

Opinion: Calif. growth is just a fantasy

By Joe Mathews

California has an official state flower (poppy), state insect (the Dogface Butterfly), and state theater (the Pasadena Playhouse). But no official state sport.

Unless you count the great Californian pastime of overestimating our own population growth.



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It should be enough that, at 38.7 million, we're the most populous state in the Union. But California's own collective identity is so tied up with our size that we routinely exaggerate it.

We overestimate our population in the present (politicians and pundits have long called this a "state of 40 million" even though we still haven't reached 39 million) and in the future (we've been saying for more than a generation that we'll be 50 million people by 2020). Gov. Jerry Brown invoked the 50 million figure last month in urging Californians "to find a more elegant way of relating to material things."

The trouble is that at our current pace we'll barely have 40 million people by 2020. For 20 years California has been experiencing the lowest rates of population growth in our

history, with flatter immigration and a cratering birth rate.

In the last few years, the state government has been quietly – and rapidly – ratcheting down its long-exaggerated estimate of future growth. USC demographer Dowell Myers points out the following: in 2007, the state Department of Finance projected that California would reach 50 million by 2032. By 2012, that milestone had been delayed until 2049. In the most recent revised projections based on 2014 figures, we don't hit 50 million until 2051.

Why do we keep overstating our numbers? For two big reasons – one nice, one nasty.

The nicer one is our deep attachment to the 1980s, those salad days back when people came to our state in droves. It was in 1985 that the Population Reference Bureau first made the 50-million-by-2020 prediction, and the U.S. Census Bureau was still echoing that in the mid-1990s. Such projections made sense then – given California's 20th century growth from less than 2 million people in 1900 to 33 million in 2000.

But our demographers have found it hard to shake assumptions created by that historic growth. Even after the early '90s recession changed California's trajectory, the Census thought we'd make 49.3 million by 2025. It took the Great Recession to convince demographers that we weren't going back to the '80s.

So why do false assumptions about population persist? That's the nasty reason – population growth serves the left and the right.

On the left, those warning of the environmentalist apocalypse rely on the Malthusian notion that California is being doomed by endless growth, which in their view must be stopped. That's allowed them to justify opposing the essential replacement of aging infrastructure, and the adoption of new energy sources.

On the nativist right, the narrative of endless population

growth serves the anti-immigrant cause. Lately the right has been blaming drought-related water shortages on an imagined population growth from a supposed surge in immigration that is not in fact taking place. While California has 10 million foreign immigrants, most of them have been here a lot longer than you (nearly half are citizens).

Our population overestimates are a close cousin of the assumption that, as USC's Manuel Pastor has described it, "that California is on its way to becoming 150 percent Latino." Indeed, with the slowdown of border crossings and a plunging birth rate among Latinos, our ethnic mix is no longer changing so fast. Demographers who once predicted Latinos would soon become a state majority say it's possible that Latinos will never represent a majority in California.

The irony, unappreciated by the environmental left and anti-immigrant right, is that they have already won. California's population is not growing out of ecological or demographic control.

The trouble is that so few of us recognize this reality or have responded to it. The narrative that we're being overrun by newcomers crashing our nirvana is understandably seductive. But California, with fewer children and a stagnant population, needs to do more for its children, since they will have to be more productive than previous generations. And if we want to have the economic growth to support an aging population and generous social benefits, we need to think—for the first time—about how to attract more people here from other states and other countries, and to do a better job of retaining the people we do have.

Unfortunately, there is little serious effort or investment aimed at growing our actual population. Perhaps because we're too busy coping with the population boom taking place in our collective imagination.

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