

THE FORTNIGHTLY CLUB OF REDLANDS, CALIFORNIA

Meeting No. 1948



Can the Eastern Sierra be Saved?

Jim Hendon

A.K. Smiley Public Library, Redlands, California

January 23, 2020

Summary

California's Eastern Sierra region is a scenic and recreational wonderland and a haven for wildlife -- and its small towns are blessed with historic charm. But can it be saved from the rampant land development which has ruined so much of overpopulated California? Most of the spectacular, southeastern Sierra Nevada, and the areas bordering the Owens Valley, are protected as national parks, federal wilderness and national forest. But some 500 square miles of private land is controlled by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, or DWP, which acquired most of the Owens Valley and its water rights in the early 1900s. DWP says it has no plans to develop the valley, which it manages and protects first and foremost as a watershed. And thanks to past court rulings and regulations, DWP is investing millions to restore areas damaged by its past water extraction practices. But with DWP committed to maximizing water exports to its Los Angeles customers -- and with both drought and climate change complicating the situation -- questions persist about its long-term plans for sharing water in the valley and selling some of its lands and other properties. Some concerned residents want to turn the Owens Valley into a national park or protect the DWP lands with a vast, conservation easement. In the meantime, environmentalists, citizens and government at all levels are working to shape a positive future, embracing their reliance on a tourist economy while respecting and preserving the wide-open Eastern Sierra they love.

Author Background

Redlands native Jim Hendon is a former newspaper reporter and editor who covered energy, business, technology and other topics during a 10-year career, including four years at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver. He later worked 15 years in corporate communications for Chevron Corporation and served as the company's head speechwriter. From 2004 to 2014, he worked as an independent business writer and speechwriter, primarily for Chevron. An amateur photographer, he served four years as vice president, Programs, for the Redlands Camera Club. Son of former Fortnightly member Larry Hendon, he holds a degree in journalism from San Diego State University (1974).

SLIDE: TITLE

Can the Eastern Sierra be saved?

Well, first you might ask:

Saved from what?

For me, that's easy.

Saved from this:

SLIDE: SUBURBAN SPRAWL

OK, but then you might ask:

Saved for who?

That's easy too: Saved for me.

SLIDE: JIM AT KEARSARGE

* * *

Seven years ago, I bought a guidebook titled Exploring Eastern Sierra Canyons.

I started visiting these fantastic places with my camera.

Along the way, I got to know the area's towns better.

SLIDE: LEE VINING SIGN

And now, I want this place to stay just like it is . . . for myself.

* * *

I take the turnoff from I-15 at Victorville and push north through forgotten mining towns, open desert and prehistoric cinder cones.

SLIDE: LONE PINE PEAK

In just three and a half hours, I catch sight of Lone Pine Peak and – lonesome, but happy – I enter the Owens Valley, a place apart with a strong sense of itself.

Every clear afternoon here, the massive silhouette of the Sierra crest slowly advances like a tide across the landscape.

SLIDE: SHADOWS

It's like watching time itself.

And the valley lapses into evening well before the rest of California.

I first saw the Eastern Sierra when a friend took me camping at a place called Rock Creek Canyon . . . just down the road from the exquisite Little Lakes Valley.

SLIDE: LITTLE LAKES

It was a lifetime gift.

Lounging around the campfire, Dick would raise his plastic tumbler of chipped ice, bourbon and 7-Up and proclaim: “We’re up-town now!”

And I’d lean back in my lawn chair and rhetorically ask: “I wonder what the poor people are doing today?”

Sometimes we’d stop into the Rock Creek Resort for a slice of pie.

I’ll never forget the fishing advice I got there one morning from an old timer with a steel-grey crew cut.

I asked him, “Does it matter what kind of dry fly I use in Rock Creek?”

His response: “Not to me.”

Last October, I introduced my nephew James to the Eastern Sierra.

SLIDE: JAMES

And I’m delighted to report: He can’t wait to go back.

* * *

In almost every way, it’s the polar opposite of auto-infested Southern California.

SLIDE: CARS IN HOLE

May they rust in peace.

No Disneyland. No Universal Studios. No freeways.

Authentic, unique, unpretentious and lacking in urban superficiality.

