

LAKE TAHOE: MICROCOSM OF ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Lake Tahoe can be seen as both a microcosm and a symbol of the American environmental movement. From John C. Frémont's tantalizing glimpse through the mist of a February morning in 1844 to the well-publicized presidential summit in 1997, the Lake has been described as sublime and squalid, enchanting and endangered, resource and resort, wilderness utopia and urban wilderness. As the environmental movement has evolved from preservation to conservation to sustainability to "deep ecology," debates about Lake Tahoe have mirrored these frequently conflicting philosophies. This paper illustrates the principal issues in environmental history with examples from Lake Tahoe. I also argue that water clarity as a symbol for the total environment complicates decision-making and management.

INTRODUCTION

From Discovery to Forest Reserve

On February 14, 1844, Lieutenant John C. Frémont and his topographer Charles Preuss climbed the highest peak near their camp and

. . . had a beautiful view of a mountain lake at our feet, about fifteen miles in length and so entirely surrounded by mountains that we could not discover an outlet. We had taken with us a glass; but though we enjoyed an extended view, the valley was half hidden in mist. . . (Frémont)

People have been trying to get a clear view of the lake ever since. We can assume that the first Washoe Indians had days of clear views, but we can also assume that smoke from their campfires contributed to the natural haze. The point is that Lake Tahoe has acquired an aura from descriptions that are repeated by word of mouth, in print, and in paintings and photographs, an aura that takes on a life of its own and often obscures the real place. The central problem for historians is what is meant by the words like "natural" and "environment?" (Cronon, 81)

Obviously historians use the word environment in the generally accepted sense of total range of conditions, physical, biological, social, and economic, in which an organism (including humans) lives, but historians worry more about the apparent differences between nature and culture and whether nature means the place we live and work, or someplace we only visit. This was already apparent in the nascent environmental philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in the same month and year that Frémont saw Lake Tahoe wrote in his journal:

That bread which we ask of Nature is that she should entrance us, but amidst her beautiful or her grandest pictures I cannot escape the *second thought*. I walked this p.m. in the woods, but there too the snowbanks were sprinkled with tobacco-juice. (Emerson)

Entranced by the picture, we forget we have to spit. This is the paradox of which Emerson speaks. A little more than five years after Frémont's discovery, the stage road from Carson City to Placerville was open and settlers lined the route south of the Lake. (*Cultural and Historical*

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Significance of the Lake Tahoe Region) The history of the rapid development of mining, logging, transportation, and tourism in the Tahoe Basin is well told in Douglas Strong's *Tahoe: An Environmental History* and need not be repeated here. The first fifty years of Tahoe's recorded history are an intimate part of the history of the west, although its frontier phase ended well before 1893, as tourism replaced logging and mining.

Mark Twain, who arrived in Nevada in 1861, explained the lure of Tahoe as a combination of natural beauty and the promise of quick wealth through "wood ranching." Although he accidentally set a fire that burned 200 acres, Twain found solace drifting on the Lake:

So singularly clear was the water that when it was only twenty or thirty feet deep the bottom was so perfectly distinct that the boat seemed floating in air! Yes, where it was even eighty feet deep. . . the water was not merely transparent, but dazzlingly, brilliantly so. All objects seen through it had a bright, strong vividness, not only of outline, but of every minute detail, which they would not have had when seen simply through the same depth of atmosphere. So empty and airy did all spaces seem below us, and so strong was the sense of floating high aloft in mid-nothingness, that we called these boat-excursions 'balloon-voyages.' (Twain, 138)

On August 28, 1873, the physicist John Le Conte, found that he could see a white dinner plate more than 100 feet below the surface of the Lake. (James, 70) Perhaps he had read about the disk invented by the Italian astrophysicist Angelo Secchi, but in any case his dinner plate became the most recognized emblem of the Lake's purity.

Less scientific tourists soon arrived at the Lake, but they too remarked on the transparency of the water and the brilliant spectrum of colors reflected on its surface. The intrepid Caroline Churchill, who traveled by rail and stage in 1871 observed:

The water is so clear that one can see to the depth of fifty feet any object that is visible at that distance in the open air. . . The water is so clear that it is impossible to detect the surface except by the ripples made by the steamer, or in case some foreign substance should chance to be borne along on the surface; and leaning over the side of the steamer gave one the impression of being propelled through the air. (Churchill, 94, 97-98)

Tourists continue to seek and expect to see the aqueous clarity and to experience the promised spiritual transformations.

