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## Can a rock climber help ‘restore’ Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley?

Gregory Thomas

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*Lucho Rivera gathers his gear while preparing for a climbing trip at his home in the Mission District of San Francisco.*

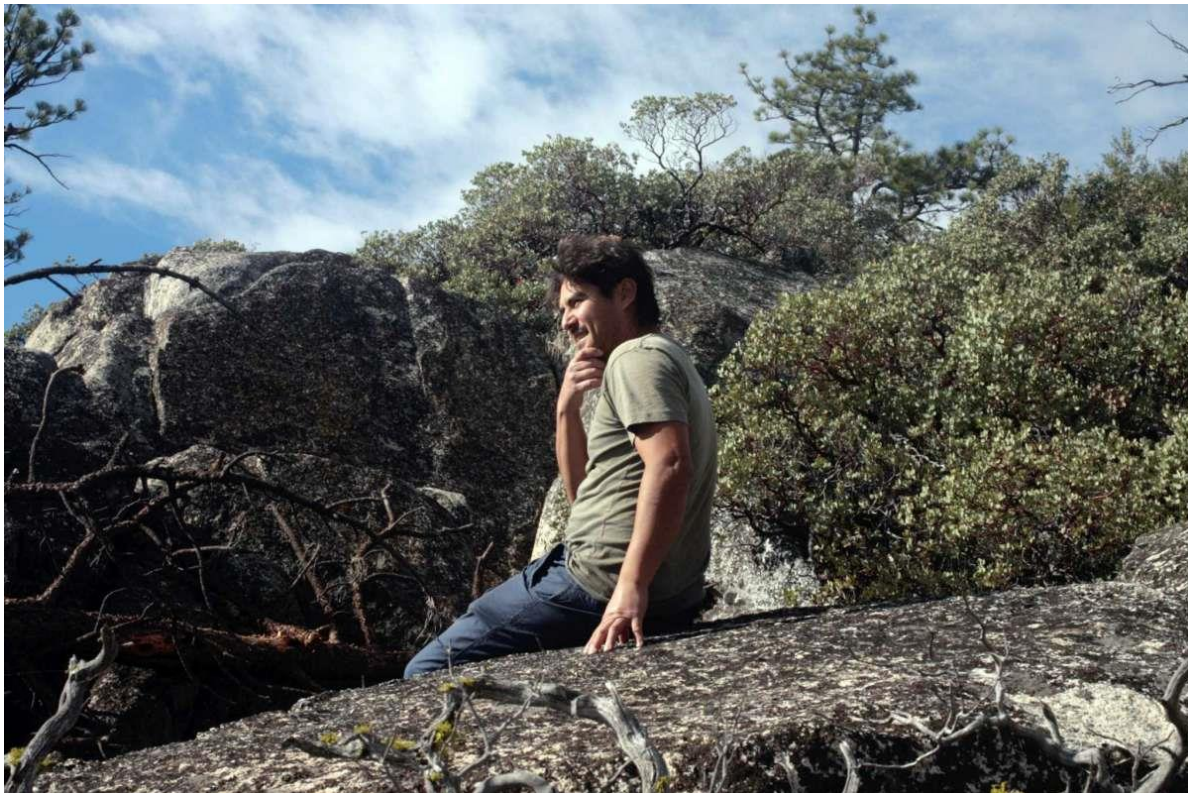
On a sunny November morning, Lucho Rivera tiptoed along the edge of a granite cliff rising 1,800 feet above the flat, indigo surface of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. He checked to make sure that a pair of steel bolts he’d driven into the rock years before to anchor climbing ropes were still intact. Then he and fiancée Mecia Serafino went about setting up camp a few steps from the precipice for a weekend of climbing.

“We used to sleep right on the edge but eventually moved our camp back a little ways,” Rivera said. “I’m not really a sleepwalker but I wouldn’t want to start here.”

Rivera, a 41-year-old climber who grew up in San Francisco's Mission District, has set up dozens of expert-level climbing routes in this overlooked sliver of Yosemite National Park for almost 20 years. That makes him somewhat of an anomaly in the climbing community, which for generations has focused its energy on the more storied walls in Yosemite Valley to the south.

For nearly 100 years, since it was dammed and flooded to provide a stable supply of drinking water to San Francisco residents, Hetch Hetchy Valley has been off limits to campers, boaters and fishers and is accessible to day visitors only between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Only about 1% of Yosemite's roughly 4.5 million annual visitors set foot in this area of the park. Apart from a small day-use parking lot and a single trail skirting the rim of the reservoir, infrastructure is sparse. There's no lodge, restaurant or gift shop.

But Rivera is one of a small cadre of intrepid climbers who have, at one point or another, favored climbing there as a more solitary and exploratory experience.



*Climbers Lucho Rivera and Mecia Serafino hike to the top of a granite wall above Wapama Falls on the north side of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park*

*Gregory Thomas / The Chronicle*



“That’s been the climbers’ M.O. with this place: Let’s keep it to ourselves. Which is cool, and it’s part of what drew me here. But I’ve had a change of heart over the years,” he said.

