

# THOU SHALT OFFER SALT

DISPATCHES FROM THE SALTON SEA



STUART PALLEY



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"Beauty and folly are old companions."

- Benjamin Franklin



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# INTRODUCTION



*“All good boats go to heaven, and the bad ones are laid to rest on the shores of the Salton Sea. For every dream come true there's a broken one lying encrusted in salt along the periphery of this manmade folly. Amongst quiet hollows of abandoned homes and dead-palm avenues, whispers of the American Dream bygone. The lights of the Coachella Valley pollute the Milky Way in the distance and the rumble of the train breaks the silence. Walking along the shore my boots crunch over dead Tilapia, sinking into the primal mud of dead fish and God knows what other pollution. It feels like home now.”*

*- Field notes from the Salton Sea, October 2013.*

Low down in the Colorado Desert nestled in the Imperial and Coachella Valleys lies the Salton Sea, located between the shadows of civilization and the end of the earth. The Mexican frontier calls to the south and the oasis of Palm Springs sits to the north. Surrounded by mountains to the east and the west, the Salton Sea is an accidental manmade geographic feature quite unmatched anywhere in the United States.

The Salton Sea is a result of mankind's folly and arrogance, a quest for domination over the natural landscape. A century after its formation, the Salton Sea's slow death has accelerated with drought and changes in water usage and management. Towns along the shore have suffered economically.

This book seeks document the current state of the Salton Sea, - a snapshot of where it is today in 2013. What will it

be like 5, 10, 50 years from now? Will it have dried up? I don't know the answer, and neither does Imperial County, Riverside County, the State of California, or even the sea's residents.

This book is about images, the stark beauty and visual appeal that such a place has. Despite the Salton Sea's issues, its beauty is undeniable, drawing photographers and artists for decades.

Residents still call the place home, and the sunsets are as beautiful as any Pacific Ocean evening. My photography of the Salton Sea will continue for the rest of my life, as the sea changes with the passage of time. I hope for this book to serve as a record for the Salton Sea's state in 2013, the "first chapter" in an ongoing documentary work.

Stuart Palley, October 2013

# Salton Sea Map



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SALTON SEA

The Salton Sea was created by accident at the turn of the 20th century when irrigation canals diverting the Colorado River for agricultural purposes in Imperial County burst their banks. The water flowed to the lowest point in the area for over a year unabated, which at that time was the dry ancient Lake Cahuilla. The area is more than 200 feet below sea level. Before the 1905 flood of the Colorado River that created the Salton Sea, the area was in competition with Death Valley for recognition as the lowest point in the United States.

Ancient Lake Cahuilla is essentially a geographic bowl with no natural outlets such as streams or rivers the flow to the ocean, due to its extremely low elevation. The New River and Alamo River actually flow into the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea is approximately 30 miles tall, 15 miles wide, with varying depth. The Salton Sea is up to 52 feet deep, but on average is shallow and only 14 feet deep. The northern end has steeper beaches than the south, so the most evident signs of drying out are on the south end. Total square mileage of water coverage is roughly 376 square miles.

Eventually the leak in the diverted Colorado River was plugged, but the Salton Sea remained. Today the sea is fed by runoff from agricultural fields that surround part of its perimeter, and runoff from the Alamo and New Rivers. The Salton Sea kept a relatively consistent shoreline over the decades, and by the 1950s and 1960s communities were established along its shores with names like Bombay Beach, North Shore, Desert Shores, and Salton City.” These were the postwar boom times, and real estate agents and land speculators sold hundreds of plots of land in Salton City, promising it as the “Salton Riviera” to eager people wanting a second home or investment property. Architect Albert

Frey designed the Salton Bay Yacht club, and speedboat races were held on the Salton Sea. It was a popular stop with water skiers and bird watchers alike.

Lots had power and waterlines, paved streets, and street signs. Many lots were left empty, while other lots had trailers and homes built on them. The 1970s brought an economic recession and speculation declined, and in the 1980s, extra rain and runoff caused the Salton Sea to flood. Most towns were inundated. Bombay Beach and Desert Shores were nearly destroyed until an emergency dike was built. This left half the homes on dry land, the other half separated in salty water by an earthen dike.

By now the real estate speculations in places like Salton City were bygone, and concerns about the salinity of the water and polluted runoff from the New River (drains from Mexicali, Mexico), hampered interest in continuing to develop the area. By the 1990s all that was left around the Salton Sea were hardy souls still living in the area, migrant agricultural workers, abandoned homes and trailers, and rows of paved streets with empty lots.

Palm trees, synonymous with Southern California and the desert, withered and died where they were planted in the sand. Palm Trees of the kind that were planted are not native, and they didn't last long in the withering sun and 115-degree summer heat. The skeletal remains of palm trees against a stark blue sky, beige sand, and rusting aluminum trailers create a Martian landscape, at the very least. Add to this the buildings that flooded were crusted in salt crystals, giving a surreal look amidst the desert landscape.

There is no natural outlet to the Salton Sea and there are thousands of acres of agriculture in the Imperial and Coachella valleys surrounding the area. Runoff from these operations drain into the Salton Sea, along with

excess fertilizer which contains nitrogen, phosphates, and heavy metals such as Selenium. These metals can accrue in the mud at the bottom of the Salton Sea. Over time the metals build up. "Several heavy metals and selenium were found at elevated levels within some sediments."

With high demand for water from municipalities like San Diego, some farmers have found it more profitable to sell their water to the cities under the table from the Imperial Irrigation District and let their fields go dry in the desert. The result is the agricultural runoff that sustained the Salton Sea began to level off, meaning the sea evaporated water faster than it received runoff. The net result was a reduction in the sea's shoreline, beginning in 2010 and accelerating from 2011-2012. I photographed a spot in 2007 that I returned to again in 2011, 2012, and 2013, and compared the photos side by side. The sea is visually half a mile receded from the 2007 photograph. This has exposed a salty crust on the surface of the Salton Sea, and nobody knows what's in it.

The Imperial Valley is wide open and has few geographic features to prevent strong wind currents. There is no natural vegetation to keep the possibly contaminated soil from blowing away. The wind creates dust storms, kicking up clouds of dust unhealthy for humans to breathe. The Aral Sea in Kazakhstan was in a similar situation in the 1990s, and due to Communist mismanagement of irrigation practices, dried and sank to a salty crust. The net result was a biological and wildlife disaster, and huge increase in asthma amongst the population (Gerd Ludwig).

The Banning Pass separates the Los Angeles Basin and Inland Empire from the Coachella and Imperial Valleys. Interstate 10 passes through Banning Pass and the main Union Pacific double track line from Los

Angeles to Forth Worth passes through as well. The rail and road follow the original Butterfield Stage route into Los Angeles, since the Banning Pass was the way to get from East to West. Today there are also thousands of windmills at the Banning Pass to generate wind power, due to the strong wind currents created by the desert's climate systems mixing with the semi-arid chaparral climate of the Inland Empire. Wind kicked up 60 miles south in the Salton Sea could potentially be filled with harmful particulates for humans to breath, and fairly easily picked up and blown towards Los Angeles. The Imperial Valley already has the highest rate of asthma amongst children compared to other counties.

Since there is no natural outlet at the Salton Sea, it has steadily increased in salinity content, heavy metals from agricultural runoff, and other pollutants. The Salton Sea is at 45,000ppm of salinity, whereas the Pacific Ocean is only at 35,000. Every few years, millions of fish, mainly Tilapia die off in the sea.

There is also a human side to the Salton Sea, towns inhabited with trailers, those on the run from the law, those on welfare, and a few hardy "Desert Rats" who eschew regular societal integration. The water levels of the Salton Sea have been dropping, and this could be catastrophic because nobody knows what is in the muck at the bottom of the sea, that if exposed to the high desert winds, could blow into dust storms and blow towards Los Angeles, causing similar health issues to those seen at the Aral Sea.

