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Looking down on our Valley through our haze

By William Tweed

As I try to each June, I put on my backpack recently and trudged up to Alta Meadow in Sequoia National Park. When I was younger, I often did this as a day hike, but now I prefer to enjoy camping at Alta Meadow. In this way what might be a strenuous one-day adventure becomes a more leisurely wilderness vacation.

I go back to Alta Meadow year after year because it has a truly astounding view. From the vicinity of my campsite, perched near the northern rim of the great canyon of the Middle Fork of the Kaweah River, one can see everything from the 13,000-high Kaweah Peaks to the Kaweah Delta country of the San Joaquin Valley.

Except, of course, that I couldn't really see the San Joaquin Valley at all. As is almost always the case in the summer, the Valley was obscured by pervasive regional "haze" — a nice word for the air pollution that fills our Valley nearly all the time during the summer months.

Air pollution is a fact of life here, something we live with as best we can. We also complain about it — both the fact that our air is often very dirty and the fact that we are required to abide with rules that attempt to improve the situation.

What we don't often consider is why our air is so bad. Sitting on a rock at Alta Meadow, looking down on the Valley from an elevation of over 9,000 feet, gave me a good opportunity to review that question. From my mountain perch I could see much of the answer.

We humans create the very dirty air that plagues our region, but surprisingly to many, this does not result from our being especially abusive of our local atmosphere. As a regional society, we treat our air shed no worse than many other places that are much less polluted. So, why then is our air often so dirty?

The primary answers result from geography.

First, we're in a region that sees stable, dry weather most of the time during the warm season. During the summer, our air tends to stay put, sometimes for weeks at a time.

Secondly, our Valley is nearly surrounded by mountains. The Sierra Nevada, the Coast Range, and the Tehachapi Mountains, in combination with the stable climate, serve to make the Valley a wonderfully effective air trap. Again, the result is that the air here tends to stay here for long periods.

You will notice that I have yet to say anything about human beings. Nature, working on its own, has designed in Central California a place that sees less summer air movement than almost any place else in the United States.

But now let's add some people — almost four million of us in fact. Because of our stable climate, the air in our mountain-rimmed Valley retains almost everything we put into it during the summer, and each and every one of us is contributing something. We drive, farm, manufacture, extract oil, make wine, and barbeque hamburgers in our backyards. All of these activities add something to the atmosphere.

The inescapable truth is that, when it comes to air, we live in an extremely unforgiving place. If all four million of us lived in a region of comparable size somewhere in the Midwest and lived there just the way we live here, we would have cleaner air much of the time than we enjoy locally. Geography rules.

The implications of this are difficult to escape. Because we live in a region that is extremely prone to the collection and intensification of air pollution, we must work much harder here to control the pollution than is necessary in most other regions. This may not be fair, but that's simply the way it is.

The San Joaquin Valley is special in many ways, and our agriculture takes advantage of our unique environment. But our Valley's distinctive climate also requires things of us, and foremost among these is that we must work much harder than many who live elsewhere to keep our air from becoming hopelessly polluted.

Several years ago, I visited China. There, in a country that is doing very little to control air pollution as it pursues economic growth, I saw almost unimaginably dirty air. We're doing much better here, but there is no time coming when we will be able to step back and relax.

As long as our population continues to grow, and our economy keeps inventing new ways to do things, we will need to remain vigilant. We have chosen to live here, and from that decision come challenges we cannot evade.

And that's what I saw looking down from Alta Meadow.

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