Twitter Thread by Caleb Scoville



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I was bombarded w/ messages about Trump's claims about California water & a "certain little tiny fish," the delta smelt, the topic of my dissertation & current book project. I wrote a short reaction piece but was unable to get it published as an oped. Here it is a thread ■ 1/25

The Real Meaning of Trump's "Bizarre" Claims About California Water Politics:

Trump's recent behavior may be erratic, but his statements on California water politics have been remarkably consistent. We should acknowledge what he is doing and refuse to take the bait. 2/25

In one of his first interviews after being diagnosed with COVID-19, President Trump complained to Sean Hannity of Fox News that California has to "ration" water because it pours its supply into the sea to "take care of certain little tiny fish." 3/25

The fish in question is the delta smelt, an endangered species that is found only in the northeastern part of San Francisco Bay, where it receives the flow of the mighty rivers that drain the Sierra Nevada. 4/25

This area, known locally as "the Delta," is the lynchpin of California's water system. 5/25

Commentators swooped in to point out the seemingly "bizarre" nature of Trump's claim, e.g. this piece published by the Business Insider. 6/25 https://t.co/PTv29jJ1Rl

However, the President's statement, while factually incorrect, was far from unusual. Trump was merely repeating a narrative that Hannity himself popularized over a decade ago. 7/25

For Trump and Hannity, the delta smelt controversy is not simply about water in California. It's about the politics of "us" and "them." 8/25

The delta smelt is listed under the Endangered Species Act. Protections have sometimes placed limits on water extracted from its habitat, although far less than is often claimed. It has been a player in California's water policy for decades. 9/25

However, it only entered the national stage in 2009, when Hannity dedicated a special to the species, which alleged “incredible suffering in this region because of a government that has put the interest of a two inch delta smelt … before the people of California” 10/25

The delta smelt would go on to be labeled as a “stupid little fish” by Congressman Devin Nunes. In 2016 Trump pointed to the delta smelt as evidence that “there is no drought” in California. 11/25

A systematic scientific analysis of restrictions on Delta water use refutes these claims. First, it shows that the proportion of water being extracted for human use from the San Francisco Bay watershed has increased, rather than decreased in recent decades 12/15

Second, it shows that during the 2012-16 drought, protections of the delta smelt accounted for a minuscule constraint on water project exports in California (only 1.2% of actual water flowing through the Delta to the San Francisco Bay). 13/25

In some years – even as the controversy boiled over – the export of massive amounts of water from the Delta was not impeded by protections for delta smelt at all. (Full article here: https://t.co/qCVxTHK8xk) 14/25

Why all the focus on the delta smelt, then? When regulations governing the species’ protection were being attacked in federal courts in the late 2000s, conservative opinion leaders seized on an opportunity to blame liberal environmentalists in cities for CA's water woes. 15/25

Hannity’s focus on the delta smelt brought the species out of obscurity, making it a symbol for all that was supposedly wrong with California, liberals, and environmentalism. 16/25

The delta smelt controversy reveals important patterns underlying partisan controversies. Most importantly, it demonstrates the immense power of media personalities. Hannity did not merely report on a controversy. He helped create it. 17/25

A look at Google search interest in delta smelt makes this clear. Interest in the species does not track its effect on water policy. Instead, the largest spike in public interest in the delta smelt by far is in September 2009, when Hannity held his exposé on Fox News. 18/25

Hannity and other conservative elites outside of California used the delta smelt’s small size and uncharismatic appearance to suggest that liberals in faraway cities care more about a “stupid little fish” than ordinary Americans. 19/25

Although protections of the delta smelt are not the cause of California’s water problems, the state’s water system does face threats. 20/25

Climate change is making California’s weather more volatile, reducing snowpack in mountains, causing seawater intrusion in the Delta, and straining aging infrastructure. 21/25

Scientists argue that the decline of the delta smelt is a warning sign that California’s relationship with water is unsustainable. 22/25 https://t.co/dU2yLJuJO8

Even when detached from underlying reality, political symbols like the delta smelt have consequences. 23/25

Stoking partisan resentment by mobilizing the delta smelt has become an electorally convenient way to avoid talking about climate change and other systemic environmental problems that threaten humans and aquatic ecosystems alike. 24/25

The next time the president makes false claims about water in California, his words should be taken for what they are: an attempt to divide Americans against their common interest in a livable planet.

25/25

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