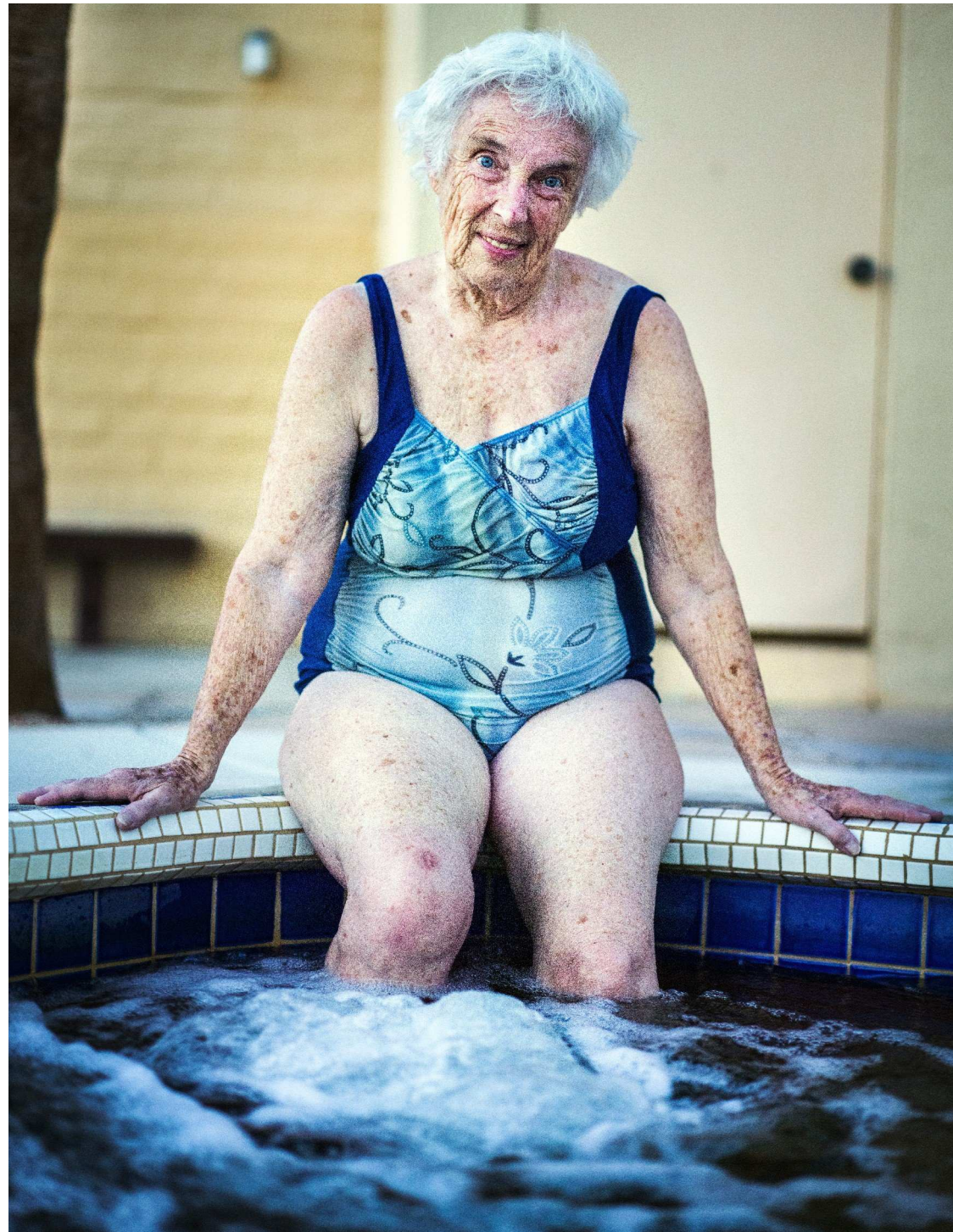
**Right:** A dead tree on a newly formed salt flat near Red Hill Marina at the south end of the Salton Sea. In 2007 this tree was partially submerged and was used by birds for nesting. The nests have since been abandoned and fallen apart, without any water to protect young birds from predators like Coyotes.





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# PEOPLE



Donna Solem has been going to the Fountain of Youth Spa every winter for the last 50 years. Her parents first came to the spot after World War II. Solem is originally from the St. Paul, Minnesota area.



Norm Niver with his dock on Riviera Keys in the background. The dock is not longer at sea level and has begun to collapse from lack of use over the past few years. As of mid-October 2013, Norm's wife Connie was beginning to tear the dock down.



Leonard Knight, creator of Salvation Mountain in 2010. Knight no longer lives at the site of Salvation Mountain near Niland, but is rumored to be in a nursing home in San Diego after suffering a stroke. Rumors abounded that he has died, but like the desert winds that blow through at night, stories come and go, and the truth is hard to find.



Buck and Naomi Griffis watch the sunset in their golf cart at Bombay Beach on the eastern Shore of the Salton Sea. Naomi is Buck's daughter who was visiting.



Fred Garbutt, proprietor and owner of the International Bananna Museum on Highway 111 near North Shore. Garbutt opened the business in the last year after purchasing a managerie of bannana paraphanelia from a collector in California. Garbutt acknowledges the wacky nature of his business, but said "as long as you come give me a dollar I don't give a fuck."

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# PLACES







Sign marking the entrance to Salton City, 2012.



Abandoned building in the flooded part of Bombay Beach

Sign marking the entrance to the Riviera Keys neighborhood of Salton City



Empty lots along a subdivision of Desert Shores.



**Left and right:** Former site of the Salton City Yacht Club, Salton City, 2012.

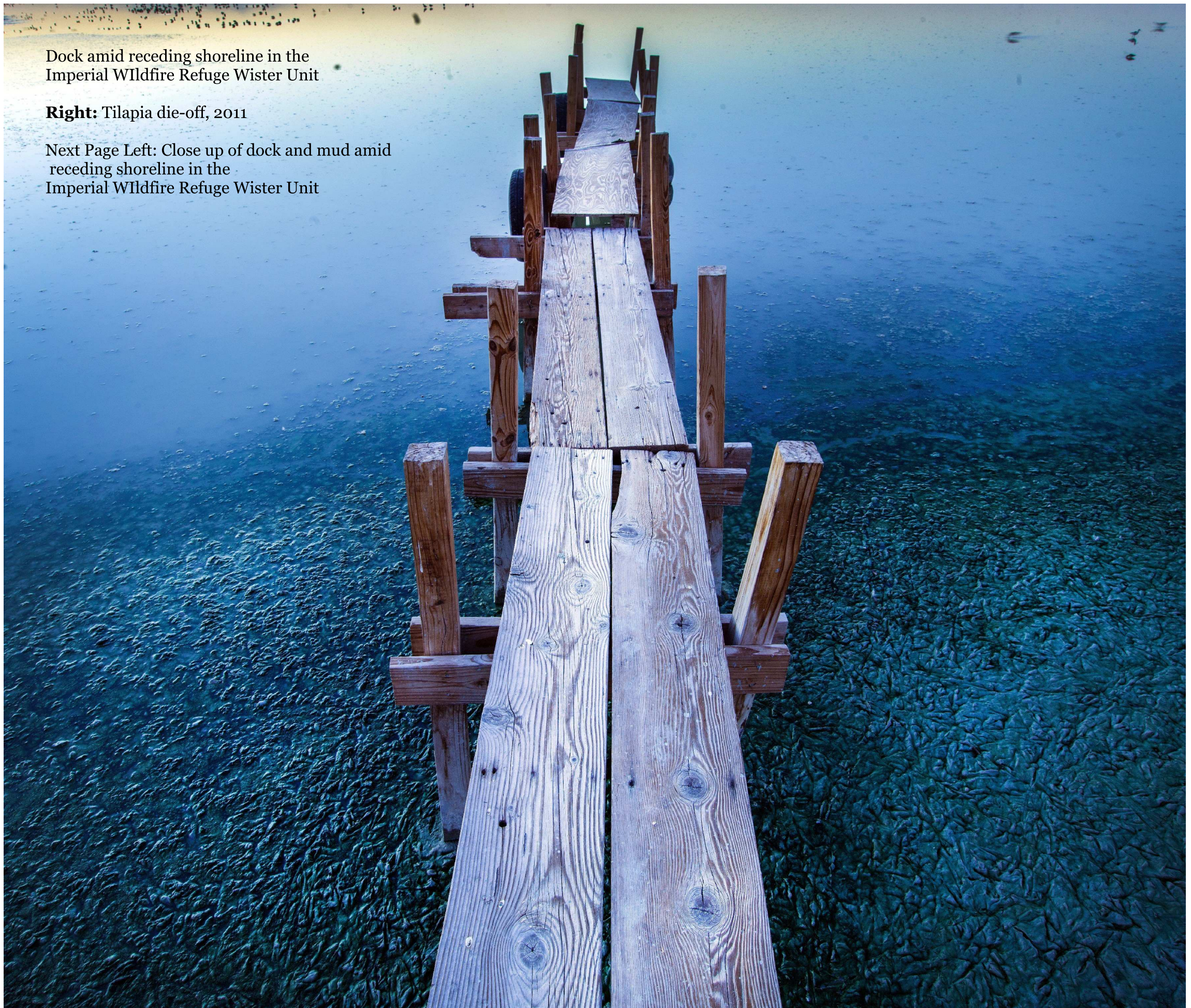




Dock amid receding shoreline in the  
Imperial Wildfire Refuge Wister Unit

**Right:** Tilapia die-off, 2011

Next Page Left: Close up of dock and mud amid  
receding shoreline in the  
Imperial Wildfire Refuge Wister Unit













Three trees near Red Hill Marina, 2007. The same scene on right, 2013.





Red Hill Marina, 2007. The same scene on right, 2013.





