

Witnessing Blind Faith

by Douglas Dunaway



Is it possible that Mono Lake can become invisible? With a surface area of over 70 square miles, it is hard to imagine that this vast inland sea could, at times, be hidden from view. Sometimes during the winter months, when conditions are right, fog forms over the lake's surface, completely hiding any clues that what lies beneath a thick veil of airborne ice crystals is a natural wonder that has captured the minds and hearts of tens of thousands of people. The native Kutzadika^a called this ice fog "poconip." Thick enough to hide all evidence of Mono Lake's existence, the poconip hovers over the Mono Basin, completely blocking the sun's rays as it picks up moisture from the lake's surface and gently deposits it throughout the Mono Basin in a delicate rime-coating.

People traveling through the Mono Basin in the winter are usually treated with breathtaking views of Mono Lake—images powerful enough to guarantee more return trips in the years ahead, often compelling them to become Mono Lake advocates. But there are occasions when the poconip shows up and hunkers down over the lake, daring Mono Lake Committee staffers to convince visitors to the Mono Lake Committee Information Center & Bookstore that Mono Lake does in fact exist—it's right down there under that dense curtain of fog. Really. The usual response is a hands-in-the-pocket saunter over to the front window, a cursory glance around the store and a hasty departure. It's hard work to enlist future members of the Mono Lake Committee when the lake plays peek-a-boo with Mother Nature.

The Information Center and Bookstore plays many important roles that are vital to Mono Lake Committee operations including providing visitor information, educational displays, regional books, and offering a chance to support restoration, protection, and education at Mono Lake through becoming a Committee member. The staff is dedicated to providing a friendly and comfortable atmosphere in the store that encourages people to ask questions about Mono Lake and to learn more about the area. In this way, the Information Center and Bookstore also becomes a central meeting place for members. This contact with the Committee membership is both fun and inspiring—providing staff with some of the best reasons to work for the Mono Lake Committee.

This past summer, during a busy day in the store, I was fortunate enough to have witnessed a truly unique membership experience. A woman opened the front door for an elderly man and his Seeing Eye dog. I greeted them warmly and offered my help. He informed me that he was a long time Mono Lake Committee supporter and was stopping in to renew his membership, as well as to stock up on new Mono Lake T-shirts.

His friend guided him over to the T-shirt display wall and, after careful scrutiny and help from his companion he came to the counter and told me his choices. I handed him the shirts he requested, and he spread them out on the counter—delicately tracing each shirt with his outstretched hands, gauging them for size and cut. One by one, he used his fingertips to follow the ridges of color on each image left by the ink transferring process. He carefully felt each shirt, rejecting some because they felt too dark, picking others because they sounded more colorful. By this time, everyone in the store was aware of what was happening. The normal fast pace in the store was replaced with a pleasant aura of serenity, and the noise level had dropped dramatically. Both children and adults were kneeling down, taking turns petting his dog. After he purchased his shirts and renewed his membership, he firmly shook my hand and thanked me for all of the hard work that the Mono Lake Committee does to protect his lake. With that said, he quietly left.

I still wake in the middle of the night thinking about that experience. How can someone continue to support a cause that can't be seen? Is beauty in the eye of the beholder, or is it the other way around? When the poconip rolls in and covers Mono Lake with its icy shroud, unknowing people will drive through the quiet little town of Lee Vining and imagine that they have not missed a thing. On days like that, when even long time residents of the Mono Basin wonder if the lake is still there, I am thankful that the Mono Lake Committee has members with the grit, determination, and blind faith that it takes to see something through to the end. ❖

Douglas is the Committee's Staff Assistant. He enjoys listening to people's experiences with the Mono Basin, so come on in with your story and say hello!