Owens Lake Still Full of Dust
By Michael Prather

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) would like to begin pumping up to 4,000 acre-feet per year from under Owens Lake for dust control as early as this fall. It is anticipated that this will amount to a negative declaration or mitigated negative California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) with Los Angeles acting as the lead CEQA agency. The project will include pumping water from under the lake as well as flooding on the surface. The LADWP will need the permission of the State Lands Commission (SLC), the Great Basin Unified Air Quality Control Board (GBAQCB), and the Inyo/Los Angeles Standing Committee before any pumping could begin. Legal challenges to the negative declaration are being considered by local Sierra Club activists.

The City of Los Angeles is under order from both Federal and State environmental protection agencies to abate dust on Owens Lake—the largest single point PM 10 (particles of 10 microns or larger) source in the country. Consultants Camp, Dresser, and McKee (CDM) hired by Inyo County and paid for by the City of Los Angeles are currently working on a hydrologic evaluation of Owens Lake in the form of a technical memo—a form of communication developed between Inyo and Los Angeles. This information would determine how much, if any, water can be pumped from under Owens Lake to control dust.

See Owens Lake Continued on page 6

Canoeing the Lower Owens River. The agreement between Inyo County and the City of Los Angeles will put water in the lower 65 miles of River.

Nevada Wilderness Conference is a First
By Anne Martin

Wilderness lovers from Nevada, neighboring states (and beyond!) convened in Reno May 6-8 to participate in the first annual Nevada Wilderness Meeting. The meeting was well-attended with representatives from American Lands, Friends of Nevada Wilderness, Nevada Wilderness Project, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, Nevada Outdoor Recreation Association, Patagonia, Sierra Club, the Wilderness Support Center, Committee for Idaho’s High Desert, the Great Basin Institute, and the Wilderness Society.

The first day of the meeting was devoted to learning about potential wilderness areas, threats to pristine wild places, and roadless area inven-


Moose Curve
BY ELDEN HUGHES

Sometimes in high school civics one learns about the three branches of government and maybe even the two party system. It takes college Political Science to learn about the Black Caucus and Women’s Caucus and a lot that happens in the real world. Probably one has to get elected to public office before understanding Moose Curve.

Interstate 68 crosses over the mountains of Western Maryland, passes through Cumberland, Maryland and then joins (ends at) I 70 going east on into Baltimore. It is a 70 mph highway all the way, except for Moose Curve where one is forced to slow to 40 mph and a high concrete wall displays the scars left by those who failed to slow.

I 68 must pass through Cumberland. Good engineering would say to have the highway cross over the Potomac and then return, bypassing downtown Cumberland. But the south side of the Potomac is West Virginia, not Maryland, and states do not work well together building interstate highways. So the Highway Department determined that I 68 would stay on the north side of the Potomac. That put it on a collision course with Moose Lodge #271.

Cumberland was once the second largest city in Maryland. Now it is far down the list. It has little political power. Yet the power structure of Cumberland belongs to the Moose Lodge. They may not have had much to say on national transportation policy. They may have had a bit more input into routing I 68. They had absolute say on 300 yards of routing through Cumberland, Maryland. “The highway will not go here.” They made it stick.

Of course the highway department should have gone back to the drawing board, but they did not. They built 40 mph Moose Curve, a monument to “It will not go here”.

Environmental organizations have comparatively little input into national defense policy. Oh, we raise a fuss when something is done really dumb. Star Wars comes to mind. We pretty much take the location of Ft. Irwin as a given. Ft. Irwin wants to expand and we say no! It has not proven the need. We can demonstrate it is not efficient in the use of its present 1000 square miles of land. It wants to expand to the southwest, into the finest tortoise habitat in the West Mojave and we say, “It will not go here.”

We are fighting it politically. We are fighting it in the press and in public opinion. Such expansion makes no sense when we no longer have Russia as a potential tank war enemy. If need be we will take it to court based on a badly flawed Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). We will fight it on behalf of good land planning and recovery of the Desert Tortoise which is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Our desert was once considered a wasteland and limitless. We know the desert is precious and limited. Ft. Irwin may want to expand, but “It will not go here!”

Issues Update

Summer for Congress is a strange time. The push is on to complete Interior Appropriations before the August recess. Yet there is a lot of work undone and a lot of bad riders on the bills in the Senate and the House. There could well be vetoes or it could stretch into the Fall.

California Desert Land Acquisition

The President’s proposed budget contains the needed $36 million. The Senate has approved $15 million. The House (at the request of Congressman Jerry Lewis (R-CA)) has approved zero. The Sierra Club is lobbying hard for the full appropriation. Letters thanking Senator Dianne Feinstein for her leadership on this issue can be very helpful.

Mining

Senator Larry Craig (R-ID) has added a rider that amends the Mining Law of 1872 that would eliminate a Department of Interior rule limiting mine dumps on Federal lands to five-acre sites. The rider could open up large tracts of lands to cyanide dumps from heap leach gold mining.

Grazing

There is a rider on the senate appropriations bill that directs the Bureau of Land Management to renew expiring grazing permits without conducting environmental reviews. This amendment would remove the BLM’s authority to deny grazing permits to ranchers that overgraze our national lands.

Air Restrictions Over Grand Canyon

The federal government on July 9 issued proposed restrictions on flights over the Grand Canyon National Park. The proposed rule would limit the number of air tours to about 88,000 flights per year. Air tour operators object to the new rules while environmentalists say the rules don’t go far enough. The public has 60 days to comment.

We might have a national consensus to build a highway system and lots of federal and state cooperation in planning the major routing. Highway departments are notoriously unsympathetic to structures in the way of their approved path. Yet the completed highway curves around Moose Lodge #271.
Screaming Jets Will Become A Little Quieter At Joshua Tree

BY DICK HUGGSON

The U.S. Navy and the National Park Service are on course at last to mitigate (but not remove) the ground-level, 5-mile-wide "screaming jet" military training route (MTR) known as VR-1257, which destroys the peace within frequently used recreational areas of Joshua Tree National Park (JTNP). For the past twenty years, the MTR has regularly shattered the silence - in outrageously startling fashion - through the heart of this park (as well as in Anza Borrego Desert State Park).

