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## Opinion FORUM

### Hetch Hetchy reclaimed: In 1987, an attempt to bring back the valley

By Tom Philp -- Bee Associate Editor

Published 2:15 am PDT Monday August 30, 2004

Was he ahead of his time or out of his mind to propose what he did?

In 1987, the interior secretary for President Reagan, Donald Hodel, sought to focus public attention on the smaller twin of Yosemite Valley, known as Hetch Hetchy. He suggested getting rid of the dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, restoring this landscape inside the national park and somehow replacing the water supply for the San Francisco Bay Area. Soon after he floated the idea, it sank. He attracted few allies from the liberal conservation community, mobilized fierce enemies, particularly San Francisco's mayor at the time, Dianne Feinstein, and generated more skepticism than excitement. He retreated. Ever since, no one with equivalent power has dared touch the subject.

The environmental community that failed to rally behind Hodel is now trying to revive the issue, spearheaded by Environmental Defense and Restore Hetch Hetchy, a nonprofit based in Sonoma. Today, they want what Hodel wanted but couldn't get: a comprehensive study to answer whether Yosemite can reclaim its twin valley while ensuring that the Bay Area and Central Valley retain their water supplies and electricity at a reasonable price. For that study to occur, someone with power at a state or federal level would have to champion the idea. That person would need a thick skin for the fight.

Hodel, now in private life in Colorado, revisited his old crusade and handicapped the new one:



In 1987, then-U.S. Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel and San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein visited the reservoir. Hodel's plan to restore the valley fizzled.

Sacramento Bee/Skip Shuman

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**Q:** What have you been doing since you were interior secretary; where do you live and what do you do now?

**A:** When I left Washington, D.C., I moved to the mountains of Colorado because I'm an avid skier and established a consulting firm, mostly in energy and natural resources matters. In the vernacular, I have lived happily ever after.

**Q:** Let's go back to somewhere in 1986 or 1987, and you are the secretary of interior. How did you initially get interested in Hetch Hetchy and the possibility of restoring the valley?

**A:** I had become increasingly aware of the fact that Yosemite National Park is a million acres, and there are 5,400 acres that everybody wants to crowd into. And I had made some comment that Yosemite is not overcrowded, one part of it is overcrowded because of its scenic values and so forth. And somebody, maybe a park ranger, maybe a superintendent, said to me, "You know, there is another Yosemite valley."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

And I then learned about the history of the battle over Hetch Hetchy and the fact that this reservoir sits in that valley.

Somewhere down the line, we talked to the Bureau of Reclamation and said, "Is there any possibility that the water that is in Hetch Hetchy could be recovered in some fashion if Hetch Hetchy were removed?"

They did a back-of-the-envelope study. To my great surprise and pleasure, they came back in a few weeks

and said that it looks like they could remove the dam and if San Francisco and the other water operators on the river would operate their systems in a more coordinated fashion, they could capture more water and get more benefits than they are right now.

**Q:** How did you then go about proposing it?

**A:** I made several phone calls. One of them was to a fellow I had gone to college with, Mike McCloskey. He had been the executive director of the Sierra Club. We were pretty much on opposite sides of the political spectrum. We were at odds on most things.

I had called him and told him we were proposing to do this. He knew me well enough to know that that is what I meant. I wasn't playing games or trying to mousetrap anybody. I genuinely thought it was worth getting a second Yosemite valley available.

And I also called Mayor \[Dianne\] Feinstein. And when I called her, I had hardly gotten the words out of my mouth on what I wanted to do, she began just listing aggressively all of the ideas why this was a terrible idea. I don't think she mentioned the fact that San Francisco was making about \$50 million a year net on the sale of power. I informed certain senators. And then I went out and spoke at the \[San Francisco\] Commonwealth Club and made a

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presentation.

**Q:** Were you jeered?

**A:** I had a computerized slide show, which included pictures of the old Hetch Hetchy ... coming back to life. We had a picture of the reservoir with the water behind it, and the reservoir was lower and the dam removed and a barren valley then began to take life, the vegetation came back. It was really impressive for the day.

The Commonwealth Club was not staunchly environmental. Frankly, economic interests generally are not quick to jump on an idea that has possibly negative economic consequences. It was polite, although my recollection was that during the question-and-answer period, there were some fairly strongly hostile questions, which I thought I handled admirably (laughing).

**Q:** Did you ever visit Hetch Hetchy?

**A:** I did. I visited Hetch Hetchy with Mayor Feinstein.

**Q:** Now was this before or after you had suggested dam removal?

**A:** After she came back down out of orbit.

**Q:** Describe the aftermath of the next few months.

**A:** Feinstein and others of the same opinion went to the Congress. The House of Representatives was in the control of the Democratic Party. Sidney Yates of Chicago was the chairman of our appropriations subcommittee. At their urging, he wrote into the appropriations bill that no money could be used to study Hetch Hetchy. And that was it.

**Q:** Does that prohibition still stand, or was it just for that single year of appropriations?

**A:** It was for that appropriations bill.

**Q:** What was the broader reaction from the environmental community, San Francisco, newspapers and other interest groups?

