

# Salton Sea State Recreation Area



## Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



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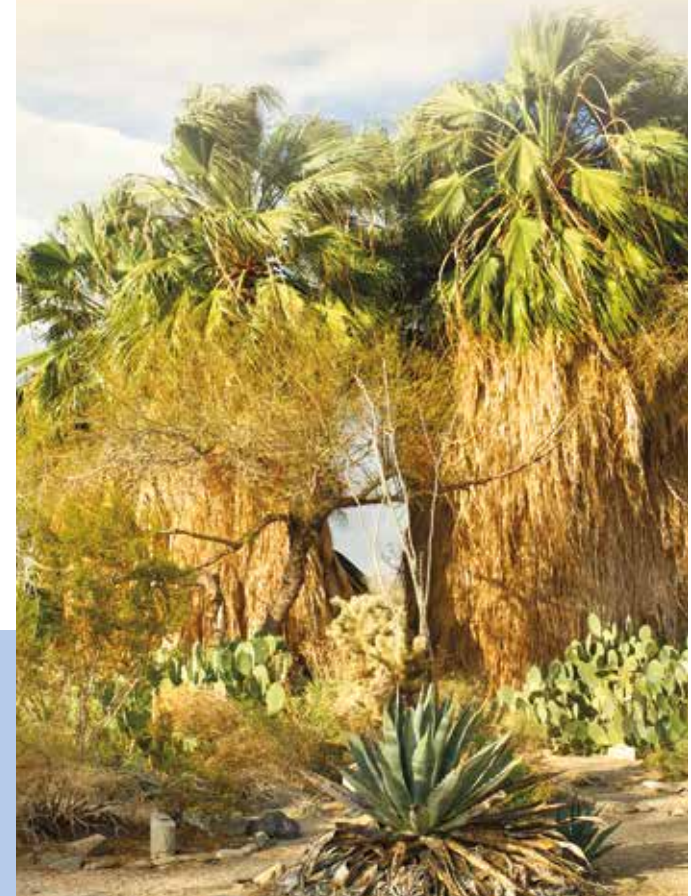
For information call: (800) 777-0369  
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711, TTY relay service

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**Salton Sea State Recreation Area**  
**100-225 State Park Road**  
**North Shore, CA 92254**  
**(760) 393-3059 or (760) 393-3810**

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*At the Salton Sea,  
millions of migrating birds  
and generous fishing  
limits entice more than  
30,000 visitors each year.*



## *A*long the northeastern edge of the Salton Sea

lies one of the world's most important winter stops for birds traveling the Pacific Flyway. Salton Sea State Recreation Area is a birdwatcher's delight.

Birds begin arriving by tens of thousands in October. By January the wings of more than 400 species of migrating birds form living clouds across crystal clear skies. By May most of them have continued to their ultimate destinations, but while they make use of the Salton Sea's rich offerings, the birds are an unforgettable sight.

Typical of the Colorado Desert area, average low and high temperatures in spring and fall range from about 50 to 85 degrees. July and August are the hottest months, with 75-degree mornings and afternoons well over 100 degrees. Winter days average 60 degrees, but nights can drop to freezing.



*The Salton Sea*

## **PARK HISTORY**

### **Native People**

Thousands of years ago, Cahuilla and other California Indians occupied these lands. Originally, the Salton Sink held a much larger body of water—ancient

Lake Cahuilla—well above sea level. This huge freshwater lake, full of fish and teeming with abundant wildlife, covered the entire valley. Archaeological evidence of the ancient lake's existence comes from early house pits, middens, and various artifacts found along former sandbars, creeks, and washes.

As the lake shrank, the native people moved their villages down from the mountains and settled in the areas once covered by water. Their fishing camps generally followed the contours of that ancient lake, and they built fish traps of stones in the lake's shallower waters.

The Cahuilla may have met Europeans in 1540 when Melchior Diaz explored the area for Hernán Cortés. Later, Juan Bautista de Anza crossed the Salton Sink looking for a trade route in 1774.

Historians estimate that as many as 10,000 Cahuilla once lived here. Their first encounter with Anglo-Americans came in the 1840s when they permitted travelers to pass through their lands. By the 1850s, the Cahuilla lands had been taken by new settlers, and the indigenous people lost the resources they needed to survive. Finally, the introduction of diseases to which they had no immunity nearly decimated the Cahuilla. Today, about 3,000 Cahuilla descendants live on reservations administered by elected tribal councils. The Cahuilla have revived their traditional ceremonies, languages, and crafts, and they are passing these skills on to future generations.

