

New Motorized Boat Tour Permit Underway

Committee Applies Principles to Determine Acceptability

It's All About Avoiding Impacts

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

A proposal to conduct daily guided tours of Mono Lake by motorboat has challenged both the Committee and California State Parks to independently determine if such a tour can be done without significantly impacting the lake or visitor experience. Through careful and comprehensive rules and requirements that are consistent with the Committee's lake protection principles, the answer is yes.

The issue is a challenging one. On the one hand, motorized boats have a long travel range and a greater potential for disturbing the migratory and nesting birds for which Mono is so important. And boating at the volume of, say, Lake Tahoe would certainly have ecological impacts and would permanently alter the scenic solitude that is so central to the Mono Lake experience.

On the other hand, motorboats are used for wildlife viewing and sensitive ecological studies. A small number of motorboats have been on Mono Lake for decades. And guided tours are substantially different from the free-for-all scenario that a motorboat rental operation raises.

The analysis, in the end, cannot be based simply on whether a tour boat has a motor hanging off the end. Tours are planned and controlled by the operator and, with or without motors, can, and must, be designed carefully to be low impact activities. Even low impact craft like canoes and kayaks can become high impact lake users when present in great numbers or in sensitive places. It is the specific activities and ecological impacts of a tour that need to be analyzed.

The Committee has approached the issue from the perspective of the lake. Two years ago, staff developed a set of principles regarding boating. In the past year, we've talked to scientists, agency

staff, and the tour operator and measured commercial boating proposals—including our own canoe tours—against those principles. The Committee's goal is to protect the lake while encouraging people to experience and learn from it. As Mono Lake Committee Co-founder Sally Gaines says, "when done responsibly, getting people on the lake to see it first hand builds dedicated protectors of the lake."

The Committee's principles are that boating activities should not produce:

- significant ecological impacts on the lake and wildlife;
- cumulative impacts through multiple small operations;
- loss of solitude, scenic views, and other qualities that make up today's unique Mono Lake experience;
- a departure from the long-standing recreation policy of focusing visitor use at key sites, leaving the rest of the basin open for individual exploration;
- safety problems, given Mono's dangerous winds and record of boating fatalities.

This specific tour proposal, made by local resident Tom Crowe, is for up to four tours per day on a motorized low-profile, eight-person boat he originally used for wildlife surveys in Alaska. The tours would be educational, focusing on wildlife viewing, natural history, and photography, and would travel from the west shore to South Tufa and, when allowed, Mono's islands. "The lake," Crowe offers, "can only really be appreciated when looking out from a boat at the shoreline, enjoying the grand view of the mountains."

Committee staff have worked with both Crowe and State Parks, which issues permits for commercial operations, to understand the proposal and advocate principle-based changes. The proposal is

now well defined with clear boundaries and protection provisions included, allowing the Committee and science advisors to feel comfortable with it proceeding.

Numerous provisions in the permit protect the lake ecosystem. Buffer zones around stream deltas, nonfocal visitation sites, and County Park would limit impacts in sensitive areas. Maximum tour lengths, shoreline no-wake zones, and an east Mono Lake no-tour zone would address resource impacts. The use of a quiet four-stroke motor limits water and noise pollution. Numerous requirements address safety concerns.

Concerns about "opening the door" to numerous motorized tours have been raised and addressed through State Park's policy of capping the number of motorized tour permits to be issued at one.

To assure permit compliance and to watch for unanticipated impacts, a State Park ecologist will monitor commercial operations on the lake. The monitoring will be undewritten by a nominal per-passenger fee.

In fact, the Committee's canoe tours and Caldera Kayaks' kayak tours are also being reviewed and permitted by State Parks this year. Committee staff have looked at them both using the same set of principles. No significant concerns have been found with the current operations, which were already subject to a number of Forest Service permit requirements, but State Parks is setting consistent regulations across the board. For example, the maximum number of canoe and kayak commercial permits is being set at two.

State Parks is completing its environmental analysis of the motorboat, canoe, and kayak tours as this Newsletter goes to press and will be accepting comments through June 13. Please contact Craig (craig@monolake.org) at the Committee at (760) 647-6595 with any questions. ❖