

# Opinion: My Calif. lake it too good for you

By Joe Mathews

Stay away from my lake, Californians.

It's too important, for the likes of you.



Joe Mathews

Yes, as a legal matter, I don't own Lake Mathews. But I've always felt a kinship with a Riverside County reservoir that spells our mutual name the correct way, with just one "t." What's more, Lake Mathews serves as the beating heart of the system that supplies water for me and millions of Southern Californians.

Lake Mathews represents an end and a beginning. It's both the terminus of the 242-mile aqueduct from the Colorado River, and a distribution center, sending that water, via gravity, from its elevation of 1,500 feet, around the region.

It's also a singularly forbidden place. All over California, rivers, canals and reservoirs double as sites for recreation and leisure. But not Lake Mathews. It's completely fenced off. And decades of efforts to secure public access have been denied by its owner, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

So in an era when every body of water inspires plans for

public access or development or both, Lake Mathews retains a special mystique. My lake is like an old-time movie star—unknowable. And that's probably the way it should remain.

The special status of Lake Mathews is the product of its history. The area, known as Cajalco Canyon, was mostly orchards when the Met identified it as the perfect elevated spot to build a reservoir for Colorado River water that could flow downhill into Southern California. But one landowner, who believed the property contained tin that would make him rich, waged an epic legal fight against eminent domain. The Met eventually secured the land—completing a dam in 1939 and starting water deliveries in 1941—but the legal cost is one reason why the water district hasn't shared its hard-won lake with the public.

That tough stance embodies the lake's namesake, William Burgess "Billy" Mathews, who, with contemporaries William Mulholland and Ezra Scattergood, fathered the water and power of modern L.A. (While Billy doesn't appear in my Mathews family genealogy, L.A. history is malleable enough for me to claim him.) Mathews was elected L.A. city attorney in 1900, served as general counsel of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, from 1909 to 1929 (doing the legal dirty work to secure Owens Valley water), and then quietly obtained Colorado River water and formed the Metropolitan Water District. But he died in 1931, as the project that would bear his name was just getting under way.

With the goals of preventing contamination and protecting water quality, the Met has repeatedly fortified Lake Mathews—by boosting its capacity and by buying surrounding land to keep development away. The lake got further protection in 1982 with the establishment of Lake Mathews and the area around it as a nature reserve that protects habitat for 65 plant and animal species, including bald eagles.

While other reservoirs in the region—Lake Perris, Diamond

Valley Lake—were opened for recreation, Lake Mathews has remained off limits. Riverside County and the city of Riverside have been seeking public access since 1960. The idea remains popular and talked about in the area. But the Met hasn't budged.

Former Riverside Mayor Ron Loveridge says the city probably should have annexed Lake Mathews in the 1960s, which would have provided local leverage for public access. In 2012, local Assemblyman Kevin Jeffries introduced state legislation to open the lake, but the Met forcefully slapped it down. Even if it had passed, the legal protections against public access are “bulletproof.”

Other waterways in California have very limited public access, too—for example, there are limits on access to Hetch Hetchy, the Yosemite-adjacent valley that provides San Francisco water. But there is something especially pristine about Lake Mathews. “A lot of times you have to make compromises and tradeoffs,” says Jeffrey Kightlinger, the general manager of the Met, and allow hiking or other public uses of reservoir. But why should the Met do it at Lake Mathews, where it doesn't have to?

Recently at the lake, a couple miles off the 15 as it makes its way to San Diego, I drove around the fenced-off shoreline, and then got out and walked for a couple miles. Despite the fence and the warning against trespassing, it felt idyllic, its water deeply blue, with birds chirping everywhere. In the lake, the fish, unmolested by visiting humans, grow so big that they are sometimes removed and used to seed other waterways where the public can fish.

The Met offered me a chance to get inside the fence and get a tour. But I declined. It seemed wrong to intrude on a place that, because it belongs so profoundly to California, doesn't really belong to any of us.

*Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.*