RESTORING HETCH HETCHY VALLEY:
The cause that never died

The movement to conserve the environment has been able to celebrate glorious victories. But many people have never forgotten its first defeat: the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. John Muir called this splendid landscape the "second Yosemite." Its loss broke his heart — and proved that national parks were not sacrosanct.

One reason Americans feel that nature reserves, including national parks, are important is that they are areas set apart from commerce. They are supposed to be closed to economic exploitation. But that principle had not yet been established in 1913, when Congress passed the Raker Act allowing the City of San Francisco to build a dam and reservoir on the Tuolumne River in Hetch Hetchy Valley. In a battle between competing public uses — public water and power versus inviolate parks for the people — water and power won.

Conservationists never forgot about Hetch Hetchy, but the subject rarely caught the public's eye — until 1987, when Donald Hodel, Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan, proposed taking down O'Shaughnessy Dam and restoring Hetch Hetchy Valley.

I had known Hodel since college days, when he and I championed opposing political causes. Later, as Interior Secretary, he took positions that made him seem anything but a conservationist. Given his background, his proposal to restore Hetch Hetchy seemed out of character. But Hodel directed the Bureau of Reclamation to study how the dam might be removed and the water and power replaced. Suddenly, the idea was transformed from a lost cause of the past into a practical hope for the future.

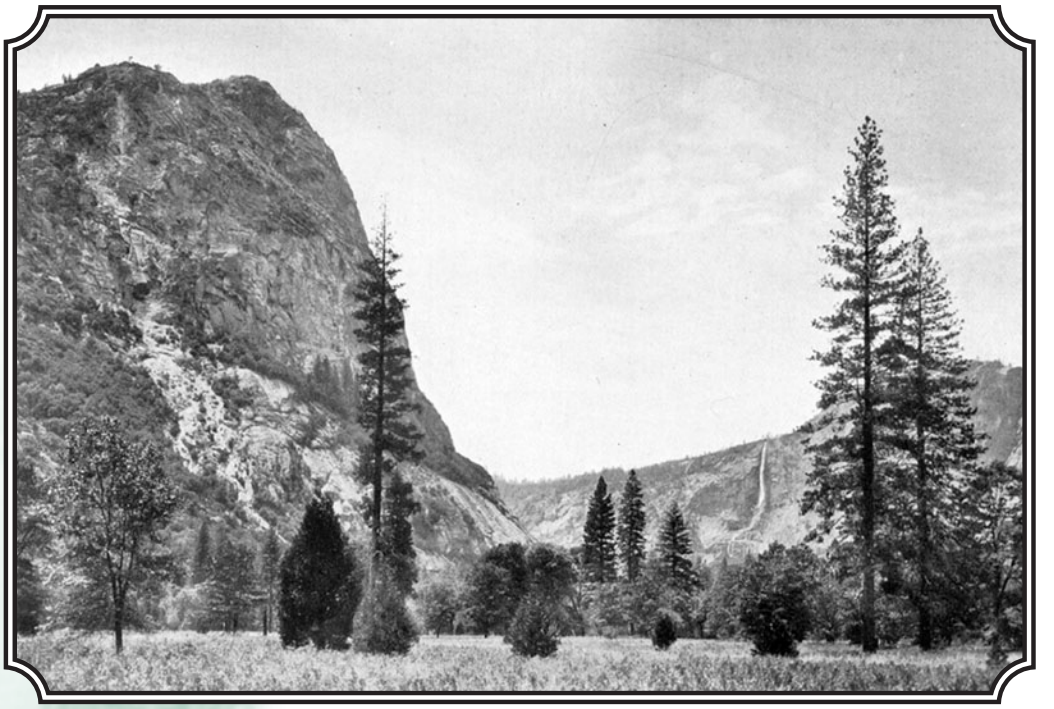
In a published article at the time, Interior Secretary Hodel said, "Restoration of Hetch Hetchy Valley to its natural state may be a dream, but it is our obligation as concerned Americans to discover if this dream can become a reality. It is for our generation to decide that this is an investment for future generations. . . . If we succeed, America can once again boast its position as a world leader in the care, improvement, and restoration of our National Parks."

In 1999 Restore Hetch Hetchy was formed as a grassroots organization especially devoted to the idea that O'Shaughnessy Dam could be taken down, Yosemite National Park's Hetch Hetchy Valley could be restored, and the needs of the San Francisco Bay Area's water and power users could be accommodated in other ways.

Americans are now realizing that natural streams are too scarce because we went overboard in damming too many rivers in the past. Older dams are now gradually being removed. The era of restoration has arrived.

