

continues to experience further degradation. Here is the conversation that new arrivals have with old hands. I've been on both ends over the years.

Old Hand: Los Angeles is pumping so much groundwater that springs have dried up, and alkaline meadows have been invaded by shrubs. Wet meadows are overrun with cows and are showing signs of deterioration. Dust is still blowing off Owens Lake, causing air pollution and illness. Los Angeles is violating its own Long-Term Water Agreement.

New Arrival: If it weren't for the city, this place would be wall-to-wall condominiums and car dealerships.

Old Hand: Yes, but the city is undeniably a poor steward of the biological and hydrological resources of Owens Valley.

New Arrival: Believe me, if Los Angeles didn't own nearly everything, there would be even less water on the valley floor because of local demand.

Old Hand: Yes, but . . .

This conversation will never end because the conflict will never end. Nearly 3.8 million people now live in Los Angeles and another 27 million visit annually. That's a lot of thirsty folks. As climatic warming reduces the Sierra Nevada snowpack, streamflow will decline and the city will inevitably intensify its efforts to extract every possible drop from Owens Valley. Relations with the city, already fraught with tension and distrust, are not likely to get better.

When I moved here, I knew almost nothing of these problems. If I thought about them at all, I assumed they were in the past. Then I learned a little more, and I started expecting solutions and improvements, even reform and progress. Now I know that we'll be lucky to maintain the status quo, much less return to an earlier time such as the late 1960s when groundwater was still high enough for springs to flow across the valley floor.

Meanwhile, I'm grateful for the citizens and scientists who stay in the fray year after year, trying to get the city to live up to its contractual obligations and sometimes succeeding with the help of the courts. More personally, I'm grateful there was a little spot for my husband and me along Birch Creek. We have not, it turns out, found a place that time forgot, but it is a place where we often forget that days are rushing by.

FISH STRINGS AND BLACKROCK
FORGOTTEN TOWNS OF OWENS VALLEY

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