Red Hill Marina boat ramp, 2007. The same scene on right, 2013.







Abandoned cafe on Highway 111 near the Imperial and Riverside County lines. This restaurant has been abandoned since at least 2007. The RV park the arrow points to is still in operation.



Art installation at East Jesus art community, a collective of artists living in Slab City, near Niland. East Jesus is on the homesite of Container Mike, a Slab City resident who died of a heart attack. I last saw Container Mike in 2010, and when I revisited in 2013, the artists who had taken over his spot updated me on Mike's death.



Sign advertising lots for sale near the North Shore Yacht Club in North Shore. The sign painted over the old advertisement for the motel at North Shore, which was demolished in 2008 or 2009.



Home abandoned while under construction in Salton City. There was a spurt of new building in Salton City, which abruptly ended in October 2008 after the Great Panic and the California housing market bubble burst. This house and others in the area are half-built, with insulation, windows, plumbing, and electrical already installed.

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The restored North Shore Yacht club off Highway 111 in North Shore. For years it was abandoned and covered in graffiti. By 2011 it had reopened as a community center after receiving a grant for it's rebuilding. The North Shore Yacht Club also housed the Salton Sea Museum, which has since moved. My grandmother said she used to go to the Aces n' Spades restaurant which occupied the building decades ago.



An outbuilding of an abandoned motel in Salton Sea Beach at sunrise in 2012. A palm tree droops on the barbed wire of the chain link fence, seemingly melted under the desert heat, giving up hope on the Salton Sea and it's future.





Dead and mummified Tilapia at Salton Sea beach during the first rays of sunrise



Step down into a mineral pool at a spa since abandoned near the Wister unit of the Imperial Wildlife area. According to locals there is also an abandoned ice plant nearby as well.





Pilings at the North Shore Yacht Club. The spit of land to the left is part of the marina that used to exist at the site, complete with a Texaco gas station and sign.



Abandoned house, Salton Sea Beach. This home and others nearby are popular with photographers driving through, and has been repeatedly vandalized and spray painted.

**Previous:** Sections of the shore that used to be underwater, and birds flying at sunrise on the shore.



"Tacos Jalisciencs" off Highway 86 in Westmoreland. For every operating business there are seemingly many more that are abandoned, boarded up, or burnt down in hardscrabble agricultural towns like Westmoreland, a few miles south of the Salton Sea.



Water ski and tire, Imperial Wildlife Area Wister Unit.

A senior citizen dries off in the sun after going for a late afternoon swim at the Fountain of Youth Spa off Highway 111 on the southeastern shore of the Salton Sea. The Fountain of Youth Spa is a 55+ community comprised mainly of mobile homes and RVs occupied by seasonal residents. There are a few hardy year-round residents, but the vast majority come from colder places like Canada and the American Upper Midwest during winter months.



**Previous Page**

**left:** A dock extends into much along the south shore of the Salton Sea at the Imperial Wildlife Area Wister Unit. The blue-green hue of the mud comes from algae on the surface. The muck is a sediment rich in organic material from bird droppings and decomposing fish. The patterns in the muck are the footprints of birds who live and walk along the shore.

**Previous Page right:**

A dead fish in a small flood channel cut into otherwise rock-hard dirt in the Riviera Keys subdivision of Salton City.





**Left:** Skeletal remains of palm trees at the once thriving Salton City Yacht Club area all that's left decades after the Salton Riviera was in it's prime. The abandoned building and swimming pool were bulldozed years ago, and the area is now little more than a decrepit dirt parking lot surrounded by dead trees.



**Above:** A vintage Imperial Irrigation District Department of Water and Power building in Brawley, CA. The IID manages water supplies in the area and also provides power to the region.

**Right:** An Imperial Irrigation District Department of Water and Power barricade knocked over after torrential rains in August 2013 washed out roads throughout Imperial County. Spare road repair funds and low use of many roads mean that repair is not a high priority, and this particular road will probably never be fixed.

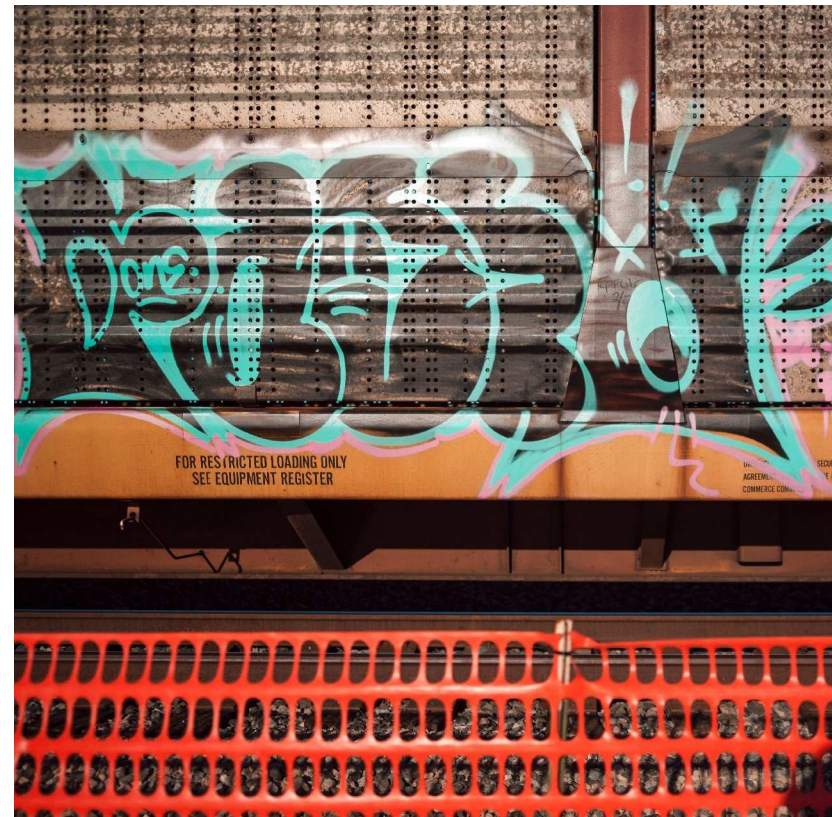
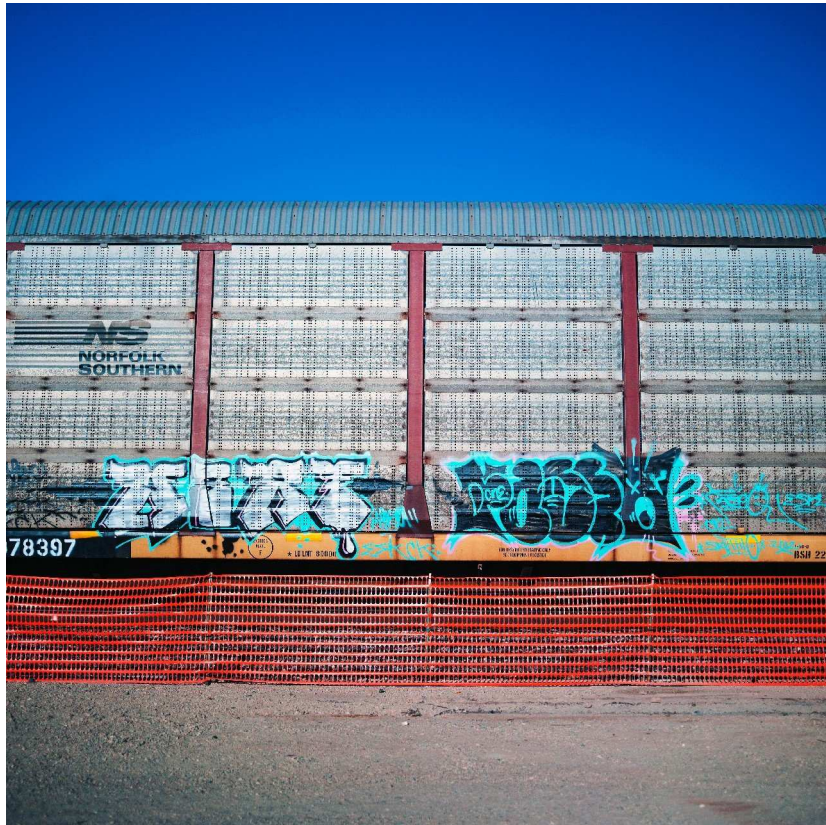




