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KNOWLEDGEABLE EYES

by David Carle

Thirty years ago, in the spring of 1982, Mono Lake's first park rangers arrived. A new law had taken effect, creating a park that included the lake and lakebed that had been exposed by water diversions to Los Angeles. At the urging of the Mono Lake Committee, the land and water were given the most protective classification in the California State Park System, as a State Reserve.

Only one full-time ranger was to work at the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve. My wife Janet and I, together, were that ranger, and we job-shared the position for the next 19 years. With the help of seasonal park aids and interpreters during the busy season (notably David Marquart, who has worked at the Reserve since 1983), we had the privilege of building a park operation from scratch.

A key focus for the Reserve is protecting tufa formations. When we arrived there were fire rings built with tufa rocks. A dead cow was gradually decomposing along the South Tufa trail; illegal grazing by cattle and sheep was a problem. So was off-road vehicle use, mostly in dune buggies.

David Gaines took us to South Tufa and to the sand tufas of Navy Beach on one of our first days, and we talked about the protection issues that would require signs and patrols. He carried a spotting scope and binoculars, and began our introduction to the birds and the amazing natural history of Mono Lake. The appeal of the ranger job at Mono Lake, for us, was the whole package of responsibilities extending well beyond law enforcement. Unlike most parks that rely on specialized staff to handle daily maintenance, resource management, and environmental

education, *anything* that needed doing at Mono Lake was our job, either to personally accomplish or, when major projects like a new boardwalk were needed, to organize help from nearby Bodie State Historic Park or from the Sierra District Headquarters at Lake Tahoe.

Most of the time we were on our own, ranging. That, very simply, is what rangers do. "Patrol" is a daily discovery, with eyes open and mind engaged, noting changes and patterns through the seasons, looking for problems, and always, everywhere, picking up pesky bits of litter. If the lakeshore looks litter free, you should know who to thank. If it is a mess, a ranger has been away too long. What emerges from this daily process, after a few years on the job, is an expert. What I liked most about my career as a ranger was becoming one of the few people who really *knew* Mono Lake ... someone who could answer almost any question from a park visitor ... who followed the seasonal changes in migratory birds and hatching of shrimp and emergence of new springs and patterns that only can be seen after years of looking with knowledgeable eyes.

Many people thought that the tufa towers, especially the sand tufas, were so fragile that they might weather away in just a few years. We photographed them and learned that snow and wind work very slowly on the tufas, but also that a single climber breaking a tower's hard outer crust could trigger rapid erosion. Public education, trail routing, signs, enforcement, and resource documentation all go into the effort to protect that signature resource.

Year-round guided tours and star talks on summer evenings began in 1982. Teachers responded eagerly to our invitation to bring school groups of all ages to Mono Lake. Environmental education was one of the most challenging things to do well, but our most gratifying task.

The battle to save Mono Lake reached a resolution 12 years after our first summer. In 1982, Mono Lake was at its lowest ebb, 45 feet below the 1941 elevation. Language in the enabling legislation specified that the Reserve "would not impact the water rights of the City of Los Angeles." Constrained by the law, we could not tell people what to think, but we let them know what was special about Mono Lake, the changes brought by the diversions, and the positions of the lake's defenders and the City. Inevitably, Mono Lake sold itself, with no hard sell from us. It was gratifying to serve as expert witnesses in the court and State Water Board hearings, providing information about visitor numbers (which soon jumped to about 250,000), recreational use patterns, and tufa formations.

In 1984, the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area was created and the State Reserve office moved into the new visitor center in 1992. Inevitably, the question arose: were two agencies really needed at the lake? The Forest Service's funding for patrols outside the visitor center was just as slim as the state's, so both agencies benefited from the combined efforts. A key goal was ensuring that the public found uniform policies on the checkerboard of federal and state ownership along the lakeshore. Budgets, always tight, have reached crisis points for both agencies several times through the years.

Twice in the last two decades, the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve was put on park closure lists to help balance the state budget. Support organized by the Mono Lake Committee helped avert those closures. Such a small operation never has required much money, but unlike many parks, the Reserve does not generate much revenue. A portion of fees collected by the Forest Service has been shared, recognizing services the state's ranger patrols provide to the partner agency.

As I write this essay, ranger positions have gone unfilled at Bodie for over a year and the Mono Lake ranger has been required to spend too much of his time there, instead of at the Reserve. Another park closure list is being discussed.

The state's fiscal problems cannot be solved by abandoning its responsibilities at Mono Lake. Park protection is a legal status meant to last forever. We trust—we hope—that the lake will never lose the benefits of rangers' knowledgeable eyes.

David Carle retired from the Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve in 2000 and Janet three years later. They still live in the Mono Basin. Janet is coordinator for the Mono Lake Volunteer Program. David is the author of 11 books, including *Mono Lake Viewpoint* (Artemisia Press, 1992), *Mono Lake Basin* (Arcadia, 2008), *Water and the California Dream* (Sierra Club Books, 2003), four books about water, air, fire, and earth in California (University of California Press), and the historical fiction novel, *Mono: a novel* (Phalarope Press, 2010). This year, UC Press will publish David and Janet's new book about water around the world along the 38th parallel.

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