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## Going to the source

The San Diego River is born free and wild, then tamed and abused by civilization

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**W**illiam Birch McMurtrie came to San Diego in the 1850s as a member of a U.S. Coast Survey expedition. His job was to produce maps. His desire was to win fame.

The two goals were not incompatible. "There were great American painters" in the survey, said D. Scott Atkinson, American art curator at the San Diego Museum of Art. "And there were lesser painters. McMurtrie certainly fell in that latter category."

But one day in 1855, this minor artist produced something notable. Turning his back on the crumbling adobe walls of the old San Diego Mission, he sketched the view to Point Loma, a pastoral scene brightened by two bodies of water. One is clearly identifiable as San Diego Bay. To modern eyes, though, the second is less familiar.

But in McMurtrie's day, this gentle stream was one of San Diego's main attractions. This was the magnet that drew surveyors, friars, American Indians and others. This was the San

### TIME IS A RIVER A THREE-PART SERIES



Much of our region's history is tied to the San Diego River, which is formed by moisture from Volcan Mountain, and swollen by springs and streams as it heads west. But in this drought season, much of the riverbed is dry.

[More photos](#)

#### The series

#### Part One

The river slices through virgin Southern California, then buries a painful episode from



[ DAY 1 ]

the country's past.

#### Part Two

A lovely, relatively unknown park may hold the key to the



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## Diego River.

river's very  
salvation.

If a 21st-century painter tried to capture San Diego's soul, the river probably would not appear on the canvas. Worse, it might appear as a gray scar on the land.

### **Part Three**

Flowing through Mission Valley, the river is as beautiful as a preserve and as ugly as a dump.



[ DAY 3 ]

"It's been constrained and abused and ignored," said Michael Beck, a member of the San Diego County Planning Commission. "That's how we've treated our rivers in the last hundred years."

Nature taunts Southern California's rivers, pestering them with drought and rugged terrain. Humans have been cruel, too. Most streams have been mined for sand; shoved into concrete channels; and ringed with homes, roads and businesses.

But there are exceptions. Including, perhaps, the San Diego.

Yes, our river suffers its share of indignities. Civilization restricts an already uncertain flow, with one dam (El Capitan) on the river and another (San Vicente) choking several tributaries. Sand pits? Suburbia? Channels? They're all here, plus toxic levels of human and animal waste.

This year, though, politicians and activists are reconsidering the river, all 52 miles, from Volcan Mountain outside of Julian to its mouth between Ocean Beach and South Mission Beach.

While they no longer see the healthy river William Birch McMurtrie captured in oil, they see something just as startling:

A river worth restoring.

### **The unspoiled river**

Every waterfall and eddy, every mud hole and algae-choked inlet on the San Diego has been mapped. But this is a lost river.

Eons ago, the San Diego quenched the Kumeyaay Indians' thirst. Later, European explorers drank here. Today, though, only a small percentage of San Diego's drinking water comes from its namesake river.

Power once flowed along this waterway, radiating from riverfront outposts for the emissaries of popes, kings and presidents. Now, the San Diego is a literal and figurative backwater.

The river's influence lives on, though, in the shape of our terrain. Silt formed the land bridge between Point Loma and Little Italy, while the flowing water peeled open Mission Valley. But those same geologic forces made possible freeways, malls and condos, the urban tangle that obscures the river's passage.

To see the San Diego River in its glory, you'd need to travel back in

time.

Or you'd have to drive 50 miles east from downtown San Diego. As Highway 78 passes Santa Ysabel and ascends Volcan Mountain, you'll find the unspoiled river.

On paper, it's easy to climb to the river's source. Just flip open the latest Thomas Bros. guide to San Diego County and turn to map 1135. There, in quadrant G7, a blue squiggle emerges from a yellow quadrant that, save for the highway and a dirt road, is empty.

On the ground, you discover that this is an illusion, a cartographer's trick. Far from being vacant, the land is as crowded and colorful as a bag of M&Ms. White sage. Blue-eyed grass. Mountain lilac. Manzanita, coast live oak and Engleman oak paint the terrain in a palette of subtle greens.

"This is the jewel of the San Diego River," said Geoffrey Smith, a Sierra Club official. "The crown jewel."

This gem is first shaped on a Volcan ridge, 3,500 feet above sea level. Here, moisture is funneled downhill. Gradually, this trickle is swollen by springs and streams.