METER

PATENT 6,786,484

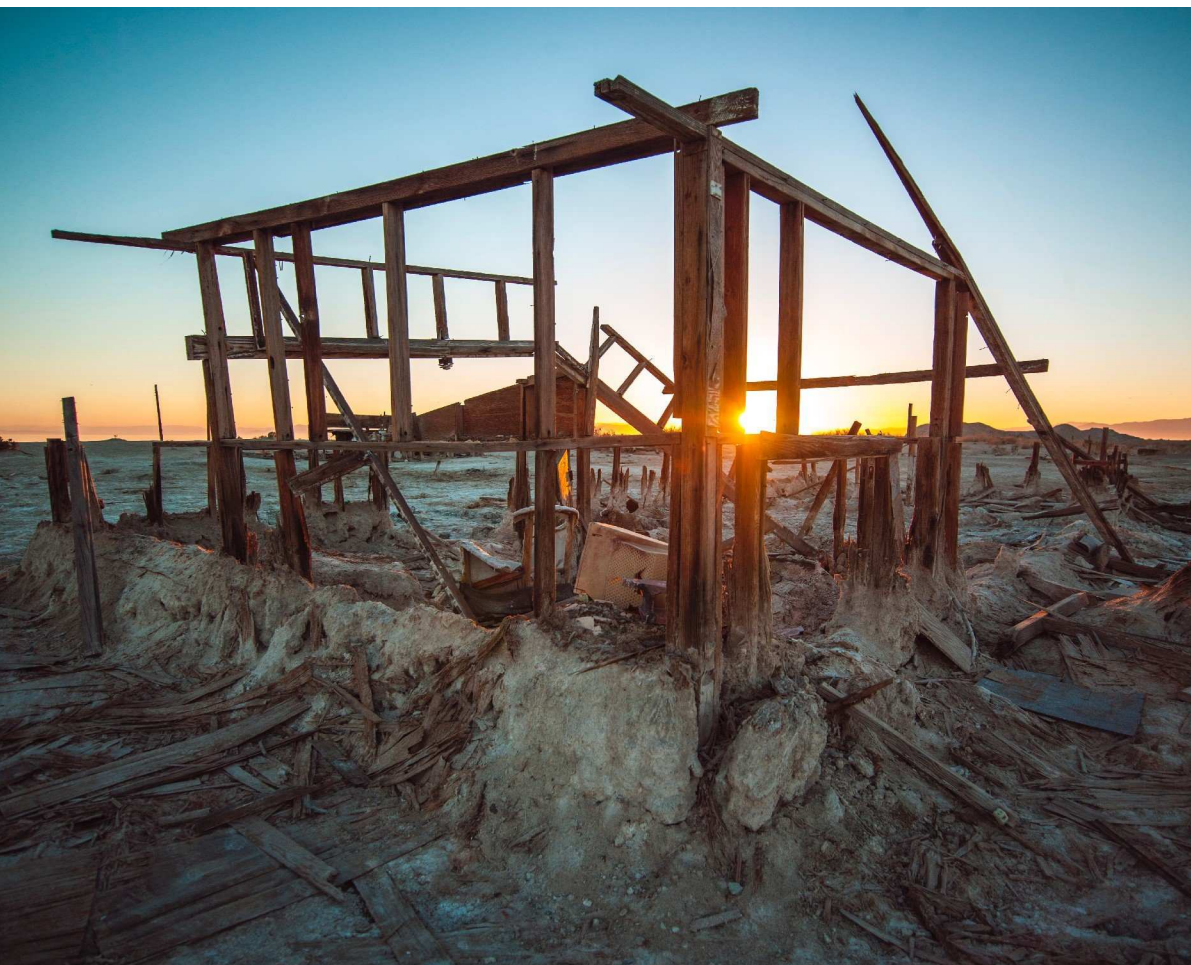
UNIVERSAL  
PATENT 6,786,484



Graffiti boxcars on the Union Pacific Railroad line that runs parallel to Highway 111 on much of the eastern shore of the Salton Sea. The Union Pacific line was recently double-tracked, and freight trains rumble through every 20 or 30 minutes. It is the main line between the Port of Los Angeles and points east, like Fort Worth Texas, where most trains head. Their cargo is filled with shipping containers from Asia carrying everything from electronic goods to cars.

**Right clockwise:** An abandoned home in Bombay Beach, a Union Pacific double stacktrain, and trash around Bombay Beach.

**Next Page:** The Alamo River seen from the air at sunrise. The Alamo and New Rivers were created when the Salton Sea was formed in 1905, and today carry irrigation and rainwater runoff from Mexico to the south.



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# NIGHT





Sea & Sun Motel, still open for business under a full moon. The Sea & Sun Motel is the only lodging between Coachella and Brawley, a 70 mile distance.



The sand and dirt golf course for the Fountain of Youth Spa at dusk under a full moon. By mid-October the course was largely empty, but fills up in the winter as more "Snowbirds" come into the area. Snowbirds are Canadians who come to the deserts of the American Southwest during the winter. The strength of the Canadian Dollar has also led to an influx of the Snowbirds.



Home in Salton Sea Beach at dawn





West Shores Market and Liquor store, Salton City. The Post Office for this part of Salton City is located inside of the market.



"Godzilla," an abandoned speedboat on the eastern shore of the Salton Sea off Highway 111 in what appears to be an abandoned marina. The lights of the Coachella Valley are in the distance.



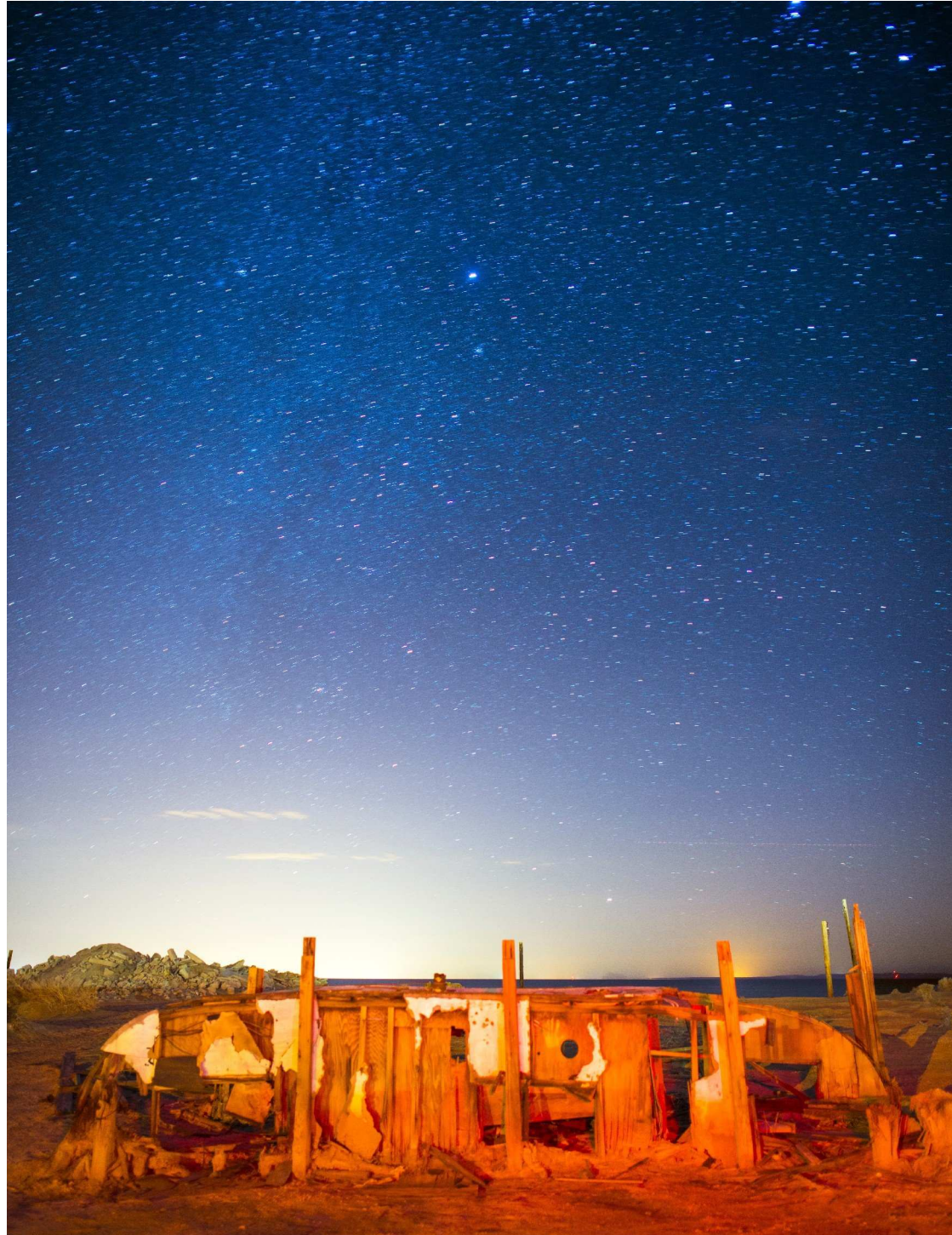
Dead Tilapia at night under the Milky Way at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area headquarters near North Shore. The entire circumference of the Salton Sea has a thick sheet of dead fish, mostly Tilapia that are like rings in a bathtub, showing the shrinking of the sea and the multiple fish die-offs.