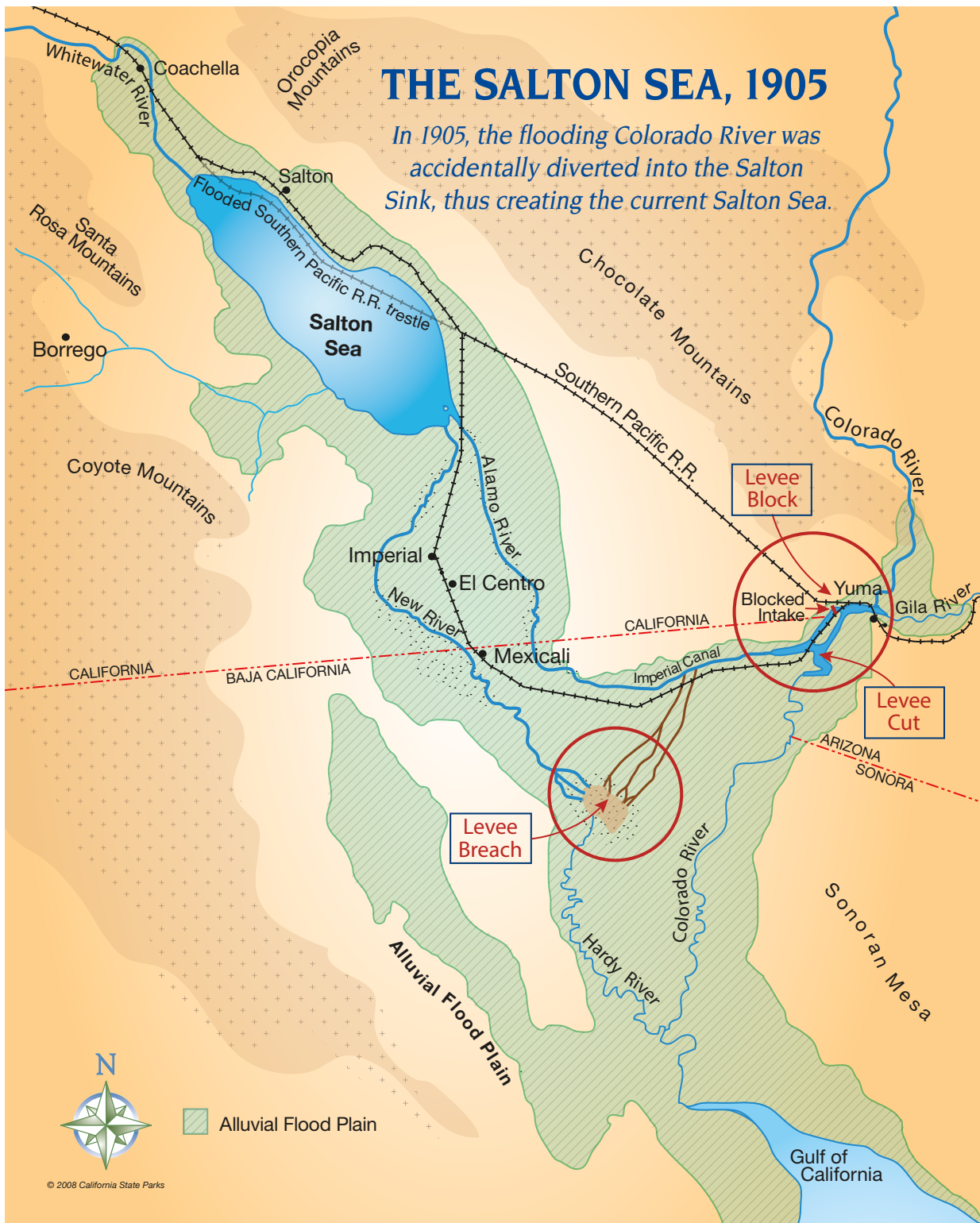


*White pelicans*

*Brown pelican*

## THE SALTON SEA, 1905

*In 1905, the flooding Colorado River was accidentally diverted into the Salton Sink, thus creating the current Salton Sea.*



## THE SEA'S GEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Geologically, the Salton Sink is a complex of faults, hills, and ancient drainages—essentially a landlocked extension of the Gulf of California. The Salton Sea, California's largest lake, is approximately 35 miles long, 15 miles wide, and 235 feet below sea level. Unlike most lakes, it has no natural outlet flowing to the ocean; whatever flows in, including agricultural runoff, does not flow out. Water is lost through evaporation and through percolation into the ground.

