

Zayante

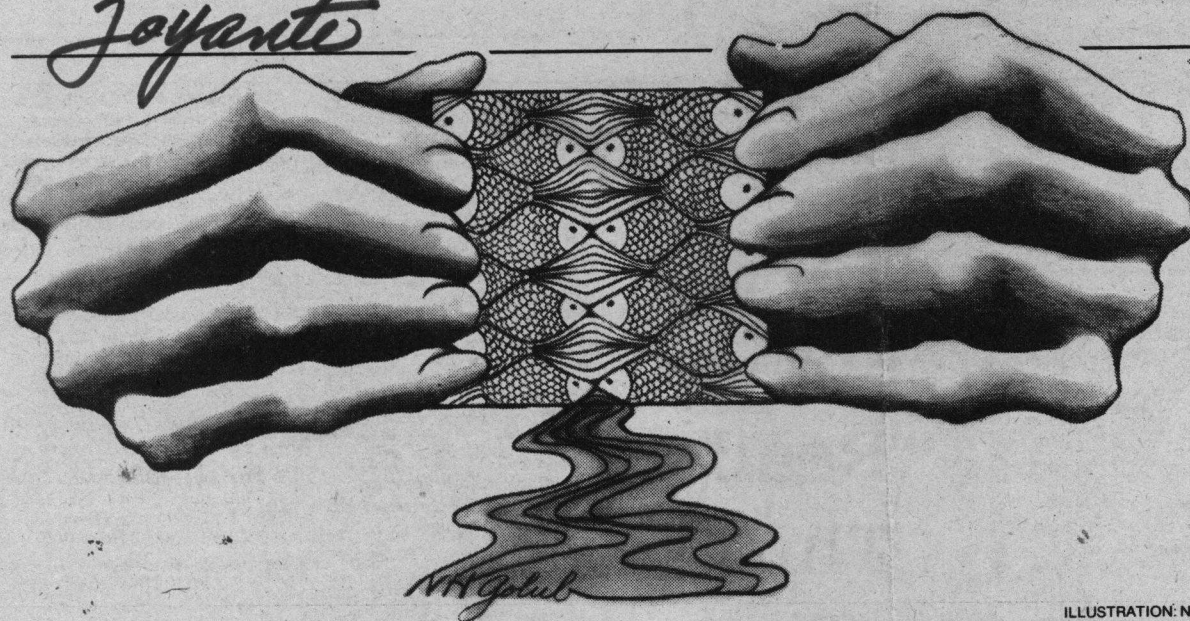


ILLUSTRATION: NORA GOLUB

along the watchtower

The Water Works

Down at the offices of the Santa Cruz Municipal Water Department (SCMWD), you could have cut the consternation with a knife. For good reason. Here, right in the midst of the City of Santa Cruz' celebrated revving-up of the Zayante Dam project—which promised to provide baths aplenty for an escalating populace—was a letter from UCSC invertebrate zoology professor Thomas Lundquist. That proposed dam, he sternly warned, would pose a serious threat to the last refuge of the endangered Zayante humpback slug, a creature the letter went on to describe in intimate detail.

That was three years ago. Somewhere in the meantime it was discovered that—surprise!—there is no Thomas Lundquist among the ranks of UCSC instructors. There isn't even a Zayante humpback slug writhing through our local humus. Nor is there, at this moment, a Zayante Dam. But if the City water people have their way, that's one thing that soon won't be a figment of anyone's imagination.

The SCMWD and its seven sister water districts within the County are looking back over their collective shoulders. They're worried. They have plotted the upward sweep of new residents and businesses on a graph beside the curve of water acquisition potential and don't like what they see. No matter how they slice it, projected arrivals always leave projected available gallons, let us say, in the dust.

Unlike many counties to the south, Santa Cruz has never had to launch exhaustive expeditions for imported water. No neo-robbert baron tactics nor fist-full-of-coins lobbying has been necessary to insure an uninterrupted flow to homes, industry and agriculture. Our valleys here are studded with numerous wells and the heavily-forested mountains come complete with several fine watersheds. While the not-so-mighty San Lorenzo river is more a scenic centerpiece and shopping-cart depository than a viable water supply, the County's capacity for developed groundwater has always picked up the slack left by surface sources.