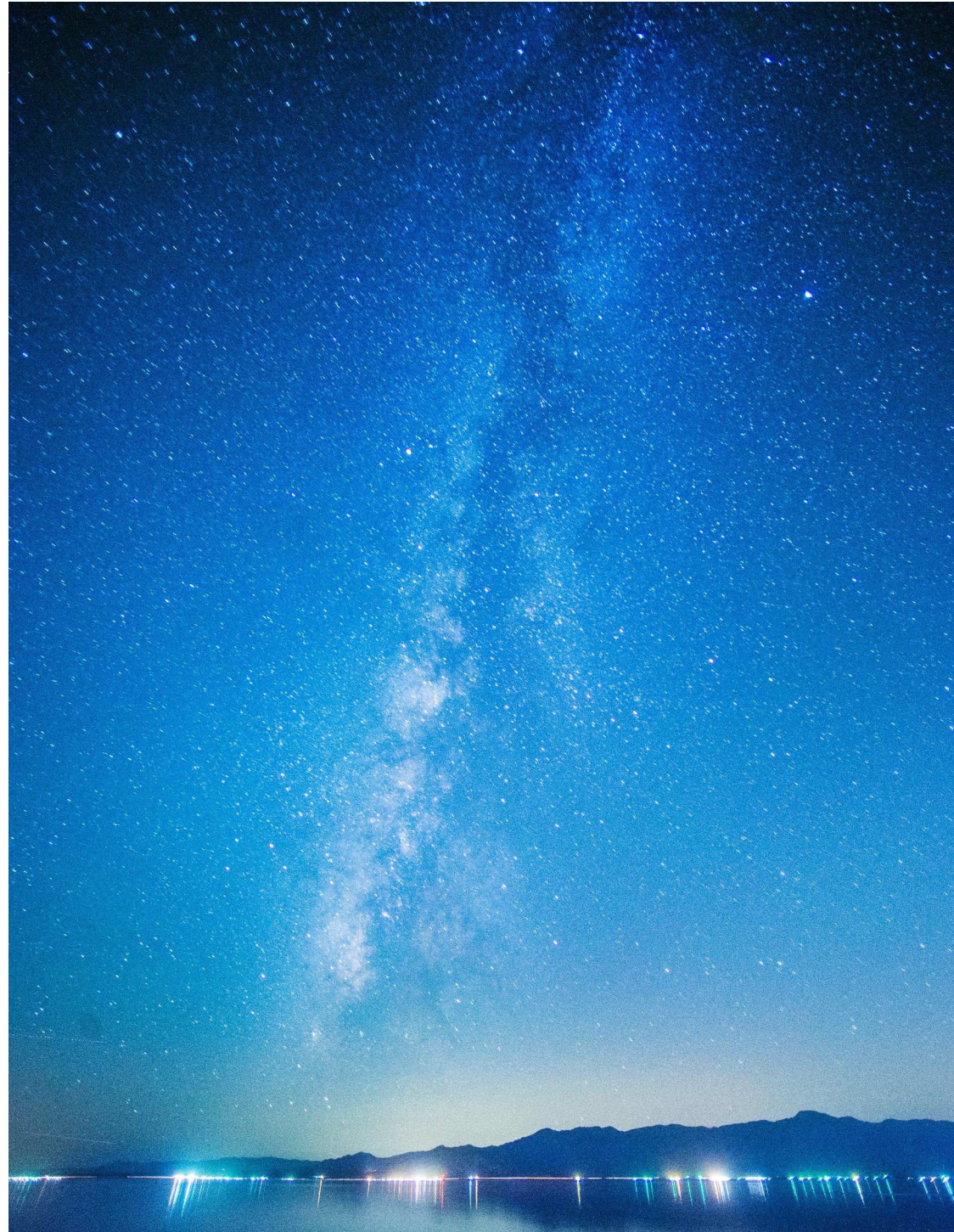
A long exposure of the Salton Sea looking west as seen from Parkside Drive near the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. The lights to the far left are from Salton City, a 40-mile drive, but only 15 miles in a straight line.



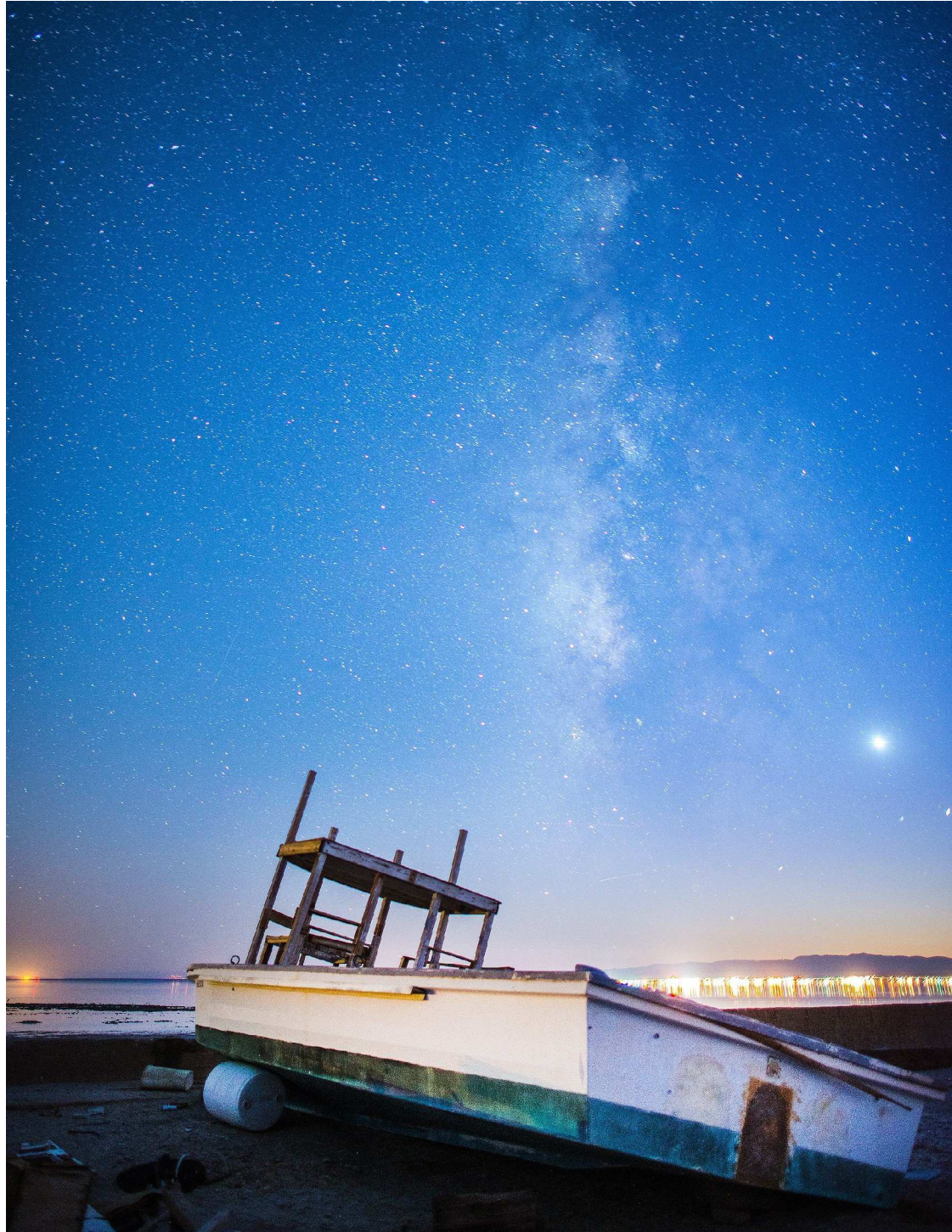
Remnants of a pier at Bombay Beach in the section that flooded in the early 1980s.



Abandoned trailer in the flooded portion of Bombay Beach. In the early 1980s rising Salton Sea levels inundated the town, and a dike was built to protect the part of town still on dry land. The unlucky side closer to the Salton Sea was abandoned, and this trailer is one of the remnants. This trailer, amongst others, are often photographed and will turn up in a Google search of Bombay Beach.



The Milky Way as seen from the Salton Sea State Recreation Area. There is little light pollution and the stargazing is incredible in the area. The further east one goes into the mountains, the better the conditions get.



Boathenge I





Boathenge II

The famous three trees of Redhill Marina at the South End of the Salton Sea (SEOTSS). These are the most photographed trees at the Salton Sea. They have appeared in the work of various photographers who have worked in the area ,



"God Is Love" reads out on the main facade of Salvation Mountain near Niland.



Newly planted field being irrigated at night, Vista Santa Rosa, Unincorporated Riverside County. The flat land surrounding the Salton Sea is largely used for agriculture.



