

# Can Hetch Hetchy Learn from Mono Lake?

By Kimberly Rollins

*Editor's Note: There's quite a buzz about efforts to restore the Hetch Hetchy Valley, where a respectable portion of the Bay Area gets and stores its water. Can the lessons learned at Mono Lake, where a balance was struck between the needs of people and the environment, be applied at Hetch Hetchy too?*

**L**ong before David Gaines and the Mono Lake Committee fought to save Mono Lake from going dry, the naturalist John Muir and the Sierra Club waged another battle. Theirs was an attempt to save Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park from being filled with water to provide a reservoir for San Francisco.

In 1913, Congress ignored the fervent pleas to conserve Hetch Hetchy and passed the Raker Bill, which allowed the valley to be flooded. In 1923, the O'Shaughnessy Dam was completed, Hetch Hetchy Valley was submerged under 300 feet of water, and some of the cleanest water in the country was transported, by gravity, 160 miles to the Bay Area.

Although nearly 100 years have passed, the issue of whether Hetch Hetchy Valley should remain a reservoir for the Bay Area or whether it should be restored is still a poignant subject.

In 1987, Don Hodel, Secretary of the Interior, suggested removing the dam and restoring Hetch Hetchy. However, ardent opposition blocked studies from ever being conducted to see the feasibility of restoring Hetch Hetchy.

In 1999, several environmental groups organized to form a non-profit, Restore Hetch Hetchy, which concentrates solely on restoring the submerged valley.

Recently, proponents of restoring the valley have reason for renewed optimism due to a report released by Environmental Defense titled "Paradise Regained." The study says a similar supply, storage, and quality of water can be maintained if the water is stored elsewhere.

The authors claim that 96 percent of San Francisco's share of the Tuolumne River can be caught further downstream in the Don Pedro Reservoir in Stanislaus County. The study has been released at a pertinent time since San Francisco Public Utilities Commission has plans for a \$3.6 billion overhaul to the Hetch Hetchy water system. According to the report, the water system could be changed for \$500 million to \$1.6 billion. Environmental Defense says this report is a starting point for discussion.

"'Dam the Hetch Hetchy?'" (Muir) famously declared. 'As well dam for water tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.' The battle over Hetch Hetchy marked the beginning of a new era: as the forces behind unfettered development clashed with conservationists, the environmental movement was born."

As this Newsletter goes to press, updates and new developments continue to take place. Keep up with the news and discussions on Hetch Hetchy online at [www.hetchhetchy.org](http://www.hetchhetchy.org). ❖

## Just Add Water, Stir, and Instant Owens Lake!

by Mike Prather, Outreach Coordinator, Owens Valley Committee

*Editor's note: We often get the question: What's going on with Owen's Lake? Here is an update from the Owens Valley Committee.*

**A**lthough not that simple, the addition of significant amounts of water at Owens Lake for dust control continues one of the largest wildlife resurrections in the west. It was not the intention of Los Angeles to create new habitat that has lured tens of thousands of migrating shorebirds back to Owens. It was not their plan to foster the largest inland snowy plover nesting site in California. But because of the Clean Air Act the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) is trickling water on square miles of the dry surface of Owens Lake in order to control the extremely hazardous regional PM-10 dust particle emissions. This in turn grows algae which nourishes seething masses of flies and set the table for the return of the birds.

By the December 31, 2006 deadline for clean air at Owens Lake there will be approximately 25 square miles of shallow flooding for dust control. Much of this recreates the historic shallow lake food stopover that Owens Lake was before it was dried up in the 1920s. However, the current policy of Los Angeles is that water is for dust and not necessarily for birds. Current methods of dust control may be changed to methods

that don't use water, such as gravel, or that use less water and have less wildlife value such as managed vegetation.

As part of its permits for dust control Los Angeles was required to mitigate loss of habitat by creating and dedicating in perpetuity 1,000 acres of shorebird habitat where water would serve the dual purpose of dust control and wildlife enhancement. DWP has submitted a habitat management plan for this area to the California Department of Fish and Game. In addition, further permitting has required up to 1,000 more acres of habitat for shorebirds to also be dedicated in perpetuity. All of this is a good start on the road to a final resolution of how much of the habitat created for dust control should be managed for the dual purpose of dust and wildlife in perpetuity. May the birds as well as the dust settle on Owens Lake.

Postscript: The Sierra Club has filed a CEQA lawsuit on the Lower Owens River Project (LORP) Environmental Impact Report arguing that the LORP will dry up the outflow of the delta onto Owens Lake. This area is a known habitat location for migrating and nesting shorebirds and for waterfowl. It is hoped that this area can be defended or that an equivalent area can be found in the nearby dust control zones.