SLIDE: LP MOVIE MUSEUM

Lone Pine has the Museum of Western Film History and vintage neon signs.

Slide: FROSTY CHALET, RAY’S

For a burger, stop by the family owned Frosty Chalet.

Staying overnight? I recommend Ray’s Den in Independence.

Up the road in Bishop, there are chain motels, but I prefer the aging El Rancho.

SLIDE: EL RANCHO

Because in the morning, I can walk to the Great Basin Bakery and get my java with the natives.

SLIDE: MINARET AND DEVILS

In Mammoth, don’t miss the Devil’s Postpile and the sunset at Minaret summit.

SLIDE: OBSIDIAN

Further north, be sure to spend some time at the mountain of tortured volcanic glass known as Obsidian Dome.

In June Lake, if you need fishing gear in summer . . . or ski equipment in winter . . . Ernie's has you covered.

And don't miss the remote Virginia Lakes Resort north of Lee Vining.

SLIDE: VIRGINIA LAKES RESORT

The sign on their front door says it all:

"SORRY, NO ATM, CREDIT CARDS OR INTERNET"

* * *

Can the Eastern Sierra be saved?

I believe so.

There are too many protections in place and too many people who care about this place to let it be ruined.

And I'll come back to all that.

But first let's draw some boundaries.

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When we say "Eastern Sierra," we don't mean the entire 400 mile Sierra Nevada range.

No – we mean the southeastern Sierra.

SLIDE: WHITNEY

Here, Mount Whitney and 13 other peaks over 14,000 feet tall preside over the narrow Owens Valley and its meandering spirit, the Owens River.

We access this area by Highway 395, which runs 122 miles from Lone Pine in the south, up to tiny Lee Vining just outside Yosemite.

SLIDE: E SIERRA MAP

Most of the Eastern Sierra lies in 10,000 square-mile Inyo County.

The rest is in Mono County, a third that size, but still big.

Just 35,000 people call this place home.

More people live in Yucaipa than live in these two Eastern Sierra counties.

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History here is well understood.

First miners, then settlers, took the area from the Indians in the 19th Century.

Then Los Angeles took it from everybody in the 20th.

The often romanticized mining era was actually a terribly destructive time, particularly for the forests.

SLIDE: CERRO GORDO

But because the boomtowns needed food as well as wood, the settlers were able to create – and enjoy -- an agricultural economy.

Today, Bishop's annual Mule Days commemorate those times when everything depended on four-legged engines.

SLIDE: MCGEE and MULE ART

This robust heritage lives on as well in the Eastern Sierra's healthy community of back-country outfitters, like this one at the McGee Creek Canyon trail head.

The coming of the mines, farms and ranches very nearly wiped out the Indians.

It's a shameful story we won't try to cover here.

Today, the Owens Valley Paiute-Shoshone people occupy four reservations next to the towns along 395.

SLIDE: CASINO

They operate this tiny casino at Fort Independence, and the larger Paiute Palace casino in Bishop.

But gambling is one of the few elements of the region's economy that doesn't depend on the Eastern Sierra's rugged good looks and outdoorsy personality.

SLIDE: TOURISM

Today's economy is dominated by tourism: Sightseeing, hiking, fishing, backpacking, camping, bird watching, rock climbing, four wheeling and more.

The centerpiece of course has, been the development of Mammoth Mountain for skiing in winter, mountain biking in summer.

In the once-sleepy town of Mammoth Lakes, vacationing in a beautiful alpine setting or owning a second home are still driving limited growth.

So I sat down with Ted Carleton, publisher of a local weekly newspaper The Sheet, to get the big picture.

SLIDE: THE SHEET

He found my project interesting, but a bit pretentious.

Most people up there, he said, are too busy living their lives to wonder about “saving” the Eastern Sierra -- even if that’s a reasonable question.

Ted also reminded me that the mountains are vast, deep and seemingly limitless. Pure solitude, dangerous isolation and hungry trout, he said, are always here for those who are up to the challenge.

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SLIDE: BOB GARDNER

I was blessed also to talk with Mono County supervisor Bob Gardner, a former Redlands City Council and Fortnightly member now semi-retired in June Lake. Most everyone, he said, appreciates the value of hosting 4 million-plus tourists each year.

