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Right now water monitoring is done with stationary sensors. Those are fine if one wants to know what pollutants or flow is like at a single point, but they don't say as much about how a plume of some contaminant is shaped -- for instance, if it is more concentrated towards the center of a channel or near the banks.

To get around this, the researchers designed robots that can either float with the current or propel themselves along in the water.

Before cell networks and GPS became ubiquitous, free-floating robots would have been chancy. Finding them would have been a project in itself. Now they can be tracked and send [data](#) in real time. The sensors without propellers will be for passive measurements, while those with them can travel to specific areas to study. The low cost of the sensor robots also means it's possible to deploy dozens at a time.

Salinity is just one of the issues in the Sacramento river basin, which includes the San Joaquin delta and eventually empties into Suisun Bay, which leads to San Pablo Bay and the Pacific. But the robots could be fitted with sensors to look for other chemicals as well.

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Another big plus for the robots is when a disaster such as a levee breach happens. The stationary sensors are not likely to be in the place where a problem occurs, but the [mobile](#) robots can be dropped into place and transmit the water flow data -- along with information about any contaminants.

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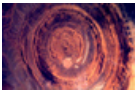
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