



# The True Depth of Mono Lake

## *A Reflection on the 25th Anniversary of the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve*

by Dave Marquart

**T**his year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve. The State Reserve consists of approximately 4,000 acres of the lake's 40-mile shoreline including landscapes ranging from alkali flats to meadows, wetlands, and renowned limestone tufa groves. It also includes the bed and waters of the lake itself—bringing the total number of acres in the Reserve to about 49,000. Some of these lands are frequented by large numbers of visitors, while other more remote portions of the Reserve are seldom walked upon.

The beauty and uniqueness of Mono Lake and the basin in which it lies inspired both California and the United States to take steps to preserve them. The Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area was created two years after the State Reserve's creation and includes approximately 76,700 acres of land surrounding Mono Lake and the State Reserve.

The State Public Resources Code affirms that "State reserves consist of areas embracing outstanding natural or scenic characteristics of statewide significance." The California Legislature recognized the unique, fragile tufa formations that were being exposed as the lake was dropping due to diversions of its tributary streams by the City of Los Angeles and was inspired to create the Reserve. The Public Resources Code also entrusts the Reserve with the protection of "its native ecological associations, unique faunal or floral characteristics ... and scenic qualities."

You may think I intend this to be a piece detailing the successes of the first 25 years of the management of the State Reserve. But I wish to highlight only one of them—what I consider to be the most important one. It is that we've never lost sight of our goal of maintaining its natural beauty and wildness.

About 250,000 people visit the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve every year. It can be challenging trying to balance the recreational needs of visitors with the mission of a State Reserve. Reading visitor comments left at several of the visitor registers around the lake (yes, we do read them!) there's a predominant theme that resonates with me. Here are a few of those comments that highlight that theme: "Extremely peaceful; tranquil; serene; great place to meditate; soul-soothing."

Why is it that so many of us feel so embraced by this place? What exactly is it that nature does for us?

I see Mono Lake as being a wise and powerful teacher for those who are willing to listen. For me, communing with Mono Lake and its silence can allow me to more clearly realize who I am as a human being, what is important to me, and where my place is in this world. Henry David Thoreau wrote, "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."

The Mono Basin has been a stepping stone for hundreds of seasonal state, federal, and Mono Lake Committee employees over the past three decades. I've encouraged a few of them to make time for the lake, to find a secluded place around the shore somewhere to sit and just be with nature. I also request that they leave all possible distractions behind including friends, MP3 players, books, (yes, even their bird books and field guides). This is not an easy assignment for many. Being alone with no distractions

risks making us restless and uncomfortable, and for some, bored. But that glimpse of who we are when we are without any props or distractions can be illuminating. Some have reported back that their experience has brought improved clarity and direction to their lives. "Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another," wrote the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman poet, Juvenal.

During stressful times we humans seek refuge in nature. Studies show that communing with nature does, in fact, reduce stress. Research has also shown that people who are able to be around nature or even view images of nature following a stressful event can recover more quickly from that event than others. That would explain the surge in the number of visitors to state parks immediately following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Several visitors to the lake that fall spoke to me of how much more important Mono Lake was to them at that particular time. A visit to Mono Lake following 9/11 may have reassured many that there are forces at work in the world that are much larger than the violence humans inflict upon each other.

Considering visitors often conduct their vacations the way they do their lives—hurriedly—even a brief visit to Mono Lake can do wonders for the soul. And the visitor registers show that many of you visit repeatedly. "We keep coming back; we love this place—we come here often; after all those years—still awesome" is another sampling of comments. A visit with Mono Lake, however brief, can also help us renew our relationship to the earth and recharge the spirit.

Having talked to thousands of visitors over the years I've learned that many of you who have desk jobs are able to do what you do because you know there are places like Mono Lake in existence. For some of you Mono Lake is California's Alaska—if you can't get here often, just knowing it exists and is being protected, and will be there

when you need it is sometimes "soul-soothing" enough, at least temporarily.

"No words can describe" writes another Mono Lake visitor. "Yes, the earth speaks, but only to those who can hear with their hearts. It speaks in a thousand, thousand small ways, but like our lovers and families and friends, it often sends its messages without words," writes Steve Van Matre, author of *Earth Magic*. Some who try to interpret nature only with their minds may never feel that deep connection with the earth that some of us feel.

For some, nature can speak to us in a group, but others may need the stillness and solitude to receive her messages. "... breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, that lovely, mysterious and awesome space" wrote wilderness advocate and environmental writer Edward Abbey. For some of us solitude is the only way to introspection and a connection with that mysterious part of us that patiently waits to be discovered.

Those of us who work for land-managing agencies in the Mono Basin have an awesome and important job to protect the sense of wildness that provides opportunities for solitude and reflection. Lest we ever lose sight of that mission we simply need to read another comment in the visitor register like this one: "This place just makes me feel good."

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