But the Eastern Sierra is being loved almost to death.

It can still be saved with regional coordination, investment and what Bob called “proper economic compromise.”

But coming up with strategies is a tricky business.

Skiers are the smallest visitor group, but spend the most money.

Fishermen are a large group, but require costly, annual trout-planting programs.

Birdwatchers require almost nothing and spend more than fishermen.

And a perennial shortage of housing for locals and seasonal workers has everyone concerned.

We had a good laugh over my predicament in taking on this paper.

But I was determined to persevere.

So I set out to gain a better understanding of the big dog in the neighborhood, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, or “DWP.”

* * *

SLIDE: MAP DWP LANDS

Many of us know that in the early 20th Century, DWP systematically bought up ranch lands, town properties and water rights up and down the Owens Valley.

Resistance by residents proved futile as DWP set out to capture every drop to fill the new Los Angeles Aqueduct.

By 1933, DWP owned 85 percent of the valley's residential and commercial property and 95 percent of the valley's farms and ranches.

Today, their Inyo and Mono Country holdings add up to about 310,000 acres.

Here we see DWP's land positions in yellow . . . in the Owens valley . . . up by Mono Lake . . . and near Mammoth.

Pretty much everything else is federally owned.

But DWP holds nearly all the private land in the Eastern Sierra – about 500 square miles of mostly open country.

* * *

Why isn't it covered with townhomes and fast food outlets?

Because Los Angeles views the Eastern Sierra first and foremost as a watershed.

SLIDE: PIE CHART

They want this self-renewing treasure – which at one time supplied up to 70 percent of L.A.'s water -- to provide up to 42 percent for the long term, according to Aqueduct Manager Clarence Martin, DWP's head man in Bishop.

To enhance supplies, DWP aims to conserve more, improve storage, recycle and capture more storm water.

But by 2039, they're still expecting to need about 675,000 acre feet per year, compared to about 550,000 now.

SLIDE: AQUEDUCT AND STREAM

So in Owens Valley, DWP has little incentive to develop -- or encourage any development – which could substantially reduce the amount of water they can export to their customers in L.A.

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DWP is the largest private employer in Inyo County, with more than 300 employees.

They pay some \$20 million in Inyo County property taxes,.

People value these solid jobs and tax dollars, but also resent the utility's iron grip on the valley.

So conflict is business as usual, but Martin told me the DWP is often closer to working things out with its opponents than it may appear.

After all, they're neighbors.

They bump into each other at the grocery.

Their kids go to the same schools.

Some people still see DWP as an outsider, but they've been here for more than a century.

SLIDE: DWP SIGN

And they invest continuously in the community, for example, recently donating \$20,000 to Bishop's South Main Street Beautification Project.

Everywhere you look, DWP's holdings connect with public and private lands.

So they collaborate constantly with all levels of government on everything from fighting fires to managing tourists, because 75 percent of DWP's lands are open for recreation.

Many historical accounts argue that the big utility "stole" the Owens Valley, destroying a paradise and fossilizing the regional towns.

But another truth is undeniable.

The water barons of Los Angeles saved Owens Valley from development.

If they hadn't, the Eastern Sierra would probably look like Reno.

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SLIDE: MOUNTAIN BARRIER

Of course, geology has helped a lot as well.

Happily, the Owens Valley is literally walled off from the rest of the state.

For a distance of some 150 miles -- from Sherman Pass in the south, to Tioga Pass on Route 120 into Yosemite -- no road crosses the awesome southeast Sierra.

SLIDE: STOPPING THE ROAD

In his 2014 book, *Stopping the Road*, author Jack Fisher tells the story of the last serious proposal to build a new trans-Sierra highway right through what is now a protected wilderness, east of Mammoth.

It was killed off once and for all in 1972 after a 50-year battle.

This happened partly because keeping the proposed road open in winter would have been nearly impossible.

But shrewd political wrangling and preservationist zeal mattered most.

The lesson: if the Eastern Sierra is to be saved, people have to save it.

* * *

Fortunately, the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service reign supreme over half of the entire Sierra Nevada.

SLIDE: WILDERNESS, PARKS MAP

As we see here, the southeastern Sierra is a patchwork quilt of preserved and protected lands.

