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I appreciate the opportunity to speak today on the Audubon California view of the importance of the Salton Sea ecosystem. In addition to addressing the significance of the Sea to birds and bird watchers, I will also speak to some potential strategies for protection and restoration of the Sea.

The Salton Sea: A Crown Jewel in the Pacific Flyway

The Salton Sea is home to numerous endangered and sensitive species, and literally millions of migrating and wintering waterbirds. The annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count often reports the highest counts in the nation for such species as the rough-winged and bank swallow, Scott's orioles, orange-crowned and yellow-rumped warblers, redstarts, burrowing owls, mountain plovers, long-billed curlews, marsh wrens, and ruddy ducks. Without exaggeration it represents one of the most critically important wildlife habitats in the nation.

The Salton Sea is one of the crown jewels of avian biodiversity. Birds that use the Pacific Flyway travel thousands of miles annually in their movements up and down the planet --- and many of these birds depend on habitats in the Salton Sea area.

Birds banded at the Salton Sea have been found in many distant areas (see distribution map). Birds like airplanes are able to travel limited distances until having to land and refuel. Yet, as California has lost 95% of its wetlands, these avian refueling and breeding stops are becoming farther and farther apart as well as more limited.

More than 400 species of birds have been recorded within the greater Salton Sea ecosystem. Awareness of this biodiversity results in birders from near and far participating in an annual bird festival in hopes of adding additional species to their life list and to enjoy the wide variety of bird species present. However, more than the rich avian biodiversity of the area, it is the year-round bird use of the Salton Sea that makes this ecosystem so important. Nineteen waterbirds of conservation concern use the Salton Sea ecosystem during different times of the year. In 1999, more than 14,000 pairs of colonial breeders comprised of 11 species representing three families were tallied at the Salton Sea. In total, this ecosystem serves as a breeding area for about 100 species of birds.

Summer use of the Salton Sea includes one of the largest populations of black skimmer (Rynchops niger) in western North America and one of the few breeding populations of the western subspecies of gull-billed tern (Sterna nilotica), several thousand California brown pelicans (Pelecanus occidentalis), large numbers of the American white pelican (P. erythrorhynchos) and a variety of other species including substantial numbers of breeding black-necked stilt (Himantopus mexicanus and American avocet (Recurvirostra americana).

Winter use includes up to 30 % of the entire North American breeding population of the American white pelican. The Sea is a primary wintering area in western North America for white-faced ibis (Plegadis chihi) and the Sea also supports the largest wintering population of Western snowy plover (Charadrius alexandrinus) in the interior of the United States. Agricultural lands in this ecosystem support a wintering population of the mountain plover (C. montanus) estimated to represent about 30 percent of the species' entire population (Shuford et al. 2000). The Salton Sea is also an important wintering area for the ruddy duck (Oxyura jamaicensis).

Regarding the American white pelican, the Salton Sea and the Colorado River Delta provide essential foraging and resting habitats, which are used by these species all year and as part of their north - south migrations. The Salton Sea Authority estimates that up to 80% of the American white pelican population may spend time at the Sea. Unfortunately, due to the significant degradation of the Delta, the Sea plays a much more important role in supporting this species. Also, it is important to note that unlike the brown pelican, the American white pelican is not known to successfully forage in the Gulf. (Personal communication with Dan Anderson, Ph.d., University of California, Davis, April 2002).

"The Salton Sea is one of only eight sites in the interior of western North America that holds over 10,000 shorebirds in fall and one of five such sites in the spring. In terms of overall shorebird numbers, the Salton Sea is the most important area in the Intermountain and Desert region of the West in spring and the second most important, after Great Salt Lake, in fall" (Shuford et al. 2000, Audubon Exhibit #13).

The seasonal highlights noted above do not include many additional species present. Among the more noteworthy occurrences reported by Shuford et al. (ibid) are:

- The double-crested cormorant (Phalacrocorax auritus) breeding population at the Salton Sea is one of the largest in western North America;

- The Yuma clapper rail (Rallus longirostris yumanensis) breeding population is about 40 percent of the entire U.S. population;

- This is one of the most important migratory stopover and wintering areas in the world for eared grebes (Podiceps nigricollis) (Jehl 1988 in Shuford et al, 2000, Audubon Exhibit #13, and Warnock in Audubon Exhibit #14);

- The Salton Sea is one of the key migratory stopover sites in western North America for black tern (Chlidonias niger).

