

Imperial Valley & the Salton Sea

God, Water and the Imperial Valley



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The interplay between sun and water defines the ebb and flow of life in the valley and informs the psyche of the people who call it home.

For as long as I can remember, which now spans a considerable amount of time, there have been two constants in the Imperial Valley. One is the irresistible force of the sun and the other is the pervasive influence of water. Living here in what was once termed the Colorado Desert but is now charitably referred to as southernmost Southern California, it is hard to conceive of one without the other or to take either for granted.

That's because the Imperial Valley sun, which basically goes on a rampage during the summer months, can kill you, so you never want to completely turn your back on it. But the water will save your life.

It is this interplay between sun and water that defines the ebb and flow of life in the valley and informs the psyche of the people who call it home. These are people who don't have to be reminded they live in a desert, as the evidence is all around them and they couldn't forget about it if they tried. Many of them are employed in agriculture and instinctively know the food they purchase in the supermarket doesn't originate there. When they drive to work in the morning or back home at night, it isn't too many cars they must contend with, but slow-moving tractors.

Ask them about agricultural-to-urban water transfers, and they'll tell you they tend to work better on paper than on the ground, particularly where the Salton Sea is concerned. Engage them on whether the irrigation of forage crops like alfalfa hay meets the reasonable and beneficial use test, and they will ask what you have against cows (or milk). And then, if you should press them on how it is that the Imperial Valley, with more acres under cultivation than actual residents, could hold the legal right to 70 percent of the state's annual entitlement to water from the Colorado River, they will explain that's just the way God planned it.

I can't say that God played any part in bringing water to this extreme corner of the state at the

turn of the last century, but I wouldn't presume to say that He didn't, either. What I do know is that everything that has transpired since then has flowed from that singular event, and there is a natural inclination, if you live here, to see the hand of providence in it. At the same time, there is a sense of foreboding that, if the drought that has gripped California persists, there will be renewed calls for the Imperial Valley to transfer more of its water, the logic being that it can do more good, for more people, somewhere else.

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A better course, it seems to me, would be to ensure the water transfer agreement already in place isn't undone by the state's failure to address the looming public health crisis at the Salton Sea. Just as water seeks its own equilibrium, the level of anxiety associated with it in this part of California has struggled to do the same. That anxiety, like so much else in the Imperial Valley, may be attributable to the sun.

Or maybe God really did plan it that way.

Kevin E. Shelley

Onions in the Imperial Valley



Photo: Imperial Irrigation District