The painters who arrived at the Lake in these years illustrate this point. John Ross Key, grandson of the author of "The Star-Spangled Banner," served with the Corps of Engineers in the Civil War and visited Tahoe in 1870. His painting, "Lake Tahoe," emphasizes the luminous water and air linked by two tiny white sail boats near Tahoe City. Three years later, William Marple, who came to California as a Forty-niner, recorded a more plebeian scene, two row boats on a calm but gray day.

In the following decade the painters William Weaver Armstrong and Albert Bierstadt recorded strikingly different atmospheric conditions, but both reveal the essential link between lake and sky in their paintings. Armstrong's Indians and Bierstadt's trappers also nostalgically recall the lost paradise before logging and tourist development. In 1895, English-born Edwin Deakin painted "Mt. Tallac" with a prominent cross of snow in its sunlit ravines, a conclusive statement on the Nineteenth-Century search for meaning in nature. (*From Exploration to Conservation*, 10, 88-89, 102, 111)

Tahoe's development as a resort fits the pattern of the first period of environmental consciousness, which led to the creation of state and

national parks and forests. Preservation of some remaining wilderness became a national priority, but creating access to these areas was important too. Since the Central Pacific (later Southern Pacific) station at Truckee was just fifteen miles from the north end of the Lake, the first tourist facilities were built there. As early as 1877, Caroline Churchill noted that the steamboat she took from Hot Springs wharf to Tahoe City and Emerald Bay "wears the brand of the Central Pacific Railroad, as nearly everything does upon the Pacific coast." (96) The struggle between those who sought unspoiled nature and those demanding easy access was well underway when the first proposals to protect Lake Tahoe were made in the California Assembly in 1883.

In 1896 the proprietor of the hotel at Glen Alpine joined the newly organized Sierra Club in urging the federal government to create a Tahoe forest reserve from Yosemite to Truckee. After lengthy debate over the need for watershed protection versus the rights of property owners, a much smaller Lake Tahoe Forest Reserve was created April 13, 1899, climaxing the first phase of Tahoe's environmental history. (Strong, 63)

From Reclamation to Urbanization

The next fifty years of Tahoe's environmental history are also a microcosm of American debates over conservation of natural resources. With the passage of the National Reclamation Act in 1902, Tahoe became the center of the experiment in irrigation and water management for the arid west that dominates much of current environmental history. (Horton; Opie; Reisner; Strong; Worster)

Although a dam had provided some regulation of the outflow from Tahoe into the Truckee River since 1870, the need for a predictable supply of water to operate electrical generators and to irrigate farms necessitated better control. As the reclamation project developed more conflicts arose. The Bureau of Reclamation, which did not control the dam until 1915, wanted to be able to lower the level of the Lake by as much as six feet in dry years, but the owners of lakefront property organized in opposition. Through wet years and dry the Lake Tahoe Protection Association, the electric company, farmers, and Pyramid Lake Paiutes contended for their interests in the lake's water.

It was in these years that Professor James E. Church began his meteorological and hydrological studies of the Tahoe Basin. As I have argued elsewhere, Church represents two dimensions of American environmentalism, the scientific and the aesthetic. His initial interest in snow was purely recreational. His first ascent of Mt. Rose in winter was made in 1895, inspired by the arctic explorations of Peary and Nansen. After two years in Munich working on a PhD in Classics, Church returned to Nevada with Alpine hiking experience and German snowshoes. The week of New Year's 1901 he and his wife Florence camped on Mt. Rose.