Rivera wants to open more eyes to Hetch Hetchy’s potential as a recreation destination. To that end, he and Serafino, a 41-year-old climber and San Francisco native, recently joined the board of directors at Restore Hetch Hetchy, a Berkeley nonprofit with a singular mission: to persuade the powers that be to drain the valley and reopen it to visitors. Under the scenario they propose, thirsty San Franciscans wouldn’t notice a change, as the reservoir’s water (up to 117 billion gallons at capacity) would be relocated to holding facilities downstream. There’s no cost estimate for such an idea.

It’s a radical proposition, and while it stirs the imaginations of outdoor lovers excited about opening a new slice of scenery to explore, it hasn’t gained much traction.



Climbers Lucho Rivera and Timmy O'Neill explore the granite walls of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park for a film project. They hope to raise awareness about a proposal to drain the reservoir and "restore" the valley to its former state as a wilderness area.

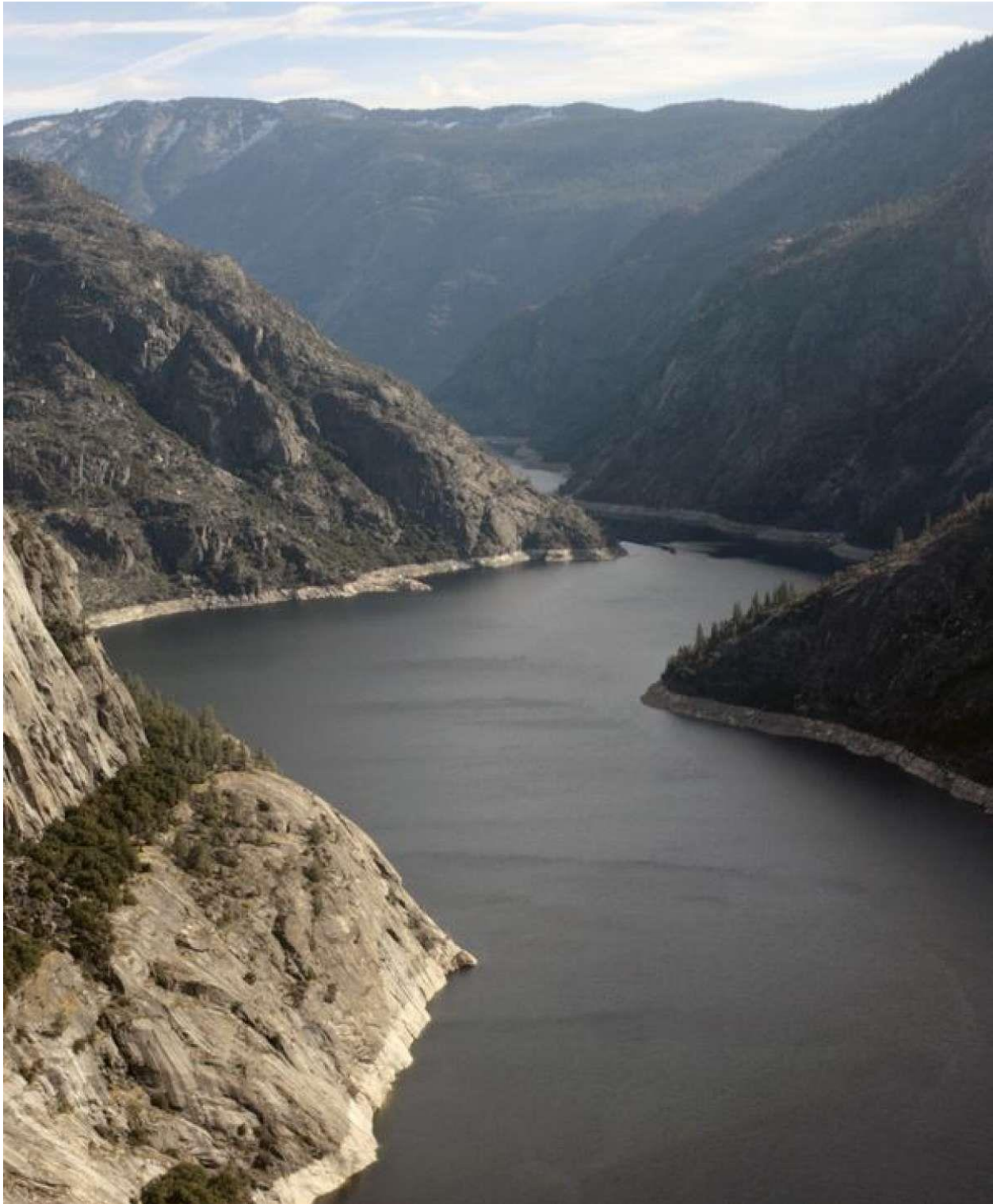
*Chris Burkard / Restore Hetch Hetchy*

San Francisco voters roundly rejected a 2012 ballot measure to remove the dam and empty the reservoir. A lawsuit brought against the city by Restore Hetch Hetchy was shot down by the California Supreme Court in 2018. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, which manages the reservoir's water infrastructure with the National Park Service, firmly denies that the concept is feasible or appropriate and says it could jeopardize a key source of drinking water.