"You come here when there are pools of water," said Jeff Rundell, a county ranger who patrols the river, "it's just a paradise."

During the current drought, paradise is dry. A recent visit found a streambed choked with dust, leaves and poison oak. Smith was undeterred. At the wheel of his Jeep, he conducted a lively tour. His knowledge was encyclopedic. His wit, entertaining.

His driving, terrifying.

As Smith turned his attention to the passing natural wonders, the Jeep crept downhill without apparent driver oversight. The San Diego River Gorge lay at the bottom of a rocky 1,500 foot drop, but Smith's voice remained steady and rational.

He is, after all, a former software engineer. Despite color-blindness — "I don't see green in nature" — he left a corporate job to explore the great, if unnaturally pigmented, outdoors as the Sierra Club's regional conservation coordinator.

While fond of the entire river, Smith is passionate about this remote pocket. He'd better be. Camille Armstrong, his wife, is campaigning for the California Wild Heritage Act, a federal bill that would ban dams, new roads and new trails on 22 California rivers, including the upper San Diego.

But this summer's Pines fire, east of Julian, added fuel to the debate over the bill. Jim Wright, deputy director of fire prevention for the California Department of Forestry, told the Union-Tribune that when fire erupts in a wilderness area, "it's going to get bigger because of the prohibitions you have. You cannot ... get right next to the fire line and work it directly with fire engines."

The act's defenders insist that it wouldn't change the way firefighters operate in these areas today. The act merely preserves the status quo in all its wild, undeveloped glory and ensures these public lands are never domesticated.

"Sometimes," Smith said, "Camille and I like to tell people, 'We have 400,000 acres of land in the back country. Maybe we should go visit it this weekend.'

"Then we say, 'It's your land, too.' "

The Jeep lurched along the narrow dirt track. Far below, the gorge looked as wild as the Snake, as distant as the Amazon.

"Best deal on Earth," Smith said.

Like all great deals, this one must be seen to be believed. And there's only one way to obtain a full and accurate view:

You have to leave your car and walk down into the gorge.

### **On the trail**

In Congress, there's a move afoot to bestow federal wilderness designation on the river's first 11 miles. Beyond a few practical consequences — in wilderness areas, machines are forbidden — this is an exercise in political semantics.

No matter what you call it, the San Diego River Gorge is as wild as a "Crocodile Hunter" adventure.

Cindy Buxton, a veteran hiker and Sierra Club member, can't resist lighting out for this forbidding territory. Even in dubious company. When several rookies asked her to lead them into the area, she was skeptical.

"I'd feel better about this if you could run six miles on the beach without slowing down," she said. "But, OK."

Buxton escorted her party to a proposed San Diego River park's eastern entrance. From the Inaja Memorial on Highway 78, Buxton and a friend, Greg Moll, led the newcomers down a dirt path. It was easy to follow — for 10 minutes.

A walk in this park is no walk in the park.

You pick your way through blackberry. Poison oak. Buckwheat. Cattails. Poison oak. Dudleyea, a hardy succulent. Willows. Poison oak. Cottonwoods. Tamarisk. Poison oak.

And boulders. Boulders that resemble petrified basketballs. Boulders that resemble Volkswagen campers. Boulders that convincingly imitate "No Trespassing" signs.

"You remember the opening scene from 'The Sound of Music' when

Julie Andrews is on top of the mountain and all of a sudden the scene opens up?" Buxton asked. "We have one of those moments coming up."

The hikers scaled a boulder posing as the Matterhorn — and, on reaching the summit, gawked. Canyon walls fell below them. Far below them. The riverbed, marked by a narrow band of trees known as "the gallery forest," twisted like Chubby Checker. In winter and spring, this view usually has a soundtrack, a waterfall's steady roar. But in summer, and for the duration of the current drought, you are greeted with silence.

The hikers continued on, clambering over boulders. Through sycamores. Around poison oak. When they reached a chain of shallow pools, a string of liquid pearls descending a granite escarpment, they were winded and battered.

"If you're not bleeding," Moll said, "you're not having fun."

Three hours later, they climbed back to Highway 78. Judging by their elbows and knees, they had had tons of fun.

"You did all right," Buxton conceded.

They had taken on the 11-mile-long San Diego River Gorge, and conquered.

One full mile.

### **The river mild**

The San Diego moves from east to west, from mountain to ocean, from wilderness to city. When the river escapes the gorge, the landscape remains rugged and unpopulated.