Lake Tahoe lay like a great mirror. . . while the western sky became a luminous mass of crimson and gold, blended into one gorgeous color that filled the heavens from north to south and from the horizon halfway to the zenith,--an Alpine glow, exceeding in wondrous beauty any sunset effect I had seen in the Alps. (Church, 1903, 226)

Stimulated by an article he read on the importance of meteorological observations on the peaks of the Sierras, Church and other volunteers built the first weather observatory on Mt. Rose in 1905 and maintained it for many years. In the winter of 1908-09, with the help of University of Nevada colleagues H. P. Boardman and S. P. Fergusson, he invented and tested his snow sampler and by 1911, he had worked out the percentage of normal system that allowed him to make relatively accurate predictions about the spring runoff in the Tahoe Basin. In 1917, Paul Norboe, chief assistant state

engineer in the California Department of Engineering convinced the state Assembly to fund snow surveys for the next five years. The California and Nevada Cooperative Surveys began the institutional structure employed today. In 1937, Church reflected on how his early enthusiasm for winter camping evolved into a new career as a snow surveyor.

I had gone to the hills for pictures and pleasure, but to the public I was merely a great fool. So the humanist decided to become a scientist and a 'hero,' yet still take his pictures on the side. (Church, 1937, 141)

His words suggest the change in American environmentalism from simple preservation of wilderness to efficient management of natural resources. Church strongly believed that snow science could help to solve the bitter conflicts among water users at Tahoe and elsewhere. But Tahoe's environmental problems were larger than the water wars in which lakefront property owners and police prevented angry farmers armed with a steamshovel from cutting an outlet below the Truckee River dam.

Highways for automobiles began creeping up the Sierras to the Lake from north and south. By 1915 the "Wishbone Auto Route" gave tourists a choice of destinations from Sacramento, north to Tahoe Tavern or south to Tallac, from which points they could drive along the new "Tahoe Boulevard" from one to the other. On June 9, 1914, George Wharton James, a popular travel writer, described his trip in terms that vividly reflect the changes taking place at the Lake and the emergence of what might be called a windshield appreciation of nature:

The first mile or two from the Tavern is through avenues of second growth timber just tall enough to be delightful. In turn we passed many of the choice residences that are making Tahoe growingly popular as a summer home, and then crossed Ward Creek and Blackwood Creek. This latter is one of the principal trout spawning streams of Tahoe, and to prevent fishermen from catching the fish that seek the stream at the spawning season the Fish Commissioners have placed a buoy out in the Lake, some twenty-five hundred feet away, within which bound it is illegal to catch fish.

While many trees have been logged from this region there are still enough to make it forest-like, and as the road winds and turns it affords glimpses and full views, sometimes for only a moment or two, and again for a minute or more, of the placid-faced blue Lake on the left, or the snowy mountain summits straight ahead or on the right. What rich contrasts of color, what revelations of majesty and sublimity each new turn affords! (James, 129-130)

Summer homes, Fish Commissioners, "forest-like" environments, these have clearly changed the meaning of "sublimity." The experience is, he notes, one of "carefully engineered surprises and revelations." The glimpses and views of the Lake, sky, and mountains from the car remind him of the movies:

Every few feet new vistas of beauty are projected before us. The moving pictures are all exquisite. (131)

In short the automobile and motion pictures remade the wilderness experience. Tahoe again is a microcosm of the changes wrought by the road building projects of the National Park Service in the 1920s. Many of the highways were designed by landscape architects to harmonize as much as possible with the surroundings, but inevitably they changed the meanings of nature and natural. (McClelland) Photographs in promotional brochures for the Lake Tahoe Sierra Association, Tahoe Tavern, and the Southern Pacific Railroad in the 1920s and 30s show the Lake from the veranda of a hotel with stumps and dead trees in the foreground. Activities offered tourists include golf, fishing, motoring, swimming in a heated pool, and horseback

riding, but not hiking. (Lake Tahoe Pamphlets) Tahoe was coming to be valued for more than its natural beauty.

