

Remember when....



## Special Reprint

# *Salton Sea: A journey from the best fishery in California to a dead sea*

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It was the kind of sight avid ocean anglers dream about. The sea was calm, and for as far as you could see in all directions, the water was alive, quivering. Every couple of hundred yards there were baitfish skittering across the surface as foamy boils opened up and gamefish slashed into the schools of bait. In the distance, desert mountains shimmered.

Mazatlan? The Yucatan? The Sea of Cortez?

How about the Salton Sea.

That was how I started a story about fishing in the Salton Sea in May, 1999. I was standing on the shore at Corvina Beach on the east shoreline with the superintendent of the Salton Sea State Recreation Area, Steve Horvitz. Schools of corvina were slashing through the water, sending schools of sargo, croaker, and tilapia skittering across the water. It was an amazing spectacle. I have seen fishing boiling on big schools of bait since and before, but never have I experienced anything like that day on the Salton Sea

30 years ago.

Sadly, that was only five short years before the last of the corvina were gone from this once amazing fishery.

The sea was rapidly becoming too salty for three of the four species that thrived in the inland ocean. By 2002, sargo disappeared from surveys done annually by the Department of Fish and Game

(now Fish and Wildlife). And 2003 was the last year any corvina or croaker were caught in the sampling nets set all over the sea. Tilapia flourished until 2010 and then they too slowly disappeared.

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During the 1960s, the Salton Sea was considered California's most productive fishery. It produced more poundage of fish per surface acre and provided better fishing than any other water in the state, including the ocean. That was when over a half-million visitors flocked to the state recreation area on the northeast side of the lake for the fishing and water recreation. But visitors numbers began declining. Fish and bird dieoffs and an occasional stench that could permeate the entire Imperial Valley, fed a growing negative publicity that would eventually drive most recreation users away. The scientists were all saying that growing salinity levels would eventually wipe out all fish.

However, the exceptional fishery thrived well into the 1990s and anglers stayed until the bitter end. From the 1960s through the 1990s, the primary gamefish were three species that had been planted in the Salton Sea from the Gulf of California in the 1950s. The orangemouth corvina, gulf croaker, and sargo spawned successfully and became self-sustaining. Tilapia, a freshwater fish planted in Imperial Valley canals to control algae, found their way into the sea later and also thrived. The corvina was the top of the

food chain and the most popular sportfish because it grew to sizes in excess of 20 pounds, while the sargo, croaker, and tilapia were rarely bigger than two pounds. The smaller fish mostly provided forage for the corvina, although anglers caught and ate all four species with delight.

The fishery went in decline during the 1990s. The corvina fishery had swings in population numbers predicated on the success of each year's spawn. The success of the spawn became predicated on whether or not there were unusually wet winters or monsoon rains that kept the Salton Sea's salinity and nutrient levels below what would kill the fish.

But they were gone all gone by 2003, even before the salinity levels reached the level scientist knew the salt would wipe them out. It turns out nutrient levels because of water quality was the grim reaper with salt the secondary killer.

Unlike tilapia, all of the three marine species are open-water spawners and feeders, and the high and growing nutrient load in the sea depletes oxygen levels over vast areas, making nearly the entire Salton Sea an anaerobic system at times during the hot summer months. This was particularly hard on young-of-





reported in the spring into 2016 but with fewer and fewer fish since. With the salinity so high in the sea now, it is unlikely if even the tilapia will return to their former numbers.

So over a span of 70 years, the Salton Sea went from one of the premier fisheries in the United States to a dead sea. The 30-mile long body of water was created by an accident that diverted most of the flow of the Colorado

the-year fish. Small numbers of tilapia survived near shore where constant wave action keeps the water oxygenated, but the marine species were gone.

How good was the fishery?

In the 1960s through the 1980s, during the peak of the summer fishing, it was not uncommon for anglers to catch a limit of six corvina that weighed over 100 pounds, with a 20-pound average pretty common. Most anglers used a live minnow for bait – usually a small sargo or croaker caught on light tackle. But mudsuckers, then available at bait stores, were also popular baits.

The last run of good corvina fishing ended in 2002, which ironically was about as good as anyone could remember for corvina. That year marked the sixth year in a row of excellent fishing, and the corvina had just been getting bigger and bigger. By the 2001 and 2002 seasons, anglers were reporting more big corvina than had been caught in 15 or 20 years.

The last big corvina year was followed a tilapia boom that started in 1994 and continued through the rest of that decade. But by 2002, the tilapia had almost disappeared. By then the corvina were gone.

Tilapia made a comeback by 2007 and anglers eagerly filled ice-chests with these popular and tasty gamefish. While small, they made up in volume for what the corvina had provided in size. With no limit on the tilapia, anglers would fill 100-quart ice chests with the half- to two-pound fish. That boom ended by 2012, but the fishery held on with good catches

River into the desert sink in the Imperial Valley in 1905. The flow wasn't stopped for 18 months, and the sea was born.

In the early years, it was a freshwater fishery, but soon the salinity became too great for the bass and catfish that had washed into the lake. In the 1950s, the DFG experimented with a whole variety of saltwater species, and three took.

Do you remember when?

**NOTE:** *This is the first of a monthly series of outdoor stories by veteran Southern California outdoor writer Jim Matthews looking back at how hunting and fishing was in Southern California in the not-so-distant past. He remembers when....*

