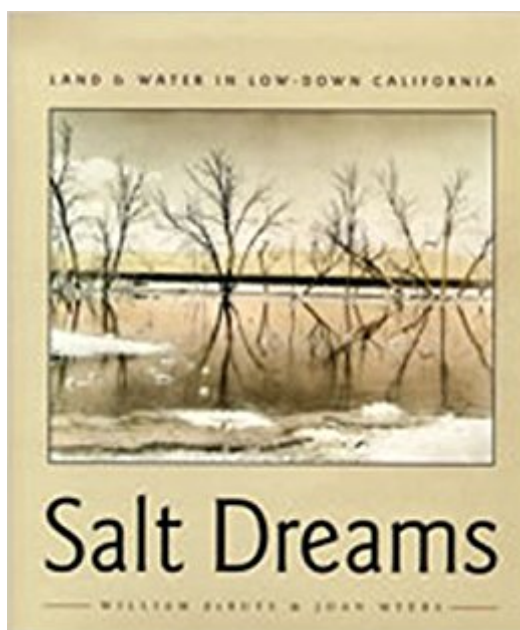


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# Salt Dreams: Land And Water In Low-Down California



## Synopsis

In low places consequences collect, and in all North America you cannot get much lower than the Imperial Valley of southern California, where one town, 186 feet below sea level, calls itself the Lowest Down City in the Western Hemisphere, and where the waters of the Colorado River sustain a billion-dollar agricultural industry. The consequences of that industry drain from the valley into the accidentally man-made Salton Sea, California's largest lake and a vital stopping place for migratory waterfowl. Today the Salton Sea is in desperate environmental trouble. A second river also ends in the Salton Sea. It is a river of dreams, the remains of which may be seen in the failed real estate developments that sprawl beside the sea. As the ending point of both the real Colorado and this river of dreams, the Salton Sea has become emblematic of much of the history of the American West. Its troubling story is masterfully told here in William deBuys's narrative and Joan Myers's austere beautiful photographs. The story of Southern California is fundamentally a story about the control of nature. Beginning with the Yuman-speaking tribes encountered by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, deBuys traces the subsequent exploration and development of the region through the Gold Rush of 1849, the government-sponsored surveys that followed, and the inept tinkering with the river by an assortment of irrigation and development interests that resulted in the floods that formed the Salton Sea nearly a century ago. He introduces us to a gallery of rogues and dreamers who saw a great future for this arid wilderness but could never refrain from interference with the forces of nature. The floods that produced the Salton Sea created a vast desert oasis, but the agricultural exploitation of the region, combined with evaporation, poisoned that paradise. The stark beauty of the desert, the engineering feats that have transformed the landscape, and the eerie spectacle of Salton City and its ruined beaches and abandoned yacht club are the subject of Myers's photographs, made over a period of more than ten years. In the last section of *Salt Dreams*, deBuys acquaints us with the human and avian denizens of the region, all struggling for survival as the twentieth century draws to a close. The history of chicanery and greed recounted in deBuys's narrative and his empathy with the desert dwellers he and Myers have come to know--hardworking laborers and entrepreneurs who live on both sides of the Mexicali border, eccentrics hiding out in the Salton Desert, pelicans dying of avian botulism--are crucial to an understanding of the border issues of today and the impassioned environmental debate on whether--and how--to save the Salton Sea.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

William Smythe, a Southern California booster, was not alone when in 1900 he expressed his hope that "the great brown waste which lies on the borders of two republics... will some time be as densely populated as the lands of the Nile, as rich in industry as the Kingdom of Holland." A century later, the coastal desert of Southern California has indeed become a rich and populous place. The interior desert, however, along the U.S.-Mexico border, is as empty and poor as ever. Historian William deBuys and photographer Joan Myers explore that country, its virtual capital the salt-choked Salton Sea, in the pages of this fine book, which offers a deeply learned but readable study of the politics of water and land use in the arid Southwest. DeBuys remarks that for Europeans and Americans the land has always seemed a geographic tabula rasa, subject to making and remaking, a landscape in which dreams can come true--one of them being to remake an unforgiving desert into an agricultural treasure house. Those dreams, however, can turn into nightmares, as speculations fail and dunes reclaim what is rightfully theirs--for, as deBuys notes, "in low places consequences collect." Desert rats and students of California history will find many rewards in these pages. --Gregory McNamee

