

Photos From The Future Show The Distressing Potential Story Of An American River

WHAT WILL OUR WATER SYSTEM LOOK LIKE IF WE DON'T FIX IT?

To photographers Susannah Sayler and Edward Morris, the American River in California is not so much a river as "an elongated site of capture and distribution." The waterway is so "apportioned and owned" that it no longer belongs with the natural world. It's fundamentally a creation of man.

Their pictures here show different points along that river, which runs from the Sierra Nevada mountains to Sacramento. You see half-dry reservoirs, otherworldly piers peaking from the mist, and drought-savaged fields where the water doesn't flow at all. "The point of these photographs is to follow a river from its origin, through its technological containment and rationalization, to its end use—in this case industrial agriculture," says Morris, who also teaches at the Syracuse University.



Though taken in the present, the conceit is that the pictures are actually "from the future," snapped, as it were, 200 years from now. There are few identifying features, and, where human beings figure, they are hard to make out. "There is an attempt to make the landscape look a bit alien," Morris says.

The Morrises want us to think about the consequences of continued irresponsible water management—basically what California's current drought could look like if we don't start employing [new practices](#). Postmarking the pictures from the future offers chance for "a little more play and reflection about what the images are saying," they say.



"We're thinking about water extraction as it relates to a larger extraction economy. There is a mentality to the way water is allocated and managed, similar to the way we manage other resources, which is to say as a form of extraction," Morris says.

The photos, which are part a longer series called [The History of Future](#), are currently being exhibited at the [Verge Center for the Arts](#), in Sacramento. The Morrises plan to follow up a series focused on possible solutions to the West's water crisis and they insist the pictures here aren't meant to be depressing.

"We're headed for some turbulence in the future but we're also optimistic about our ability to come up with new forms of common [water] governance," Morris says.

[All Photos: Susannah Saylor & Edward Morris]

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