The essentials of the U.S. Navy's proposal, as released in a draft NPS/Navy Environmental Assessment last spring were:

- To relocate the route several miles southward, thus getting it away from places where most of the park visitors go, yet keeping it within the Park, and for a slightly reduced linear distance; and

- To place its attitude permanently at 1,500' above ground level for half its Park traverse; drop altitude permanently to only 200' AGL for the other half, which substantially overlies the "addition lands" from the 1994 California Desert Protection Act (CDPA). Refer to Map, shown.

No relief is presented concerning Anza Borrego, though this matter has been argued in recent regional Air Force-sponsored forums on regional military airspace. Sierra Club's 1994 position favored relief for that park as well. Perhaps, after the conclusion of this new adjustment, that Park's problems can be better addressed, though it will take renewed advocacy!

The Navy had not been legally obligated to do a mitigation, owing to the military air-supremacy clause inserted as an amendment to the CDPA in 1994. Nonetheless, JTNP Superintendent Ernie Quintana effectively engaged the Navy - no mean feat - in listening to our concerns while considering equally productive training opportunities elsewhere in the newly enlarged Park. According to Commander Erick Armstrong, Judge Advocate General's Corps, U.S. Navy, "the joint effort between the National Park Service and the U.S. Navy illustrates how the intent of the California Desert Protection Act can be accomplished by our agencies working cooperatively at the field level to a mutual benefit."

The intended route will no longer pass over any campgrounds, picnic areas, popular climbing areas, or scenic roadways. It involves the realignment of three segments of the VR-1257 corridor by moving two existing navigation points.

The Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club has long sought, under leadership of this correspondent during his eight years as its Conservation Coordinator, to have the route dis-established - an exchange of correspondence between the Chapter and Assistant Navy Secretary Robert Pirie accelerated the process of review.

The mitigation which would be achieved is a partial one in that it still leaves a substantial route within Park boundaries and over proposed Wilderness, with no scheduled seasonal respite periods, and at altitudes which do not conform to the 2,000' AGL lower limit requested both by the Sierra Club policy on Military Airspace in National Parks and by the 1990 Interagency Agreement between the FAA and the Department of Defense regarding national parks.

Nonetheless, in the context of current legal realities, the Sierra Club response of April 24 "applauds the Navy for ... environmental mitigation - so as to increase visitor enjoyment of the unfractured desert stillness so essential to the Park's very aura - its unique and irreplaceable power of place.

A final Record of Decision and Final Environmental Impact Statement is expected in August, which should provide further environmental analysis and insight into what hopefully will be a continual process of mitigation and monitoring.

Figure 1-2. Location of existing and proposed VR-1257 over Joshua Tree National Park.
Tamarisk and the BLM
BY ELDEN HUGHES

Tamarisk is a beautiful and insidious plant, actually thirteen species of plants brought to the United States by the U. S. Department of Agriculture. In this century it has invaded virtually all natural surface water sources in the non-forested West. It uses huge amounts of water and kills the soil with its salt encrusted leaves. It provides no food to native animals. Feral burros will, as a last resort before starving, eat tamarisk.

Removing tamarisk is a killer task. It requires physical removal by cutting and then chemical treatment of the stump, then pulling of the next year’s seedlings for years.

Bill Neill of the Sierra Club (Angeles Chapter and the California/Nevada Regional Conservation Committee (CNRCC) and the Desert Protective Council has been a pioneer in pulling together volunteer efforts at eradicating tamarisk. The CNRCC Desert Committee has tamarisk removal outings in San Diego County’s desert areas.

Perhaps we have helped inspire the managing agencies for the desert. Certainly we have helped by writing letters of support for grant funding requests.

The following is condensed from a report by Tim Read, manager of the Bureau of Land Management Barstow Field Office and describes the ongoing work of that field office.

PARTNERSHIPS IN RIPARIAN RESTORATION - TAMARISK CONTROL

The Barstow Field Office (BFO) has embarked on six major site restorations in the 1990’s, including the Afton Canyon Restoration Project (1991), The Grimshaw Lake Watchable Wildlife Viewing Trail Project (1998), the Desert Springs Restoration Project (1996), the Amargosa Canyon Restoration and Protection Project (1998), the Harper Dry Lake Watchable Wildlife Viewing Area Project (1994) and the Salt Creek Hills Interpretation, Resoration and Protection Project (1996). These ambitious projects all share similar backgrounds in that: 1) most aspects of these projects were prescribed in the late 1970’s; 2) these projects were viewed as too large and complex to garner management support necessary for adequate funding; 3) early funding requests to implement this project work through BLM’s base funding process were largely unsuccessful; and 4) funding was finally secured through the development of collaborative partnerships, leveraging and alternative funding.

Partners on these projects have been as varied as the possibilities that exist in the alternative funding world, including such disparate entities as Absolut Vodka, California Department of Fish and Game, California Wildlife Conservation Board, Global Releaf, Miller Brewing, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Southdown Portland Cement, Quail Unlimited, San Bernardino County Range Improvement Advisory Council, San Bernardino County Transportation and Flood Control, Starbucks Coffee, Fish and Wildlife Service and the US Army.

A total of $287,000 from alternative funding sources has been generated for on-the-ground implementation of these projects from these partners, with an additional $810,000 in grant submissions awaiting review and final disposition by the California Wildlife Conservation Board, the Mojave Desert Restoration Task Force and Global Releaf. Not only have these partnerships resulted in actual dollars, some have resulted in long term MOUs (Memorandums of Understanding) and matched on-the-ground services, such as the invaluable partnerships entered into with the California Conservation Corps, the California Environmental Project and the Los Angeles Conservation Corps. These latter groups form the bulk of BFO’s labor source for these projects, and these inner city youth groups together with the Mojave Desert Resource Conservation District-supervised Baker State Prison inmate crews, are largely responsible for the project successes BFO has encountered thus far.

