SALTON SEA ENVIRONMENTAL TIMESERIES

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Community Science

Salton Sea Environmental Timeseries

VIEW DATA

The Salton Sea

The Salton Sea is a hypersaline inland lake that plays an important role in the surrounding communities and ecology. Located in Riverside and Imperial counties, it constitutes part of unceded Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indian territory and is an important stopover for migratory birds along the Pacific Flyway. The origin of the current Salton Sea traces back to 1905, when Colorado River water breached an irrigation canal and spilled into the Salton Sink. Since then, the Salton Sea has been fed by agricultural runoff and outflows from local rivers such as the New River, Alamo River and Whitewater River. Unfortunately, decades of detrimental policies have turned this region into an environmental disaster.

Normally fed by offshoots of the Colorado river, redistribution of water allocation from the Colorado river has led to a significant reduction in water inflow to the lake over the recent years. In 2003, the Quantification Settlement Agreement between the Imperial Irrigation District, the San Diego Water Quality Control Board, and other government entities, agreed to divert water from the Imperial Valley to San Diego County, reducing the inflow available to the Salton Sea and causing the Sea's water volume to begin shrinking. From 2003 to 2017, mitigation water (105,000 acre-feet) was allocated to the Salton Sea, abating the dropping sea level. However, the Salton Sea surface area has been rapidly declining since mitigation water ceased to be allocated to the region in 2017, altering the water properties of the Sea, exposing miles of dry playa, and contributing to a public health crisis. In fact, over the past few years, the Salton Sea sea level has been declining at a rate of about 0.3 meters a year (1 foot per year). The Salton Sea has been classified as an impaired body of water by the US EPA and the California State Water Resources Control Board.

The accumulation of runoff water in the Salton Sea, combined with rapid evaporation and detrimental policies, have led to an increased salinity, hypoxia, the proliferation of harmful bacteria, the exudation of foul smells, and the accumulation of toxins in the soil. Wind blowing over the Salton Sea releases toxic dust from the previously covered lakebed (often referred to as playa) and aerolizes chemicals from the surface of the water, leading to chronic respiratory illnesses in surrounding communities.

About Us

We are a team of community members and non-local scientists conducting water and air quality monitoring research on the Salton Sea to be used for community capacity building and advocacy efforts. Our aim is to provide discoverable and accessible data for community engagement through this dashboard that will lead to advocacy efforts for the protection and restoration of the Salton Sea providing much needed environmental justice in the form of a cleaner environment and better public health Coachella Valley residents and the biodiversity desperately need. Our team is currently conducting research in the northern region of the Sea (see map on dashboard tab).

In the News

Ghost towns and toxic fumes: How an idyllic California lake became a disaster

Once a hot tourist destination, California's Salton Sea has become the worst environmental and public health crisis in modern history.

The Salton Sea's Feral Splendor | Atmos

California's Salton Sea has long been regarded as an apocalyptic wasteland, but it's much more. It faces threats from drought and pollution.

DRIED UP: In Utah, drying Great Salt Lake leads to air pollution

The American West is experiencing its driest period in human history, a megadrought that threatens health, agriculture and entire ways of life. DRIED UP is examining the dire effects of the drought…

California's Salton Sea was an aquatic oasis. Now it's a toxic death pit.

And why the shrinking lake might be key to meeting America's clean energy goals.

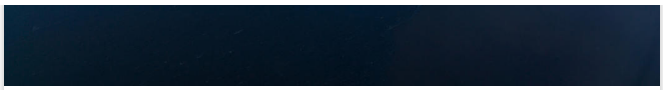
‘The air is toxic’: how an idyllic California lake became a nightmare

The shrinking Salton Sea was once a tourist destination. Now it’s home to dangerous algal blooms, endless dust and noxious air

It Takes a Village: Dr. Ryan Sinclair and Community Science at the Salton Sea

We sit down for an interview with Dr. Ryan Sinclair to talk about community science, environmental justice, algal blooms at the Salton Sea.

Salton Sea Water Quality and …



Valley Voice: Salton Sea communities needed relief long before coronavirus

Community Science Forum

The Alianza community science team presented a live webinar on the 7/20/22 to present the findings of water quality research conducted at the Salton Sea between 2021 and 2022. We hope you find it informative and illuminating as we continue to conduct community science-based research in the future.

*Many of these articles use highly negative language such as “toxic” and “death pit” in referring to the Salton Sea, portraying a hopeless situation. While we are very aware of the environmental state of the Salton Sea, we believe such language is damaging to the surrounding community and discourages remediation efforts. We encourage the use of positive language that centers not just biodiversity but the community and their stories who deserve a restored sea.

Built in the Coachella Valley ☀️