Historian and author deBuys (*Enchantment and Exploitation; River of Traps*) offers an absorbing record of the ideas and people that tamed the Colorado River and transformed southeastern California from a desert into one of the continent's great agricultural regions. Expertly interweaving extensive historical research, interviews and personal observation, deBuys creates a biography of sorts of California's Imperial Valley, one that begins with the valley's first inhabitants, the Yuman-speaking natives, and extends to the present. Recognizing that an "infinity of human lives

and relations" make up "the main cargo of history," deBuys wisely opts to make people the focus of his narrative, introducing readers to a gallery of rogues, dreamers and unsung heroes. Well-chosen quotations and document excerpts bring to life figures such as Penn Phillips, "Mr. Big" of California in the '50s, who deBuys contends made millions by selling worthless land along the polluted Salton Sink; William Smythe, who, half a century earlier, brought evangelical zeal to the cause of "reclaiming" the Colorado Desert for agriculture; and Godfrey Sykes, a 19th-century drifter, "delta rat" and "sympathetic witness to [the region's] troubles and transformation." DeBuys describes the devastating flood of 1905-06, which was caused partially by inept tinkering with the Colorado River and which led to the creation of the Salton Sea, the deepest point on the continent. Years of agricultural runoff and pollution have left the sea highly contaminated, and deBuys devotes the last section of his book to a concise examination of its ecology and current condition, and to possible solutions for saving it. Through his study of the Imperial Valley, deBuys offers a notable exploration of how the American dream has played out in one representative locale. 3 maps, 30 halftones; 100 duotone photos by Joan Myers not seen by PW. (Sept.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

As I live in the Imperial Valley, this is a subject very dear to my heart. The history and current state of the Salton Sea is treated with respect and well researched knowledge. I would like to have seen more photographs of the region - in part to see how others view us, but also to show (as well as telling) outsiders how this place and its people are. Nevertheless this will be a very well read copy before is bequeathed - or falls apart!! If you enjoy this book, you will also enjoy meeting some of the people currently here inÂ Portraits and Voices of the Salton Sea. Norm Niver, as expected, gets to be in both books!

I visited the Salton Sea to photograph birds and found it impossible to describe, telling friends they had to go there themselves to experience the place and the people. Now I tell them to read this book. From the creation of the Sea to the creation of Salvation Mountain, deBuys tells it's colorful history in a prose that fills you with the sounds and smells and people of the Sea and Imperial Valley. Anyone with an interest in man's unlimited folly, vision, corruption, and the coming environmental train-wreck in southern California needs to read this book.

A little too green

This is an unusual book. Recommend to those interested in the region, in remediation, in conservation, and in the overwhelming challenges that only increase in this endless dance between humanity and nature. DeBuys illustrates so well, and quite frankly, so poetically, the true folly of human initiative, and our continual misunderstanding of both the laws of nature, and the law of the land. Myers' stark pictures in black and white capture the the dark humor of what we, as a species, continue to do to the very planet that supports us... A very unique and arresting read. Bravo.

Bravo! Salt Dreams is the first of its kind to wrap up all of the issues surrounding the Salton Sea and Colorado River delta in one volume. The best since Cadillac Desert in its cinematic portrayal of a complicated host of issues. Awesome writing on the heroism of US Fish and Wildlife staff. My only criticism is that Congressman George Brown is slighted; Sonny Bono often called him "Mr. Salton Sea". Certainly, a book Mr. Brown would have loved.

Salt Dreams is a wonderful book about the history and politics behind the creation and existence of the Salton Sea. Though it is a bit off the mark in its description of the Sea's current condition, especially as it applies to Mexico. However, for those that want to learn more about "California's Greatest Resource" this book should be first on the list!

Superlative read revealing the vast natural beauty of the desert and its inhabitants and man's irreversable errors in judging it as a fallen Eden. Together with Cadillac Desert it ranks as a southwest water classic. Beautiful writing and stunning photographs.

Both informative and beautiful book about California's only sea. The history and information is nicely balanced with Myers' great photographs. Anybody interested in California beyond the cities should buy this book.

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