BFO has removed the tamarisk and cedar from the Harper Dry Lake area and now are in a maintenance program for continual control. We have removed 400 acres in Afton Canyon and planted 10,000 trees. We are using the primary infestation through clearing five acres and approximately one quarter mile of drainage channel within the principal side drainage, China Ranch Wash. Within the Amargosa itself we have treated 1000 feet of infested stream channel and prepared it for a prescribed burn.

Help
Need good quality photos for Desert Report
EUREKA DUNES SANDBOARDING
FROM NPCA REPORTS

The following was extracted from a National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA) letter to the Death Valley National Park Superintendent. At the Desert Committee's May meeting, a resolution calling for the immediate ban of sandboarding on the Eureka Dunes was passed unanimously.

The Eureka Dunes are one of the most important dune systems in the United States harboring many rare and endangered plant species including the Eureka Valley evening-primrose (Federally Endangered and California Rare), the Eureka Valley dune grass (Federally Endangered and California Rare), and the Shining milk-vetch (Federally Proposed Threatened). All of the above-mentioned plant species are endemic to the Eureka Dunes area. This underscores the necessity for Death Valley National Park to devise a comprehensive conservation plan that will effectively protect natural resources and ensure the survival of these rare and endangered species. NPCA believes that the most effective means to achieve this will be to create a conservation plan which promotes the preservation of the entire Eureka Dunes ecosystem rather than simply focusing on individual species. By doing so, the National Park Service (NPS) ensures that the plan protects the entire spectrum of native flora within this unique habitat.

The conservation plan must restrict recreational activities which threaten the survival of the native flora. Studies conducted by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and independent scientists have shown significant damage to the Eureka Dunes flora from off road vehicle activity. Although this activity is now legally prohibited, illegal vehicle use along with other unrestricted recreational activities such as sandboarding, sand skiing, horseback riding and camping still pose a significant threat to sensitive plant species. In particular, sandboarding and sand skiing must be eliminated in the area before such uses increase in popularity. With its roots in the pure board sports of surfing and snowboarding, this extreme sport directly destroys native flora and their habitat and is becoming increasingly popular in the Eureka Dunes. In fact, the December 3rd, 1998 edition of Sandboard Magazine specifically listed Eureka Dunes as an optimal location for sandboarding.

As Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act underscores, all federal agencies must "utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of this chapter by carrying out programs for the conservation of endangered species..." Park managers are urged to collaborate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in implementing a responsive conservation plan that bans incompatible activities from the Eureka Dunes. In order to be fully successful, the park must closely monitor the region and enforce park regulations. Prominent signs should be installed throughout the region to educate visitors on the biological and geological significance of the dunes, and the need for visitor use restrictions.

Timely interagency collaboration, public cooperation and firm implementation of the conservation plan will promote the protection of the rare and endangered species of the Eureka Dunes. As the ban on jet skis recently adopted by many national park units to protect water quality and aquatic wildlife demonstrates, inappropriate recreation that jeopardizes park resources must be restricted before resource damage is irreversible. Death Valley National Park has the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to preserve its natural resources for future generations as mandated by the Organic Act.

Reminder
ARTICLES SHOULD BE SUBMITTED TO

HERMI HIATT
8180 PLACID ST
LAS VEGAS, NV, 89123
E-MAIL HHIATT@LMEPO.COM

Endangered Dune Grass Eureka Dunes, Death Valley National Park
Owens Lake Continued from page 1

In addition, CDM wants to modify an older Desert Research Institute (DRI) pumping model and make use of it. Potential wetland impacts will not be ascertained unless the model shows that impacts might occur far removed from the pump sites. However, a monitoring protocol for wetlands will be written. The hydrologic evaluation is expected to be ready in early June.

LROP Update

In the meantime, the Lower Owens River Project (LROP), a part of the Long Term Groundwater Management Agreement between Inyo County and the City of Los Angeles, would rewater some sixty miles of the Owens River from the intake near Aberdeen all the way down to the river's terminus at Owens Lake. This rewatering would assist in restoring riparian habitat and include the creation of two large waterfowl/shorebird areas. Originally the LROP was scheduled to begin water flowing in 2003. However, due to Los Angeles' need to transport water for dust control, rewatering will occur in 2001—two years earlier than originally scheduled.

The Bureau of Reclamation has completed a draft plan for a pumpback station at the river delta. The station will recapture water from the LROP and return it to the Los Angeles aqueduct which will in turn pump water out onto the surface of Owens Lake. The pumpback station will be a part of the full environmental impact report (EIR) for the LROP which will be completed this summer.

Ecosystem Sciences (ESS) draft Land Management Plan (DLMP) dealing with river flows and land management practices is now available by agencies and signatories of the settlement MOU (Memorandum of Understanding). The Sierra Club is a member. Riparian and waterfowl habitat as well as grazing will be a part of this document.

To receive additional information on the LROP write:  
Inyo County Water Department  
162 May St.  
Bishop, CA 93514

Death Valley in '99

Judy Anderson

Prather, Dodson, Hughes, Barnes and Anderson became the trekkers of '99 for the annual Sierra Club/Death Valley National Park Service (NPS) staff meeting. Superintendent Dick Martin and five staff members represented the NPS.

DISCOVERY

A new and unnamed amphipod has been discovered in the aquifer that feeds Texas Springs. The 1/8 inch long, white, blind, crustacean was discovered when the NPS was looking at shoring up the tunnel to the spring. It appears that the amphipod spends all its life underground in the aquifer. Mike Prather, who teaches science, commented, "It is now believed there is more biomass under the earth's surface than above it."

MORE GOOD NEWS

172 burros were removed, and placed for adoption, from Saline Valley and the south end of the Panamint Range. The Park expects to remove about 300 burros next year.