The Golden Trout Wilderness connects with Sequoia National Park and the John Muir Wilderness.

The Muir embraces Kings Canyon National Park and connects with the Ansel Adams Wilderness, next to Yosemite National Park.

Further east, the White Mountains and Inyo Mountains together contain another 650 square miles of federal wilderness.

Most of what's in between is Inyo National Forest land, where development options are limited and rare.

For example, the expanding Mammoth Mountain ski area recently struck a deal to acquire 37 acres of national forest by turning over 1,200 acres of private land in another location to the Forest Service.

The idea was first proposed 10 years ago.

Other big chunks of the Eastern Sierra are controlled by the federal Bureau of Land Management, which allows a wider range of uses on the public lands, but we won't try to cover the BLM's story today.

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Now, it's important to note that the DWP and the federal government don't own everything.

SLIDE: HOT CREEK

For example, the pricey Hot Creek Ranch southeast of Mammoth preserves that stream's most beautiful stretch for dry fly, catch-and-release trout fishing.

Hidden away to the north and east, private ranchlands mostly off limits to the public have sequestered large areas along the Upper Owens River.

And the University of California operates a 150-acre preserve at Mammoth known as Valentine Camp.

SLIDE: ROCKING K

Just west of bishop, the Rocking K Ranch development offers a lush, private island of country living in the otherwise bone-dry foothills.

SLIDE: CROWLEY

Then there's the community of Crowley Lake just south of Mammoth, surrounded by DWP property and national forest.

The town grew 50 percent in the past decade and now has more than 900 residents, despite the chilly winters.

Far to the south, Lancaster' desert sprawl houses more than 160,000 people.

I have no doubt the Owens Valley would look the same if it had more private land.

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SLIDE: ESLT

Here's where an outfit called the Eastern Sierra Land Trust comes in.

These folks fear that rising pressures to subdivide historic farms and ranches could forever erase an Old West legacy of scenic and productive lands which also serve as vital wildlife habitat.

So they harness private and public funds, and wrangle zoning and tax laws to preserve private lands in the public interest.

In just 15 years, they've protected about 15,000 acres.

They're aiming to double that.

And with Bob Gardner as their president, I'm betting they'll get there.

One recent victory established a conservation easement on a ranch covering almost 2,400 acres.

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But again, private lands are only a sliver of the regional pie.

DWP, the Forest Service, BLM and National Park Service hold the rest.

As we've seen, they're not inclined toward development.

So a reasonable person might conclude that the Eastern Sierra has already been saved.

But if that's true, why are so many people still trying to save it?

* * *

Consider the nonprofit Friends of the Inyo, which has about 900 paying members, including me.

SLIDE: FRIENDS OF INYO

They combine advocacy and member benefits – such as guided hikes -- with hands-on field activities, like maintaining trails and repairing areas damaged by off-roaders.

The group envisions a landscape “unencumbered by inappropriate development.” A place for “quiet recreation.”

Their mission statement calls for “ensuring that the public lands of the Eastern Sierra exist in an intact, healthy natural state for people and wildlife.”

So they support respectful public access and embrace the tourist economy.

Case in point: They recently partnered with the Forest Service to deploy two new “climbing rangers” to help ensure that growing numbers of rock climbers respect the environment.

Their communications director, Kyle Hamada, didn't want me to label Friends of the Inyo as “preservationists,” which some here view as elitist.

But they certainly represent the green end of the political spectrum.

Recently they rallied to help block a new gold mining project on a remote site called Conglomerate Mesa.

Here, in a place almost nobody goes, the Friends of the Inyo are standing up for a friend almost nobody ever sees, the endangered Inyo Rock Daisy.

As Eastern Sierra wildflowers go, it's not very exciting.

But if you believe that living things are precious – even sacred -- you fight to make room for them wherever they live.

* * *

To that end -- and others -- Eastern Sierra environmentalists have achieved significant influence within a tangled system of overlapping laws and government agencies.

SLIDE: SCENIC

The Owens Valley Committee, Eastern Sierra Audubon and the Sierra Club, for example, were instrumental in the regulatory and legal wrangling which ultimately forced DWP to atone for its past environmental sins, which I'll discuss shortly.

The environmentalists team up with recreation advocacy groups like the Eastern Sierra Four Wheel Drive Club, Ducks Unlimited and California Trout.

