

## California Development vs. Conservation

As an Amtrak passenger traveling through southern California, you have the opportunity to view a variety of landscapes and get just a hint of the richness of California's natural resources. These resources attracted people in search of a better life – some sought a humble homestead on which to raise a family, while others saw opportunities to strike it rich. Rolling grasslands, mountainsides covered with timber, rumors of gold veins, and ports for shipping and transportation were all beacons of hope for newcomers.

Twenty-five percent of California is made up of farmland – providing food for many in the U.S. and the world. The top agricultural commodities are dairy, nursery and greenhouse plants, grapes, almonds, and beef cattle. One hundred percent of the almonds grown in the U.S. come from California, as well as 87% of the grapes. California exports more food to other countries than any other state – almost 14 billion dollars worth of food in 2008.

Of course, not all Californians are farmers. Of the 36 million people living in the state, fewer than 900,000 live in rural areas. The economy has grown and thrived through industries such as aerospace, petroleum, information technology and entertainment, enabling California to produce 13% of the country's gross domestic product in 2008.

As waves of settlers cleared land, started farms and built cities in the beautiful, rich land, some became alarmed at the destruction. John Muir, renowned nature writer and eventual founder of the Sierra Club, worked tirelessly to preserve wilderness areas for the benefit of nature and the well-being of people. He believed strongly that people need to spend time in natural areas to restore their minds and souls. Muir was instrumental in having Yosemite Valley set aside as a California State Park; it would later become a National Park. Hetch Hetchy Valley, just north of Yosemite, is said to have been equally beautiful, but efforts to save it were not successful. The Tuolumne River was dammed in the 1920's and Hetch Hetchy became a reservoir to provide for the water needs of the growing San Francisco area.

Many Californians today support conservation of the remaining wilderness areas of California, and outdoor recreation is highly popular. We don't see many trees along

our route through southern California, but today over 45% of the state is covered by forests. This is one of the leading U.S. states in the total acreage protected by land trusts, in addition to the large parcels under protection by state and federal agencies. There is also strong support for conservation of farmland to protect valuable agricultural land from urban development.

As the train travels near Beaumont, you can thank the conservationists in California for recently setting aside the beautiful San Timeteo Canyon – it is one of the recent additions to the California State Park system, and will soon provide hiking and horseback trails for visitors.

### Source(s):

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Statefacts/CA.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California>

<http://www.parks.ca.gov>