



Photographs by GINA FERAZZI Los Angeles Times

REMOVAL of dams and draining of reservoirs enabled the Klamath River to return to its historic channel, exposing submerged land.

‘Feeling inspired’ by dam removal

Historic effort has freed the Klamath, lifting hopes of Indigenous people who sought change to help salmon. ‘The river is healing,’ an activist says.

BY IAN JAMES

HORN BROOK, Calif. — Excavators clawed at the remnants of Iron Gate Dam, clattering loudly as they unloaded tons of earth and rock into dump trucks.

Nine miles upriver, machinery tore into the foundation of a second dam, Copco No. 1, carving away some of the last fragments of the sloping concrete barrier that once towered above the Klamath River.

Over the last few weeks, crews have nearly finished removing the last of the four dams that once held back the Klamath River near the California-Oregon border.

On Wednesday, workers carved channels to breach the remaining cofferdams at the last two sites, allowing water to flow freely along more than 40 miles of the Klamath for the first time in more than a century.



BROOK THOMPSON of the Yurok Tribe stands above the Iron Gate Dam removal site. “It’s like a magic trick, like it was there and now it’s not.”

Indigenous leaders and activists cheered, smiled and embraced as they watched the river slowly begin to pour through what was left of Iron Gate Dam. Some were in tears.

For activists who have been waiting for this moment for years, the feelings of joy and excitement have been building in recent weeks as the undamming work neared completion.

“The biggest thing for me, the significance of the dam removal project, is just hope — understanding that change can be made,” Brook M. Thompson, a Yurok Tribe member, said recently as she stood on a rocky bluff overlooking the remnants of Iron Gate Dam.

“This is definitely one of the highlights of my entire life, seeing this view that we’re looking at right now,” Thompson said. “This is everything.”

[See Dams, A7]

Back to college, with stricter security

Campuses tighten rules on protests and ban encampments. Students are seeing the changes.

BY JAWEED KALEEM

When Lawrence Sung returned to USC this week, he encountered a campus starkly different from the one he’s come to know over the last three years.

In place of open gates for public access, students lined up, waiting for staff to scan their IDs. Once inside, new signs warned of a possible “secondary verification screening” and that bags and personal items would be “subject to inspection.”

Tall, black fencing cordoned off parts of Alumni Park, the heart of campus and site of last spring’s pro-Palestinian encampments. Students are allowed to enter the park, where they typically rest beneath shade trees, only through specified entries and exits.

“It’s overblown,” said Sung, a senior studying international relations and global business who never protested. “It feels like a fortress closing itself down to the community.”

Last academic year, college campuses throughout the nation were roiled and divided by dueling rallies between pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian groups, accusations of antisemitic and anti-Palestinian bias, and tensions over an antiwar movement pushing for divestment from Israel. University presidents struggled with how to respond to a slew of fortified protest encampments, many that ended only after police were called in to make arrests — numbering in the thousands across the country.

Now administrations are clamping down ahead of a potentially volatile fall of continued protests opposing the Israel-Hamas war, compounded by a divisive

[See Campuses, A5]

Six facing federal charges in alleged crime tourism ring

Van Nuys car rental business is accused of working with South Americans to steal goods worth millions.

BY RICHARD WINTON AND HANNAH FRY

A multimillion-dollar crime tourism scheme that operated for years in Southern California, facilitating thefts across the country, led investigators to a most unusual hub: a Los Angeles car rental business.

But this wasn’t just any rental car shop. The business “catered only to crooks,” U.S. Atty. Martin Estrada said at a news conference Wednesday.

Federal prosecutors allege Juan Carlos Thola-Duran, who owns Driver Power Rentals in Van Nuys, ran the go-to rental car business for thieves, providing vehicles for crime tourism groups ar-

iving from South America and directing them to locations both in and outside California for their thefts.

Thola-Duran, 57, is one of six people facing charges including wire fraud, conspiracy to commit wire fraud, money laundering and conspiracy to transport stolen goods for their alleged roles in the scheme, federal prosecutors said. The indictment identifies the other five as Thola-Duran’s girlfriend, Ana Maria Arriagada, 41; his son John Carlo Thola, 33; Miguel Angel Barajas, 57; Patricia Enderton, 43; and Federico Jorge Triebel IV, 78, court records show.