They get some help as well from the Indians, who want to protect and restore their wild, historic homeland beyond reservation boundaries.

And the entire environmental community has been collaborating for years to build more protection and preservation into the recently completed Inyo National Forest master plan.

This is basically a blueprint for the public use and management of federally owned roads, trails, lakes, trees, plants, animals, you name it – on some 2 million acres.

Unfortunately, the Forest Service doesn't have enough resources to properly manage its territory.

* * *

SLIDE: INYO NAT FOREST MAP

This is not surprising, given the size of the Inyo.

Coverage has grown worse with funding cuts and the Eastern Sierra's growing popularity with visitors.

So when the Forest Service partners with local government, nonprofits and business, it's not just community relations.

It's a necessity.

SLIDE: ESIA

The Eastern Sierra Interpretive Association, for example, has been a partner since 1971.

And today they manage the large, modern visitor centers in Mammoth and Lone Pine, as well as 15 other visitor information sites in the Sierra.

SLIDE: ALABAMAS

Outside of Lone Pine, the Alabama Hills Stewardship Group since 2006 has been supporting the BLM with monitoring, planning and public outreach.

This is all the more important now, because the hills were recently designated a National Scenic Area and are attracting more visitors indifferent to rules and regulations.

More recently, there's a new initiative called the Eastern Sierra Sustainable Recreation Partnership.

Funded by a \$600,000 state grant, it's aimed at addressing everything from deteriorating campgrounds to inadequate policing.

They're now seeking ideas from towns, businesses – anyone who fits the definition of a “recreation stakeholder.”

The point here is that people understand the economic value of protecting their neighborhood and maintaining quality public access.

And even though it's the government's job, the locals are sharing the stewardship in a big way.

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Helping the Forest Service save the Eastern Sierra is almost a tradition.

But saving it from some newer challenges may not be as easy.

One of them renewable energy.

SLIDE: SOLAR

Along 395, north of Lone Pine, for example, DWP recently proposed building the Owens Valley Solar Ranch on 1,200 acres across from Manzanar.

Preservationists, neighbors and others objected, and the plan was shelved.

As Inyo County Supervisor Matt Kingsley put it, “Everybody wants green energy but nobody wants to see it.”

The prospect of new, large-scale solar projects can't and won't go away, however, because the state is requiring all utilities to phase out fossil fuels.

And because today, people are asking another question:

Can the Eastern Sierra be saved from climate change?

* * *

SLIDE: OWENS RIVER SCENIC

Historically, DWP has taken an average of 330,000 acre feet of Eastern Sierra water per year.

At the height of the recent, statewide drought, they took zero.

From 2011 to 2015, DWP had to buy almost 60 percent of their water from the overtaxed State Water Project and Colorado River.

Sure, they'd seen dry Sierra years before.

But now the unthinkable was happening.

SLIDE: REPORT COVER

Last year, a Forest Service official called climate change the biggest conservation challenge they face in the 21st century.

It threatens all kinds of outdoor recreation in an area economically dependent on tourism.

In 2016, for example, scientists found that the drought-ravaged trout population in Hot Creek was no longer able to sustain itself, so an emergency re-stocking program was ordered.

Thousands of anglers -- and the guides, hotels and cafes who rely on them -- are grateful.

But what about next time?

What about the millions of trees that have already died of thirst?

In 2018, UCLA issued a special report, Climate Change in the Sierra Nevada.

California relies on frozen reservoirs capping our big mountains for 60 percent of our water statewide.

We know that warmer temperatures and more sunlight make snow melt faster.

But now, in the Sierra, rapid melting is exposing more of the dark ground, where snowpack used to reflect heat.

The ground absorbs heat, making our snow melt even faster.

Average Sierra temperatures could rise 6 to 9 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century.

We may well get less precipitation over all.

And what we do get will be more rain than snow.

Higher runoff earlier in the year will likely cause floods and overwhelm our reservoirs.

So a lot of people are paying a lot of attention to this issue.

* * *

SLIDE: JIM BISHOP PASS

While researching this paper, I took some breaks on the trail, sometimes with an enthusiastic hiking buddy.

And I learned more -- a lot more – than I could ever cover in this paper.