"WE DON'T KNOW ENOUGH"

A constant theme of the meeting was the Park people saying, "We don't know enough!" "Until we paid for and obtained counts of the burros, we couldn't raise the money for removal. We've started a new study of the energy inputs and outputs of Devil's Hole to see if we can find what is causing the fluctuations of pupfish populations. We are now sampling every other month rather than twice-a-year. We will be doing chemical analysis of the entire ecosystem and trying to discover the entire energy budget."

"Our new staff archaeologist is at Eureka Dunes. We want to move the parking lot and the camping area to protect endangered plants, but don't want the new locations to impact archaeological resources."

"We are removing tamarisk and our newly hired biologist will, among other jobs, help in restoring riparian areas."

RAINBOW TALC MINE

The first of two payments of $1,250,000 will be made in August. The second payment is next year. The mine and the threat to Park resources will be retired.

PARK BUDGET

The Death Valley National Park base budget was increased $186,000 per year in 1996. That is not very much when at the same time it was given an additional 1.2 million acres to manage. The budget working through Congress now appears it will give the Park an additional $400,000 per year. The first raise in four years.

ONGOING AND STILL UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The General Management Plan closed its comment period July 15th. The Eureka Dunes site specific plan should follow and then the Back country Management Plan. The Timbisha Agreement has had a good start, but has a long way to go. Too much needed information is missing. Environmentalists dispute two Park boundaries at Sour Dough Springs and China Gardens, saying the boundaries were intended to keep the water inside the Park and for wildlife. This remains uncorrected.
THE DESERT REPORT

The Desert Report is published by the Sierra Club California/Nevada Desert Committee. To receive the Report send the coupon on the back cover to Desert Report, 3435 Wilshire Blvd. #320, Los Angeles, CA 90010-1904. Articles, photos, letters and original art are welcome. Please submit them to the above address two weeks before the end of March, June, September, December.

The Sierra Club California/Nevada Desert Committee works for the protection and conservation of the California/Nevada desert; supports the same objectives in all desert areas of the Southwest, monitors and works with governments and agencies to promote preservation of our arid lands, sponsors education and work trips, encourages and supports others to work for the same objectives, and maintains, shares and publishes information about the desert.

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Mule Deer
Original Artwork by Jay Morgan

Wilderness Continued from page 1

tory. Long time wilderness advocates provided a history of protecting Nevada wilderness. We also heard an update on both the local and national political situation in regards to protecting wilderness as well as what opportunities exist for public outreach.

While most of the group hiked on Friday in the Peterson Mountains north of Reno, a Friends of Nevada Wilderness proposed wilderness area, others flew with LightHawk (Environmental Pilots Organization) for a bird’s-eye view of the Black Rock - High Rock complex of wilderness study areas. In the evening, wilderness warrior and singer-songwriter, Bart Koehler (Johnny Sagebrush), premiered his song Wild Nevada, which beautifully celebrates the wonderful potential inherent in preserving Nevada wilderness areas.

Saturday was spent brainstorming and strategizing on ways to protect Nevada’s public lands wilderness for future generations.

Thanks to the Wilderness Support Center in Durango, Colorado, for organizing such a productive strategy meeting. A big thank you to Patagonia for hosting the meeting at their facility in Reno.

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Deadline
Articles and Outings
October 28
Death Valley National Park and the Timbisha Tribe

The California Desert Protection Act authorized a study of the Timbisha Tribe and the establishment of a Tribal Homeland. The National Park Service has issued a proposal and asked for comments. Below is the comment letter of the Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Dear Superintendent Martin,

The Toiyabe chapter of the Sierra club, representing more than 4,000 members in Nevada and eastern California, after having reviewed the Draft Secretarial Report to Congress dealing with the Timbisha Shoshone Tribal Homeland submits the following comments. First of all the club fully applauds the efforts of all of those involved in reaching an agreement that brings justice and dignity to the Timbisha Shoshone who have been the first residents and interpreters of Death Valley for thousands of years. The draft proposal seems well balanced and provides a clear opportunity for the Timbisha Shoshone to live side by side cooperatively with the National Park service.

Much more work, of course, needs to be done. Legislation dealing with land transfers and acquisitions as well as potential changes in the purposes of the park must be drafted with full public review and participation. A process must be developed that will allow the public to review future cooperative agreements and pilot projects between the tribe and all of the federal agencies involved. We do have some questions and concerns that once answered will allow us to participate more effectively and to educate our own members.

Following are some questions and concerns that the Sierra Club requests be addressed:

a. The document is not clear on the exact location of the following areas - Saline Valley Rancheria, Centennial Flat, boundaries of the Timbisha Shoshone Natural and Cultural Preservation Area, Lida Ranch trust lands, Lida and Ash Meadows cooperative management areas, Mesquite Springs, Daylight Pass, Hunter Mountain, Wildrose, the Warm Sulfur Springs and the Eagle Mountain cooperative management areas, Saline Warm Springs.

b. What, if any, restrictions on use by the tribe will there be on trust lands both inside and outside the park?

c. The agreement must describe a public process with NEPA compliance.

d. Are there guidelines for the cooperative management agreements between the tribe and the NPS, BLM and USFWS?

e. Should water be set aside to maintain the mesquite groves below the village that historically received water from the springs before diversions above Furnace Creek? Is there an opportunity to develop a sustainable grove?

f. What limits on water will be established at Death Valley Junction, Scottys Junction and Lida given the NPS protests of water applications at those locations in the past? Will there be potential for harm to water resources of the park? We are concerned about the limited amount of water available for development for the number of acres proposed.

g. Will tribal housing within the park be limited to tribal members only and not made commercially available (i.e. housing for AmFac) etc?

h. Will proposed vegetation manipulation impact wilderness values?

i. The Sierra Club has helped with spring restoration in the past. Will proposed spring manipulation have negative impacts on park resources?

j. In what ways might the visitor experience be impacted by the proposed settlement?

