

Restoring Hetch Hetchy deserves some thought

By Bill James

One of the great splendors of California is the Yosemite Valley, or so I'm told. I'm probably the only native Californian my age who has not worked his way onto the valley floor.

I use that qualifier because there was one trip to the Yosemite area as a young child. My older brother, Ken, was attending Boy Scout camp near Yosemite and my parents drove those curvy roads to the edge of the valley.

I was too carsick to remember much. I know my dad had to pull over at least three times en route because of my violent reaction to mountain travel.

There was one thing I remember quite vividly about the trip that summer more than 50 years ago: the lake that filled the Hetch Hetchy Valley. I remember it because my parents told me that was where we got the water we drank back at our Bay Area home. For a little boy, it seemed big, although by today's standards the reservoir is pretty small.

Hetch Hetchy is in the news because there are suggestions that the O'Shaughnessy Dam that holds back the 360,000 acre feet in the reservoir should be removed and the valley restored and turned into a national park. Our 8th District Assemblywoman, Lois Wolk-D, Davis, this week called for a state study to look at just that possibility.

It's an intriguing proposition, mainly because of the Hetch Hetchy location and the belief by many people, not just environmentalists, that the beauty of the valley compares to that of its sister, Yosemite.

I've been a proponent of hydro-electric projects my whole life. I still think a dam on the American River above Folsom Lake at Auburn makes sense from a flood-control standpoint. Many man-made foothill lakes (like Don Pedro and New Melones) provide tremendous economic and recreational value, not to mention necessary flood-control and power-producing advantages.

I lived in the Sacramento area during some big flood years in the 1960s and 1980s when the city was perilously close to flooding. Swollen rivers were lapping at the archaic levee system that holds Sacramento's fate in check. I don't trust levees any more today than I did as a student at CSU Sacramento in 1964 during a major storm that nearly swamped the campus.

During trips to the Northwest, I often heard the call for breaching four dams along the Snake River in Washington, returning it to its natural state to restore traditional salmon runs. The economy of the entire Northwest would be severely damaged if proponents of that radical idea were to succeed. The series of dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers provide hydro-electric power for the entire Northwest. The Bush administration just a month ago stood firm against removing dams along those rivers.

Maybe it's because I have yet to enjoy Yosemite Valley's beauty first-hand that the proposal to restore Hetch Hetchy to its earlier grandeur sets it apart from other water projects. Congress passed the Raker Act in 1913 to allow the city of San Francisco to dam the Tuolumne River in the Hetch Hetchy Valley.

The reservoir provides water to San Francisco and other Bay Area cities and includes a series of hydro-electric functions. Proponents of the restoration efforts suggest that a new reservoir, much larger than Hetch Hetchy, could be built closer to the Bay Area that could essentially replace the mountain lake.

Bay Area water interests will line up against a pretty noisy environmental crowd on this issue. But don't be too surprised if some clear-thinking moderates in the dam vs. no-dam battle enter the discussion.

The issue should get a thorough review.

One of these days I'll travel those final several miles into Yosemite. And I'll probably use the same Highway 120 route my parents used a half-century ago. The question: Will Hetch Hetchy Reservoir still flood the valley or will there be efforts afoot to restore the valley into a jewel that will challenge Yosemite for its magnificence?

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