Delta: Boat not needed.

To sample waterways.

Sacramento, adjacent to least

Your Courtland Port, Jr. The

25th annual event returns July 22.
Delia: Three-day houseboat rental with the.com crowd
Delta: Jet ski reservations quickly jettisoned

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Today, almost half the water that flows into the Delta is diverted to the thirsty cities of Southern California. Ecologically, just a shadow of its former self, the Delta is under pressure from all sides. Water rights, introduced species, declining fishery, sinking farmlands, saltwater invasions and flood control are just a few of the issues at hand.

In the Meadows, and all along neighboring Snaggrass Slough, you get a feel for how it used to be before man started meddling. Cottonwood, oak and willows dangle leaf and water with shade. Tule marshes provide cover for coterie, beaver and birds. Frogs croak, crickets chirp, ducks quick and cottonwood drifts like snow at the shoreline.

California’s Department of Parks and Recreation has recently acquired much of the farm land in the Delta Meadows area and is formulating plans for a new state park. Meanwhile, a contingent of boaters who’ve been spending summers here for years are anchored out for what might be their final season.

One of them is “Ranger” Rick West, who in late April had already claimed his usual spot up-slough in the deep green water of the Meadows. Home base for West is a new, 1,070-square-foot houseboat called Claud’s. West has been spending summers on this slough since 1973, he said — and he’s the most long-term resident.

“Don and Pat White will bring in their boat Bo Be Any time now, and this will be their 45th year,” said the pony-tailed boater, attended by three brawny, black lab named Sadie, Delta and Midnight. “There are people here whose family members have been coming for 60 years — it’s been exactly like this for a long time.

Most years, West said, about 30 boats anchor out here for the season. Holidays and weekends might see that number double. The main attraction: a simple, convivial lifestyle. The rules and regulations. It’s kind of like a bunch of people tied up in a pond and everybody floating around, talking to each other,” West explained. Of how boaters spend their time here. “The lifestyle is very relaxed. We do a lot of socializing.”

Our day in the Meadows was as mellow as West’s mood. The adults read, explored the foot-path that Meadows regulars had built on land and took turns on the WaveRunner, while the kids ran in endless circles in the basin to the water to the roof of the houseboat, where they jumped into the water again.

Come evening, we voted to go to a restaurant rather than cook another meal on board. Destination: Giusti’s, a popular eatery about an hour’s cruise back south.

Fortunately, there was room — just barely — at the guest dock for our 50-foot beelie. Wild roses spilt pink buoqets of welcome over the ramp leading up to the restaurant.

Giusti’s proved a dark, warm, welcoming womb of a place that’s been in the same family since current owner Mark Mariani’s grandfather started it in 1912. The first thing to notice upon entering are the hundreds — maybe thousands — of cups hanging from the ceiling in the bar. “Farmers started leaving their hats, and we started collecting them and putting them up there,” Mariani explained. “Now people bring them to us and we add them to the collection. It’s been going on about 15 years.”

The menu has been pretty much the same for that long, too. Dinners are served family-style, with a big bowl of minestrone and another of salad brought to each table to be passed around. Batters include pastas, fish and some of the best steaks this side of heaven.

By the time we lumbered back down to our boat, dusk was fall-