

The Mono Lake Committee at 25

Success, and the Journey Ahead

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

I was looking for something else, rooting through an old box at home, when I found it, yellowing, folded, and still riveting: the Mono Lake article I clipped from the *Los Angeles Times* 24 years ago.

“Lake Bridge Blasted: Gulls Get Guard’s Aid” proclaims the headline, announcing the Metro section lead article. And there, in black and white, are the pictures and the story that we all know so well. Excessive water diversions. A lake in decline. Thirsty Los Angeles. A nesting island for California Gulls connected to the mainland. Water rights, coyotes, National Guard explosives, a hopeless situation, and a hopeful call for a thoughtful solution.

The article came about because of the Mono Lake Committee’s first twelve months of action, and one can’t help but be impressed by how very far things have come since then, how very much better off Mono Lake is today. It catches you unaware, then, back at the office, when the occasional letter comes in, or the occasional comment circulates at a local meeting, that questions the Committee’s very existence.

The work is done, the line goes, the lake is protected, the Committee’s work is over. Pack it up, the not-so-friendly conclusion usually goes, and head home. These comments usually qualify for a smile and an offhand dismissal, and like all such things, that means they are worthy of deeper thought.

Why *is* the Committee still in business?

“Teaching,” David Gaines once said, “can be a means of establishing a relationship between a person and the environment that extends to how we live, that defines a right relationship between humans, other living things, and places like Mono Lake.”

David, as usual, went right to the essence of the matter. When we learn about Mono Lake, we understand it; when we understand Mono Lake, we value it; when we value Mono Lake, we care. That’s why Mono Lake shapes our lives.

That’s why the Committee is still here. We care about this remarkable place. And we all know that when you walk away from the things you care about, you risk losing them forever.

This shared love of place is the most remarkable attribute of the thousands of Mono Lake supporters out there. There’s a story, and a special reason to care, behind each one of you. A son whose father brought him to fish Mono’s creeks decades ago, perhaps, or a photographer captivated at sunset, or a family surprised by an unexpected find on vacation, a northern Californian fighting to keep LA in line, a southern Californian helping their own city do the right thing, a teenager looking beyond the city for the first time, a birder who walked the lakeshore with David Gaines. Or perhaps, like me, a young student captivated by the struggle to define that “right relationship” with Mono Lake.

There, in that fundamental reality of shared love of place, lies the Committee’s reason to exist and the Committee’s future. What do we do next? Our job is to take that “right relationship” between people and Mono Lake, forged only so very recently, and make it grow.

There’s more to learn.

There’s much to be taught.

There will always be a lake to protect.

Our policy program must be strong, to anticipate and counteract threats to the lake, and to assure restoration. No question.

But we must go deeper as well, for this place has so much still unknown about it. The Committee must encourage science to continue exploring Mono’s mysteries.

Then we must take the lessons of science, and history, and people changing the world, and turn to teaching, to share them with those who follow us and will themselves, one day, be the stewards of Mono Lake.

The Mono Lake Committee is about one lake, one watershed, one very special place. There is much to be done. We, the tens of thousands of members of Mono Lake’s family, have notable protection successes behind us, a deep shared love for Mono Lake between us, and a future to forge together. ❖