The sea is bordered by the Santa Rosa and Coyote Mountains to the west, the Orocopia Mountains to the north, and the Chocolate Mountains to the east. This present body of water is only the latest of many lakes that have filled this basin over millions of years—sometimes for centuries at a time. The remains of both freshwater and sea creatures can be seen high in the surrounding hills and mountains.

The Salton Sink basin was originally part of what is now the Gulf of California. Flowing from the Rocky Mountains to the gulf, the Colorado River scoured out the formations of Arizona's Grand Canyon. In wet times, the river would fill the sink; at other times, it would bypass the sink, causing the lake to shrink or even to disappear.



*New Liverpool Salt Company train, ca. 1895*

Sometimes the gulf waters would flow inland to meet the river, depositing salts, water, and silty sediment. Gradually the deposits formed a delta (a fan-shaped plain), southeast of the Salton Sink.

### THE “ACCIDENTAL SEA”

During the late 1800s, the California Development Company (CDC) envisioned an agricultural empire in the Colorado Desert. But they needed water to irrigate the fields and orchards they planned. By 1901 the Colorado River had been tapped for this purpose; in two years it was irrigating more than 100,000 acres in what was even then being called “the Imperial Valley.”

However, the CDC had not provided an effective method for dealing with irrigation runoff, silt buildup, or high water levels. In 1905, after an unusually wet winter, the Colorado River broke through a poorly constructed canal cut; for about 16 months, the river’s entire volume poured unchecked into the nearest low spot—the Salton Sink. Water inundated entire communities, the main line of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the Torres Martinez Reservation, and the New Liverpool Salt Company that mined the pure salt deposits from beneath the lake.

The Southern Pacific had re-routed forty miles of track, but another flood season could jeopardize the new route. In 1907, the railroad built a trestle and gathered tons of fill matter and boulders that they dumped into the streambed. When the last loads were dumped, cars and all, the water subsided. By then the lake had flooded nearly 350,000

acres in the alluvial plain. The Salton Sea is so large that from some vantage points, the earth’s curvature hides the opposite shore.

By the 1950s, the Salton Sea had become a popular resort area. Yacht clubs, large marinas, and a championship golf course attracted celebrities; however, by the 1970s, recurring floods had marred the dream of a desert Eden.

### PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

Over centuries the fragile ecosystem of the Salton Sea has provided sanctuary to an extremely diverse collection of wildlife and the critical habitats that nurture them. The sea holds millions of fish that feed masses of wintering birds, including herons, egrets, brown and white pelicans, and kingfishers. Birds of prey species arrive in the fall—among them peregrine falcons, osprey, and ferruginous hawks.

Adjacent fields and wetlands support huge flocks of snow geese, many kinds of ducks,



*Great blue heron*



*Wintering birds*

sandhill cranes, and the state’s largest population of burrowing owls. Resident birds include Gambel’s quail, greater roadrunners, and endangered Yuma clapper rails.

The vegetation includes drought-tolerant desert scrub, creosote bush, several varieties of desert saltbush, fan palms, and tamarisk (a non-native tree that chokes out native plants and soaks up the limited fresh water). Cottonwoods and willows grow alongside freshwater streams, springs, and salt marshes.

## THE PRESENT SALTON SEA

The Salton Sea currently supports significant segments of many migratory bird populations that eat fish. Unfortunately, the sea's rising salinity threatens its vital importance to more than 400 bird species. With less than three inches of rainfall per year and limited fresh water inflow, the sea is now about 50 percent saltier than the ocean itself.

The Salton Sea lacks any outlet, with inflow from only a few sources—the Whitewater River to the north, the Alamo and New Rivers to the south, runoff from surrounding agricultural fields, and some municipal effluent and storm water. Growing concentrations of salt have caused all but the hardy tilapia and desert pupfish to stop reproducing. As salinity increases, dissolved oxygen in the water decreases, making the sea unsustainable for most species of fish. Fewer fish to provide food for migrating birds could eventually mean fewer birds overall.