In closing, once again let us state that we support an agreement that resolves the issue of the Timbisha Shoshone tribal lands. We thank the Department of the Interior and the Timbisha Shoshone for their openness in inviting the club to visit Death Valley on numerous occasions and to sit in on the initial briefing of the draft report May 4, 1999.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and we look forward to your addressing our questions and concerns.

Sincerely,

Rose Strickland
conservation chair

Help

THE DESERT REPORT NEEDS MORE ARTICLES/OUTINGS/TRIP REPORTS AND LOTS OF PICTURES
Gold Prices Take Toll on Mining Industry and the Environment
By Tom Myers

With gold prices dropping to twenty year lows, it is time to assess the impact of low prices on the mining industry and the environment.

As prices drop, so does the amount of reserves (the gold ore that can be produced and smelted at a profit). When prices drop, the number of potentially profitable future mines also drops.

In essence, there will be fewer future gold mines which is clearly a good sign for the environment except that the gold remains in the ground and will always be subject to future mining proposals. Nothing short of a complete minerals withdrawal for an area is a long-term victory.

However, the dropping price also impacts existing operations often to the detriment of the environment. In Nevada alone, at least thirteen mines are being operated by companies that have filed for bankruptcy. Nevada’s Division of Environmental Protection has a $300,000 pool that will allow them to quickly hire a contractor to shut down an abandoned operating mine. This may be adequate at small to medium sized mines, but it is totally inadequate at larger, more costly mines. It is also insufficient if more than one mine at a time closes.

Existing mines present many threats to the environment when not adequately shut down. Perhaps most important is the cyanide heap leach process. At any given time, a heap has many weeks of cyanide solution seeping through a heap. As it drains out the bottom, the company stores it in a pregnant pond for processing. If the company walks away, the cyanide solution continues to drain and may overflow.

Inadequate reclamation is another problem caused by low prices. Companies that make less money than anticipated are less likely to adequately clean up and reclaim their site. Few reclamation bonds are sufficient to reclaim an open pit, heap facility, tailings pond, and waste rock dump and it may be more cost effective for a company to abandon its bond than incur the cost of clean-up when there is no positive cash flow (gold production) from the mine. It is better for a company to be rich when reclaiming a facility.

Activists should also realize that most mining companies produce gold at costs far below the existing price ($260.20 on 6/10/99). The average cost in North America is less than $190 an ounce in 1999. Cortez produced at $55 an ounce during 1997 and currently is at $125 an ounce at its Pipeline Deposit Mine. It is only companies already on the edge financially that have difficulties at current prices. Prior to opening the Olinghouse Mine, Alta Gold had cash reserves less than 2 percent of their debt. Combined with processing incompetence which caused costs to be $450 an ounce, Alta went bankrupt and their stock dropped to 1/4.

Large companies may be at risk as well. Five years ago, Pegasus Gold, recently liquidated to pay its creditors, was a profitable corporation. Now several of its facilities are polluting aquifers in Montana and threatening the Humboldt River in Nevada.

Newmont Gold is currently the largest producer in Nevada and fourth largest in the world. While a competent gold producer, a recent report by investment bankers suggests that their corporate policies are costing it money and that its share prices are vastly overrated. Globally, Newmont may be carrying too much debt. If this company has serious financial problems, Nevada is in for very serious problems since Newmont’s mines, specifically Gold Quarry, Lone Tree and Twin Creeks are huge and present great threats to the environment if inadequately shut down.

In conclusion, the mixed blessing of lower gold prices points to the absolute necessity to obtain adequate bonding to clean up facilities. Reclamation should also begin during operations when they have a positive cash flow.

Arrastra at Marl Springs. Once gold mining scars were quite limited. Now they are huge and can destroy whole rivers and ecosystems.
Mining: Riders, Waste, Millsites and the Imperial Project

Edie Harmon

Issues related to gold mining are changing very rapidly at this time. Two weeks in May lobbying with members of the Mineral Policy Center, Western Organization of Resource Councils and U.S. PIRG, and mining activists from Washington and Montana to try to have the rider by Senator Gorton (R-WA) related to the interpretation of the Mining Law stripped from the Emergency Disaster Relief/Kosovo Funding Appropriations Bill. The rider was softened, but it ordered approval of the Crown Jewel Mine in Washington State even though the Dept. of Interior (BLM) and Dept. of Agriculture (Forest Service) had denied the proposed mine on 3/25/99 because it did not comply with that part of the Mining Law which deals with millsites on which mining waste can be legally placed, among other reasons for denial.

As anticipated, a millsites/waste rock rider issue has surfaced again. Senator Larry Craig (R-ID) has added an anti-environmental mining rider to the Interior Appropriations bill in the Senate. This rider would again modify and weaken the already outdated Mining Law by prohibiting enforcement of the provision relating to millsites and thereby legalize dumping of waste rock on public lands to an extent that is currently illegal. This rider is in response to the enforcement of the Interior Department’s Solicitor’s Opinion of 11/97 regarding implementation of the Mining Law’s Millsite provision. Currently waste rock cannot be deposited on mining claims which contain “valuable minerals” unless the company actually extracts the valuable minerals from those claims. Large waste rock piles for the current open-pit mines thus often require the presence of non-mineral millsites. Traditionally, lode claims have been approximately 20 acres and millsites are limited to 5 acres, or a 4:1 ratio for mining claim/millsite claim acreage.

On 7/14/99 Representatives Rahall, Inslee and Shays offered an amendment which would counter the Craig Senate rider and move the issue to Conference Committee before final votes. The House voted overwhelmingly (273-151) in favor of the Rahall/Inslee/Shays amendment that basically blocks the Craig Senate Rider on millsites. So now we need to convince the Senate and Conference Committee to oppose anti-environmental changes to the Mining Law by stealth riders! The Craig rider, if approved, might eliminate one of the best legal arguments for stopping the Glamis Gold’s proposed Imperial Project. Glamis cannot make any additional changes in the nature of its claims because BLM “segregated” or identified 9360 acres surrounding and including the proposed Imperial Project mine area for “Withdrawal” to protect the cultural resource values important to the Quechan tribe. Based on information from BLM and Imperial County records, it appears that the Glamis Imperial Project does not meet the strict requirements of the mining law as it exists.