For example, Kathleen New at the Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce told me that people appreciate tourists here.

But social media sites like Instagram are revealing too many fragile places to insensitive outsiders.

Meanwhile, “dispersed camping” is on the rise on public lands, and too many motor homes, squatters and yahoos are taking advantage, with almost nobody to police their activities.

To supplement my research – and have some fun as well -- I attended an Eastern Sierra History Conference.

There, I met former park ranger David Carle, who wrote a novel titled Mono, based on the DWP’s construction of an 11-mile water tunnel beneath a volcanic mountain in the 1930s.

SLIDE: MORAINE

During a break, I took this photo.

Morning light on a massive moraine left by a retreating glacier, which once covered the flanks of Mount Morrison, rising over 12,000 feet behind.

Bigger than all of us.

Older than history.

A constant reminder of a distant past much different than our present.

* * *

To see the future, however, we need to have a look at some huge, ongoing projects to address DWP’s historic exploitation of Owens Valley water.

The biggest example is Owens Lake, just below Lone Pine.

SLIDE: LAKE PANO

Steamships serving the Cerro Gordo silver mine in the Inyo Mountains once crisscrossed this remote sink.

The lake had been slowly shrinking for centuries.

But when DWP started taking all the Owens Valley's water in the early 1900s, the alkaline lake completely dried up, creating one of the worst dust hazards in U.S. history.

SLIDE: DUST CONTROL

Ordered to fix this by government and the courts, DWP over the last 20 years has spent almost one-and-a-half billion dollars on sprinklers, dikes, vegetation and layers of gravel.

Every year, the dust control consumes some 60,000 acre feet of water.

No one believes the lake can be restored.

But DWP's ponds have attracted so many birds that now, every spring, the Owens Lake Bird Festival celebrates their return.

SLIDE: OWENS BIRD SIGN

And a big sign marking the lake's public bird-watching area testifies to DWP's collaboration with regulators and critics.

As Audubon Magazine put it in a 2014 article, "One of the most audacious water grabs in the history of the American West is now the site of one of its most innovative restorations."

But Owens Lake is only part of DWP's restitution agenda.

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Just above Owens Lake is the Lower Owens River Project, overseen by the County of Inyo.

SLIDE: LORP

When DWP started taking all the water in the early 1900s, the Owens River virtually disappeared.

Several decades later, the courts and regulators ordered them to put it back.

And in 2006, DWP began diverting water to re-create a 62-mile river ecosystem with a 20,000-acre waterfowl preserve.

When the river gets to Owens Lake, DWP keeps some water for dust control, but puts the rest back in the aqueduct.

The largest restoration of its kind is still a work in progress.

But as one DWP official put it, they can't undo history, but they can make things better.

* * *

Consider, for example: the restoration of Mono Lake, northern sister to Owens Lake.

SLIDE: MONO SCENIC

When DWP extended its water rights north of Mammoth, it cut off the flow of snowmelt, which sustained the huge, alkaline basin.

As the lake level fell, salt levels rose, and Mono was doomed to become first a dead sea, then ultimately -- like Owens -- an intolerable dust hazard.

In 1979, a group called the Mono Lake Committee filed suit to save this ancient, wildlife habitat.

And in 1994, a judge ordered DWP to start refilling Mono Lake.

The project is consuming 60,000 to 90,000 acre feet of pure water annually and will take another 20 years, according to the committee, which has grown into a formidable advocacy group.

Boasting more than 16,000 paying members, they monitor DWP's every move, including taking care of several major creeks.

So, who benefits from all this?

Just ask these Wilson's Phalaropes.

You can find as many as 100,000 of them fattening-up on shoreline insects here each summer before migrating 3,000 miles to Central America.

And for me, that's reason enough to save Mono Lake.

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SLIDE: COTTONWOODS

On top of its three big projects, DWP has been required to take on more than 100 other, small environmental mitigation jobs, some already completed.

In fact, Inyo County has been coordinating with DWP to manage Owens Valley water for over 40 years.

The relationship today is governed by the Inyo County/Los Angeles Long Term Water Agreement, signed in 1991.

It includes regulating DWP's extensive network of wells for pumping out groundwater, which has created desert like conditions where lush habitat and farms once thrived.