"This was a bad idea back in 2012, when San Francisco voters overwhelmingly rejected it," said John Coté, communications director for the SFPUC. "It's still a bad idea."

But the setbacks haven't dampened enthusiasm among those who view Hetch Hetchy as a sunken natural treasure in need of revival.

"We can correct this," Serafino said. "How cool would it be to see this place in its natural state?"



Hetch Hetchy was once a Sierra valley with granite cliffs soaring above. Gregory Thomas / The Chronicle

Rivera and Serafino have joined Restore Hetch Hetchy at a pivotal moment for the organization. Following the group's failures to force change via the ballot box and in court, public interest in the overall concept has flagged.



“The bottom line is we need to generate more political support for this,” said Spreck Rosekrans, the group’s executive director. “We’ve been around 20 years and the dam is still there.”

A spokesman for Yosemite National Park said staffers “understand and respect” Rosekrans’ group, but that the park doesn’t have authority to green-light such a proposal. The park works with the SFPUC to preserve the water quality and protect the dam.

Now, Restore Hetch Hetchy’s leaders are rethinking their strategy and messaging. Rosekrans wants to clarify the group’s mission statement with specifics on what a “restored” valley would look like. Would it include bike paths? Foot trails? Parking lots? A hotel? Rosekrans had initially hoped to avoid fleshing out such details before gaining buy-in, but those are the kinds of questions people keep asking. No one wants to see another Yosemite Valley, mobbed by crowds and choked with traffic.

Central to the group’s efforts is attracting a core of younger, diverse urban advocates. That’s where Rivera and Serafino come in. Rosekrans said he believes they could be important messengers to a rising generation of voters and activists.



*Climbers Lucho Rivera and Mecia Serafino hike to the top of a granite wall above Wapama Falls on the north side of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park.*

“We’ve long talked about the fact that our board is a little bit too homogeneous — old, white,” Rosekrans said. “We really do want Hetch Hetchy to be a place that is more open to the demographics of the population than national parks have been. Those people will have different views as to what restoration should look like.”

“Mecia and I have our ideas about how to expand their following,” Rivera said. Like reaching out to members of the Bay Area’s growing community of gym climbers. He acknowledges: “It’ll take some time.”

Rosekrans is also working on highlighting Hetch Hetchy as a viable destination to today’s visitors. He is working with park staffers to expand the gate hours, improve signage along Highway 120 and add campsites.

If more people visited the place, Rosekrans said, they might be moved to support his cause.



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*Chris Burkard / Restore Hetch Hetchy*

To demonstrate the beauty and possibilities of Hetch Hetchy, Rosekrans' group commissioned a film crew to shoot a climbing flick last spring on Hetch Hetchy Dome, a prominent feature above the reservoir. In the film, Rivera leads renowned climber Timmy O'Neill on his first route in the valley and the two bivouac for the night partway up the rock face on a portaledge, a hanging platform.

Like many climbers, O'Neill has scaled cliffs in Yosemite Valley for decades, but had never turned off Highway 120 toward Hetch Hetchy.

"For me, it's always been synonymous with lost land," he said.

In Yosemite Valley, visitors can easily drive to the bases of its spectacular granite walls, park and hike around or start their climbs. In Hetch Hetchy, the approach to any given part of the canyon involves its more laborious rim trail. Plus, O'Neill said, the limited gate hours hamper access.

"That's a huge hindrance," he said. "It's very strange."



*Climbers Timmy O'Neill (left) and Lucho Rivera scope out the face of a granite wall in Hetch Hetchy Valley from a portaledge overlooking the reservoir.*



*James Q. Martin / Restore Hetch Hetchy*

The film, which runs about 12 minutes, is due to be released soon on the Restore Hetch Hetchy website.

“The idea is to get people psyched on not only climbing but just visiting Hetch Hetchy,” Rivera said. “It’s a hard place to be passionate about unless you’ve spent time there, like I have.”

Reflecting on his countless days hammering into Hetch Hetchy granite, Rivera acknowledged that the routes there might be considered his life’s work. Selfishly, he’d like to see more people climbing and appreciating them.

“A lot of the routes I’ve put up there have fallen into obscurity,” he said. “Of course, I want recognition within my climbing community.”

When he envisions a Hetch Hetchy drained of water and returned to nature, what would he like to see?

“I’ve always thought it’d be cool to keep it totally wild,” Rivera said. “There wouldn’t be roads — just trails and some campgrounds. That’s my vision of it. It’s cool to dream about it and see where it could go one day.”

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