Same field under irrigation as left.



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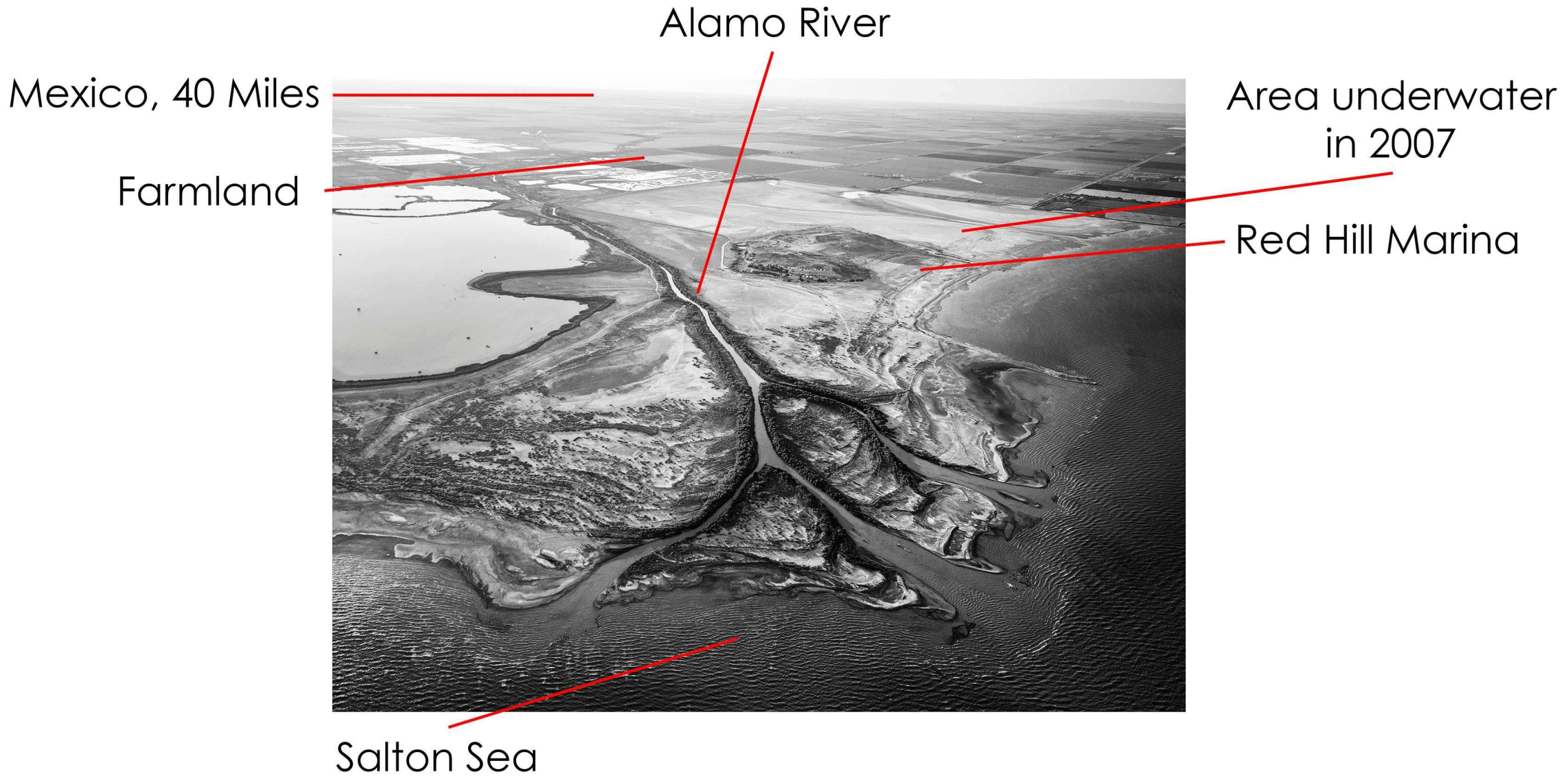
# AIRBORNE







Alamo River and Red Hill Marina  
at the South end of the Salton Sea, looking South





Laborers working in a field during the early morning near Mecca. Mecca is another small town near the Salton Sea whose lifeblood is agriculture. The town also is primarily Spanish speaking.

Date trees seen from the air near the intersection of Highway 86 and 195 north of the Salton Sea.



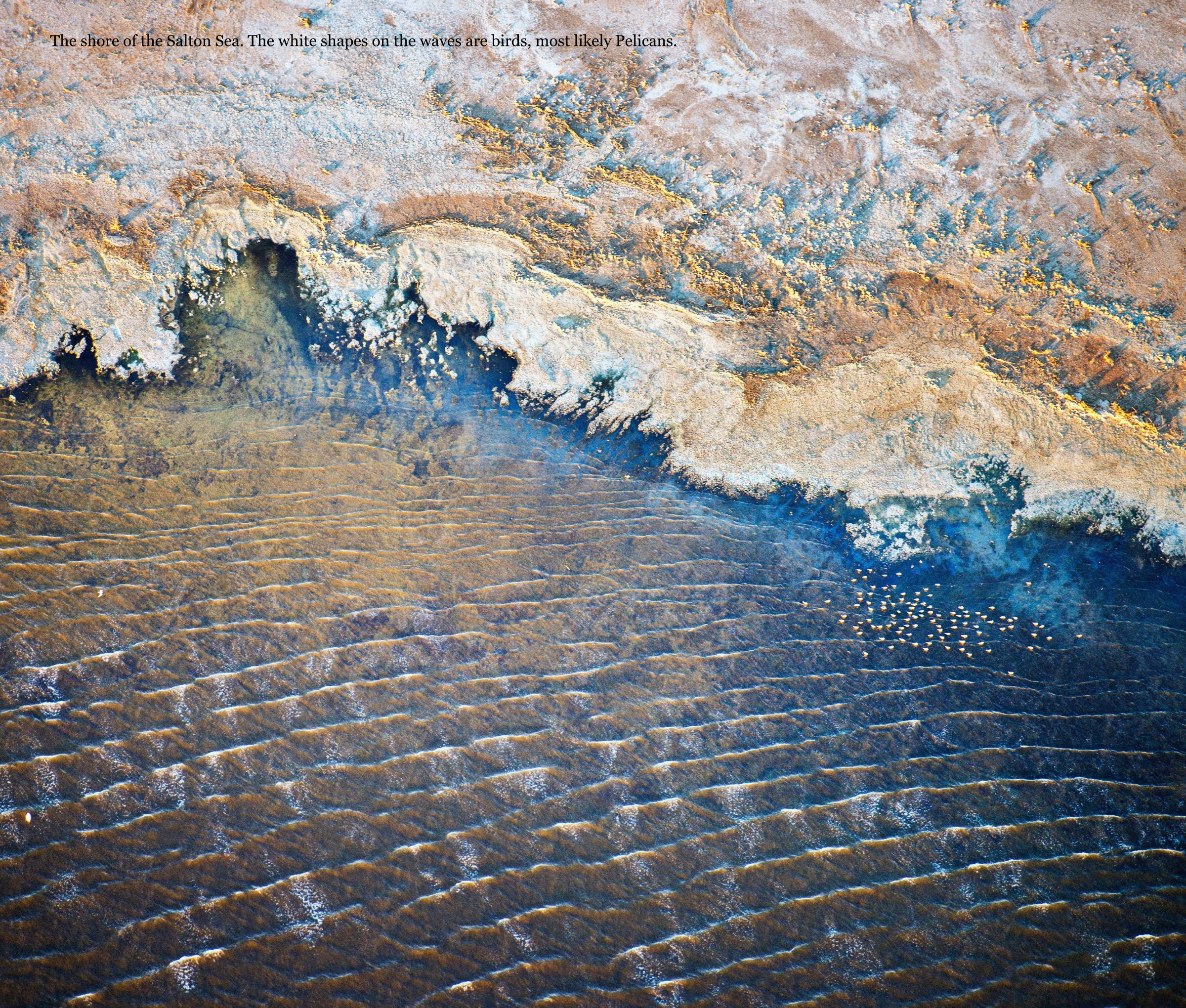




The Salton Sea from the air, south end. The specks on the water are birds in the image on the right. The left hand image shows mud volcanoes active from geothermal activity in the area.

**Next page:** A tractor plows a field near Mecca at dawn

The shore of the Salton Sea. The white shapes on the waves are birds, most likely Pelicans.





