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# Past, Present, and Future

By Jim Canaday

**M**ono Lake—like our own lives—has a past, a present, and a future. My intent is not to bore the reader with a philosophical dissertation, but only to remind us all that Mono Lake's present is a result of all actions of the past tempered by the recent. Following that logic, the future is the sum of what happened today when added to yesterday.

The origin of the Mono Basin is told in the story of the rocks. This geologic truth can be seen as one takes a 360-degree view of the lake and its surroundings from the US Forest Service Visitor Center. The view is a mosaic of events that occurred over millions of years resulting in the creation of the larger landscape. Some of the landscape features you will also see are as recent as tens of thousands of years to several hundred years before present. What becomes clear is that Mono Lake and its basin was born of fire and sculpted by ice. The Sierra crest, Negit and Paoha Islands, the Mono Craters, and the glacial moraines like those in Lundy and Lee Vining canyons are testaments to those past events.

Harder to see but nevertheless important to the present have been the past activities of humans. The period of the basin's occupation by people began only yesterday in geology-speak. The legacy of our significant effects on the Mono Basin ecosystem can be measured in terms of a few human generations.

Native peoples have occupied the Mono Basin and its surroundings for hundreds of years. The environment and nature's economy defined the life of these first occupants: the Kutzadika<sup>a</sup>. Weather and food resources dictated their seasonal movements within the basin. Mono Lake was always central to their lives.

This would all change with the discovery of gold and silver in the region and the arrival of prospectors and European settlers shortly after 1850. The natural resources of the Mono Basin would now be divided and reallocated on behalf of the expanding European populations because of their demands for land, water, food, and fiber. The fate of the Kutzadika<sup>a</sup> was displacement and assimilation into this new human era in the Mono Basin.

It is important to understand that the land and streams within the basin were significantly modified early on for ranching and farming practices. Timber harvest also became an economically important activity due to the demand for lumber in places like Aurora and Bodie. Leroy Vining was one of the first to commercially harvest timber.

The new activity in the Mono Basin in some instances significantly modified the environment from what existed in the time of the Kutzadika<sup>a</sup>. Many people are familiar with the story in the recent past of the conflict over the water in the Mono Basin. To understand the present it is important to realize that the land, fresh water, and forest resources within the Mono Basin were not pristine with the arrival of the water interests from Southern California. Mono Lake itself had not been greatly changed by those earlier activities ... but that was soon to change.

After 1941 the diversion of water from some of the Mono Basin streams to the City of Los Angeles would result in significant changes to the streams and Mono Lake. The ensuing battle for Mono Basin water has been compared to the story of David and Goliath. The Mono Lake Committee and others brought to the forefront the consequences of these diversions based on scientific assessments. Based on that science, the California State Water Resources Control Board issued its 1994 decision that limited the City's diversions from Mono Basin streams, set future Mono Lake elevations, and required actions to restore conditions that existed in the streams prior to the City's diversions. These were the events of the Mono Basin's past.

Presently, the City of Los Angeles, in collaboration with the Mono Lake Committee and others, is taking actions that will in the future restore much of what was changed by the diversions. Stream channels have been reopened to allow water that is released into Rush, Walker, Parker, and Lee Vining creeks to reoccupy historic channels while trying to simulate natural flow patterns. Students from the inner city of Los Angeles have had the opportunity to come and work with the Mono

Lake Committee on restoration projects that increase their appreciation of how precious water is not only for where they live but also for Mono Lake. Scientists continue to monitor stream fisheries, lake limnology, and waterfowl populations. The riparian forest that once embraced Rush and Lee Vining creeks in some areas is now robust where not long ago it was absent. Wildlife species not seen in a generation have returned. This is all wonderful news but there is much more to be done to ensure Mono Lake's future.

The main ingredient for Mono Lake's future is "time," and continued dedication by those working for it. Mono Lake is a work in progress. It can take hundreds and in certain instances thousands of years for the present conditions to recover their past. Even with restoration efforts, some things will never be as they were. In the future, the environment of the streams and the lake will surely have changed. So too will there be new generations dedicated to the protection and recovery of Mono Lake. Where there was once little hope there is now optimism. Continued dedication in the present will ensure a very bright future for Mono Lake.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words and the photographs adorning this calendar make that a true statement. However, don't let your Mono experience be only the pictures in this calendar ... go there ... see it ... experience it!

Mono Lake Committee co-founder David Gaines once wrote, "So come visit Mono. The old lake needs new friends, and will not begrudge some more human footprints along its shores, provided we walk lightly." So come to Mono Lake, walk lightly, and view its wonders.

"In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks." — John Muir

*Jim Canaday is a retired Senior Environmental Scientist for the California State Water Resources Control Board. Most notably, Jim was the lead scientist-project manager and one of the authors of the State Water Board's 1994 Mono Lake public trust decision. He oversaw the Mono Basin restoration program ordered by the State Water Board until his retirement in 2007.*



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