“These defendants acted essentially as quarterbacks for a massive team of eager thieves,” Estrada said.

Estrada said the group directed crime tourists who committed hundreds of thefts across the nation — including in Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties — beginning around

[See Crime tourism, A10]

No student debt relief for now

The Supreme Court lets stand an appellate court order blocking Biden’s revised program. **NATION, A4**

More density ahead in L.A.?

The huge planned Fourth & Central project may be indicative of downtown’s trajectory. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

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Weather
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ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

CONSTRUCTION is progressing at Cotino, a master-planned community that Disney is building in Rancho Mirage, Calif. Some city residents are dubious.

Disney’s new mega-neighborhood is taking shape in California desert

BY JACK FLEMMING

RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif. — Mickey Mouse is making his way to the Coachella Valley — whether locals want him there or not.

In Rancho Mirage, the Walt Disney Co. is making progress on an ambitious development that promises

to sprinkle some Disney magic into real estate. Dubbed Cotino, the master-planned community is the first of the entertainment giant’s “Storyliving” projects, designed for home buyers who want to bring Disney deeper into their everyday lives.

Donald Duck won’t be delivering your mail, but the

specs offer plenty of Disney flourishes, including an “Incredibles”-themed gathering space and a 24-acre lagoon. It’s a massive undertaking, with 1,932 planned homes spread across more than 600 acres.

But some desert dwellers say they’ve already found their happiest place on

[See Cotino, A10]



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Disney's desert mega-neighborhood takes shape

[Cotino, from A1] Earth — and it has nothing to do with Disney.

"Rancho Mirage is quiet, peaceful and friendly," said Mark Wolpa, who moved here from San Francisco in 2008. "But Cotino's bringing pollution, commotion and chaos to an area that didn't want it."

Wolpa lives down the street from the Cotino site and said once-empty roads have swelled with traffic as tractors, cranes and trucks shut down lanes and clog the road.

On a visit last week, excavators working along Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra drives slowed traffic as the site's exterior was taking shape. A roughly 6-foot wall separates the property from the street, and drought-tolerant landscaping spruces up the sidewalk that wraps around it.

Wolpa said his main concern is the water usage required to fill and maintain a lagoon in the middle of the desert.

The artificial oasis is called Cotino Bay, and Disney is touting it as the centerpiece of the project. Once finished, it'll feature sandy beaches, swimming, water sports and a promenade.

For the project, Disney tapped Crystal Lagoons, a company that specializes in creating massive bodies of water. The company keeps the specifics of its technology under wraps, but the website claims its lagoons consume 33 times less water than an 18-hole golf course and replace much of the water lost to evaporation by capturing rainwater. The Rancho Mirage area receives an average of around 6 inches of rain a year.

In a Desert Sun guest column in 2022, Rancho Mirage's mayor at the time, Ted Weill, defended the lagoon, writing that property owners have a right to develop their land in accordance with city standards and pointing out that Disney's plans fell within its allotted water budget. Weill noted that the Coachella Valley has 54,000 swimming pools, so the lagoon is nothing new, and Disney even downsized the original design by 10 acres.

As details about the lagoon kept trickling out that year, Wolpa became upset, since the valley was in the middle of a major dry spell.

"We had tight restrictions on water usage at the time. Everyone was ripping out their yard and replacing it with artificial grass. And meanwhile, I started seeing signs for a massive lagoon," Wolpa said.

Water restrictions were lifted after significant rainfall over the last year, but Wolpa's thoughts haven't changed.

"It's still a desert, and water is still a precious re-



CONSTRUCTION is progressing at Cotino. Plans call for it to include 1,932 homes on more than 600 acres. Once finished, the lagoon area will feature sandy beaches, swimming, water sports and a promenade.

Photographs by ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times



FLOOR PLANS range from 2,200 square feet in the Cottage Collection up to 3,900 square feet in the Grand Collection. Prices start in the upper \$1-million range and go above \$2 million.

source," he said. "To think about having a lagoon here just feels wasteful."

Although a lagoon the size of 18 football fields might seem out of place in the desert, Rancho Mirage already is something of a man-made oasis.

Dense trees line the streets, and grassy golf courses sit east and west of the property. Across the street, a gated neighborhood lures passersby with a rushing waterfall at the entrance.

