

AUTUMN JOURNEYS

Setting Sail on the Winding Waterways of California’s Delta

The sprawling 1,250-square-mile system of water and farmland in Northern California is a four-season destination for watersport fans and home to many riverbank communities.

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Sailboats at Owl Harbor Marina. Once a vast marshland and now unrecognizable from its original form, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta remains a deeply connected interplay between land and water. Drew Kelly for The New York Times

Dr. Peter Moyle, a professor emeritus at the University of California, Davis’s Department of Wildlife, Fish and Conservation Biology, has been studying the Delta for decades. Dr. Moyle has focused his research on the endangered Delta smelt and other fish of the Suisun Marsh, an area which, he said, “most resembles the original Delta.” He has no doubt that, whatever the path forward, major change is a given.

“The Delta is a very different system than it was 150 years ago, even 50 years ago. It’s going to keep changing,” he said. “What we’re living with now is a temporary condition, and people need to figure out what they really want the system to look like.”

There are infinite possibilities of what it could look like, from attempts to maintain the status quo as much as possible to a kind of eco-reclamation of open waterways and marshland. Everyone wants to save the Delta, but what version of the Delta deserves to be saved? And who does that Delta best serve?