

Earth Log: After 40 years of journalism, an October sunset

By Mark Grossi
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Thirty-seven years ago, I wrote my first story about the environment on a thoroughly modern electric typewriter. The story was about this idea to build the “Peripheral Canal,” but this column is not about that idea.

This is me looking back as I approach a very personal sunset this week. So this is not the usual Earth Log.

The helicopter that ferried Sierra snow surveyers and Mark Grossi to 11,000 feet in March 2015. Mark Grossi mgrossi@fresnobee.com

The newsroom typewriter died soon after that Peripheral Canal story in the 1970s. By 1985, I was using a primitive personal computer at an East Coast daily newspaper, and the digital changes have been nonstop ever since.

In March this year, I shot a video on an iPhone in the Sierra Nevada during a snow survey. I sat in a helicopter, parked at 11,000 feet, to edit the video on my phone. The video was more popular than the story I later wrote. What a difference.

But some things haven't changed much in the last four decades.

That 1970s Peripheral Canal concept is still front-page news, now appearing as a tunnel idea. It's still about sending water south and avoiding the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the troubled crossroads of California's water.

A reporter will continue to cope with that story and the swift digital changes in this business. It just won't be me.

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In my last column this week, I want to leave you with my short list of Central California stories that won't stop anytime soon. Call it my top five. If you've read The Bee and my work for a few years, none of this will be a surprise.

But first, you should know a little more about me. I'm not an environmental wonk or a total science geek. I'm a newspaper junkie from Bakersfield. I have covered the environment exclusively for 22 years, but I had other newsroom jobs in the 18 years before I moved to this assignment.

I've been a features section editor, a local news editor, general assignment reporter and a copy editor. At the Providence Journal, I was a television columnist before coming to Fresno.

My background includes a year at Massachusetts Institute of Technology on a science writing fellowship, and I slipped more than my share of science courses into my bachelor's and master's degrees studies.

It has been a fascinating ride.



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It is beyond anything I ever imagined back in Bakersfield when I wrote about the Peripheral Canal in 1978. I’m humbled and honored that so many readers called or emailed to talk with me about their lives. Thank you.

Onward to the top five endless stories:

The San Joaquin River. A controversial \$1 billion-plus project continues to reconnect the river with the ocean and re-establish salmon. The push to build Temperance Flat Dam is also a key part of the river’s story.

Farm, city and environmental water supplies in the San Joaquin Valley. It’s a broad category that includes groundwater and the Sierra snowpack. I would include other large farming issues such as irrigation drainage on the west side of the Valley.

Air quality. The issues span summer, fall and winter pollution in the Valley, one of the most polluted air basins in the country. We’re talking about breathing.

Environmental risk in everyday life. It’s about adding up all the risk factors, such as tainted air and water, poverty, education, birth weight and asthma, among others. The Valley’s rural areas dominate Cal-EPA’s areas with the highest risk factors.

Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks. Among the rarest of outdoor treasures, these places and the rest of the Sierra help purify water we drink and air we breathe. Water and air are pretty good reasons to pay attention to that massive mountain range.

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