**A:** Pretty tepid. If it wasn't hostile, it was pretty tepid. The Sierra Club was, if not alone, one of the few organizations that actually said that at least it is worth a study. They were so hostile to Ronald Reagan and his administration that many of them couldn't bring themselves to say anything positive about a proposal coming from a Reagan secretary of interior. And it was close to a presidential election, although Reagan wasn't running any longer.

**Q:** Looking back, what were the lessons learned? Was this the right idea from the wrong person at the wrong time? Was the idea itself in error?

**A:** I believe it is an idea that is absolutely worth an honest study. Because if it could possibly be true, if we could restore Hetch Hetchy to the national park system, there is nothing like it in the world. Just imagine. Where else are you going to find in that kind of locality a new Yosemite valley that you can add to the park system? It just doesn't exist. What is that worth to the country, to the world? It is absolutely worthy of study if there is any reason to believe that it is possibly true.

**Q:** When you proposed this, in hindsight, did you feel that you had solid enough

data, preliminary data, to hold the discourse for a while?

**A:** Unquestionably. Nobody wanted to look at it. Nobody challenged it. They would say things like it can't possibly be true - based on prejudice, but not based on knowledge. Had I any idea that Dianne Feinstein would be so implacably and staunchly - I was going to say violently - opposed, I probably would have spent some time thinking about who could speak with her to whom she can't react angrily. I would have spent much more time finding a way to at least neutralize those people who were the most ardent opponents.

**Q:** Is Feinstein the key here in terms of opening some political legitimacy to studying this?

**A:** I don't know today whether that's the case. It is a sad situation if she is.

**Q:** How could this possibly be in the Bay Area's interest, either today or in 1987?

**A:** Remember the Panama Canal debate when the U.S. senator from California said we stole it fair and square? I suppose San Francisco could argue that \[the dam\] should not be removed because it stole this valley fair and square. It is receiving an economic benefit of disproportionate significance out of a national resource because they stole it from the public trust. And the issue is, because they once stole it, do we leave it there forever? I think the burden of proof is really on them to show why they should continue to occupy and burden the national park in this way.

**Q:** That gets to another issue, the rent that San Francisco pays for the valley.

**A:** That has gone up I understand. It was \$30,000 when I was in office.

**Q:** It still is. The Bush administration proposed a higher rent. That got shot down.

**A:** Oh boy.

**Q:** Is raising the rent a way to approach this?

**A:** It certainly would be appropriate for the National Park Service to receive a more reasonable rent for use of the national park. But if it is looked on as a precedent - that if you pay enough, you can occupy a national park with a dam - I would oppose it.

**Q:** Let's say you are Don Hodel, secretary of interior for George W. Bush. You have the same idea. Would you advance it?

**A:** I would not advance it in an election period.

**Q:** Do you know if there are any closet supporters within this existing Interior Department?

**A:** I don't know.

**Q:** What ingredients do you think are needed for the idea to gain enough legitimacy for the water districts, the state and the federal government to study the various water and hydro options?

**A:** (Laugh). I think there needs to be a substantial groundswell of public support so that finally political leaders see greater benefit in responding to the

public support than in listening in private to the objections of the water interests. It is very hard to imagine that the water interests will ever think that even studying it is a good idea. I used to run the Bonneville Power Administration. I remember the reaction to proposals from California that there should be a study of whether water could be transported from the Columbia River to California. It was what I would call the Feinstein Reaction. Don't even study it. So, why is that? Because there is fear that you might find a way to do it.

**Q:** We've talked a lot about San Francisco, but arguably Modesto and Turlock are as big or bigger players on the river. They have the senior water rights. What could conceivably be in Modesto and Turlock's interest to cooperate with San Francisco and the Park Service with this?

**A:** At the time we proposed to do something, to do the study, we were convinced based on the initial reviews that significantly more water would be made available if all users were to be brought into a coordinated system than is provided by Hetch Hetchy. Presumably at that time Modesto and Turlock could have benefited significantly with more water. I'm sure they will say it is not true. Only a study will tell you whether that's true or not.

**Q:** How about global warming? That is not something that you had to worry about as interior secretary. Does global warming make this idea basically a nonstarter?

**A:** If we're in a warming period, which has occurred from time to time over the years, then it will affect the snowpack regardless of the cause of the warming period. These changes come and go. Having been head of the Bonneville Power Administration for five years and worked there for eight as deputy and then administrator, I can tell you that trying to predict the weather is fruitless. You need to make your decisions on a longer-term basis than that.

**Q:** Will any new effort to prompt a study of Hetch Hetchy suffer the same fate as yours?


**A:** I am excited by the fact that some people who have genuine environmental credentials like Restore Hetch Hetchy have taken this on. I admire them for what they're doing. I think in the end they have a strong possibility of getting a study - hopefully, an honest study.

You cannot study a system as complex and broad and big and deep as that without learning important things that you don't now know, or at least have not been focused on. You have a benefit coming no matter what. You don't have to be embarrassed about urging a study.

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