



David Gaines' Canoe

by Douglas Dunaway

During my first internship at the Mono Lake Committee I spent the winter in David and Sally Gaines' old pumice-block house. Steeped in karma and saturated with Mono Lake Committee history, this home has regularly housed interns working for the Committee, providing them a comfortable if not rustic place to relax and spend the season—allowing Mono Lake to quietly work its magic on them. Hanging on an outside wall on the backside of the house is an old, beat-up canoe turned upside down—exposing an underside that is scraped and battle scarred. I spent many winter nights in that house, stoking the fire in the wood burning stove, wondering about that canoe. Covered in snow, with crystal clear icicles hanging from its sides, it seemed to whisper through the walls that there were stories to be told and calm waters patiently awaiting the dip of a paddle.

Could this be the canoe that David Gaines used to ply the waters of Mono Lake? Intrigued, I called Sally Gaines and asked if she could tell me the story behind the canoe. “Presumably you are referring to an old Grumman aluminum canoe with lots of patches? The story is longer—Dave bought a Grumman canoe in Sacramento in about 1974 so he could survey Yellow-billed Cuckoos along the Sacramento River. He then brought it to Mono Lake to do field trips that included canoe rides. It was in use for several years and in the days before park rangers we locked it to a tufa tower on shore so interns would not have to carry it back and forth. Unfortunately, one lazy intern failed to lock it and it was stolen. When we asked for a donated canoe to replace it, the Russian River Canoe renters gave us one that had seen a lot of bumps and dings and hence, was patched all over. That is the canoe hanging on the house.”

Bumps and dings and patches. Occupational hazards for a 26-year campaign filled with setbacks, uncertainties and great victories—all set in motion by a quiet man who knew that the only way to truly know the lake was to be in it. Whether

swimming in its cradling buoyancy or paddling on its mysterious surface, David Gaines always found refuge on the waters of Mono Lake.

Presently at 41,600 acres, Mono Lake has a brighter future now than it did in the early years when David and Sally were desperately trying to get the word out about Mono Lake's receding shorelines. The lake's ecosystem was in danger of collapse. The dreaded Negit Island land bridge had finally connected with the shore and allowed predators to invade the California Gull rookery—an event that is still impacting gull behavior today.

David wrote poignantly about that disaster in the *Mono Lake Newsletter*: “Last month, canoeing through herds of brine shrimp and flotillas of chocolate-brown baby gulls, I thought about that island. I remembered walking its flanks in 1976, picking my way through thousands of eggs, chicks, and screaming gulls, an intense concentration of life energy. A few years later the birds were gone, the island engulfed in white alkali. Mono's beauty, power, and worth comes from more than birds, shrimp, tufa, islands or people alone. It comes from all these things together. It comes from wholeness. If we lose Negit Island, we maim this place. We make it ugly. We render it a mirror to our own greed.”

This was not a pleasant memory for David and his canoe. Neither was the day in 1980, when the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power unexpectedly released water down the parched and arid streambed of Rush Creek. The scouring action of the floodwater washed thousands of pumice rocks and dead tree limbs out onto the lake's surface, where a lone Brant was observed riding among them, looking lost and out of place.

During all those times—the worrisome years of not knowing if Mono Lake would survive, the uncertain years of lawsuits

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and litigation, up until the present day, where visitors can see a lake that is on the mend—there has been a consistent and overriding feeling of hope. A feeling that is best experienced sitting in a canoe, quietly paddling over clouds of brine shrimp and the upwelling of spring water from submerged tufa towers.

Educating the public about the wonders of Mono Lake has always been at the forefront of the Mono Lake Committee's mission. From the beginning, David and Sally Gaines took visitors out onto Mono Lake, so the lake could speak for itself.

In 1978, the Mono Lake Committee started half-day field tours that included an off-shore paddle among the tufa towers at what is now called South Tufa. David's canoe played host to California Assemblymen, State Legislators, writers, photographers, and many of the key players in the legal battles to restore Mono Lake and its streams. In 1989, weekend interpretive canoe tours were started, and continue today. The Committee's Education Programs have taken over two thousand Southern California students out onto the lake, giving them the opportunity to learn about Mono Lake's vibrant ecosystem and the importance of water conservation. All in all, hundreds of people have had the opportunity to sit in David's canoe and see first hand why Mono Lake was worth saving.

Back when David Gaines was canoeing at Mono Lake, the pressures on the lake were obvious—either Los Angeles curtailed their diversions of water from the Mono Basin, or the lake was going to die. But David had a sense that the more people who heard about Mono Lake, the more people's impacts would be felt. Aldo Leopold once said, "Of what avail

are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?" In a 1979 newsletter article, David wrote: "Mono Lake is as blank a spot as you can find anymore. Though the hand of man hangs heavy over its future, Mono still retains the magic and power of primeval America. I wonder whether this elusive and precious quality can survive with large numbers of people, however well-intentioned?"

Ice Age Mono Lake only had one island—Cedar Hill. Separated from Mono Lake thousands of years ago, this remnant of ancient times is facing the pressures of development. The west shore of Mono Lake is in danger of being impacted by road improvements and subdivision. Just when the old lake is starting to relax, new and inevitable events are on its horizon. What would David Gaines think? Reunited with his canoe, paddling the mirrored image of today's Mono Lake, would he sigh with resignation, or would he dig his paddle in deeper, and continue the fight he started 26 years ago?

Like an old soldier after a long campaign, David's canoe has been retired. It has taken a long journey and deserves a rest, but like all things at Mono Lake, the future is uncertain. The old canoe may yet be pressed back into service, and I think both David and his canoe would be grateful. ❖

Douglas Dunaway is the Committee's Staff Assistant. He is looking forward to the time when the Committee's canoes are no longer encased in snow and are ready for paddling season.

The Committee's Restoration Principles

The Mono Lake Committee believes that the best and most cost-effective method of restoration is re-establishing natural processes. This is the same guiding approach being used in the restoration of Rush, Lee Vining, Walker, and Parker creeks.

While some water diversions will continue from all of Mono Lake's creeks, the goal of re-establishing natural processes provides important guidance towards how and when water is diverted. This means re-establishing peak flows and maintaining base flows on the creeks. These give the creeks enough energy to recreate their former habitats without significant intervention or continued maintenance.

When past degradation is such that it is difficult to reinstate natural processes, the Committee supports a limited helping hand, such as reopening side channels to raise water tables and provide complex habitat, or planting native vegetation to jump-start streambank recovery. These principles have been applied successfully on Mono Lake's other tributaries, leading to the recovery of a more natural condition, and the Committee is anxious to begin restoration work on Mill Creek once a settlement is reached.

Current Status of the Settlement Process

Talks continue as all parties remain committed to the process of resolving an almost 20 year-old Federal Energy Regulatory Commission relicensing procedure while simultaneously developing a comprehensive water management plan for the north part of the Mono Basin (see Spring 2003 *Newsletter*).

The parties—United States Forest Service, Southern California Edison, Bureau of Land Management, Mono County, California Department of Fish and Game, American Rivers/California Trout, People for Mono Basin Preservation, and the Mono Lake Committee—all have diverse interests and goals. The primary challenge has been (and will no doubt continue to be) that of effectively balancing water between competing uses and determining how best to distribute that water to benefit both the existing natural systems and the goals of the water rights holders. ❖

Lisa Cutting is the Committee's Eastern Sierra Policy Director. The warm spring days are a gentle reminder that fly fishing and hiking are "right around the corner" as Bartshé—the office weather soothsayer—would say.