The water, though, is tamed. This is El Capitan Reservoir, where the San Diego's natural flow is swallowed by a man-made lake.

The reservoir is many things to many people. El Cap supplies drinking water to San Diego; recreation to boaters, jet-skiers and anglers; and a sad symbol to two Indian bands.

Beneath its surface lies a lost world. In this drowned canyon, the ancestors of the Barona and Viejas peoples raised crops and children.

"Bureau of Indian Affairs records show that these were upper-middle class Indians," said Florence Shipek, an anthropologist who has devoted her career to studying San Diego's tribes. "We really cheated them by never paying for their water."

The San Diego River's winding course traces our history, from mission to presidio to Capitan Grande canyon. Never heard of the latter? No wonder. When El Cap is full, the canyon lies under 37.9 billion gallons of water. The current drought has reduced the lake to 25 percent capacity; that's still enough to cover up an old injustice.

In 1853, a group of Kumeyaay left Mission Valley to settle 30 miles to the east. Washington blessed this relocation — Col. John B. Magruder, who would later follow West Point classmate Robert E. Lee into the Confederate Army, issued a federal permit.

Even without permission, Indians had lived there for centuries, up to 20,000 years by Shippek's estimate. In the 19th century, bands founded villages on two forks of the San Diego — Los Conejos on the south, Capitan on the north. The Indians farmed rich river-bottom land and enjoyed dances, parties and sports.

Men and children played "shinny," a form of lacrosse, and a game called "rooster pully."

"They would tie some money in a handkerchief and bury it," the late Dora Curo told Myrna DeSomber, a Barona oral historian. Horsemen "would try to pull the handkerchief from the ground. Whoever got it, got the money."

Long before Disneyland, Capitan Grande boasted a flume ride. Begun in 1887, a 37-mile flume brought water from Lake Cuyamaca to San Diego.

The San Diego Flume was the 19th century's Splash Mountain. But as a water supplier, it was limited. By 1911, there were plans to create a dam and flood Capitan Grande.

The deal was struck in 1931, when the city purchased 15,753 acres on the river for \$361,428. The surrounding hills remained in Indian hands — they now compose the Capitan Grande reservation — but these steep slopes lacked what the bands needed: water.

"The government said they'd pay for the land and the water," Shippek said. "But they didn't. They just paid for the land."

Los Conejos purchased a ranch to the south and became known as the Viejas band. The Capitan moved north, adopting the name "Barona." Today, both bands operate thriving casinos. But until Indian gaming arrived, they had struggled to farm their new, arid land.

"They were well-to-do farmers until the dam was put in," Shippek said. "We are looking at people who were extremely competent, good farmers. They had fruit trees, nut trees, corn, beans. ..."

"And all of this was lost."

### **Go, fish**

Something, though, was gained. Above the abandoned farms, catfish and bass swarm.

These are sizable fish: 15-pound largemouth bass, 18-pound carp and 45-pound blue catfish have been caught here; larger ones may have gotten away. The lake has a 22-mile shoreline and a maximum depth of 197 feet. When El Cap is full, you could hide a 19-story skyscraper below the surface, let alone a 19-pound carp.

**From the air, El Cap resembles a giant's chaise longue. If Paul Bunyan reclined here, his feet would aim at Lakeside; his torso would be pinched between the chaparral-covered slopes of Capitan Grande reservation; and his head would be bathed in the San Diego River.**

**"In terms of volume," said Jim Brown, the city's lakes manager, "this is our biggest and best."**

**Since 1913, San Diego has allowed hikers, boaters, birders and anglers to use reservoirs as recreational sites. Now, with the city's 10 reservoirs providing a scant 5 percent to 10 percent of our water, these lakes may be more valuable as parks. El Cap alone annually draws 40,000 paying boaters and anglers.**

**"For recreation," Brown said, "the lakes rival Balboa Park and Mission Bay."**

**Aboard a 21-foot aluminum launch, he crossed El Cap on a warm weekday morning. The reservation's stony hills looked down on a handful of anglers, casting and waiting, a scene as warm as a William Birch McMurtrie sketch.**

**This is a common sight on the lake, as is the cruiser that overtook the city vessel. The skipper, a tall man with bronze skin and a black ponytail, waved to Brown. Then the Indian sailed on, above his ancestral home.**

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