Update on Glamis Gold’s proposed Imperial Project

Edie Harmon

BLM is currently determining whether Glamis has valuable mineral deposits on its lode claims. Traditionally, BLM has used the 10-year average price of gold to determine if a mine proposal can be profitably mined by a “prudent person” given the grade of the ore, proven and probable reserves, and the amount of rock that must be removed to get to the ore bearing rock (strip ratio), and given the costs of the mining operation and incorporation or implementation of all required mitigation measures. However, the price of gold was assumed to be $400/ounce in the original 11/96 Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) for the proposed Imperial Project. The price of gold has been declining since that time. After the Bank of England sold 25 tons of its gold reserve at auction last week, the price of gold dropped to $256.70/ounce on 7/12/99. More than a few economists claim that the price of gold may never recover its earlier levels in the decades to come. They reason that demonetarization of gold is a permanent change in the value of gold. Therefore, it appears to make no sense to base a validity determination on the past 10-year average of the price of gold as central banks and the International Monetary Fund are and/or are contemplating selling portions of their gold reserves. El Centro BLM states it is preparing the Record of Decision (ROD) and Final EIS for the Imperial Project. However, these documents cannot be completed and released for public review until after BLM gets the recommendation of the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation and until the validity report has been completed. Dates for release of the ROD and Final EIS have been given as end of July or end of August 1999. So be prepared. The courts will probably have the final say about the various legal issues.
MOJAVE PRESERVE THREATENED BY AIRPORT LEGISLATION

PREPARED BY CONSERVATION POLICY DEPARTMENT, NPCA, 5/21/99

Mohave National Preserve, created in 1994, encompasses spectacular natural and cultural resources meriting protection. Situated at the intersection of the Sonoran, Mojave, and Great Basin deserts, the Preserve is a hotbed of diversity and is home to more than 700 plant species, the world’s largest Joshua Tree forest, and 200 animal species, including the threatened desert tortoise and bighorn sheep. It also houses prehistoric petroglyphs and dinosaur tracks, and provides outstanding recreational opportunities. Despite its rugged appearance, the Mojave National Preserve is extremely vulnerable to human impacts.

Unfortunately, federal legislation was recently introduced that could irreversibly harm the fragile desert landscape. Senators Reid and Bryan and Congressman Gibbons of Nevada have introduced bills (S.930 and H.R.1695, respectively) to authorize the sale of public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to Clark County, Nevada. The land would become the site of a large cargo airport that would eventually be converted to a passenger airport serving Las Vegas. The proposed facility would be located in the Ivanpah Valley, only 10 miles from the Mojave National Preserve. Construction of the airport facility, airplane traffic, and supporting infrastructure and development will have a disastrous impact on the Mojave Preserve.

WHY THE LEGISLATION SHOULD BE OPPOSED

Procedural Issues

The land transfer is premature. Construction of an airport facility will require compliance with federal environmental review processes, including a study of alternative sites. This legislation authorizes the sale of BLM land to Clark County before such basic review is completed.

The legislation specifically obstructs public comment and oversight that, under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, is required whenever public lands are being transferred to the private sector.

Economic Issues

It is unlikely that an additional cargo airport in Nevada is necessary, or even viable, as several airports in southern California have recently expanded their cargo capacity to meet future needs. Clark County is basing its need for a cargo/passenger airport on speculative growth rates for the next 20 years. Nevertheless, the county is pushing to obtain the Ivanpah Valley land now—before the airport facility is actually needed—while the cost of the land is relatively low.

Environmental Concerns

National Park Service policy mandates protection for parks’ natural resources and values, including “scenic vistas, natural quiet and clear night skies.” The proposed airport will likely destroy all of these values. Flights over and near the Preserve will shatter the area’s natural quiet and impair the public’s ability to hear the natural sounds of the California desert. The night sky visibility over Mojave would be degraded from the airport and surrounding development.

A large cargo/passenger airport will generate supporting infrastructure and new commercial development such as hotels, casinos, and new roads in a relatively undeveloped area. Unchecked growth will undermine the buffer of protection this region provides between Las Vegas and the Mojave Preserve.

The airport and associated development will be in desert tortoise habitat and adjacent to a desert tortoise reintroduction and recovery reserve. Increased ground traffic generated by the cargo/passenger airport will exacerbate current congestion problems on the I-15, worsening air pollution.

The bills provide no assurance that substantive measures will be taken to reduce impacts to Mojave National Preserve. Although the legislation states the Department of Transportation should “consult” with the Department of the Interior to develop flight management plans that, “to the extent practicable,” restrict arrivals and departures over the Mojave, this provision is not binding.

Your input as a constituent makes a difference! Write, call, or e-mail your senators and representative and ask them to oppose this legislation for the following reasons: 1) It degrades a fragile national park unit, 2) It fast-tracks the airport facility proposal without appropriate public input and study of alternatives.

Write:

The Hon. [name of your congressman]
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Hon. [name of your senator]
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Call:

Capitol Operator, 202/225-3121
The CNRCC Desert Committee's purpose is to work for the protection, preservation, and conservation of the California/Nevada desert; support the same objectives in all desert areas of the Southwest; monitor and work with governments and agencies to promote preservation of our arid lands; sponsor educational and work trips; encourage and support others to work for the same objectives; maintain, share and publish information about the desert.

All Desert Committee activities, unless stated otherwise, are suitable for anyone who enjoys the outdoors. The average vehicle with good clearance will be adequate for most trips; however, many of the roads used are dirt and, as with all desert travel, you should come prepared. For a good guide to desert travel we recommend the Sierra Club book “Adventuring in the California Desert” by Lynne Foster.

We want you to enjoy our study trips and work parties. They are designed to help you see the desert in a way you have not seen it before. We usually have a campfire in the evenings with lots of food (potluck) and camaraderie.

