



Wilson's phalaropes flock at South Tufa ©2014 Marie Read

Waiting for a hole in the dam

by Gary Nelson

I have always looked forward to strolling along the lake at Navy Beach before the start of canoe tour season. The greening of this arid shore, the return of our iconic avian migrants, and the anticipation of sharing this wondrous place with visitors from around the world give me a feeling of joy.

My most recent inspection of the launch site has left me with an entirely different feeling: I get a pain in my lower back just looking at it! You see, before our visitors can float above bubbling springs with attendant plumes of brine shrimp, and canoe guides can poetically interpret their surroundings, we have to get the people into the boat and get it afloat.

We used to load the canoes from a sandy beach where passengers would board with dry feet, and guides could shove off and shortly be afloat. Unfortunately after three years of—dare I say it—drought, Mono Lake has dropped, and this beach is now separated from the waterline by around 30 horizontal feet of dry, dusty, moonscape-looking, relicted lakebottom. I have seen this process before; a submerged tufa becomes an island, which morphs into a peninsula, and is then absorbed by the expanding shore.

Once again, the intrepid canoe team will adapt to the current situation so that our passengers will not be inconvenienced, although hopefully they will bring sandals or water shoes. We will launch the canoes using the tried and true “3G” method. We will Grunt to get the boat moving and Groan as we Grind the canoe out to deeper waters. Thank heavens for young interns!

I really shouldn't complain, considering that even after three dry years, the current lake level is still five feet higher than it was when we started the canoe tours in 1989. Back then the tours were less interpretive and more eco-evangelical since the fate of the lake still hung

in the balance. After the California State Water Resources Control Board issued Decision 1631 in 1994, our tour focus began to change from advocacy to education while still keeping our passengers aware of the problems involved in the implementation of D1631 concerning streamflows and restoration.

Just last year I began to hear tantalizing rumors that an agreement with the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP) was in the works, and might even include a “hole in the dam” at Grant Lake Reservoir. This hole turned out to be the proposed Grant Lake Reservoir Outlet which would install a gate upon, and reconfigure, the existing (and often dry) overflow spillway. This would enable DWP to precisely release required streamflows into Rush Creek. Releases could even mimic natural flow regimes to aid restoration of the lower stream courses.

On my way back from Navy Beach I took a detour up to the Grant Lake Reservoir spillway. In several places you could see where

small sections of the concrete spillway had been cut out so that core samples could be taken from beneath. These holes, and painted survey markings along the spillway, were harbingers of a new era in Mono Basin water management. Using water in the most efficient way possible is rapidly becoming a mandatory mantra of California water management. The Mono Lake Committee, in completing the Mono Basin Stream Restoration Agreement with DWP in September 2013, is once again on the leading edge of this trend.

Mono Lake didn't change much between the end of our first canoe tour season in 1989 and the sixth in 1994. Our tufa landmarks rose to pretty much the same height above the lake, and the few underwater springs there were oozed the same small circles of freshwater up onto the surface.

Then amazing things happened. On September 28, 1994 the State Water Board issued Decision 1631, which mandated minimum streamflows and a higher lake level

for Mono Lake. Years of sacrifice, hard work, and long hours came to fruition when State Water Board member Marc Del Piero spoke these words: “Today we did the right thing. Today we saved Mono Lake.”

We had barely finished celebrating this unlikely victory when it began to snow. In the spring the lake began to rise and it kept rising throughout the summer. One year after D1631, Mono Lake had risen three feet, forever changing our canoe tour route. In the back of my mind, I just had to think that somehow the people who loved Mono Lake and toiled so hard on its behalf were being rewarded by the rushing streams and the rising lake.

Hopefully my theory will soon be put to the test when water flows from the hole in the dam.

Gary Nelson (Admiral, Mono Lake Committee Canoe Fleet Command) has gone through many ups and downs in over a quarter century of launching canoe tours from the shore of Mono Lake.



Mono Lake from the west shore ©2014 Donn Lusby