

San Mateo County Times

Hope grows for Hetch Hetchy rebirth

By Douglas Fischer
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Saturday, December 04, 2004 - Yosemite National Park may be turning a new leaf come spring. But some see even greater restoration potential on the horizon:

A remade Hetch Hetchy Valley -- minus the reservoir that's kept the valley underwater for 80 years.

In September, Environmental Defense grabbed headlines across the state with a study showing the Hetch Hetchy Valley -- long called Yosemite's twin -- could be restored.

The idea is not new. In 1923, the San Francisco Public Utility Commission plugged the valley, flooded it and started storing water for the Bay Area. Calls to restore the area have been heard ever since.

But with a host of heavyweight politicians opposed and millions of Californians dependent on the reservoir's power and water, conventional wisdom has held Half Dome will come down before the dam does.

That's started to shift a bit.

With two key Assembly water leaders calling for an assessment and the Schwarzenegger administration promising to "review the growing body of studies and analyses" calling for restoration, advocates detected the first faint cracks in the edifice.

For the National Park Service -- which remains steadfastly neutral on the politically charged issue -- the idea of restoring the valley is tantalizing.

"It would be a wonderfully interesting conversation about what should happen with Hetch Hetchy, with that valley, if it were restored," said park superintendent Mike Tollefson.

Not so fast, said California Resources Agency Secretary Mike Chrisman, who promised the study. The review, he said, will simply continue a long-running discussion over the reservoir's future.

"The time is ripe to have another conversation about it. We don't know where it's going to lead."

Though perhaps one person does.

No California water deal in recent memory has happened without approval from the state's senior senator. And her mind appears set.

"California needs every drop of high-quality water that it can get," Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein said in response to Chrisman's call for a study.

"I have no problem with a study and will be happy to look at the results. But I can't see a scenario in which I would support tearing down Hetch Hetchy."

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