

# The Triumph and Lessons of Mono Lake

Last Thursday, March 8th, more than 150 people gathered at the Masonic Center for Butte Environmental Council's Environmental Banquet 2001. The evening included a delicious crepe dinner from Guzzetti Catering, recognition of local activists in the environmental community, and a spirited presentation by Frances Spivey-Weber, Executive Director of Policy for the Mono Lake Committee. Her talk outlined the long journey towards restoration of Mono Lake after decades of diversion to the Los Angeles area.

Beginning in 1941, Los Angeles began diverting water from Mono Lake to meet the city's escalating demands. According to Ms. Spivey-Weber, the diversion went uncontested until the 1960's that brought energetic, though unsuccessful, attempts to stop it. Finally, in 1976, a group of students from Davis, UCLA, and Stanford, conducted a year-long study that drew the obvious conclusion: without sufficient mitigation, Mono Lake would be drained, as had adjacent Owens Lake.

Research student, David Gaines and his wife, Sally, made the pivotal decision to stand by Mono Lake, literally, by making it their home and to begin the long, arduous campaign for restoration. In 1979, a lawsuit was filed, based on an obscure law called "The Public Trust Doctrine." By 1983, the lawsuit was successful, but, as Ms. Spivey-Weber stated, neither success in court nor supporting scientific evidence was enough. David and Sally Gaines had to win the political battle by raising public awareness.

To do so, they drove their station wagon throughout California, showing slides of stunning Mono Lake and the negative impact of diversion. Hundreds of activists rallied behind the cause. In one well-publicized campaign, bicyclists rode from LA to Mono Lake, each carrying a vial of water to pour into the lake. Such media-friendly tactics and a whole lot of hard work ultimately won the attention of the powers-that-be, resulting in the state awarding 60 million dollars for water conservation programs to help replace water no longer diverted from Mono Lake. Then in 1994, after nearly 30 years of activism, the California Water Resources Control Board ordered Los Angeles to return "some" water to Mono Lake. Finally, in 1998, the state government passed a restoration plan for restoring Mono Lake to its earlier 25-foot level. Today, lake levels are reaching 12-feet.

Along with outlining the history of Mono Lake restoration, Ms. Spivey-Weber showed slides of this remarkable lake. Its signature "tufas" rise from the salty lake like futuristic towers of the Planet Naboo. Pictures of seagulls, migratory birds, brine shrimp, and brine flies, stand as silent testimony to the importance of Mono Lake as an irreplaceable habitat, teeming with life.

Ms. Spivey-Weber encouraged listeners to keep fighting the good fight to preserve the environment. As she emphasized, the battle can be won even if it takes decades as it has with Mono Lake; however, she cautioned that such battles are never over. New politicians and policy makers need to be educated as they cycle into power so that successes gained are not lost through uninformed, political whim. Surely, the banquet audience, made up of new and long-time, hard-working activists, needed little convincing of this sobering truth.

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