**Deadline**

**Articles**

**Outings**

**October 28**
Outings and leaders needed

Sept 17-19
Fri-Sun
CNRCC Desert/Tojayve Chp
Long Valley Caldera & Mono Basin Car Camp: Fri nite at Mammoth Lks. Explore numerous unique geological & volcanic sites. Discuss controversial mining proposals, water issues and man’s effect on ecosystems. Easy hiking. Sat nite, campfire potluck, camaraderie. For details send lg SASE, h&w phones, rideshare info to Ldr: BRYCE WHEELER, Box 4008, Mammoth Lks, CA 93548. (760) 934-3764, brycewilma@aol.com. Asst: JOHN WALTER, (760) 934-1767, 73617.326@compuserve.com.

Sept 18-19
Sat-Sun
CNRCC Desert/Tojayve Chp
Lava Beds Nat Mon Car Camp, N. CA: Fun weekend to explore this unique NM near the Oregon border. We’ll explore lava tube caves & take short dayhikes to sample rugged lava terrain, high sagebrush/grassland desert & historical sites. Lava Beds is known for its many raptors. Short jaunt to Tule Lk N Wildlife Refuge to view fall bird migration. Camp in NM campgrounds. Send SASE, h&w phones, rideshare info to Ldr: SHARON KIEL, 50 Suda Wy, Reno, NV 89509. (775) 322-2465.

Sept 24-26
Fri-Sun
CNRCC Desert/San Gorgonio Chp
Mohave National Preserve Desert Study & Car Camp: Explore with geologist Dave Johnson some of preserve’s most beautiful & interesting sites. Under full moon, camp at Mid-Hills Cmpgrd. Hikes will be mod, about 5-6 mi. Points of interest will include: Teutonia Pk/ Cima Dome w/its lg volcanic field of cinder cones & dense Joshua Tree forest; Caruthers Cyn in scenic NY Mtns (good botany and mining hist); Kelso Dunes; Rock Spring (site of old fort & petroglyphs); Kelso Dept; Hole-in-the-Wall; the “old writers cabin” & mine. 2WD OK. For info send lg SASE, h&w phones, rideshare info to Ldr: CAROL WILEY, 15457 Eto Camino Rd, Victorville, CA 92324. (760) 245-8734, cwiley@victor.cc.ca.us.

Oct 15-18
Fri-Mon
CNRCC Desert/SF Bay Chp
Diamond Range Inventory & Car Camp: Follow-up study & mapping trip to remote area N of Eureka. Document wild values, boundaries, impacts & finish up any areas we didn’t get on first visit in May. Mix of hiking & driving. Views from the long, high ridge are phenomenal. High clearance vehicles needed, 4WD helpful; cold nights guaranteed. Central commissary. Send SASE, e-mail, h&w phones, carpool info to Ldr: VICKY HOOVER, 735 Geary St #501, SF, CA 94109. (415) 977-5527, vicky.hoover@sierracclub.org.

Oct 16-17
Sat-Sun
CNRCC Desert/San Gorgonio/Angles Chp
Fort Irwin’s Proposed Expansion Tour of Affected Lands Car Camp: Study trip to areas s & w of Ft Irwin. Visit Navy’s Mojave Range B. Tour some of best tortoise lands in CA desert. Easy hikes in Rainbow Basin Natl Natural Landmark. Paleontologist/geologist will guide us. Camp established but dry cmpgrd w/ campfire & potluck. Access requires reserv w/names, addresses, social security #s, car license plate #. Send req info, lg SASE, h&w phones, rideshare info to Reserv/Co-Ldr: CAROL WILEY, 15457 Eto Camino Rd, Victorville, CA 92324. (760) 245-8734, wiley@victor.cc.ca.us. Co-Ldr: JON MILLER & ELDEN HUGHES.

Oct 22
Fri
CNRCC Desert/San Gorgonio Chp
Joshua Tree National Park-Lela Peak: Engaging five mile hike with a 1200 foot elevation gain making this somewhat strenuous but worth it if you’d enjoy seeing JTNP from an interesting perspective that overlooks Pinto Basin to the Coxcombs, the Hexitas to Monument and Eagle Mountains, Queen Valley to the Wonderland of Rocks. This is a four or five hour hike depending on how spaced out we are as a group. Bring a couple quarts of liquid, big meat boots, lunch and snacks. This is the desert after all so don’t forget a brimmed hat. We’ll meet at the southeast corner of highway 62 and Park blvd. in beautiful downtown Joshua Tree. (you may want to bring a camera). Call for time. Ldr: Al and Ann Murdy, 760-320-4610, <aemurdy@eee.org>.

Oct 23-24
Sat-Sun
CNRCC Desert/Kern-Kaweah Chp
Little Petroglyph Cyn (China Lake NWC) and Briggs Mine Tour: Sat we will explore restricted Little Petroglyph Cyn on the NWC with guides from Matarango Museum. This cyn protects unique collection of petroglyphs. Sat nite dry car camp by Trona Pinnacles. Sun we’ll tour Briggs heap leach gold mine in Panamint Valley & other local desert attractions. 2WD OK, high clearance pref. Group size Ltd. Navy requires SS #, name, address & vehicle license #. Send reqd info, $10 (Matarango Museum), lg SASE, h&w phones, rideshare info to Reserv/ldr: DENNIS
Nov 11-14
Thurs-Sun
CNRCC Desert/S. Nev Grp
W. Mojave Exploration Car

Nov 19
Sat
CNRCC Desert/San Gorgonio Chp
Joshua Tree National Park - Pines to Palms the 29 Way: Bring those ankle protective big meat boots again and your lawyer. This is a lot of rough downhill boulder hopping (about three hours of a five hour hike) but worth every blister, sprain and fracture. Many geological believe it or not. You'll want at least two quarts of drinkables, the aforementioned boots, hat, lunch, snacks and lots of nice treats to offer your hike leaders. We'll furnish first aid equipment. Meeting place: the southeast corner of highway 62 and Park blvd. in Joshua Tree where the town slogan is “Don’t forget to lock your car”. Ldrs: Ann & Al Murdy, 760-366-2932.