- This ecosystem is also one of the most important areas in the interior of western North America for wintering gulls.

Surveys conducted during 1999 in areas adjacent to the Salton Sea by investigators from the Point Reyes Bird Observatory resulted in numerous neotropical migrants being tallied. More Wilson's warblers (Wilsonia pusilla) were caught at the Salton Sea during spring migration than at any other mist-netting site in California. The abundance of neotropical migrants recorded during spring and fall included 11 species of statewide concern in riparian habitats and is evidence that the area is used extensively by migrating passerines (Shuford et al. 2000, Audubon Exhibit #13).

The Salton Sea is of regional or national importance to various groups of birds such as pelicans and cormorants, wading birds, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls and terns and some passerines. Examples of specific species include the eared grebe, American white pelican, double-crested cormorant, cattle egret, white-faced ibis, Yuma clapper rail, snowy plover, mountain plover, gull-billed tern, Caspian tern, black tern, black skimmer and Wilson's warbler (Shuford et al. 2000, Audubon Exhibit #13). The importance of the Salton Sea for migratory birds has greatly increased during the 20th century because of habitat losses at other locations. This ecosystem now serves as a critical link in the habitat chain needed to sustain migratory bird populations within western North America. The Salton Sea has been well documented as the refueling point for millions of birds -- and the breeding ground for 100 species.

The proposed water transfer and the resulting changes at the Sea would not only affect these breeding species (96 species out of 400), but all avian life that use the Sea. The effects on the other 350+ species are poorly covered in the DEIS/DEIR.

Xmas bird counts for the white-faced Ibis have increased dramatically recently. If this is any indication of need for habitat over the next 75 years, we need to preserve and increase available habitat for the millions of birds that move through our area each year.

The Salton Sea ecosystem is a migratory bird habitat for all seasons that serves waterbirds and landbirds alike. As a result, this ecosystem has become one of the crown jewels of avian biodiversity. Sustaining this ecosystem in a manner that preserves current species richness and provides for the large numbers of birds that use this area needs to become a priority. If we lose the Salton Sea, we will lose migratory bird habitat of the highest value --- and future generations will never have a chance to know or see the magnificent procession of birds that use these habitats.

The Historical Perspective

From a historical perspective, it is important to note that the Salton Sea area, also known as Lake "Cahuilla" among some Native American tribes, was a natural sink and receiving area for silt-laden waters of the Colorado River that has existed for hundreds of thousands of years. In fact, if it had not been for human intervention, the Sea would be much larger than it is today. For thousands of years, the Salton Sea trough has been an important resource area for birds, fish, other wildlife, and prior to European settlement -- Native Americans. (Sykes, Audubon Exhibit #3; deBuys, Audubon Exhibit #7)

Salton Sea and the Colorado River Delta

Given the historical connectivity of the Salton Sea to the Delta, it is not surprising that today the Salton Sea and the Mexican portion of the Delta still share important ecological connections. Over 175,000 birds are found at the Mexican Delta and 3 million plus found at the Salton Sea on peak winter days. Because over 90 percent of all natural inland wetlands have been lost in California, these areas are critically important for migratory waterbirds along the Pacific Flyway. The endangered Yuma clapper rail, while more frequently found in the Santa Clara Slough in Mexico, relies on both areas for its existence. Some birds of the Sea of Cortez, such as the juvenile brown pelicans, disperse to the Sea to take advantage of its abundant food sources. As the Salton Sea Authority has noted, "both the U.S. portion of the Delta (the Salton Sea and its environs) and the Mexican portion of the Delta (part of the same ecosystem) offer excellent opportunities to experiment with management of manmade systems to rehabilitate damaged water resources." Simply transferring water away from the Salton Sea (as part of the proposed water transfer from IID to SDCWA) to serve urban California water needs makes the development of joint solutions very difficult.

