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South Bay Salt Pond Photography

By [Caity Varian, Communications Volunteer](#) | July 15, 2015

Using a kite to fly a radio-controlled camera to great heights, photographer [Cris Benton](#) brings the intricate details of the South Bay's salt ponds into focus. Cris's aerial photographs have aided in the restoration efforts of the salt ponds and have been utilized by [our habitat restoration team](#).



Barrel Point Salt Pond EBB © Cris Benton 2009

Saltscapes: The Kite Aerial Photography of Cris Benton

Can you describe your process for kite aerial photography?

The idea is to take photographs from somewhere between head height and 400 ft. above the ground. To lift the camera I use single line kites selected for stability, often taking a quiver of six to eight kites when I head out to photograph. After watching the wind, I select a kite that matches the breeze. After launching the kite I fly it up to steady air.

After the selected kite reaches steady air I fly it for about 10 minutes to establish that the wind is reliable and the kite is performing well. And then, a hundred feet or more below the kite, I attach a little string and pulley suspension called a Picavet. Below the Picavet cross you attach the camera. Controlled by a handheld radio transmitter, the airborne cradle can point the camera in any compass direction, tilt it from straight down to the horizon, and with the flip of a switch change from portrait to landscape format.

Once the equipment is rigged to the kite line you just let out more line, the kite flies higher and pulls the camera cradle up after it. In the South Bay I have hiked five miles along the levees with the camera aloft taking photographs as I go. **I frame each photograph by watching the camera, imagining what it would “see” and using the radio to pan and tilt.** After the shot is composed, I wait for camera to be still and then press the shutter button to make the exposure. It only takes a few seconds per image and it's great fun.

How has your work progressed in kite aerial photography (KAP)?

My first forays into KAP sprang from the confluence of longstanding interests in photography and radio-controlled sailplanes. In 1995, after playing with mounting a camera on one of my planes I made a shift to kites, which tend to be stable, self-tending platforms. Since switching to kites I have progressed through three photographic stages.

The first stage, lasting several years, involved sorting out how to fly kites, mount the camera, compose the photographs, and keep my lofted gear from crashing. During my middle period, again lasting several years, I traveled broadly with my KAP gear in a quest for [aerial images compositionally worthy of display](#). This was a fine period of honing technique and skill that yielded satisfying work, the placement of images in publications, coverage in the press, and a few exhibits.

I am now well settled into my third period, the use of kite aerial photography in sustained studies of specific landscapes. The best example is my project examining the South Bay

salt pond landscape. I came across the salt ponds while taking a series of hikes with microbiologist Dr. Wayne Lanier during my sabbatical at the Exploratorium. On these hikes Wayne would photograph through his field microscope while I took overhead views of the sampled environment.

Not knowing much about the South Bay I was struck by the otherworldly colors and textures present in what was once marshland. This was intriguing territory to photograph. After learning more about the current day [South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project](#), I developed a proposal to continue photographing the South Bay landscape in service of the restoration efforts. The Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife issued Special Use Permits providing permissions conditioned on seasonal restrictions to protect wildlife. This project, still underway, has blossomed into a major undertaking.

What is the nature of this South Bay project and what has it accomplished?

I started by photographing the colors and textures associated with the various salinities of salt ponds in the South Bay. Curiously, you can see little of a pond's color or bottom detail while hiking on the ground due to sky reflection from the pond's surface. Happily, an aerial vantage point reduces surface reflection to allow a view of pond colors and bottom detail. This advantage, afforded to airline passengers landing at SFO, is also realized by a kite-lofted camera.

I was having a great time bagging new colors, as though trophy animals, when I realized that **many of my aerial images contained vestigial remnants of the marsh channels that once served square miles of South Bay marsh.** Looking more closely I also found traces of old boat landings, 19th century salt works, and curious patterns left by over a century of dredging and duck hunting.

What began as a photographic romp through a visually compelling landscape slowly shifted toward documenting the landscape's history and deciphering traces of it evident in my aerial photographs. My aerial images often presented puzzling artifacts. These fueled visits to libraries, map rooms, and local experts. Then it was back to the field for more photographs. **After photographing for several years, I came to appreciate that the landscape was still in transition, and rapid transition at that, as the salt pond restoration project gained stride.** This realization has lent a sense of urgency to the project.

Over the last ten years **I have made about 250 trips to photograph the South Bay**. The South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project has used my images for outreach and in support of science projects guiding the restoration. For instance, my low-level aerial images of Drawbridge were used to “ground truth” the locations of invasive vegetation as predicted by the analysis of satellite data. My photographs of the project have also been used by over three-dozen non-profit agencies, including [Save The Bay](#). I have mounted several exhibits of the South Bay work including a permanent display of sixty images at the [Exploratorium](#) and large panoramas in the Oakland Museum’s 2014 exhibit [Above & Below: Stories from Our Changing Bay](#).

Cris Benton is a retired professor of architecture and former department chair at the University of California, Berkeley. He uses kite aerial photography as a technique for documenting several Northern California landscapes.

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Caity Varian, Communications Volunteer

Caity helps with Communications at Save The Bay. Born and raised in Marin County, she grew up hiking the Bay Area’s many trails and developed a love for rolling hills, towering redwood trees, and vibrant wildflowers. Caity attends Whitman College, where she majors in Environmental Studies and Sociology. When home for breaks, Caity loves taking her dogs to the beach and watching the sunset from the East Peak of Mount Tamalpais.

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