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Seeking solace on Highway 395

A trip to Mono Lake and Owens Valley yields hard truths about L.A.'s water grab and U.S. policies that harm the planet

THE EASTERN side of the Sierra Nevada along Highway 395. The peaks of the mountain range frequently aren't as snowy. (Gary Coronado Los Angeles Times)

Sammy Roth Columnist Boiling Point,
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As we drove north along Highway 395 — passing the salty remains of Owens Lake, the Museum of Western Film History, the geothermal plant outside Mammoth Lakes that supplies 24/7 clean energy to San Bernardino County — I felt certain we'd found the northernmost reaches of Southern California.

It was Memorial Day weekend, and my wife and I were headed to a U.S. Forest Service campground in the White Mountains, 225 miles as the crow flies from downtown L.A.'s Union Station. If you drew a line on a map due west from our campsite, you'd cut through the Sierra Nevada and eventually hit San José.

But to my mind, we were still in Southern California.

For one thing, Southern California Edison supplied electricity here. For another, Los Angeles had sucked this place dry.

In the early 1900s, agents secretly working for the city posed as farmers and ranchers , buying up land and water rights in the Owens Valley. Then Los Angeles built an aqueduct, diverting water from the Owens River to feed the

city's growth. Owens Lake largely dried up. The city later extended the aqueduct north to Mono Lake.

As a lifelong Angeleno, I felt compelled to see some of the results for myself.

I had spent time in the Owens Valley, but never the Mono Basin. So we took a dirt road branching off the gorgeous June Lake Loop to stand atop an earthen dam built by L.A. in the 1930s. It impounds Rush Creek, the largest tributary bringing Sierra snowmelt to Mono Lake. As I looked out at Grant Lake Reservoir — beautiful in its own way, if totally unnatural — I realized I had been drinking this water my whole life.

My feelings were similarly muddled when we arrived at Mono Lake.

On the one hand, this was one of the coolest and weirdest places I'd ever seen. As we padded along a boardwalk toward the sandy southern shore, I was blown away by the gleaming blue water, the snow-capped Sierra peaks and the tufa — my gosh, the tufa. Bizarre-looking rock towers made of calcium carbonate, like something from a dream.

At the same time, much of the boardwalk ideally would have been underwater.

Under a 1994 ruling by state officials, L.A. is supposed to try to limit its withdrawals from Mono Lake's tributaries, with a goal of restoring the lake to an elevation of 6,392 feet — healthier for the millions of migratory and nesting birds that depend on it for sustenance, and better for keeping down dust that degrades local air quality.

Three decades later, the lake has never gotten close to its target level. L.A. continues to withdraw too much water, and the Mono Basin continues to suffer. Mayor Karen Bass said last year that the city would take less, but officials ultimately reneged , citing a dry winter.

As we walked past a sign on the way to the southern shore marking 6,392 feet, I felt a little pang of guilt.

Responsibility is a funny thing. When we got back from our camping trip, I read about a woman suing oil and gas companies over the tragic death of her mom, who died of overheating at age 65 during a historic heat wave that roasted the Pacific Northwest in 2021. The first-of-its-kind lawsuit claims wrongful death, alleging — accurately — that the companies spent years working to hide the climate crisis from the public.

I'm neither a psychic nor a psychologist. But I'm guessing, based on more than a decade reporting on energy and climate change, that executives at the fossil fuel companies in question — including Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Phillips 66 and Shell — aren't suddenly feeling guilty for their role in boiling the planet.

Same goes for the Trump administration — impossible to guilt. The World Meteorological Organization reported last week that Earth is highly likely to keep shattering temperature records in the next few years, driving deadlier heat waves, more destructive fires and fiercer droughts. That hasn't stopped President Trump and congressional Republicans from pressing forward with a budget bill that would obliterate support for renewable energy.

So why was I, a climate journalist, feeling guilty over something I really had nothing to do with? Was it silly for me to bother taking responsibility when the people wrecking the planet were never going to do the same?

I think the answers have something to do with the importance of honesty.

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As we sat at our campsite by a roaring fire — stoked by my wife, who's way better than me with open flames — I cracked open a book of speeches by President Theodore Roosevelt, delivered in 1903 on his first trip to California.

He was on my mind because he'd originally established Inyo National Forest, where our spectacular campground was, to protect the lands and watershed where Los Angeles would build its Owens Valley aqueduct.

"You can pardon most anything in a man who will tell the truth," Roosevelt said.

"If anyone lies, if he has the habit of untruthfulness, you cannot deal with him, because there is nothing to depend on."

The businessman or politician who does not tell the truth cheats; and for the cheat we should have no use in any walk of life," he said.

Naturally, I thought of Trump, whose political success is built on outrageous lies, from climate and election denial to insisting that Haitian immigrants eat their neighbors' cats . I also recalled a recent order from Interior Secretary Doug Burgum discouraging "negative" depictions of U.S. history on signs at national parks and other public lands — a directive with the Orwellian title, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History."

Did that mean educational materials at Manzanar National Historic Site — which sits just off Highway 395 and is managed by the National Park Service — would soon be revamped, to avoid explaining how the U.S. government cruelly and needlessly imprisoned more than 10,000 Japanese Americans there during World War II?

If a similar order were issued covering the Forest Service, which is overseen by a different federal agency, would the Mono Lake visitor center take down its thoughtful signs explaining the history of the Los Angeles water grab? Would the Forest Service alter a sign at the nearby Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest detailing the possible effects of global warming, considering that the U.S. is the largest historical emitter of heat-trapping pollution?

Only time will tell. But Teddy Roosevelt was right. So long as Trump and his allies keep lying — pretending that oil and gas aren't cooking the planet, that we don't need sound science, that Americans have only ever done good — they'll feel no guilt, no responsibility. Because they'll have nothing to take responsibility for.

Accepting the facts means owning up to the hard ones.

It's not just politicians who have trouble. Highway 395's Museum of Western Film History is mostly hagiography, a collection of props and artifacts that fails to unpack the settler colonialism behind the western films it glorifies.

But I did learn that the original "Star Wars" was one of many films to shoot footage in the Owens Valley. And the "Star Wars" universe, as it happens, is all about fighting an empire that seeks to control people's homelands and histories — a message central to Season 2 of "Andor," now streaming on Disney+.

"I believe we are in crisis," says Galactic Sen. Mon Mothma, a leader of the brewing Rebellion. "The distance between what is said and what is known to be true has become an abyss. Of all the things at risk, the loss of an objective reality is perhaps the most dangerous.

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The death of truth is the ultimate victory of evil.”

Here’s the truth: There’s not enough water in Mono or Owens Lake. It’s hotter than it used to be. The sky is dark with wildfire smoke more often. The Sierra Nevada peaks frequently aren’t as snowy.

Again, the senator: “When truth leaves us, when we let it slip away, when it is ripped from our hands, we become vulnerable to the appetite of whatever monster screams the loudest.”

In America, monsters are screaming. Find harbor in honesty, and perhaps the mountains.

This article is taken from the latest edition of Boiling Point, a weekly newsletter about climate change and the environment in California. Sign up at latimes.com/boilingpoint.