The Lake was rapidly becoming urban, a continuous strip of homes, resorts, and commercial services, with occasional ribbons of park or forest, governed by two states, six counties, and several municipalities. From Brockway to Stateline the area suffered from typical urban problems--crime, crowded schools, ugly signage, traffic congestion, and trash. World War II slowed population growth, but the post-war boom brought accelerated development and the building of large gambling casinos beginning in 1955, further erased differences between Tahoe and Reno. Concern for water quality became paramount when residents realized that raw sewage was being dumped into the Lake. The California Water Pollution Control Act of 1949 gave responsibility for regulation to regional water quality boards, but inter-county cooperation was difficult and inter-state almost impossible, as the story of the failures of Interstate Compact Commission of 1955 demonstrates. (Strong)

The old symbols, the Lake's clarity and the merging of water and sky, linger on, but it is significant, I think, that in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's 1945 novel *The City of Trembling Leaves*, the young hero and his friend spend an afternoon at the Lake drifting on a raft:

. . . peering down into the water or staring up at the sky. The illusion kept coming over me that I could dive up as well as down. We seemed suspended in the midst of a single substance. . . something on the bottom which looked like an unblemished tin or nickel canteen. It gleamed very brightly where it lay upon the distinct ripples of the sand. It looked large and near. We decided to dive for it, not because we wanted it, but just for the fun of getting it. That's how you feel about everything at Tahoe when it's quiet. (Clark, 166-167)

But they cannot retrieve it. "The shining thing was as far away as the sun." (168) Le Conte's dinner plate had become an unobtainable holy grail.

From Environmental Assessment to Ecosystem Management

In the third and on-going phase of American environmental history, Lake Tahoe remains a microcosm. The conservation movement became the environmental movement in the 1950s. (Hays) Although many continued to focus on park and wilderness recreation, more came to see the environments of cities, countryside, and wildlands as a unified whole.

Politically effective plans for dealing with various forms of pollution are, of course, difficult to achieve. Efforts began in the late 1950s when the privately funded Nevada-California Lake Tahoe Association established the Lake Tahoe Area Council to collect data on environmental issues, sponsor studies, and begin building public support for long-range regional planning. Initial results were mixed. The Council funded the Lake Tahoe Regional Planning Commission that published a report in 1964 reflecting the interests of the business community by addressing the immediate problems of sewage treatment and clean drinking water. It failed, however, to address broader changes in the Tahoe Basin ecology, and it also lacked any mechanisms to enforce its decisions. (Strong)

The Council urged the creation of a bi-state planning agency, and after both states authorized separate planning agencies, Congress created the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency on December 19, 1969, shortly after the National Environmental Policy Act had been signed into law. The decade of the 1970s was filled with promise for better planning and control. TRPA, working with dozens of local, state, and federal agencies, commissioned studies of the cultural and historical significance of the Lake Tahoe region, on its landscapes and travel routes, and on "visual pollution."

Three features of these planning documents are noteworthy: 1. The assumption that the human history of the place should be considered as much as its natural history. (*Cultural and Historical Significance of the Lake Tahoe Region*) 2. The assumption "that development per se need not have severe negative effects on this ecosystem." (McEvoy and Williams) 3. That the visual experience of the Lake is chiefly from the automobile and that a single criterion can be used to evaluate the tourist's perceptions. (*Scenic Analysis of the Lake Tahoe Region*)

Including the human history of the Tahoe region reflects two major shifts in environmental values--that the present eco-system of the region is the result of centuries of human occupation, and that unless we understand the ways in which work connects us to nature "we will condemn ourselves to spending most of our lives outside it." (White, 185) Lake Tahoe cannot be restored to some perfect moment in pre-history, it is simply a place that people value for different and sometimes conflicting reasons. A knowledge of the ways in which the Lake has been used, as well as idealized, may help us use it in less destructive ways.

That growth can continue without severe negative effects on the ecosystem reflects the assumption that ecosystems management, emphasizing sustainability, systems perspective, human values, and collaborative decision-making can establish an environmental policy agenda and set achievable goals. (Haeuber) The TRPA reports of 1971 and the *Lake Tahoe Environmental Assessment* issued by the Western Federal Regional Council Interagency Task Force in 1979 are products of this management philosophy.

The third assumption of TRPA planning reports is also significant. There is little discussion in most ecosystem management plans of the impact of the automobile, not just on visual pollution, or the damage to soils, vegetation, and water caused by the construction and maintenance of roads and parking lots, but on the way in which we look at and define nature. In the charming little sketches appended to the *Scenic Analysis* guide, we are told that billboards, neon signs, and telephone poles are manmade features that detract from the "natural scene," while a road is not; moreover, pedestrians and traffic signs are labeled "distractions to driving." ((25-26)

The paradoxes raised by these assumptions are too numerous to discuss further here, but the ability to redefine nature to include the highway as an enhancement of the visual experience (27) and to focus on panoramic views to the exclusion of more intimate landscapes that may include interesting examples of human presence raises broader land use and transportation issues. (Frankel) The traffic problems on highways 28 and 50 are another microcosm of American environmental history.

