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Spreck Rosekrans: The elephant in Yosemite Park

BY SPRECK ROSEKRANS

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President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant in 1864, marking the first time in world history that a natural landscape was set aside and protected for the citizens of a nation. The birth of Yosemite is thus also the birth of the national park idea — a concept described by author Wallace Stegner as "America's best idea."

It was also in Yosemite where conservationist John Muir successfully lobbied President Theodore Roosevelt by a campfire, setting in motion Roosevelt's expansion of our national parks. Today, we honor Muir and Yosemite's Half Dome on the California quarter.

So it was wholly appropriate that elected officials, National Park Service leaders and a plethora of conservationists came together on June 30 to celebrate the vision that Abraham Lincoln held for our nation in 1864, when horrific civil war battles were threatening to tear it apart.

The celebration included a ceremonial groundbreaking, made possible through philanthropy, to remove the roads and parking lots that threaten the ancient giant sequoias in Yosemite's fabled Mariposa Grove. Events of the day culminated with the swinging of golden sledgehammers, stirring speeches about the future of our national parks, and an acknowledgment that the concrete in the Mariposa Grove was "an embarrassment to Yosemite."

If a concrete parking lot in the Mariposa Grove is an embarrassment to Yosemite, what then is the O'Shaughnessy Dam, which has buried the park's Hetch Hetchy Valley under 300 feet of water for almost a century?

None of the official remarks mentioned Hetch Hetchy. For some in the crowd it was the proverbial "elephant in the room" — blatantly obvious but too controversial to acknowledge. Others appear to have forgotten that the once iconic glacier-carved valley is part of Yosemite.

In the early 20th century, San Francisco's proposal to build a dam in Yosemite sparked nationwide outrage, and was opposed by more than 200 newspapers. But San Francisco's influence in Washington, D.C., eventually prevailed, and Congress passed the Raker Act in 1913, allowing the project to proceed.

The controversy left an unpleasant aftertaste. Three short years later, Congress created the National Park Service to ensure that no such destruction of any of our national parks would ever again be allowed. But the dam and reservoir remain.

San Francisco officials aggressively defend that reservoir. While it is one of nine reservoirs in their system, they claim it, not the Tuolumne River, as the "source" of their supply.

The dam's defenders also claim that because California is vulnerable to drought, we should not pursue restoration. But almost all cities in California have made significant changes in how they move, store and use water over the last 20 years, allowing them to preserve reliable supplies while accommodating environmental improvements.

Cities have built new off-stream reservoirs in urban areas, invested in groundwater recharge, and are increasingly recycling wastewater. Farmers have also invested in groundwater, and have installed more than a million miles of drip irrigation. The new water supply required to restore Hetch Hetchy is a tiny fraction of what these other water agencies have recently developed.

As a result, California's Trinity River retains more of its natural flow, helping its salmon population and the Indian tribes that have depended on it for millennia. Migratory bird populations benefit from the newly dedicated flows to restore Mono Lake and rewater Central Valley wetlands. And court rulings under the Endangered Species Act have required increased flows through the delta and out to sea, albeit much to the dismay of Central Valley farmers.

Some water agencies have adapted to and even embraced these changes. Others continue to fight vigorously. But while most California water agencies have become more responsible stewards of the environment, San Francisco — of all places — has avoided serious discussion of the damage to Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley and of the water system solutions that would accommodate its restoration.

Let's be clear: Restoration of Hetch Hetchy Valley is entirely possible, Yosemite National Park can be whole again, and nobody will lose any water. San Francisco simply needs to make a few investments similar to those made by other cities over the last two decades. No more excuses. No other city stores water in a national park, and neither should San Francisco. Let's restore Hetch Hetchy Valley for the benefit of all.

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