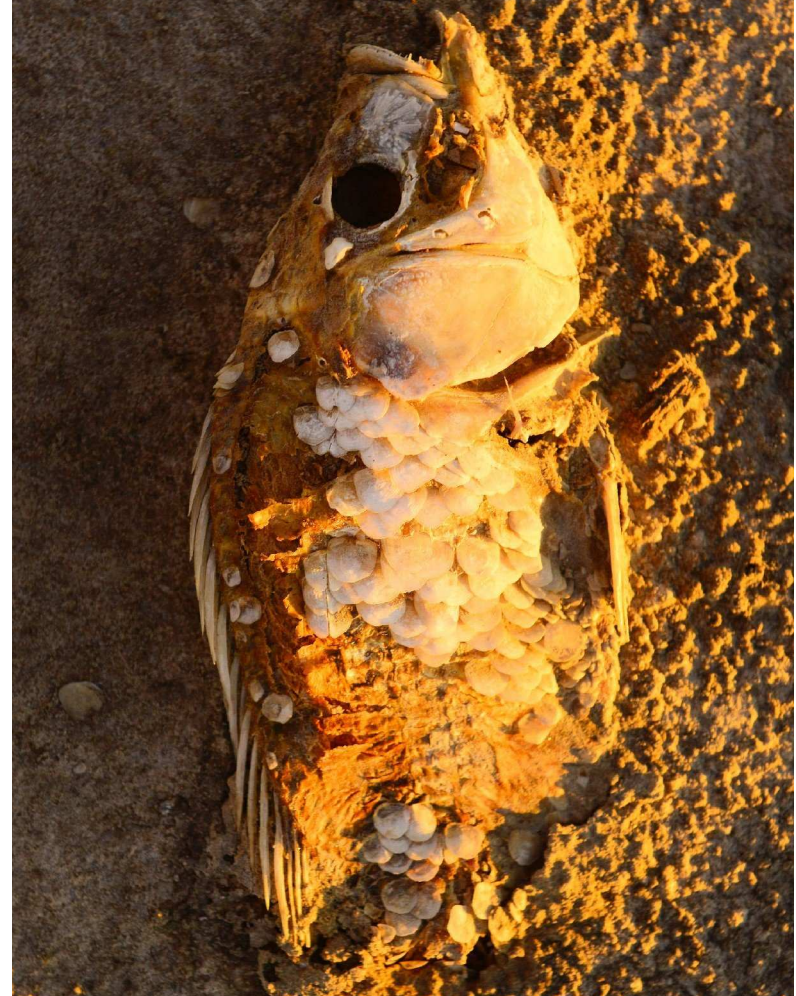
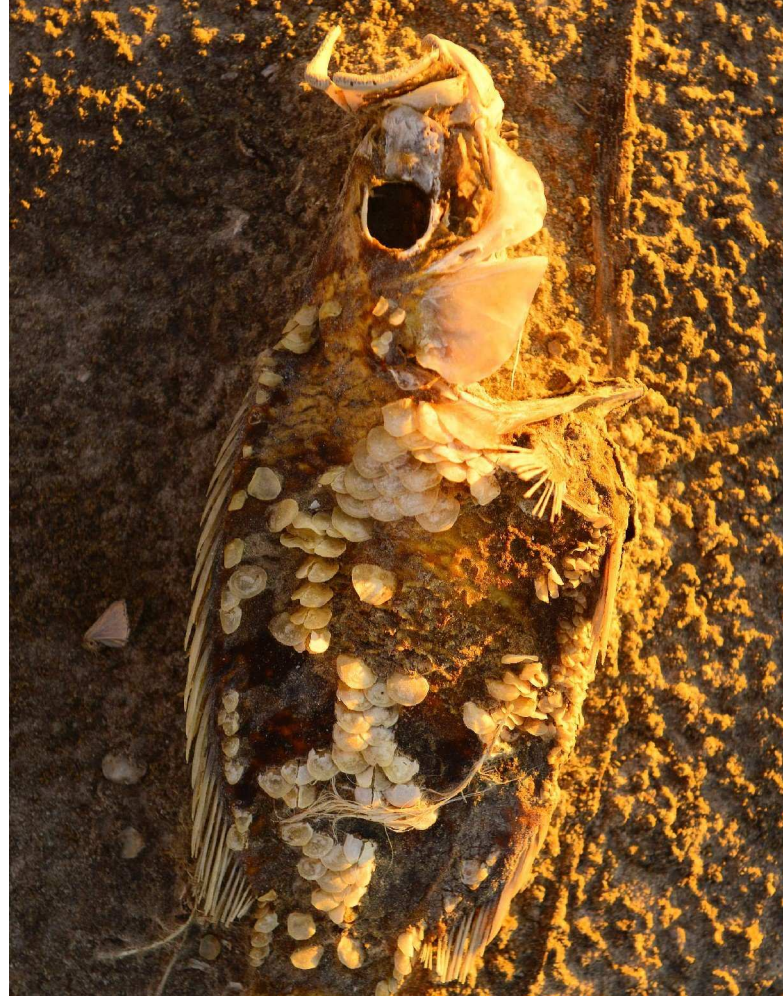