Strategies for Protection and Restoration

Given the importance of the Salton Sea to the Pacific Flyway and avian biodiversity, Audubon California believes the following principals should guide Imperial Valley ecosystem activities:

1. Embrace Wildlife Friendly Farming. Farming is of ecological benefit to the region.

Audubon believes there is a symbiotic link between agriculture and the Sea. Because the Colorado River has now been dammed, the river's delta no longer meanders as it did historically. The natural inundations of the Salton trough no longer occur, so agricultural return water accounts for over 90% of the flows to the Sea. Without agriculture, there is no sustainable Sea and no agriculture without the sea as a salt repository. Today, without agriculture, there would be far fewer habitat types in the area. The agricultural practices within the Imperial Valley can be improved, though. Audubon supports the continued development of wildlife friendly farming practices and management. This recognizes the dual objectives of farming: 1) Production of food and crops for human consumption and 2) support and maintenance of birds/wildlife and improved water quality. However, the proposed water transfer jeopardizes the existing symbiotic relationship between agriculture and the Salton Sea by removing water that both depend upon.

2. Don't Shy Away From Big Projects. Support engineering efforts to provide solutions that address salinity increases.

The Sea has no outlet. As a result, salts and other constituents concentrate in the Sea. Engineering efforts to provide an outlet or otherwise manage the water chemistry of the Sea will help stabilize and improve water quality.

3. Address Inputs. Support other efforts to improve water quality, particularly the Sea's eutrophic conditions.

While we recognize the important link to agriculture, we also acknowledge that agricultural return water brings with it constituents that impair the lake. Other sources, particularly municipal wastewater from Mexico also contributes to water quality

problems, particularly the boom and bust cycles associated with the Sea's eutrophic conditions. Unlike salinity control, eutrophication cannot likely be solved through engineering alone. All interests should support programs that reduce or address the Sea's eutrophic conditions such as the Regional Water Quality Control Board TMDL process and the research and pilot projects of the Salton Sea Authority and Science Office.

4. Water is the environment's lifeblood. Maintain and secure water supplies to the Sea.

The Sea is a public trust and serves important environmental beneficial uses. Water for the Sea must not be an easily dismissed footnote when discussing California's use of Colorado River water. We must be certain that the decisions associated with agriculture to urban water transfers do not "short change" inflows to the Salton Sea.

5. Audubon supports efforts to weave science into decision-making .

A scientific foundation is critical for a complex restoration project. Science must be a continual part of the program, particularly insofar as adaptive management strategies are employed.

In summary, the Salton Sea is one of the crown jewels of avian biodiversity. It is also one of the most critical wildlife habitats in the nation. However, there are problems at the Sea that have been many years in the making. These problems are serious for birds, wildlife, and humans --- and the problems will continue unless a more balanced holistic approach is taken to the region. Several solutions are being considered to protect and restore the Salton Sea --- and all of them hinge on the continued availability of water.

The Water Board now contemplates a decision that can have significant irreversible effects. What we do at the Sea will be pivotal to the future of the Pacific Flyway.

This is a moment of truth for the Salton Sea ecosystem. We will see if the extensive commitments by local agencies, the federal government, and other Stakeholders to ecological restoration will be realized; or, whether we will turn our back on the Salton Sea and the millions of birds that have come to depend upon it.

Audubon California urges a strong and vigorous effort by the local, state and federal government and other stakeholders to protect and restore the Salton Sea. The Sea must remain a great California asset for generations of people and wildlife to come. We stand ready to work to make this a reality.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Biographical Information for Daniel Taylor

Dan Taylor serves as Executive Director for Audubon California, the official state program of the National Audubon Society. He leads the Audubon conservation efforts in California that includes 51 local chapters and 67,000 members and a professional staff of 50.

Before assuming the post as State Director, Mr. Taylor served as western regional representative of the National Audubon Society for 17 years. His duties included leading National Audubon's work on protecting Mono Lake, water reform, endangered species protection, and forest conservation.

A California native, he received an AB degree in zoology from University of California, Davis, and an MA in Biology with emphasis in plant ecology from California State University, Fullerton.

Mr. Taylor has served on numerous state boards and task forces including the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture, the California Riparian Habitat Joint Venture, the California Timberlands Task Force, and the Upper Sacramento River Fisheries and Riparian Habitat Advisory Council.

A resident of Sacramento, he is married and the father of a seventeen year old son.

The mission of Audubon California is to conserve and restore California’s natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth’s biological diversity.