



California's newest state park is like a time machine

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The sun rises, shedding light onto an oak grove along the western edge of Dos Rios. Gelay Concepcion for NPR

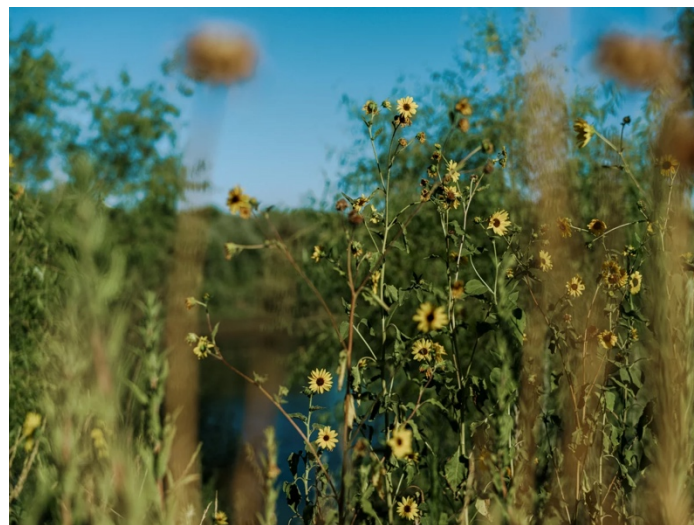
At the crack of dawn in California's Central Valley, birds sing their morning songs and critters chirp unabashedly. In a shady grove next to a river, an owl swoops down from the spindling branches of an oak tree that has stood its ground for centuries.

A few feet above the tree's base, its massive trunk is lined with a white ring, indicating how high the San Joaquin River rose during a flood last year. Dos Rios is *supposed* to flood — it's a floodplain, recently transformed into California's newest state park.

The park opened this summer, emerging among the never-ending rows of agriculture the valley is known for. It's a lush 2.5 square miles now bursting with hundreds of thousands of native trees, bushes and animals.

Dos Rios, named for the Tuolumne and San Joaquin rivers that meet at the edge of the park, is the first new California state park in more than a decade.

But it isn't like most state parks. In addition to bringing much-needed green space to an underserved area, its unusual design uses nature-based climate solutions that reinvigorate native wildlife.



Sunflowers flourish near a Dos Rios oak grove.



By restoring the natural floodplain, the park will also help mitigate flooding that threatens residents in the area.

Transforming farm fields back to a floodplain

Dos Rios is like a time machine. Just 15 years ago, this plot of land looked much like its surroundings.

“These floodplains were once laser-leveled fields that grew alfalfa, or a rotation of corn and winter wheat, which would be harvested and moved over to where the dairies are to feed the cows,” says conservationist Julie Rentner.

Now, the land looks more like it did hundreds of years ago, before farms and towns cropped up, before the Central Valley became an agricultural hub of America.



Julie Rentner has had a hand in the formation of Dos Rios since its conception. She's thrilled to see the park finally open to the public.

Rentner is president of the nonprofit organization River Partners, which began the process of purchasing the plot from a farming family back in 2008. Since then, her team has been transforming the land to return it to some semblance of the floodplain it naturally was.

“Most of the critters here, the willows, the cottonwoods, the mugwort and the gum plants are actually stimulated by occasional flooding,” she says.

In the summer months, the San Joaquin and Tuolumne rivers flow lazily around the edges of this park, but in the spring and early summer, when snow melts in the Sierras, the rivers take on a forceful character, rampaging through this land, swelling above their banks and flooding this area.

Last year, the rivers rose about 20 feet higher than they are now. At the time, River Partners was giving boat tours through the area, as floodwaters brought back animals like river otters, beavers and waterfowl.



The San Joaquin River snakes through the landscape.

Working with nature to tame floodwater risk

While flooding is now welcome at Dos Rios, for Central Valley farmers and residents, it has long been a demon. It destroys crops and homes.

A 2018 report from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its state partners said that Stockton, a large metropolitan city about 30 miles north of Dos Rios, faced an “unacceptably high risk of flooding from levee failure.” Dos Rios is meant to be an escape valve, before torrents of water threaten levees in nearby places like Stockton.