SLIDE: AQUEDUCT

Add it all up and DWP currently leaves more than half of its historic L.A. Aqueduct supply in Mono and Inyo counties for environmental preservation. For some folks, however, that's not enough.

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Bishop-based activist Daniel Pritchett, for example, advocates a Los Angeles exit – a LAXit -- from Owens Valley.

He's been a key player in the Owens Valley Committee, which has long criticized DWP and "the underlying political injustice of colonial rule."

Not surprisingly, this organization participated in much of the legal action which led to DWP's ongoing investments in environmental reparations.

SLIDE: THREE HORSES

Some people have suggested national park status for the valley.

Others want to create a 500 square-mile conservation easement, with L.A. relinquishing its lands, but retaining its water rights.

This was first suggested 20 years ago by Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan and the Wildlands Conservancy.

Since 1995, the conservancy has protected 156,000 acres in 19 preserves, including our own Whitewater and Oak Glen.

And last year, they slowly started collaborating with kindred groups to try again to permanently shelter the DWP's properties in the Eastern Sierra.

* * *

Learning all of this has been very encouraging.

But there's something else I want saved.

The character and atmosphere of the towns along 395.

Mammoth, once a mellow mountain village, is now a ski town and a beehive of summer fun, buzzing with tourists, unbearably busy at times, but undeniably more valuable to the regional economy than ever before.

OK, fine -- but Bridgeport, Lee Vining, Bishop, Big Pine, June Lake,

Independence and Lone Pine, to me, still have that timeless Eastern Sierra feel.

When tourism is your bread and butter, being frozen in time can be a good thing.

SLIDE: LLOYD'S

Of course, these towns face many of the same challenges as small towns everywhere.

Particularly the loss of small, colorful retail businesses to chains, big-box stores and internet shopping.

During my research, Lloyd's Western Wear -- open since 1937 -- called it quits. In this case, the owner just got old and his family didn't want to take over.

But empty storefronts send a bad message that Main Street is dying.

Healthy, established businesses, new retail and a bit of development can promise the opposite.

The region has taken some positive – and surprising -- steps.

In 2013, they completed a \$120 million high-speed internet project known as Digital 395, partly to give new employers and entrepreneurs an incentive to relocate here.

SLIDE: ASPEN

And they work hard to promote tourism, for example, during the fall colors.

But Eastern Sierra towns must still contend with the DWP, the area's biggest landlord, as we can see here.

SLIDE: BISHOP ISLAND

That's the Bishop Paiute reservation in purple and DWP in orange, completely surrounding the city of Bishop in blue.

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DWP leases out most of its land to farms and ranches.

But they also own and lease out much of the private property and a lot of buildings in the towns.

Historically, they haven't wanted to sell much of it.

But a year ago, they announced plans to sell or auction 37 properties, while retaining their water rights – the largest proposal of its kind in 10 years.

The fresh focus is “now is on individuals in Owens Valley who want more control over their own destinies,” a DWP official said.

SLIDE: PINES CAFÉ

Thanks to an obscure law, DWP must give current tenants the opportunity to purchase their properties before others can bid.

If they don't want to buy, they can continue to lease.
But this means continuing to live with a disincentive to improve properties they don't own.
Learning this, I began to understand why many of the buildings along 395 have retained their historic character.
The Pines Café in Independence is one of the DWP properties slated for sale. It has been in a state of arrested decay for many years, with no one interested in renting it.
And I, for one, have always hoped it would reopen.

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Arguably, the DWP sales could help the area retain its old timey charm and give an economic boost to Eastern Sierra towns.
Bishop has expressed interest in several of the DWP properties slated for sale. But development here will always be a double-edged sword.
A report prepared for the city observed that people are attracted here because they assume that Bishop won't become a sprawling city with an ever expanding footprint.
Change that, and Bishop won't be Bishop any more. The report concluded: "If the city has the ability to acquire DWP land parcels in the future, it must do so strategically to ensure a balance between economic growth and open space preservation."

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SLIDE: FARMS, RANCHES

As for the wide open spaces in between, DWP has historically leased land to Eastern Sierra farms and ranches and provided them with water.
And they value these relationships, Clarence Martin told me.
But given the recent drought – and DWP's very substantial, ongoing obligations to provide water for restoration and preservation -- the utility in recent years has said there really is no "surplus" of Owens Valley water.
Not like in the old days, when the city of L.A. actually couldn't take all the water the Eastern Sierra had to offer.

