

confidence.

As the Salton Sea dwindles, pesticide-laced sediments have blown over the reservation, exposing thousands of tribal members and other nearby residents to toxic chemicals. In 2001, Livesay, the tribe's head of water resources, was charged with finding a solution.

"We can't afford to have the Salton Sea dry out or people couldn't live here anymore," she said. "It would be 200 times bigger than Owens Lake. All you need is an inch of water to keep the dust settled. So I said, 'Let's make a wetland.'"

Working mostly on her own out of a converted trailer, Livesay won \$2.3 million from state and federal agencies and began excavating seven ponds ranging from a few inches to 6 feet deep, and up to 20 acres wide.

Contractors built artificial islands and barriers between pools. Using a complex system of pipes and valves, they diverted water from the Whitewater River, filling and emptying the ponds each day for two years to leach out salt.

Then, in 2005, the valves opened wide and water gushed into the ponds for good. Livesay released young tilapia, mosquito fish and mollies to control insects. She planted native palms.

Nature did the rest.

Willows and cottonwoods began to spring up. Herons nested on the islands. A bald eagle took up residence alongside numerous ospreys. Biologists say they wouldn't be surprised to find a California condor soon. They spotted one in nearby Anza-Borrego Desert State [Park](#) last year.

Livesay expects to open her creation to the public in November under the name "California's Everglades." And she hopes to create 10,000 more acres of wetlands across vast swaths of desiccated lake bed.

Tribal Chairman Ray Torres recently described the restored wetlands as a "magnificent sight." The tribe is building a cultural center and an amphitheater near the project's entrance on South Lincoln Avenue.

"The state's Salton Sea restoration plan is very ambitious, but there is degradation going on right now," said Monica Swartz, a biologist with the Coachella Valley Water [District](#) who advises Livesay. "The Torres Martinez are the only group taking responsibility for it. Everyone else is talking about it, but they are the only ones doing anything about it."

She called Livesay a "force of nature," adding, "Debi is a remarkable person who doesn't understand what impossible is. She saw what the tribe needed and she made it happen."

Livesay, who is not Native American, worked at the Whittier Daily News and the North County Times before quitting journalism because she said it was too difficult to be married, be a reporter and raise four children at the same time.

She picked up part-time jobs, working as a bartender, running construction crews and building houses.

"I can do anything I want to," she said matter-of-factly. "I can teach myself anything."

As her children got older Livesay began looking for a full-time career, something that satisfied her interest in science and the environment.

She took courses on water management, worked with wildlife biologists and landed a job with the Torres Martinez tribe in Thermal.

"This is where I am supposed to be," she said.

She often spends seven days a week at the remote wetlands site, and sometimes gets in dangerous standoffs with hunters.

Friendly but tough, Livesay fiercely guards the place.

She calls it "my baby" or "this puppy" and describes it as an egg she has "hatched."

At times she lapses into jargon about particulate matter and water chemistry that can baffle the uninitiated. Yet her overall message never changes.

"This is the future of the Salton Sea," she said, looking over the shimmering water. "Right here." Still, potential problems abound.

For one thing, selenium, endemic in Salton Sea sediment, could find its way into the ponds. The mineral is thought to cause genetic mutations in birds.

If the wetlands water gets too salty the fish could die off. And hunters are a constant threat, illegally shooting anything that flies, including, on one occasion, a black swan.

Hunting is forbidden on the reservation and Livesay routinely confronts violators. She recently found six hunting platforms on the edge of the wetlands. Thousands of pelicans, ibises, herons, ducks and grebes floated within easy range of the platforms, which were camouflaged in palm fronds.

"One day I came out here and the whole berm was covered in dead coots. The hunters just wanted to kill them and then left them there," Livesay said, clearly angry. "These guys show up in their cammies, with their dogs and trucks, and think they can't be arrested on tribal land -- but now they are learning otherwise. I got three arrested."

Richard Gamez, who works at the site, has found 15 birds at a time killed by hunters. The lock on the gate has been broken four times.

"When I stop them, they tell me they have hunted here for years," he said. "There are signs up everywhere that say 'No Hunting.' They tell me the game warden said they could hunt here."

Harry Morse, a spokesman for the state Department of Fish and Game, said enforcing hunting regulations on tribal land is a "jurisdictional nightmare."

"We can't go on the land and make an arrest because we have no authority," he said. "But when they step off the reservation, we can do something."

So far, Livesay said, they haven't done much. She depends on local sheriff's deputies to go after violators.

"I want to open this place up to ecotourism, and you can't do that with firearms going off everywhere," she said.

The creation of the wetlands is significant for the Torres Martinez, a poor tribe whose 25,000-acre reservation includes 10,000 under the Salton Sea.

The reservation is one of the most polluted in the West, largely because of illegal dumping. But recent efforts by the tribe and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have made a difference.

Twenty of the 27 illegal dumps have been cleaned up, and fires at dump sites have been reduced 75% in the last year, said Clancy Tenley, head of tribal programs for the EPA.

"We have developed a strong partnership with the tribe on environmental issues," he said. "Now they have the first wetlands reclamation program on the Salton Sea."

The project stuns some tribal members.

"The first day I worked out here I was amazed," said Joe Tortes, who helps regulate pond levels. "It really took me by surprise. I had no idea this place was here."

Last week, Livesay boarded her "mule," an all-terrain vehicle, and motored down a dirt path along the water. It was cold and blustery. Snow squalls enveloped the San Jacinto Mountains behind her. As she entered an overgrown glade by the gurgling Whitewater River, dozens of black ibises shot up from the tall grass. Ospreys wheeled overhead.

She cut the engine.

"Wait until you go around the corner," she said. "You have never seen anything like it."

A few feet away, birds were thick as mosquitoes. They floated in dark, choppy water and buzzed about like feathery missiles.

"You have birds here that shouldn't be here, birds from Canada all the way down to Central America," she said. "People come from all over the world to see this sight. There is no other place like it. And that's why we have to preserve it."

david.kelly@latimes.com

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