“This place is reducing flood risk for downstream communities by absorbing floodwaters as they pour out of the Sierra Nevadas,” Rentner says.



Reengineering Dos Rios involved cutting holes into berms and levees, and allowing the rivers to flood instead of attempting to constrain them. The floodwaters then soak into the ground, sparing nearby communities, and recharging groundwater. These, Rentner says, are solutions designed to work *with* nature instead of against it.



Lilia Lomeli-Gil has lived in Grayson for most of her life. She runs the community center there, but wants more recreational spaces for the people of Grayson.

Another community that could benefit from Dos Rios is Grayson, a small, unincorporated area just a few miles west of the park. Lilia Lomeli-Gil, a community leader there, remembers suffering from the devastating floods of 1997. At the time, she was living in Modesto, just east of Dos Rios.

“It still brings tears to my eyes,” she says, as she recalls her house swamped with 3 to 4 feet of water. “We had to start over, we were homeless.”

Eventually, Lomeli-Gil and her husband were able to relocate back to Grayson, where she has spent most of her life. Now she says she is relieved that Dos Rios is in Grayson’s backyard — not only because of flood-risk mitigation, but also because it’s a new place to recreate.

“A place to go barbecue, join other family members,” and it’s a place to appreciate nature for local community members, she says. “I think that emotionally, it’s going to be very good for their mental health.”

Grayson is a tiny, 4-by-5-block farming community. Most of the residents are agricultural workers. The community center Lomeli-Gil runs is the only gathering place in town for residents, other than the gas station market next door.

“We need more, we need a variety, not just one place,” she says.



Grayson muralist Jose Muñoz hand-painted this sign welcoming visitors to Dos Rios.

A new place to enjoy nature

At 8:30 on a recent Friday morning, Lomeli-Gil had gathered a group of parents, teenagers and young children from Grayson around some picnic benches on the edge of an old riverbank at Dos Rios. Everyone in the group speaks Spanish, like most of the surrounding community, so their tour guides, Eduardo Gonzalez and Julian Morin, lead the group through a portion of the park in English and Spanish.

“We want to continue to increase accessibility to parks, they’re out here for everybody,” says Morin. “Language barriers shouldn’t be why people can’t get out and enjoy state parks and experience everything they have to offer.”

Gonzalez leads the group on a walking path that, in a way, divides the past and future of this park: An old almond orchard is on one side, and a lush landscape of bushes, trees, birds and animals on the other.



Eduardo Gonzalez and Julian Morin lead Grayson community members on a tour of Dos Rios in late June.

In Spanish, Gonzalez says, “12 years ago this was *all* pure orchard, and [River Partners] removed them.” Pointing to the other side of the path, where birds are chirping loudly, he says, “And they began to plant more native plants that were here before agriculture.”

He tells the group that like the rest of the park, that almond orchard will eventually become a campground or a place for families to gather. The park will also offer family events like group campfires and stargazing nights. When school is in session, the park plans to organize educational visits for students.

Opening up the land to Indigenous people, as a place to gather plants

The Dos Rios team has also consulted with Indigenous tribes about how this new park can benefit their communities. Austin Stevenot, the San Joaquin field manager for River Partners, first came across the organization a few years ago when they invited his extended family to visit the park.

Stevenot and his family are members of the Northern Sierra Miwok tribe. Stevenot consulted his mother and aunts, founding members of the California Indian Basketweavers’ Association. They put together planting palettes of native plants — like a mood board for plants — that would be beneficial to the habitat, but also for Indigenous medicinal and cultural practices.

“All the things we were like, ‘It would be great to gather this here!’”



Austin Stevenot helped design the Native Use Garden at Dos Rios. He hopes the entire park will one day be a place where tribal members can go to gather plants for cultural practices.

Stevenot brought members of local tribes to plant native shrubs like Valley Sedge, which is used for basket weaving, or mugwort, used as a natural bug repellent. Now, a 3-acre Native Use Garden is blooming at Dos Rios.

A century ago, he says, his people were forcibly removed from their ancestral village, about 60 miles from here. So it means a lot to him to have a piece of this land his family and other Indigenous people can use as their own.

