

Earth Log: Don't use this fake fish in delta smelt arguments

By Mark Grossi



UC Davis biologist Peter Moyle in a doctored photo with a faked monster delta smelt as part of April Fool's Day joke in 2013.

UC DAVIS

Scientists have not discovered a 9-pound version of an endangered Northern California fish called the delta smelt in Southern California lakes.

And the scientific study about this fictitious fish was just as unreal. It was part of an annual [April Fool's Day joke](#) posted on a blog in 2013 by a group of scientists at the University of California at Davis.

I'm trying to snuff a budding San Joaquin Valley myth or rumor that, curiously enough, I unwittingly helped to spread. Here's how it rolled out.

On Monday, The Bee published [a letter](#) from a reader who was taking me to task about a tiny fish, called the delta smelt. I had written [a story](#) about voluntary water cutbacks to protect the fish. I wrote that this smelt only lives in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Citing the study mentioned in the April Fool's Day posting, the letter writer said I was wrong. The writer basically said the large smelt are living in three Southern California reservoirs – Pyramid, Castaic and Silverwood. The letter talks about pulling the smelt off the protected list of the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Then readers began commenting on it, as though it was real.

As California water issues go, the delta smelt is no joke around the Valley. Delta water pumping supplies a multibillion-dollar farm industry here. When the pumping is slowed to protect this dying fish species, it costs farmers, farmworkers and the economy as a whole.

Scientists take the issue seriously, too. As the populations of smelt and other fish decline, so does the ecological health of the delta. Their April Fool's Day posting was not intended to light up another argument about this fish, though it turns out the light moment was badly misunderstood. When people here read a blog post like this, it's hard to look for humor.

Back to The Bee. How did the letter get into print? The editor who received the letter last week had asked me about UC Davis posting on the school's [California WaterBlog](#).

I read the blog and laughed, thinking he understood the joke. I should have pointed out the April 1 date and the obviously doctored photographs showing a scientist and a dog holding this huge delta smelt. There was room for misunderstanding, and I didn't realize it.

This morning, UC Davis biologist Peter Moyle, a well-known and respected scientist who studies California fish, told me there needs to be a systematic study of Central California fishes in Southern California reservoirs.

He said some Northern California fishes have established populations in Southern California reservoirs. They include tule perch, hitch, prickly sculpin and Sacramento blackfish. The fish have made their way south through California's extensive water pumping and canals.

But the delta smelt has not colonized Southern California reservoirs, he said.

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