## Only Time Tells the Truth: Reflections on California's Land, Water, and Resilience

Austin Stevenot

I remember when we thought we had to choose.

Between the fields that fed us and the rivers that gave us life.

Between the water we could sell and the water the land needed.

Between what the market demanded and what future generations deserved.

I remember when we measured the value of land by what we could take from it.

When rivers were confined by levees, and floodwaters were something we feared rather than understood.

When we spoke of restoring nature as though people had never been part of it.

But I also remember when things began to change.

When we started listening to the land again.

When farmers, Tribal people, scientists, and communities began asking different questions.

Not just, what can this land produce for us today?

But what can this land provide for generations?

**Agriculture and Restoration: Finding Balance**

For so long, we looked at California's landscapes in pieces.

This land was for agriculture. That land was for wildlife. This water was for farming. That water was for the environment.

We drew boundaries and convinced ourselves these things had to compete.

But the land never worked that way.

A river doesn't recognize a property line.

A migrating bird doesn't know whether it's flying over a farm or a wildlife refuge.

And water doesn't understand the boundaries we've drawn on a map.

Over time, we began looking at entire landscapes rather than individual parcels.
We recognized that some lands were essential for agricultural production. Others were better suited for reconnecting floodplains, restoring habitat, or recharging groundwater.
And sometimes the same landscape could serve multiple purposes.
Agriculture was never the enemy.
Farmers were doing what our economy asked them to do. They grew what markets rewarded, invested in their communities, and made decisions based on the information and resources available.
We couldn't expect farmers to carry the entire financial burden of environmental recovery.
Markets had to change. Incentives had to change. And our understanding of productive land had to change.
We didn't stop farming.
We began thinking differently about what to grow, where to grow it, and how to support the people doing the growing.

**Giving Rivers Room to Breathe**

I remember when we believed controlling rivers meant protecting communities.
We straightened them, confined them, and built levees along their banks.
Those decisions provided benefits, but they also came with consequences.
Floodplains became disconnected. Wetlands disappeared. Fish lost important habitat.
Eventually, we began recognizing that a river was more than the water flowing between two banks.
It was its floodplain, wetlands, forests, wildlife, and the people connected to it.
I remember projects like Dos Rios, where we began reconnecting rivers to their floodplains.
These projects weren't simply about restoring acres.

They represented a different relationship with water.
We learned that sometimes the best way to protect ourselves from a river was to give it more room.

**Remembering What We Already Knew**

But perhaps one of our greatest lessons wasn't something new we discovered.
It was something we remembered.
For thousands of years, California Indians shaped these landscapes through burning, tending, harvesting, and generations of observation.
Our ancestors understood that people were part of the ecosystem, not separate from it.
Their agriculture didn't always look like the straight rows and orchards we recognize today.
But these were productive landscapes that supported food, medicine, wildlife, and culture.
For too long, we treated Indigenous knowledge as something belonging to the past.
We eventually began recognizing that Tribal nations weren't simply groups to consult.
They were peoples with enduring relationships, rights, and responsibilities to these landscapes.
And traditional knowledge wasn't a book of answers.
It was thousands of years of people paying attention.

**Only Time Tells the Truth**

Looking back, we didn't get everything right.
There were restoration projects that didn't work the way we expected.
Agricultural practices we believed could continue that eventually had to change.
And decisions we were absolutely certain about that turned out to be wrong.
We're human.

We make decisions with the information we have, and sometimes those decisions feel absolutely right in the moment.

**But only time tells us the truth.**

The land doesn't care how certain we were when we made a decision.

It responds to what we actually did.

What changed wasn't that we suddenly became smarter.

We became more willing to listen.

More willing to adapt.

And more willing to admit when something wasn't working.

We learned that resilience wasn't about finding the perfect answer.

It was about building a California capable of learning from the answers we got wrong.

**The Future We Haven't Created Yet**

Looking back over these last 24 years, I don't measure our success by whether we made every right decision.

I measure it by whether we were willing to learn.

Whether we strengthened relationships.

Whether we left the next generation with more choices than we inherited.

Because guardianship doesn't have an ending.

There will always be challenges.

There will always be competing needs.

And there will always be things we don't fully understand.

But there's something I haven't told you.

**The year isn't 2050.**

**It's 2026.**

None of what I've described has happened yet.

We haven't made those mistakes.

We haven't learned those lessons.

And we haven't created that California.

Not yet.

The future I've been remembering isn't a memory.

**It's a possibility.**

And 24 years from now, someone really will be looking back at the decisions we're making today.

The question isn't whether we're going to get everything right.

We won't.

The question is whether we're willing to listen, learn, adapt, and keep trying.

**Action Speaks Louder than words so what are we going to do today to make that future possible?**

**AUTHOR BIO**

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