What better place is there to restore a natural landscape and an undammed mountain river than in Hetch Hetchy Valley? John Muir called it "a grand landscape garden, one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain temples." Never in our nation's history has such an extraordinary site been lost in a place that was supposed to be protected by the United States government. Our country has exported the national park idea to the world, and we urge everyone to uphold the sanctity of land consecrated in this fashion to nature. And yet, nearly a century ago, we failed to do so ourselves when we let Hetch Hetchy Valley be flooded.





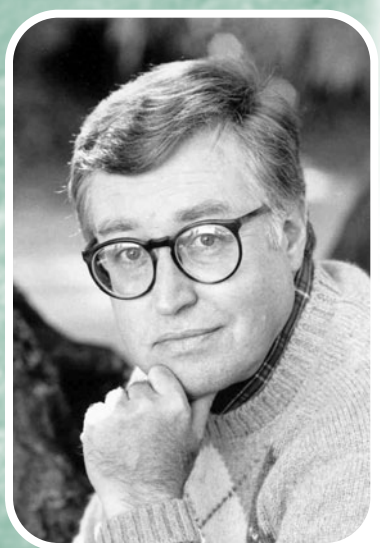
"Grand Landscape Garden" by Herbert Gleason, Sierra Club Bulletin

It is time to correct this tragic mistake. For more than nine decades, paying rent of only $30,000 per year, the City of San Francisco has enjoyed the right to use Hetch Hetchy Valley as a water tank. Surely that is long enough. It is time for the American people to reclaim the "second Yosemite" that it lost at Hetch Hetchy and for nature to begin the process of healing.

In our lifetimes, we have seen other major structures torn down, from the Berlin Wall to San Francisco's Embarcadero Freeway. So also can the dam and reservoir in Hetch Hetchy Valley be removed. In our lifetimes, we have seen the City of Los Angeles make accommodations to restore Mono Lake. So also can the City of San Francisco make accommodations to restore Hetch Hetchy Valley.

How Hetch Hetchy can be restored in the most beneficial way is the subject of this study. Experts have been assembled to grapple with all the engineering practicalities and to analyze all the alternative water and power sources. This study marshals the facts and figures that demonstrate that our hopes are not misplaced and that our dreams are not fantasies. Restoring Hetch Hetchy Valley does make practical sense. There can be a "win-win" outcome. This report points the way.

It is time for the healing process at Hetch Hetchy Valley to begin.

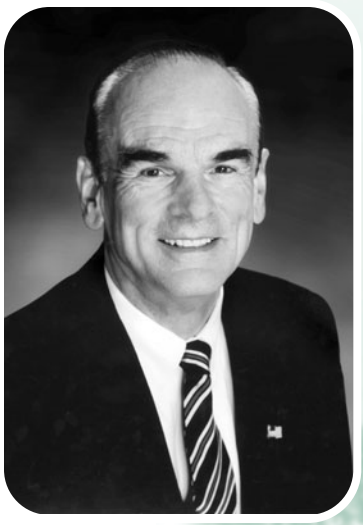


Michael McCloskey
Sierra Club, Executive Director (1969–1985)
Sierra Club, Chairman (1985–1999)
Restore Hetch Hetchy Advisory Committee (1999–present)

RESTORING HETCH HETCHY: A PRACTICAL IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

A letter from former Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel

As Secretary of Interior under President Reagan, I was concerned that the Hetch Hetchy Valley, which would have been a premier visitor destination in Yosemite National Park, was managed for a single purpose for the sole benefit of one region of California.



That is not to say that the water and power needs of the Bay Area and the Central Valley are not real. Indeed, they must be fulfilled for the benefit of the people living there.

I proposed a study to determine if it might be feasible to remove Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and restore Hetch Hetchy Valley as a vital part of one of our greatest national parks. I recognize that when Congress passed the Raker Act in 1913, it may have appeared that the best way to meet water and power needs for San Francisco was to flood what is now part of Yosemite National Park. But a wide variety of techniques now exist that can meet those needs, including, but by no means limited to, expanded water storage facilities, water efficiency, wastewater reclamation, and groundwater management.

The power needs of California must also be met when the dam is removed. Combined cycle turbines, solar energy, energy efficiency, reconfiguring the existing power system and a host of other options on or off the Tuolumne River can make California power users whole.

I worked hard to restore and preserve our great system of national parks. Scholars have called the national parks "America's greatest idea," and that idea has spread throughout the world. Now we can take the next step. If we can find a way to remove the reservoir, we can resurrect one of the most important features of a national park that attracts millions of visitors a year. This new feature will buoy the local economy of the Central Sierra Nevada, and make Yosemite an even more attractive place to visit.

Partisan differences will always occur in decisions over the use of our natural resources. But we all can agree that restoring Hetch Hetchy should be a non-partisan cause embraced by all those seeking a useful, productive, and great national park system.



Donald Hodel
Secretary of the Interior, 1985-1989