

San Francisco Chronicle

OPEN FORUM

Friday, August 05, 2005

What to Do About Hetch Hetchy Restore the valley

By John Garamendi

As Californians, we now have the opportunity to do something truly great for our state, our children and for generations to come. We can, and should, restore the magnificence of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. Today, there is great momentum to support this effort. It is a window of opportunity that may not come again. Therefore, we must act now.

With its great waterfalls thundering from towering granite cliffs onto a serene valley floor, Hetch Hetchy was described by John Muir as Yosemite Valley's "wonderfully exact counterpart." Like its better-known twin, Hetch Hetchy Valley was born of uplifted granite scoured by glacial forces, leaving a monument of breathtaking beauty.

Sadly, while one valley was preserved for future generations, the other was flooded. In the early 20th century, despite a nationwide outcry led by Muir and including more than 100 newspapers from coast to coast, Congress permitted Hetch Hetchy Valley to be submerged under 300 feet of water. No similar development has been allowed in our national parks since Hetch Hetchy was dammed.

The beauty of Yosemite was made famous the world over by early 20th-century artists and writers such as Albert Bierstadt and Muir. Later, photographers such as Ansel Adams and Galen Rowell captured Yosemite's special values. In 2005, Californians honored our commitment to preserving our natural heritage by emblazoning Yosemite's Half Dome and Muir's image on the state's commemorative quarter.

Now, we have a unique opportunity to bring back the beauty of Hetch Hetchy and make our treasured national park whole again. As a reservoir, Hetch Hetchy is part of a system that provides water to 2.4 million people in the San Francisco Bay Area. Reservoir releases also generate hydropower that San Francisco uses for its own municipal services or sells to Turlock, Modesto and other municipalities and irrigation districts. This is very important, but recent studies by UC Davis and Environmental Defense have clearly identified how downstream diversions and other reservoirs can replace the water storage and most of the power now provided by Hetch Hetchy. Yes, it is possible for our children and their children to walk the Hetch Hetchy Valley floor just as Muir did.

With bipartisan legislative support, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration is reviewing these studies and assessing what the value of a restored valley would mean to California and the nation.



Chronicle / Michael Macor

Go with the flow: Water now stored behind O'Shaughnessy Dam (above) in the Hetch Hetchy Valley could be rerouted to another reservoir down stream.

Replacing water supply in California is never easy -- all the communities that rely on the Tuolumne River will need to have their needs met before restoration of the Hetch Hetchy Valley can begin. A restoration plan must be identified that provides an undiminished supply of high-quality water to San Francisco and other Bay Area cities. Equally important, any restoration plan must also protect Modesto and Turlock, whose interests on the Tuolumne River are intertwined with San Francisco's.

Yet, despite these obstacles, it is clear that the real work will not be resolving the technical issues, but overcoming the political hurdles. The possibility of experiencing the majesty of a restored Hetch Hetchy Valley is inspiring enough that it should be examined above the political fray. Developing a viable restoration plan will require all parties coming to the table. Creative approaches will need to be pursued to meet the future water and power needs of California's cities and farms. To replace water supply, serious consideration should be given to connecting the Don Pedro Reservoir in Tuolumne County to San Francisco's water-delivery system, or to rebuilding the Calaveras Reservoir. Much of the power loss could likely be addressed by modifying the Canyon Tunnel so that the Kirkwood powerhouse could retain its generating power.

My experience leads me to believe that it is possible to restore Hetch Hetchy. Before being elected to my current post, I served for 16 years in the California Legislature representing the Hetch Hetchy Valley area, and three years as deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior in Washington. I still own and operate a working ranch in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. At the Department of the Interior, I worked with farmers, loggers, cities and environmentalists to develop holistic plans that would provide both economic growth and environmental protection.

As we encourage economic growth in California, we should also make a commitment to cherish and sustain our spectacular natural heritage. I can think of no better way than restoring Hetch Hetchy Valley for our children and grandchildren.

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