

Past Decades Driest

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The past 30 years have probably been the driest period in southern California in at least 50,000 years--since before the last Ice Age--says Carl L. Hubbs, professor of biology at the University of California's Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

He warns that the situation may continue. "We ought to be prepared, on the existing incidence, to meet the very strong possibility, if not the probability, of even increased aridity in the southwestern regions, including southern California and Baja California. It would be most unwise to plan otherwise."

Hubbs has found that as the ample lakes and running streams that characterized the West in the Ice Age shrunk to isolated pools and trickles, distinctive fish populations were developed. Many of these have lived for hundreds of generations in a relatively small pond or water hole, and can be identified as living relics of the past. During the past 30 years he has seen several of these populations die out after having survived perhaps 12,000 years of increasing drought.

Some of the changes long believed to have occurred over a span of thousands of years may rather have happened during a few hundred years. "There is some evidence that Point Loma, the southwesternmost tip of the United States, was forested when the Spaniards arrived here about 400 years ago," he says. "Today it is covered only by low-growing scrub."