

Streamwatch

Tribute to a Tree

by Greg Reis

On a walk along the Lee Vining Creek Trail last fall I came upon a quaking aspen that had fallen during a windstorm. It was about 35 feet tall and forked at its base. I recognized it immediately as it was the one I used to use as a landmark when pointing out the Red-tailed Hawk's nest in a nearby Jeffrey pine on creek tours.

"See the top of the aspen tree?" I used to say. "The nest is halfway between the top of it and the top of the Jeffrey pine behind it. It looks like a bundle of sticks against the trunk of the pine."

I had noticed that the aspen was growing quickly. Last year I gave a Creek Tour, and the top of the aspen had grown to be in the line of sight with the

nest. It was disorienting at first, but it made it just as easy to point out the nest. The highlight of the stop on that tour wasn't the nest, though; it was how fast aspens grow.

But now my landmark tree is gone. Not gone completely, but gone from its former position and function. One more change in a constantly changing riparian corridor along the creek. Instead of sifting the breeze, growing toward the sky, and providing a landmark for pointing out a hawk's nest, now it will slowly become part of the forest floor.

First the smallest branches will break off and decompose, nourishing the sandy soil, and then as the years go by and as the trunk settles more and more into

contact with the ground, the underside will become moist and inhabited by wood- and bark-eating organisms.

Leaves and pine needles will drift down, year after year, building up the mulch around it in nature's giant compost pile.

Meanwhile, numerous seedlings and saplings are reaching for the sky to take the place of the fallen giant. ❖

Greg Reis is the Committee's Information Specialist. He is finding Inyo-Mono Transit to be a wonderful thing.



Lakewatch

Lake Level Model Prediction High for Third Year in a Row

by Greg Reis

In the last Lakewatch, we promised to update you this spring on the supplemental lake level forecasting and model checking that we did this winter. Concerns have been raised for two years in a row because the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) lake level model predicted the lake level to remain constant, but in both years the lake level dropped. DWP relies on the runoff model to determine how high the stream restoration flows should be, and the lake level model is what predictions of future lake levels (and water exports) are based upon. If

either model were not working properly, the water management implications would be serious.

Overall, hydrologist Peter Vorster and I found that the runoff and lake level models are both working as expected. Runoff can be predicted fairly accurately because snowpack can be measured. Translating runoff into lake level, on the other hand, requires making assumptions about future precipitation and evaporation—and since your local weatherman often can't predict the weather next week, it is also too much to expect the lake level model to predict the weather over an entire year. Errors in recent lake level forecasts are the result of assuming that precipitation and evaporation will be average, when in reality it was warmer, drier, and windier than average.

Concerns that this weather could be part of long-term climate change remain. Should we continue to assume that future climate will be similar to the climate we

observed in the past? How will decision makers adapt to climate change? These questions remain unanswered.

In January it appeared that this year's lake level prediction would be right on target. As of January, 2002, Mono Lake stood at 6382.8, and needed to rise 0.4 feet by April 1 to match DWP's forecast. Every year since 1989, when the lake level injunction began reducing diversions, Mono Lake has risen 0.4 feet or more between January and April.

There is one problem in reaching this goal. This winter is turning out to be a reverse of the last three. From 1999–2001, the October–December period was dry while the January–March period was wet. This year, the October–December period was wet while the outlook for January–March was drier than average. As of February 25, it is starting to look like the lake level prediction will be too high for a third year in a row. ❖

