



SANTIAGO ESCHUCERIA

The Lake and the ‘Hood

by Jane Braxton Little

Mono Lake is a magnificent landmark for all who care about conservation. The return to health of this austere, hauntingly beautiful basin offers hope that dedication and good science can protect the landscapes we treasure.

But the lessons of Mono Lake go beyond the victory the rising waters represent. It is here that environmentalists pioneered a process rejecting the traditional politics of tradeoff. In their 16-year David-versus-Goliath battle with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP), the Mono Lake Committee insisted on saving the Mono ecosystem without harming another system. How they did that is as inspiring as the streams rushing down hillsides to fill the lake.

The environmentalists knew from the start their fight was with Los Angeles’ water bureaucracy, not its residents. They always recognized the city’s need for water. What they did not know when they made this commitment is that their most enthusiastic allies would come from inner-city activists and the children of East LA—that this disenfranchised community

would become the standard bearer for Mono Lake. Equally ignored by traditional politics, the rural conservation community joined hands with urban barrios over water.

Today they share a modern-day watershed linked by a man-made aqueduct, not a natural stream channel.

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It would have been easy to treat Los Angeles as a villain. The 350-mile aqueduct diverting water from Mono Lake’s feeder streams was part of a grandiose scheme to benefit the burgeoning metropolis. City officials employed stealth, deception, and ruthless power to acquire the water rights eventually used to drain Owens Lake, and they

were bent on wiping out Mono Lake, too. From William Mulholland to the water czars that followed him into the 1990s, Los Angeles officials held the unshakable conviction that the city’s domestic and industrial needs for water were of far greater value than any agricultural usage. The value of a natural resource was not even discussed.

The Mono Lake Committee fought back in a series of

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lawsuits, but it remained committed to more than saving the lake. From the start these activists looked for solutions that would reconcile the need for water at the lake and in Los Angeles. Although the aqueduct was built to enrich the city at the expense of the lake, the Committee viewed it as an inextricable link between two communities, one very rural, the other ultra urban.

Various court decisions ordering protections for the lake and its feeder streams culminated in 1994, when the California State Water Resources Control Board ordered Los Angeles to reduce its water diversions until the lake level returns to a surface elevation of 6,392 feet. Years earlier, however, Mono Lake Committee Executive Director Martha Davis had laid the groundwork for turning the orders into real water. Her goal was to develop conservation programs in Los Angeles that would replace the water the courts ordered returned to Mono Lake. Her efforts contributed to state legislation allocating \$35 million to Los Angeles for water conservation and recycling.

How that money hit the city's streets is part of the karma radiated by Davis and the Committee's approach to problem solving. Primed by a three-year drought, the DWP was ready to use the state funds to test a pilot program distributing low-flush toilets, and to hire community groups to do it. Whether or not the inclusive "we're in this together" philosophy of the Mono Lake Committee was a direct influence on this decision, it was a remarkable choice. And DWP topped it by hiring Elsa Lopez, an inner-city activist, to coordinate the toilet distribution program in her neighborhood.

Lopez and her grassroots group, Mothers of East LA, Santa Isabel, sent neighborhood youth door-to-door extolling the benefits of the ultra-low-flushers, which cut water use to a third of the old ones. That's 5,000 gallons a year that could stay in Mono Lake, these neophyte conservationists said. Soon East LA had several hundred new low-flush toilets installed every week. DWP officials were impressed with the program's success. But what happened next stunned them.



An Outward Bound Adventures group visiting the northernmost reach of the LA Aqueduct, where some of their drinking water comes from.



Southern California high school Olympic Academy getting perspective on the Mono Basin from the top of Panum Crater.

Lopez understood the educational benefits of experiencing lessons hands-on. She worked with the Mono Lake Committee to send a group of Los Angeles youth to Mono Lake for five days of camping, hiking, and swimming. It was the first time for many of them to see living fish in a stream and a river that doesn't have concrete sides. Once home, the kids carried their real-life vision of Mono Lake to their parents, teachers, and neighbors. In two months the number of low-flush toilets was triple the number distributed the previous seven months.

The link between Mono Lake and their lives in Los Angeles is intangible for most of these campers, but one may have spoken for all when he said, "Mono's better than Magic Mountain. Mono's part of the 'hood.'" This enthusiasm has contributed to an astonishing conservation record: Los Angeles has cut its water usage by 15 percent and held its demand for water to 1970 levels despite a 30 percent population increase.

The relationship the Mono Lake Committee now enjoys with Los Angeles is a tentative alliance that will be tested when the lake level reaches the 6,392-foot elevation goal, triggering a State Water Board review of future water diversion. These discussions will also test the grassroots urban constituency the Committee has developed and its commitment to Mono Lake.

What will matter then is what has always mattered as much as Mono Lake: working toward solutions that benefit everyone. The Mono Lake Committee has taught us a way to save the places we love without trading them for someone else's beloved spot. It has taught us the value of unlikely alliances. It has given us a process for hope. ❖

Jane Braxton Little, a freelance journalist based in Plumas County, California, has been covering water and other natural resource issues since escaping to the Sierra Nevada with a Harvard MA in Japanese cultural history. She has won numerous professional awards for investigative, consumer, and environmental affairs reporting. Her writing and photographs have appeared in over 40 national publications, including Audubon, American Forests, High Country News, The Los Angeles Times, and Utne Reader.