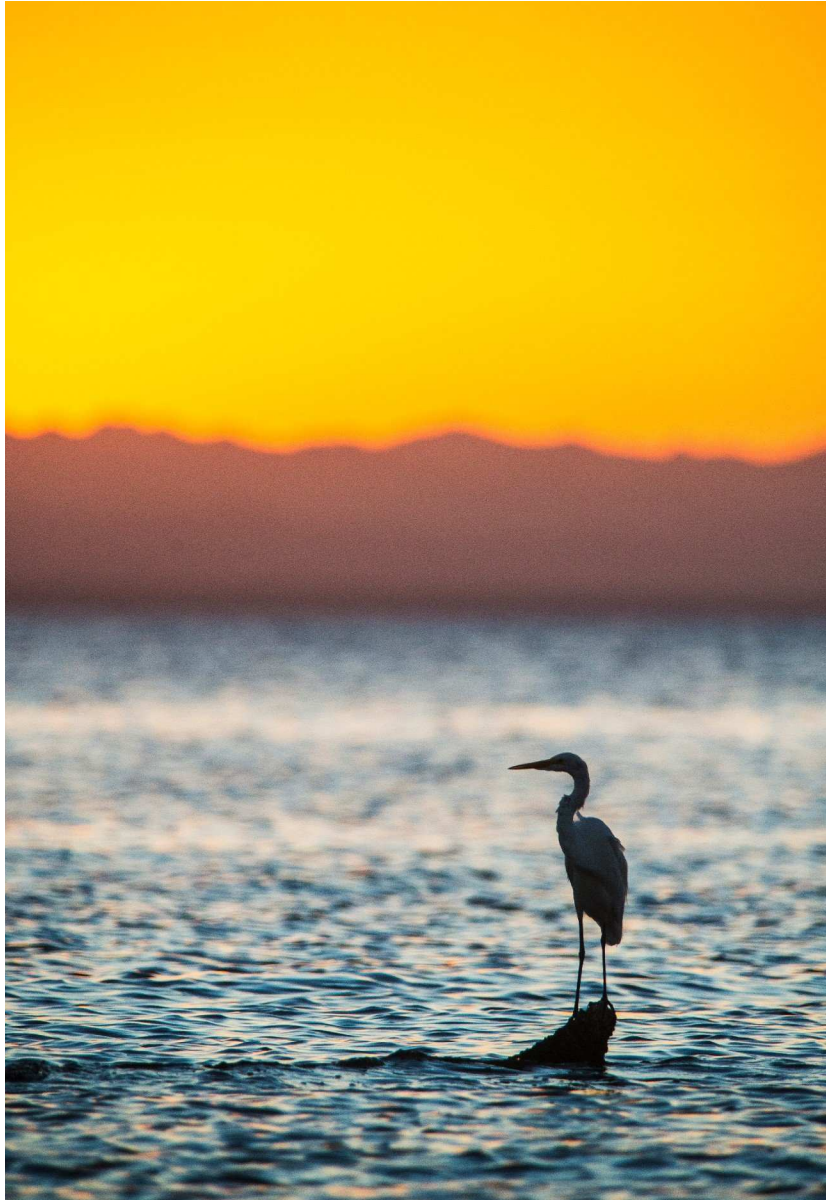


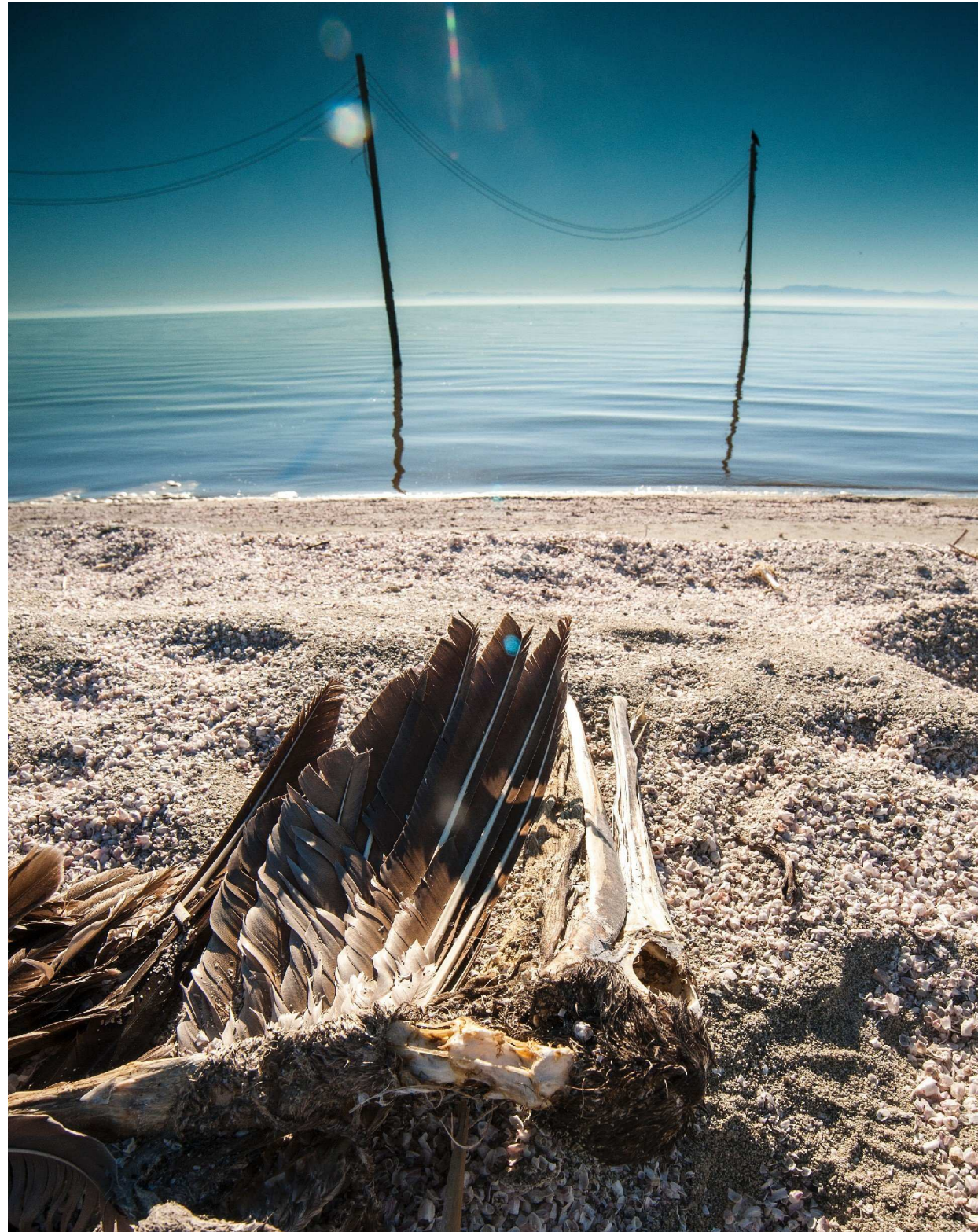
# LIFE & DEATH











**Right:** A dead and desiccated bird, most likely a California Brown Pelican near Niland Marina in 2009. Periodic outbreaks of Avian Botulism occur when dead Tilapia infected with the toxin rise to the surface after dying off during alga blooms, and the birds eat the infected fish.

**Next Page:** Various wings and bones from dead Pelicans and other birds encrusted in a newly-formed salt flat surrounding Red Hill Marina on the south end of the Salton Sea.

**Previous Page:** Dead Tilapia are a common sight on the shoreline of the entire Salton Sea. Left are Tilapia at Red Hill Marina, right at Bombay Beach.

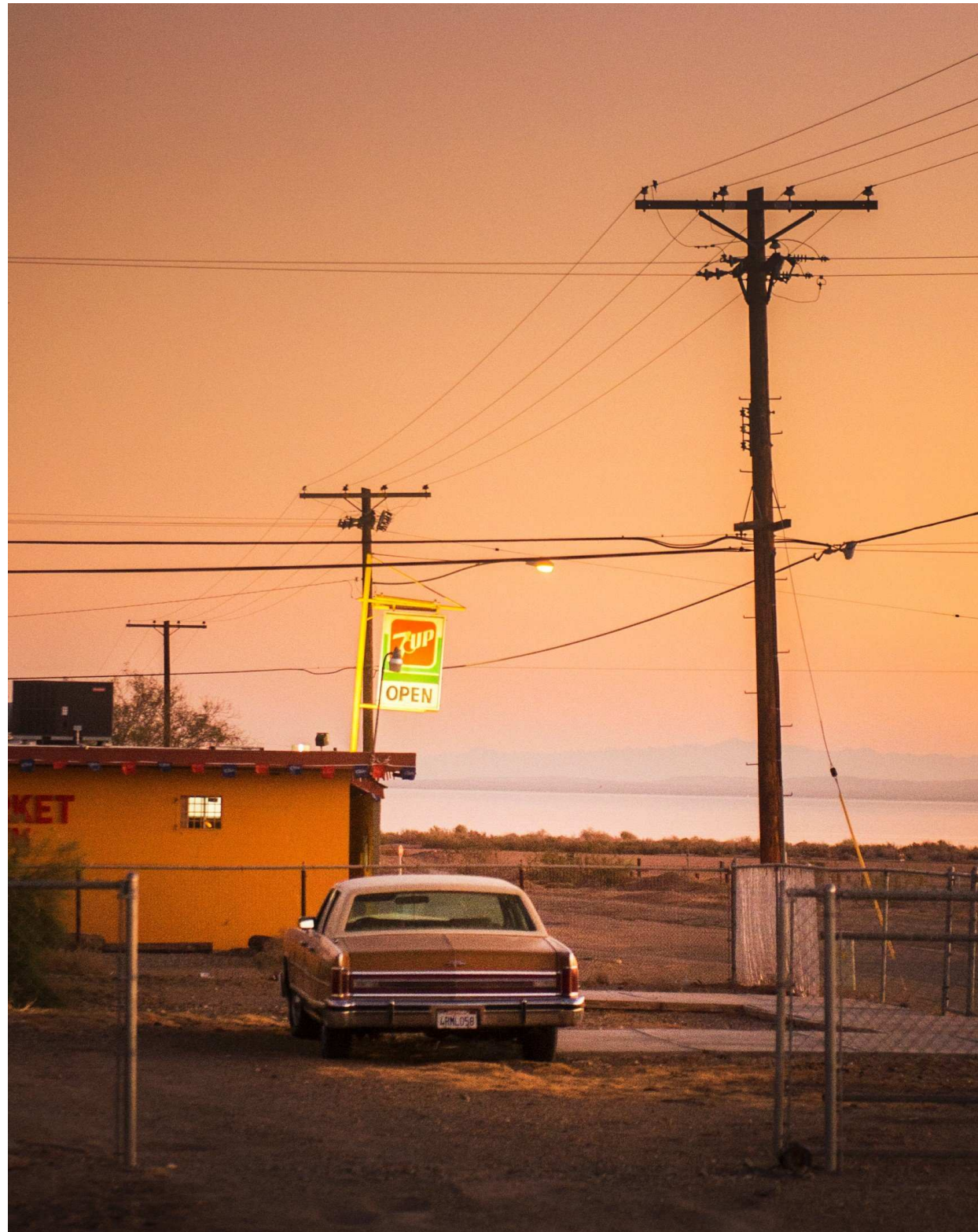




Parked car at sunset, Bombay Beach.

Overleaf left: "Save The Sea" stencil graffiti in Salton Sea Beach at sunrise

Overleaf right: End of the road in a subdivision of Desert Shores at dusk



SAVE

TREE

FOR

EVERY





END

Handwritten graffiti on a red diamond-shaped sign, including the word 'LOVE' and other illegible markings.

Handwritten graffiti on a metal barrel, including the word 'FIML' and other illegible markings.







GOD IS

LOVE

1857-18  
SAY JESUS I'M  
A SINNER PLEASE  
COME UPON MY  
BODY AND INTO  
MY HEART

FAITH  
MEEKNESS  
TEMPERANCE  
LOVE  
GOODNESS  
LONG SUFFERING  
JOY  
PEACE  
GENTLENESS

JOHN 3-16  
FOR GOD SO  
LOVED THE  
WORLD THAT HE  
GAVE HIS ONLY  
BORN SON THAT  
WHOEVER BELIEVES  
IN HIM SHOULD NOT  
PERISH BUT HAVE  
LASTING LIFE.

THE LORD'S PRAYER  
Our Father who art in  
Heaven, hallowed be thy  
name. Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done on earth  
as it is in Heaven. Give us  
this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our  
debts, as we forgive our  
debtors. And lead us not  
into temptation, but  
deliver us from the evil  
one. For thine is the  
kingdom, and the power,  
and the glory forever, O  
God the Father. Amen.

YOU  
FORGIVEN  
GOD  
HOLY  
BIBLE