In 2018, the utility announced they would stop providing water to a 6,400-acre area near Mammoth called Long Valley.

SLIDE: LONG VALLEY

Mono County is suing DWP over this.

Along with the Keep Long Valley Green Coalition -- and a contingent of cattle ranchers -- the county is protesting that DWP's move will devastate a scenic resource and wetlands which have sustained both livestock and wildlife since the 1940s.

But dewatering Long Valley could net DWP up to 32,000 acre feet per year at a time when each drop is more valuable to them than ever before.

Opponents argue that more conservation by consumers in L.A. could achieve the same thing.

So I don't think we've seen the last of these kinds of conflicts.

* * *

SLIDE: YELLOWLEGS

There's another group I haven't mentioned with a particular interest in saving the Eastern Sierra.

These are the wild creatures represented by human friends.

Like this Greater Yellowlegs . . . enjoying the restored habitat at Owens Lake.

SLIDE: MARMOT, BIGHORN

Many of these animals rely on the extraordinary federal and state laws protecting endangered species.

Up where the air is thin, the Yellow Bellied Marmot is holding its own.

The Sierra Bighorn is being supported by preservation efforts throughout its range.

And projects are in progress to bring back the Mountain Yellow Legged Frog, a high-altitude species nearly wiped out when humans planted non-native trout in their habitat.

SLIDE: SIGN AND GROUSE

Few creatures, however, stand as tall as the Bi-State Sage Grouse, which lives not so much in national parks, wilderness and forest, but on private and public lands at lower elevations.

They're widely protected from Owens Lake . . . to Tahoe . . . into Nevada . . . throughout DWP's sagelands . . . across the BLM's ranchlands . . . and beyond. And the more their needs are considered, the more the environment is respected by the rest of us.

* * *

There are many other examples.

But one small, incredible story stood out for me.

In the fall of 2016, state scientists discovered that the drought was threatening populations of the California Golden Trout.

SLIDE: GOLDEN TROUT

Using horses and mules, they rode into the high country, rescued 52 Goldens, brought them out in metal cans, loaded them into a tank truck and hauled them 500 miles to temporary quarters at a hatchery near Sacramento.

Nine months later -- after conditions had improved -- they made the same journey in reverse and returned the fish to their home, hopefully to thrive again.

SLIDE: REPEAT TITLE SLIDE

Time will tell if the Eastern Sierra can be saved.

But if people are willing to do something like that, I'm optimistic.

#

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to many individuals who provided information and advice during the course of preparing this paper, *Can the Eastern Sierra be Saved?*

Special thanks to Sylvia Beltran and Clarence Martin, Los Angeles Department of Water & Power; Kyle Hamada, Friends of the Inyo; Kathleen New, Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce; Deb Schweizer, Inyo National Forest; Bob Gardner, Mono County Supervisor; and Ted Carleton, publisher, *The Sheet*.

Several books were especially helpful as well, including *Stopping the Road*, Jack Fisher; *Deepest Valley*, Genny Smith; *Eastern Sierra: A Visitor's Guide*, Sue Irwin; *Exploring Eastern Sierra Canyons*, Sharon Giacomazzi; *Mono*, David Carle; *The Land of Little Rain*, Mary Austin; and *101 Moments in Eastern Sierra History*, Dave Babb.

Thanks to the *Inyo Register*, the online news service *Sierra Wave Media*, and the weekly newspaper, *The Sheet*, for their excellent reporting on local issues. I also appreciated the information, insights and perspectives presented at the fourth annual Eastern Sierra History Conference, organized by the Eastern Sierra Interpretive Association.

Dick Corneille, who previously worked on the Owens Lake dust mitigation project, provided helpful background. Wayne Purcell, fellow photographer and Eastern Sierra enthusiast, contributed research materials, good humor and encouragement. Lastly, I'm grateful to my wife Kathryn for trusting me to be careful during my road trips and solo wanderings in pursuit of answers to my question, *Can the Eastern Sierra be Saved?*

-- Jim Hendon, January, 2020