## CAN THE SEA BE SAVED?

The Salton Sea presently supports a significant number of threatened or endangered bird populations. With nearly 95 percent of California's wetlands converted



*Fishing is popular at the Salton Sea.*



*Tilapia*

to other uses, the sea is a critical refuge for many declining species—including mountain and snowy plovers and long-billed curlews.

Federal, state, tribal, and local entities, as well as concerned interest groups and individuals, are working together to try to save the Salton Sea. In 2003 the California legislature passed the Salton Sea Restoration Act, directing the State to “undertake the restoration of the Salton Sea

ecosystem and the permanent protection of the wildlife dependent on that ecosystem.” Recent budget allocations and grant monies from various sources have followed to help save this extraordinary resource.

## RECREATION

At least 30,000 annual park visitors enjoy such activities as camping, picnicking, fishing, boating, water sports, kayaking, bird watching, and hiking the trails. The camp store near the headquarters visitor center rents kayaks and sells supplies.

**Bird Watching**—Marsh birds, shore birds, and waterfowl of nearly every description stop over to replenish themselves. Annually, as many as 1.5 million eared grebes and nearly half of California's population of white-faced ibis have been counted at the

sea. Cormorants and cattle egrets maintain year-round nesting colonies. From November through February, park staff offer guided kayak tours and other programs, where visitors may see a variety of water-dependent bird life.

**Fishing**—Although rising salinity limits the diversity of fish that thrive here, fishing is still excellent. Tilapia (similar to crappie) abound and have no catch limits. As a solution to the sea's salinity is developed, there may be hope for the return of the locally famous corvina and sargo. Both shore and boat tilapia fishing are equally successful. A fishing jetty is available at Varner Harbor.

**Boating**—The Salton Sea is called the fastest lake in the U.S. because its high salt content allows boats to be more buoyant, while its below-sea-level elevation gives engines greater operating efficiency. Obey all posted speed limits.

**Camping**—Five campgrounds offer more than 200 campsites, including some with full hookups. To reserve a campsite, call (800) 444-7275 or visit the site at [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov).

- **Headquarters**—This area has two campgrounds. **Headquarters**, near the visitor center and camp store, has more than a dozen sites with hookups. **New Camp** has access to hiking trails, a fishing jetty, the main boat ramp, sanitation stations, and a boat washing area. Flush toilets, showers, and some hookups, plus a group camp without hookups, are on site.
- **Salt Creek Beach**—Salt Creek flows to the north of this prime birding spot, a primitive kayak campground with chemical toilets.

- **Corvina Beach**—a primitive kayak campground with chemical toilets and water. Beach access has a sharp underwater drop-off.
- **Mecca Beach**—a large, developed campground for swimmers, boaters, and anglers, with easy beach access, flush toilets, showers, and full hookups at some sites.

**Hiking**—Nature trails loop around each campground. The best hiking can be found along the shoreline.

### ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

**Camping**—New Camp has accessible parking, campsites, restrooms, and showers.

**Picnic Area**—Varner Harbor has one accessibly designed picnic site. No water is available. Accessible parking and a portable toilet are nearby.

**Fishing**—No designated accessible fishing facilities exist in the park, but many visitors fish from the Varner Harbor picnic area. The visitor center and camp store are accessible.

Accessibility is continually improving. For details, visit the website at <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