Dave Barber

Along the north coast such graybearded watersheds as Majors Creek and Liddell Spring, which both date back to the nineteenth century, are still churning away. The Loch Lomond Reservoir, built in 1961, impounds somewhere in the vicinity of 2.8 billion gallons in the wet season and has been shouldering more and more of the burden for Santa Cruz municipal demands. In the Soquel/Aptos corner of the County, groundwater recharge potential was outlined in glowing terms by the US Geological Survey (USGS) not so very long ago by virtue of a veritable bevy of prolific aquifers.

But if all this sounds brimming with promise, not to mention excess gallons, listen a bit closer. What you will hear are eerie organ chords from the inner sanctums of various city halls announcing the specter of impending water shortages if we don't hurry up and do something quick.

Upon careful inspection, this alarm is not entirely unwarranted. The Soquel Creek County District, for example, received a bucketful of bad news a year or so back when its old Friends from the USGS reported that because of accelerated seawater intrusion those bubbling mid-county wells would only be able to be plumbed for half the original estimated amounts. Over in the valleys of Scotts and San Lorenzo, well dependence has recently fallen on hard times thanks to dwindling productivity and pervasive levels of nitrates that just won't come out in the wash.

Then there is the precedent of the 1976 California drought. A rude comeuppance, to be sure. It was in the throes of that crisis that certain individuals in our local government became fully convinced that something heroic had to be done to rescue this fair seaside community from parched summers and water rationing. No phone booth was handy,

it seems, so it was decided that the next best thing to hop into was a lively, upper-County San Lorenzo tributary, the Zayante Creek.

Not that speculations for a dam of this sort were new. Quite to the contrary. The City first drafted construction proposals way back in the wetter and less worrisome days of the early 1960s. Santa Cruz has hoarded the legal water rights to the area for some 20 years now, a condition which is scheduled to expire in December of 1982. In filing for a renewal of those rights, declares SCMWD official Gene Watson, it is crucial to demonstrate an active pursuance of resource development since the Water Rights Review Board only wants to extend such privileges to "local governments who are serious about them."

Well, if any of you Board members are out there, rest assured that's one thing you don't have to worry about. The City of Santa Cruz is dead serious. Last Friday, Gene Watson hooked his thumb towards an impressively weighty stack of folders on his desk, indicating them as the two dozen or so proposals for Environmental Impact Reports the SCMWD has fielded for a formal study of Zayante. Though no approval has been granted for a dam of any kind, and won't be for some time, Watson is confident that Zayante will be "on line" by its originally scheduled date of 1995.

Even so, it's not exactly going to be a picnic stroll down to the banks of the old Zayante Creek. Unexpected opposition has arisen from the neighboring San Lorenzo District, which has not only lodged a protest against the SCMWD's application (on the grounds that the Creek is too water-deficient to accommodate a project of major proportions), but has submitted a water rights application of its very own. From the beginning there has been strong protest against the potential damages to fish populations that a Zayante Dam poses, as well as howls from the more geologically conscious citizenry over how it would court dangerous erosion.

Assembling all the pros and cons of this controversy-fraught project under one roof would take too exhaustive a guest list to compile here. As evidenced by the conjuring up of mythical native slugs and the feuding dissension between presumably compatible water districts, sentiment for and against the damming runs deeper than the Creek ever will. On the subject of depth, by the way, that's exactly what some pockets around here are going to have to have: the estimated price tag at the moment for the dam is a rather audacious \$55 million.

Perhaps the Zayante Dam will go up smoothly and without incident. Perhaps the stream will stay fish-choked in the right seasons and the surrounding landscape will remain largely unaltered. Perhaps there will be no earthquake from the nearby fault and no devastating flood loosed upon the hillsides. Perhaps those of us who have insisted that lines should be drawn somewhere have had it wrong all along—water has always been ours for the taking and it's just that these days we have to work a little bit harder for it. □