The environmental assessment of the Western Federal Regional Council may have done more than any other report to clarify the trends and to show that environmental deterioration in the Lake Tahoe region was worse than anyone thought, and by 1980 TRPA had increased authority to limit growth. Using the land classification system developed for the Forest Service by geomorphologist Robert G. Bailey in 1974, TRPA went beyond local zoning laws to classify all the land in the Tahoe Basin according to its sensitivity to environmental damage and to limit development accordingly. TRPA refused to allow some property owners to build anything, offering instead Transfer Development Rights (TDR), "the sale of one's parcel's development rights to the owner of another parcel, which allows more development on the second parcel while reducing or preventing development on the originating parcel." (Johnston and Madison, 365)

TDRs have been a tool of zoning in cities since 1916, where they allow owners of unused "air rights" to sell the space above their property to adjacent buildings, but in the Tahoe context the rights were less valuable and led one property owner, Bernadine Suitum, to sue TRPA for "taking" her

property without just compensation. The meaning of the "takings" clause in the Fifth Amendment has been challenged many times, and *Suitum v. Tahoe Regional Planning Agency* is one more microcosm of environmental law. (Environmental Policy Project)

Suitum's property at Incline Village is adjacent to Mill Creek and was classified a protected stream environment zone (SEZ) by TRPA. When her case was rejected by a federal district court on a legal technicality (her failure to attempt to sell her TDR before filing suit), she appealed, with the help of several property rights groups, to the U. S. Supreme Court, which heard her case in October 1996 but avoided a ruling by sending the case back to the district court in July 1997 (Kanner). The ultimate resolution of this dispute may have far-reaching consequences, and many local, state, and federal agencies filed briefs in support of TRPA, fearing a weakening of zoning regulations. The U. S. District Court's decision January 15 of this year ordering TRPA to pay damages to property owners may justify those fears. (*Tahoe-Sierra Preservation Council, Inc. v. TRPA*)

The most recent chapter in Lake Tahoe's environmental micro-history is the "Lake Tahoe Forum" of July 26, 1997, in which President Clinton and Vice-President Gore met with other federal and state politicians and officials to pledge funds and recommend more than twenty-five projects to improve the environment of the region, including eliminating miles of old logging roads and "returning the land to its original condition," and the controlled burning of thousands of acres of National Forest to reduce the threat of fires that might spread to private property. (Condon, 2) The new environmentalism emerging at Lake Tahoe and nationally strives to erase an embarrassing part of the past.

Other changes in the environment of the Lake also reflect national change. The Forest Service has instituted camping and parking fees, the Embassy Suites and other new hotels replace unfashionable old motels, multimillionaire casino owners and Wall Street tycoons build vast estates and lobby TRPA to control growth, and TRPA struggles to ban personal watercraft. Through all this, Le Conte's dinner plate remains the icon of Tahoe's mystique. As *USA Today* reported:

Tahoe's legendary water clarity is declining by more than a foot each year. You can still spot a white dinner plate 70 feet below the turquised-hued surface, but a generation ago you could see 100 feet down. (Bly)

Yet, as Don Lane of the U.S. Forest Service remarked, "even if the lake turned green, people would keep coming." (Bly)

CONCLUSION

As our view of Le Conte's plate grows dimmer, our historical view of Lake Tahoe's past grows clearer. History, like Peter Goin's rephotographic survey, helps us see what past visitors saw and shows, I think, that it is impossible to separate nature as an idea from the actual environment. This is why the legal briefs for TRPA continue to quote Mark Twain. Ecosystem management today struggles to balance a belief in the spiritual power of nature with demands for accessibility and profit. The paradox is not new, but our understanding of it is better. Lake Tahoe is a microcosm of American environmental history; perhaps it can also become a model for the future.

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