### NEARBY STATE PARKS

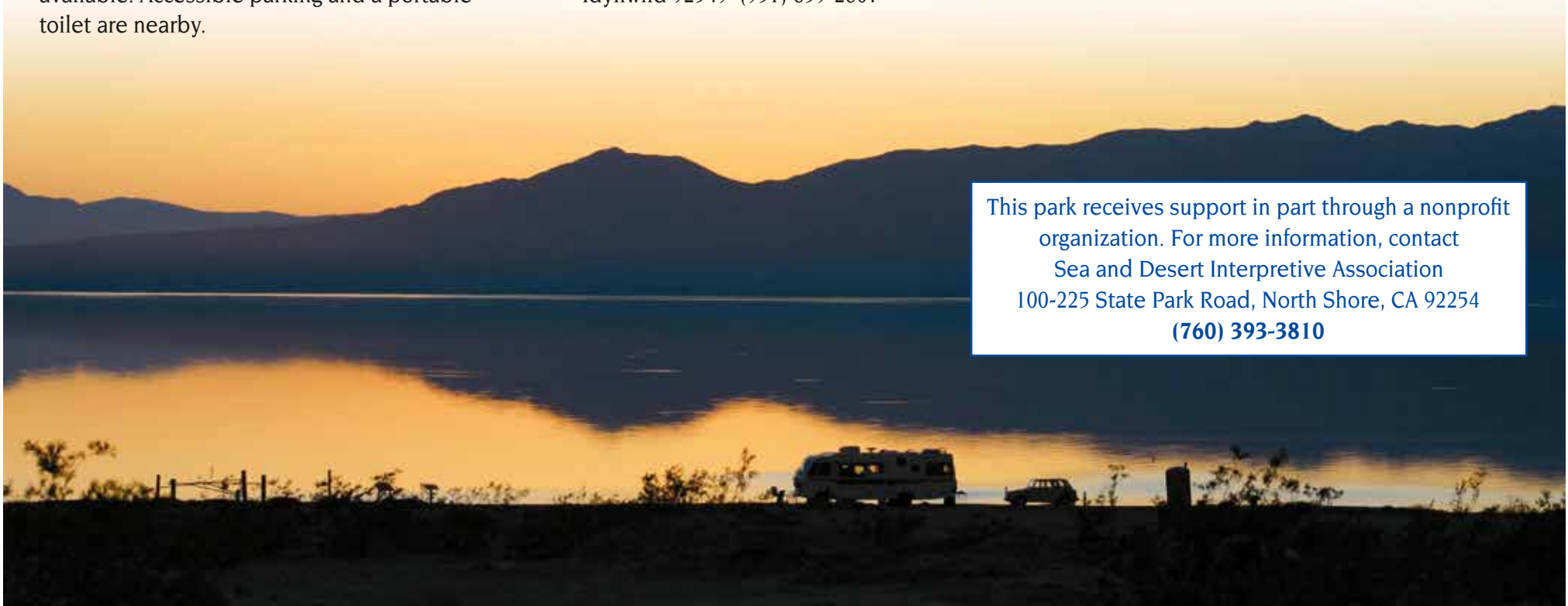
- Anza-Borrego Desert State Park  
200 Palm Canyon Drive  
Borrego Springs 92004  
(760) 767-5311
- Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area, 5172 Hwy. 78 Borrego Springs 92004  
(760) 767-5391
- Mount San Jacinto State Park  
25905 Highway 243  
Idyllwild 92549 (951) 659-2607

### PLEASE REMEMBER

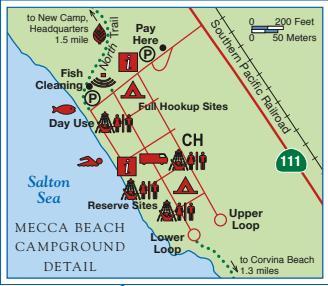
In desert country, carry extra water and other essential supplies, and stay on authorized roads. In case of trouble, remain near vehicles and in shade until help arrives.

- Except for service animals, no pets are allowed on beaches. Animals must be kept on a six-foot leash, and in a vehicle or tent at night. Please clean up after pets.
- All park features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or collected. Use trash receptacles.
- Do not gather firewood—dead wood must be allowed to decompose naturally. Firewood is sold at most campgrounds.
- Each angler over the age of 16 must possess a valid California fishing license.

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information, contact  
Sea and Desert Interpretive Association  
100-225 State Park Road, North Shore, CA 92254  
**(760) 393-3810**



# Salton Sea State Recreation Area



- Legend**
- Freeway
  - Highway
  - Paved Road
  - Hiking Trail
  - Railroad
  - Accessible Feature
  - Boat Launch
  - Boating
  - Campfire Center
  - Campground
  - Camp Host
  - Fishing
  - Information
  - Marina
  - Nature Trail
  - Park Headquarters
  - Parking
  - Picnic Area
  - Primitive Campground
  - Restrooms
  - RV Camping
  - RV Sanitation Station
  - Showers
  - Store
  - Swimming
  - Wetlands
  - Wind Warning Light



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