“It looks like a big weed patch right now. But there’s a lot here. There’s a lot of meaning here,” he says.

Though removing plants from public lands is typically illegal, a 2016 rule permits parks to enter into plant-gathering agreements with Native American tribes. Stevenot says tribal members can reach out to the park to inquire about accessing the Native Use Garden now, but their goal is for the park to eventually implement a formal permitting process for tribal members to gather anywhere in Dos Rios.



“We need thousands more acres just like this,” he says. “Not just not for just water, not for habitat, but for the people of the land, for the people that were here long before anybody else.”



The Native Use Garden is a place where, with permission from Dos Rios staff, tribal members can go to gather native plants for ceremonial use and other cultural practices.

“10 more Dos Rioses” in the next 10 years

Dos Rios holds great promise for the Central Valley — it provides new recreational space, restores native habitat, protects against flood damage and recharges dwindling groundwater in the Central Valley. But it’s only about 2½ square miles in a vast region dominated by agricultural farms, and even restoring that much land has been no easy task.

“Here in the Central Valley, we have a history of fighting over water, really being at odds with the environmental movement,” says Julie Rentner. But she adds that over the years, the community surrounding Dos Rios has shown great excitement about its multiple benefits.

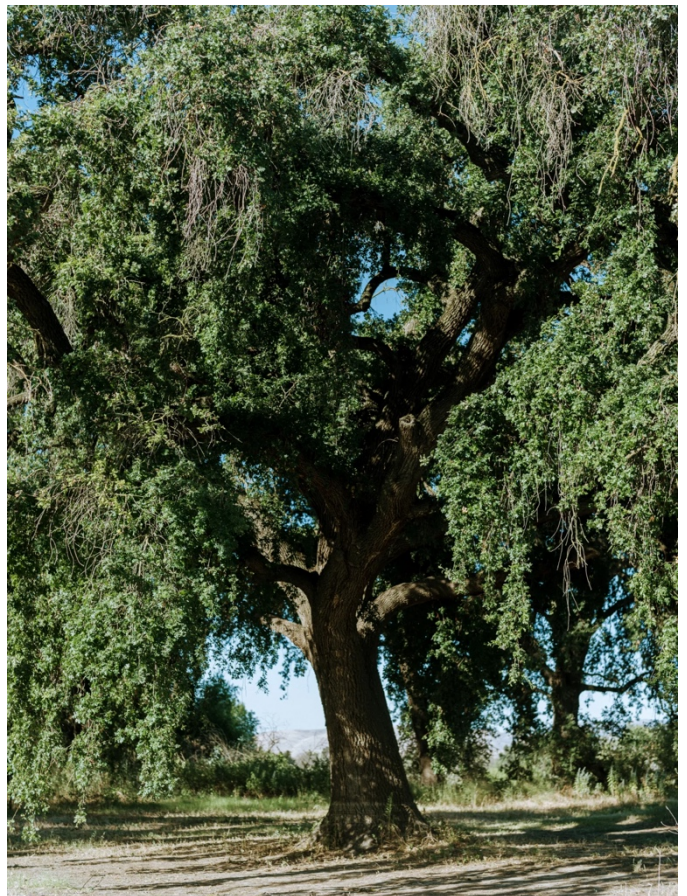


Stevenot rubs the leaves of a mugwort plant, which he explains has ceremonial uses, and also works as a mosquito repellent.

“You talk to anybody in this neighborhood and you realize, oh my gosh, we all want the same things,” she says. “We want clean, healthy communities to live in. We want beautiful places to be able to take our kids and grandkids.”

And she says California’s state government is on board with more projects like Dos Rios, as evidenced by Gov. Gavin Newsom’s 2020 executive order, which has been dubbed the “30 x 30” initiative, because it aims to conserve 30% of California’s lands and coastal waters by the year 2030. “And that encouraged us to think, how do you scale all of this?”

Rentner is optimistic. “We’ve done the planning, we’ve done the mapping,” she says, “We’re thinking about doing 10 more Dos Rioses just in the next decade. Maybe more.”



A centuries-old oak tree bears white rings that indicate how high floodwaters rose last spring.