

## SOLVING THE DELTA'S IDENTITY CRISIS

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Record Columnist

In the latest installment of "Invisible Valley," the saga of a region nobody pays attention to, a survey shows 78 percent of Californians don't know what the Delta is.

Or where it is. Or who it is.

Mind-boggling.

Seventy-eight percent of the lotus-eaters in this state haven't got a clue the Delta even exists.

Even as they drink it, fill their swimming pools with it and live on food that couldn't have grown without it.

How's this possible? The Delta is a 1,000-square-mile giant. Twenty-five million people - from Napa to San Diego - rely on it. Isn't anybody curious where their water comes from?

No, according to the survey.

Here are some answers people gave when asked about the Delta.

- » "It's an area where big cities exist;"
- » "It's the oil line from Canada to the United States;"
- » "It's about most of our commerce where the ships come;"
- » "He is not a candidate of my concern;"
- » "If it is the bill about weapons control ... every person in the world should have the right to keep and bear arms;"
- » "I know absolutely nothing."

And maybe somebody said Delta is an airline you can get skymiles for flying, then you can buy bug zappers from SkyMall.

Speaking of that, all those people flying in and out of Bay Area airports: doesn't anybody look down and see the Delta? It's pretty big.

The reporter writing about this dispiriting survey floated some plausible explanations for this staggering geographical ignorance.

"Many factors contribute to the Delta's relative invisibility. Private levees hide many of the Delta's 1,000 miles of waterways, the public has relatively little access to Delta islands, and the meandering nature of countless streams and sloughs west of Stockton makes it more difficult to identify with the Delta than, say, with one large body of water."

And there are no major cities on it, and you need a boat to fully experience it, and there's no TV show based in it like "Delta Shore," or "Survivor: Little Potato Slough."

There's also a geo-cultural dominance by coastal cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, said Robert Benedetti, director of the Jacoby Center at University of the Pacific.

"They have drawn the cultural map of California," Benedetti said. And the Delta isn't on it. Knott's Berry Farm you can find. Not the Delta.

Also, I have come to learn over the years that many multigenerational big-city dwellers are totally estranged from nature. To them, eggs come from a supermarket, not a chicken. Water comes from a tap, not a place.

Before we get on a high horse about dumb Los Angelenos, though, remember that a 2007 survey found half of Stockton's residents were unsure, or had no idea, where the San Joaquin Delta is, either.

After that revelation, I went out and pounded the pavement in Stockton neighborhoods. I asked Delta residents if they knew what the Delta was.

» "No," said a woman who'd lived in Stockton 50 years. "I don't read much;"

» "No. What is it?" asked a man who lived in Boggs Tract - as the Delta lapped about a football field's distance from his front porch;

» "I've heard of it," said a guy walking his dog on Weber Point. If he'd taken 10 steps to the south, he'd have fallen off the seawall and into the Delta, dog and all.

Yet he didn't know it was there.

There's something innately withdrawn about the Delta. Like Greta Garbo, it wants to be alone. Its success at eluding most people is part of its tranquil charm.

Overall, though, its invisibility isn't a good thing.

Sooner or later, California voters will decide the Delta's fate when they vote on the state water bond, and a possible peripheral canal or tunnel.

Normally, voters might measure the benefits of "reliable" water against the costs, including environmental damage.

But they can't assess damage to a place they think doesn't exist.

Is there a way to raise the Delta's profile? Yes. Restore the Delta is preparing a pro-Delta documentary it hopes to get through the collective coastal noggin.

Another effective tool is tourism. Waterfront tourism replaced San Francisco's maritime industry; it can and should replace Stockton's long-gone waterfront industry.

No grandiose projects will be necessary. Just the sort of things Delta boaters like: casual bars, cafes and marinas. People will get to know Garbo for the lovely lady she is.

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