Native Americans lived in Hetch Hetchy for millennia before the first Europeans arrived in 1850—hunting as well as gathering acorns and other edible plants. Many of the valley’s features bear Miwok names, e.g., Tueeulala, Wapama and Kolana, but Paiutes from the eastern Sierra used Hetch Hetchy as well. Indians did not leave the valley until the 20th century, when it was dammed and flooded.

When Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant in 1864, it was the first such dedication of land for “public resort and recreation” anywhere in the world. Lincoln, like other easterners, was inspired by the photographs of Carlton Watkins, but he was also grateful to Yosemite advocates Unitarian Minister Thomas Starr King and Jessie Benton Fremont for their opposition to slavery which helped keep California from seceding along with disgruntled southern states.

Before the National Park Service was established, Yosemite was often patrolled by army units, including battalions of Buffalo Soldiers—the name given to African American soldiers by Indians. These soldiers were instructed to keep illegal grazing out of Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite Valleys, protecting those lands for native deer, bear and other wildlife.

The name “Hetch Hetchy” is derived from the Miwok word for a grass that grew in the valley, possibly what we now call Blue Dicks.

John Muir traveled to California in 1869 and went directly to Yosemite, spending much of the next five years working and exploring the area. Upon visiting Hetch Hetchy Valley, he wrote “the world is so rich as to possess at least two Yosemites instead of one.” Muir became the world’s most famous naturalist, successfully advocating for the creation of Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks and founding the Sierra Club. In 1903, Muir camped with Theodore Roosevelt in Yosemite, and encouraged the President to establish two dozen additional national parks and monuments.

The damming of Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley was a formative moment for not only the Sierra Club but also our nation’s environmental conscience. The valley’s restoration would affirm that we need not accept the mistakes of the past.

President Woodrow Wilson signed the Raker Act, allowing Hetch Hetchy to be destroyed, as well as the Organic Act.

San Francisco’s interest in damming Hetch Hetchy began in the 19th century. The nation was more sympathetic to the request after an earthquake and fire devastated the City in 1906. (Local reservoirs were full at the time, but pipelines within the city were severed.)

“The damming of Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley was a formative moment for not only the Sierra Club but also our nation’s environmental conscience. The valley’s restoration would affirm that we need not accept the mistakes of the past.”

— Michael Brune, Executive Director, Sierra Club

Donald Hodel, Secretary of the Interior under President Reagan, caught both San Francisco and the environmental community by surprise in 1987 when he suggested that Hetch Hetchy should be restored. San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein was not pleased.

“Let’s make YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK WHOLE ONCE AGAIN.” — former Superintendents Robert Binnewies, B.J. Griffin and David Mihalic

John Muir with Congressman William Hart, who personally donated Muir Woods to the federal government. Hart supported damming Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley but then co-sponsored the Organic Act to make sure no such destruction would ever again be allowed.

“Why is it important that the anywhere in the world—to add another Yosemite Valley to our great National Park System.” — Susan hold

President Woodrow Wilson signed the Raker Act, allowing Hetch Hetchy to be destroyed, as well as the Organic Act.
When Hetch Hetchy Valley is restored, San Francisco will continue to get the vast majority of its water from the Tuolumne River.

The city’s water rights will not be affected, but its diversions will take place downstream of Yosemite National Park.

With new interconnections from Chery and Don Pedro Reservoirs, approximately 95% of the city’s existing Tuolumne River supplies will still be available. Replacing the remaining 5% is essential but very doable – other California cities have done far more to reduce the environmental damage they have done to fish and wildlife in the Central Valley.

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The Harlequins bloom
Not a drop of water
Hetch Hetchy Water

The question was posed by Art Jensen, former General Manager of BAWSCA, the agency representing San Francisco’s customers. Art wanted to know if our motivation for restoration was due to Hetch Hetchy’s intrinsic value, or if it was to correct a historic mistake.

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