The lagoon won't open for two more years, a Disney employee told The Times, but construction on the rest of the development is underway.

Home sales started this year, and the initial batch of 300 homes is being devel-

oped. The first residents will move in during early 2025.

Katie Dorr, a real estate agent based in Dana Point, has toured Cotino twice — once to see for herself, and once with a client interested in purchasing a place.

"It all feels very Disney," Dorr said. "There's extreme attention to detail, colors and artistry."

During her first tour, she was greeted by a Disney employee and shown a movie explaining the vision behind Cotino. Then, she toured a room with a map of the land and a miniature replica of Cotino Bay.

Renderings of the houses showcase designs meant to fit the Coachella Valley style, with neutral color palettes that blend in with the desert and the mid-century archi-

tecture for which Palm Springs has become famous. Floor plans range from 2,200 square feet in the Cottage Collection up to 3,900 square feet in the Grand Collection.

Bill Miller, a gardener and environmentalist who bought a Palm Springs property in 2000, is worried less about the architecture and more about the wildlife being cleared out to make room for nearly 2,000 new homes.

"Critters are being pushed out. Birds, bees, butterflies, rabbits, lizards, roadrunners — none of these are considered when the landscaping goes in," he said.

Miller drives by Cotino often and said the 618-acre site once housed hundreds

of creosote bushes, a shrub that animals use to hide from hawks and take cover from the sun.

"The big ones are ancient. They can be up to 300 years old," he said. "And once you pull them out, they're gone forever."

Miller also works as a handyman and talks to clients around the Coachella Valley to keep tabs on how people are feeling about the project. He said most feel the same as he does: They hate to see the desert torn up for more housing — especially luxury housing.

Cotino homes won't be cheap. Prices start in the upper \$1-million range and go above \$2 million.

According to Zillow, Rancho Mirage is the second-priciest city in the Coachella

Valley, with a median home value of \$878,659 — second only to Indian Wells. Even so, each of the 1,932 homes coming to Cotino will be higher than the current median.

"Nothing's being built for low-income. Everything that goes in is above \$1 million," Miller said.

He's also concerned about the vast scale of the project, and the way it will alter the area's identity. As of 2022, Rancho Mirage had roughly 8,740 households, according to Data USA. So by the time Cotino is complete, Disney homes will account for nearly a fifth of the city's housing stock.

Jim Thomas lives in Indio, and he's seen firsthand the effect that large-scale projects can have on a community, good and bad. The Coachella and Stagecoach music festivals bring in more than \$100 million to Indio's economy and \$600 million across the wider Coachella Valley, according to a 2016 study from the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership.

The festivals have changed the fabric of the city, contributing to a thriving downtown area and a glut of short-term rentals that have popped up to meet the demand of music fans. Thomas thinks a Disney development will surely have an effect on the area's cultural and financial identity — he's just not sure whether it'll be for better or for worse.

"Rancho Mirage is already one of the richest cities in Southern California, and this will only add to its wealth," Thomas said. "But where will the workers live? The housekeepers, landscapers, bartenders and hospitality employees?"

Last month, Rancho Mirage's City Council approved a 234-unit apartment complex with affordable housing, according to the Desert Sun, but the green light came after years of struggling to develop such housing. For reference, that complex will cover 10 acres — just 1.6% of Cotino's acreage.

"There's uproar whenever someone tries to develop multifamily housing here," Thomas said. "Yet Disney and its million-dollar homes are welcomed with open arms."

A Disney employee confirmed that the project doesn't include plans for employee housing but didn't specify whether it plans to develop affordable housing. In December, the Desert Sun said the project had no plans for affordable or low-income units.

Katherine Holt, a Rancho Mirage resident and Disney fan, is cautiously optimistic about the development.

"It's Disney, so we know it's going to be done well," she said. "But will it be a part of the community, or take over the community?"

Southern Californians arrested in federal inquiry of crime tourism

[Crime tourism, from A1] 2018. The thefts occurred in about 80 cities in California, Colorado, Arizona, New Jersey, Kansas and Illinois and netted about \$5.5 million for those charged in the case, according to the indictment. However, prosecutors estimated the loss to businesses and homeowners was about \$35 million.

The crews would use the rented cars while shoplifting luxury goods, breaking into homes and businesses and stealing people's credit and bank cards, prosecutors said.

