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A Place Devoted

The Community of the Mono Lake Committee

By Bill McKibben

It's a great honor to be asked to write a few words for the 2009 edition of the Mono Lake Calendar, for I respect the work of those who have saved Mono Lake as much as any activists in the country.

The first time this eastern boy ever laid eyes on the Biblical landscape pictured in these fine photos was about twenty years ago. I was on my way to Yosemite to do a few weeks of trailwork in the backcountry with my new bride, and on the advice of Terry Tempest Williams we detoured east to take a look at the dry side of the mountains. The lake was low, low enough that birds nesting on islands were in danger of predation. But I remember three things: canoeing through the tufa formations with a volunteer, wandering along the shore herding clouds of flies as if they were cattle, and my amazement at the skill and sagacity of the environmentalists we met in the Mono Lake Committee offices. I remember thinking: taking on Los Angeles seems like a pretty tough fight. But if anyone can do it they can.

What a pleasure to come back in the summer of 2007, again on the way to Yosemite, this time to give a talk and to hike for a few glorious days. On this trip there was no question I'd come in from the east—I desperately wanted to see Mono Lake again. And one glimpse from the highway view stop was enough to let me know that the good guys had won—that the water was up, that the world of that one valley was infinitely healthier than it had been.

I've spent the last couple of years immersed in environmental history, editing a thick volume of American environmental writing since Thoreau for the Library of America. It's been enough to remind me of how many other Americans, in how many other places, have made their stands—have put their wits, their fortunes, their lives on the line for the places that they loved. Marjory Stoneman Douglas in the Everglades or Ed Abbey along the Colorado or for that matter Terry Tempest Williams in the redrock of Utah. And of course those are just the names that people know from those fights—the writers who gave voice to the work of thousands of others.

I've also spent the last couple of years immersed in activism about climate change. With six recent college graduates we formed SteptUp, a small posse that in 2007 organized 2,000 demonstrations in cities, towns, forests, beaches and mountains around the country. In the last couple of years we've turned our efforts to trying the same kind of organizing internationally. And all that has been enough to remind me just how hard this kind of work really is—how much it demands that we set aside our own fears so that others can set aside theirs, how much we have to rally our best hopes, our most possible visions of the future.

It's easy enough to be bleak about the prospects for the planet. (I should know—I wrote a book called *The End of Nature*.) On my most recent trek into Yosemite I was shocked by how shrunken the snowfields were, how dry the forest. It was one more small glimpse of the very large-scale forces now dominating our environmental future. And in the face of those forces, of course, even our hardest won victories are likely to be forfeit. Los Angeles is a tough opponent, but nothing compared to a few hundred more parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere.

And here's the thing: taking on LA didn't just help Mono Lake; it helped change the second-biggest city in the country. After decades of looking to grab what they needed, Angelenos are starting to try and figure out how to take less, how to cut carbon. Hell, there are people actively trying to restore the Los Angeles River, which is a project that should define quixotic. No more so than what happened at Mono Lake, though.

So despair is neither wise nor mandatory. We know that the world is going to change, in uncomfortable ways. But we should also know that we can do much to slow that change down, and much to build communities, human and otherwise, that can cope with the change that we can't prevent. It was that sense of community that drew me most to the Mono Lake Committee, even more than the weird and glorious landscape it was protecting. After the string of Nevada towns oriented around sprawl and gambling, there's something glorious about the oasis

represented by that small storefront on the highway in Lee Vining. A place devoted to leading people by their best instincts, not their worst; to combining them instead of separating them; to seeing them not as consumers but as citizens, protectors, lovers of all that is worth loving.

Thank heaven for the Mono Lake Committee, one strong post in the fence that protects the earth's future from the forces of greed and obliviousness that threaten it now more than ever. You are an inspiration to us all.

*Bill McKibben is the author of a dozen books about the environment and culture, including most recently an essay collection called *The Bill McKibben Reader*.*



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