Thola-Duran and Arriagada are accused of directing the crews to max out the stolen cards by purchasing electronics, gift cards, designer purses and other goods from department stores and retailers such as Target, Best Buy and Home Depot, according to prosecutors and the indictment.

The couple would have the illicit goods brought back to the rental car business or direct thieves to mail them to others involved in the alleged scheme, and Barajas and Thola would pick up the parcels and deliver them to Thola-Duran, prosecutors wrote in the indictment.

Thola-Duran would buy the stolen goods from the thieves at a fraction of their retail value and either sell them to other buyers or keep them for his group, prosecutors allege, adding that the individuals used the money to buy luxury goods,



THE FBI shared this screenshot of the six people indicted by a federal grand jury on accusations of facilitating South American visitors' heists in about 80 cities.

including real estate and horses, and used gift cards to buy flooring, appliances and other items for their homes.

"These criminals were running a burglary operation with a sophistication that rivals Amazon, and instead of dispatching delivery drivers, they were dispatching trained thieves throughout Southern California to steal from what should be where we are safest — our homes," Orange County Dist. Atty. Todd Spitzer said.

Some heists were particularly lucrative.

On New Year's Eve 2020,

thieves broke into Stephen Silver Fine Jewelry in Menlo Park and stole high-end watches and jewelry, including a 4.78-carat yellow diamond halo ring. The pilfered goods were valued at more than \$5 million.

Over the course of roughly two months, Thola then set out to sell the luxury items, prosecutors allege. In a WhatsApp chat, Thola wrote to one of the alleged thieves that he had "a customer for your jewel," and that "the Russian pays well whatever good jewels come up," according to the indictment. Thola said a \$1,000 car rental fee would be deducted

from what he paid the thief for the goods.

During a traffic stop in Burbank in September 2022, authorities discovered Thola had more than 130 gift cards with a total value of about \$19,500, roughly \$9,400 in cash and receipts for electronics that were bought in San Jose and San Diego using stolen credit cards, according to the indictment.

"This group essentially acted as a linchpin for South American crime tourists who wanted to come to our country, take advantage of our liberties to steal from the American people," Estrada said. "This group not just fa-

cilitated crime tourism, but in many cases, actively directed it."

The indictment also alleges that Thola-Duran, Arriagada and others obtained nearly \$275,000 in fraudulent COVID-19 business relief loans during the pandemic.

If convicted, the defendants face a statutory maximum sentence of 20 years in federal prison for each count related to wire fraud and money laundering, up to 10 years for each count of structuring transactions to avoid reporting funds, and up to five years for conspiracy to transport stolen property interstate.

The defendants could not immediately be reached for comment and have not entered pleas.

The trend of South American crime groups visiting Southern California for thefts and robberies emerged roughly five years ago, and authorities have been grappling to get it under control. The thieves, authorities say, often arrive on easily obtainable tourism visas. The phenomenon, which police have called "burglary tourism," has spurred political outrage.

Dist. Atty. Spitzer said the Chilean government has refused to abide by a requirement to provide the U.S. with the criminal history of Chilean citizens who use a visa program called Electronic System for Travel Authorization, or ESTA. The program allows Chileans to enter the U.S. for 90-

day periods an unlimited number of times. Visa requirements vary from country to country, but travelers from several other South American nations typically require visas with tighter restrictions to come to the U.S.

In Orange County, the thieves have been spotted casing homes in tony neighborhoods, wearing specialized suits that resemble foliage in an effort to blend in, prosecutors said. They rent luxury cars to blend in at the neighborhoods and shopping centers they're intent on burglarizing, Spitzer said.

In Ventura County, more than 130 people who authorities say were involved in crime tourism rings have been arrested. The vast majority were using vehicles obtained through Driver Power Rentals, officials said.

Federal agents said they served 11 warrants, seized 35 cars and some horses while making arrests in the case. The years-long inquiry was unique in that it "targeted the entire wheel" of the scheme and "created a blueprint for future investigations," said Akil Davis, assistant director in charge of the FBI's Los Angeles field office.

"We are not done here targeting South American theft groups," Davis said. "They have, seriously impacted our quality of life in the Southland and the FBI is committed to further investigating these groups wherever they arise."