Nov 24-28
Fri-Sun
CNRCC Desert/Great Basin Grp
Pyramid Lake Car Camp, N. Nevada: Power of the pyramid carcamp Pyramid Lk. Located 1 hr N of Reno within the Paiute Indian Reservation. Enjoy serenity of this desert Lk after Thanksgiving. Meet in Reno, 1 pm. Optional climb of Pahokum Pk (8,182′), xe elev gain 4,400′ or hike Lk shore Group potluck dinners. Trip limit 20. Camp fee $5/vehicle/day. Dogs limited, check with leaders. Co-leaders: DOROTHY HUDIG 775-323-4835 <hudig@med.unr.edu>; DAVID VON SEEGERN 775-324-0558 <vonseg@aol.com>.

Dec 4-5
Sat-Sun
CNRCC Desert/Kern-Kaweah/Santa Lucia
Carrizo Plain Study Trip & Car
Camp, SE San Luis Obispo County:
Join us and naturalist to explore, photograph and map proposed Caliente Mtn Wilderness area. Explore Soda Dry Lk (good birding, sandhill cranes) & San Andreas fault
zone. Trip will include: visitor center, Painted Rock (pictographs) & easy hike to Caliente Mtn (5,106 ft) if conditions allow. Early sunset will facilitate star gazing w/small telescopes, weather permitting. This BLM area has pronghorn antelope, kit fox, kangaroo rats, numerous raptors. Dry camp w/shared hor d’oeuvres, campfire, sing-a-long. Trip extended thru Mon, if enough interest. Send lg SASE, h&w phones, rideshare info to Ldr: JOE FONTAINE, Box 307, Tehachapi, CA 93581, (661) 821-2055. joe.fontaine@sierraclub.org. Asst: CAL FRENCH, (805) 239-7338, ccfrench@ctcsn.net.

Dec 11
Sat
CNRCC Desert/San Gorgonio Chp
Joshua Tree National Park - Wallstreet Mill to Wonderland Wash: Forget that Inmax stuff, we’ve got a nice surprise planned even if you’ve done this hike with us before. If you haven’t, the hike is filled with prehistoric and historic sites plus geological wondertoms and, as a special bonus, we’ll be slightly beyond tourist range. A little boulder scrambling. Bring two liters of water, lunch, snacks, hat and layerable clothing. We’re going to meet at the southeast corner of highway 62 and Park Blvd in funky downtown Joshua Tree. Call for meeting time. Ldrs: Al and Ann Murdy 760-366-2932.

Jan 14-17
Fri-Mon
CNRCC Desert/Tahquitz Chp
Orocopia Mtns Car Camp, S. CA: Carcamp, hike, explore and see wildlife oasis cyn, etc or just loaf in little known Orocopia Mtns. For more info and reservation send sase to ldr. Ldr: KATHY KELLEY (760) 321-5778, c/o Sierra Club, Box 1122 Rancho Mirage, CA 92270. Asst. Ldr: PAULINE GOSS. (760) 868-5507

Jan 15-17
Sat-Mon
CNRCC Desert/San Diego Chp
Anza-Borrego Desert Park Sampler: Probably dry car camp in park on Martin Luther King, Jr. Long weekend. 2WD OK. Mod dayhikes xc (up to 8 mi) to variety of scenic spots in/out of park. Possibilities include: climb Whale Pk, desert bajades, archaeologically-rich Sawtooth Mtns, palm-studded cyn in Jacumba Mtns, geological oddities in Fish Creek Mtns, fossil-laden Coyote Mtns. Ldrs: GREG MOLL, (619) 238-1814 Send lg SASE with h&w phones & carpool info to Resv: NICK ERVIN, 4781 Mt. St. Helens Dr, San Diego, CA 92117, (619) 565-9582, desertguy1@aol.com.

Jan 22
Sat
CNRCC Desert/San Gorgonio Chp
Joshua Tree National Park - Wonderland Diamond Loop: This is a clever hike that was originated and shown to us by Jim Furniss, a JTNP legendary figure. Things get interesting as we stop by a very well preserved little known pictograph site known as the ‘diamond site’. From there on your right brain will take over. People are known to forget things along the trail on this hike and resort to childhood expressions such as ‘neat’ and ‘gosh’. Bring boots and tie them in your best no-trip knot. You’ll also want to have snacks, lunch, layerable clothes, hat and a day pack to put them in. Two liters of water should be enough. Meet in downtown Joshua Tree (known for being it’s lack of proximity to Graceland). Call for meeting time. Al and Ann Murdy. 760-366-2932

Feb 24-27
Sat-Sun
CNRCC Desert/San Gorgonio Chp
Salton Sea/Mecca Hills Exp1 & Car Camp: On Sat we’ll explore the Salton Sea dilemma; discuss it’s history, importance to migratory birds & environ problems. Visit Bubbling Mud Pots, Red Hill, Major birding areas, etc. Sunday, explore the Grottos of Mecca Hills w/opt hike to palm oasis. All hikes easy-mod. Camping avail Fri. Send 2 SASE w/H&W phones, carpool info to Resv: JOAN TAYLOR, 1800 S Sunrise Way, Palm Springs 92264, 760-778-1101. Ldr: Pauline Goss

Outings Continued on page 16
The California Desert Land Acquisition - Telling the Story
ELDEN HUGHES

The Wildlands Conservancy stands ready to contribute $19 million towards the purchase of 432,00 acres of railroads lands stretching from Needles to Barstow. These lands, now owned by Catellus Corporation, are important to the survival and recovery of the Desert Tortoise. They are holdings in Wilderness and the Mojave National Preserve. If they were fenced and gated, they would block access to most of the desert.

The Wildlands Conservancy has negotiated a good and fair price of $125 per acre and with their gift it becomes $87 per acre. It should be easy to give away $19 million. Nothing is easy!

In the last two weeks of May and the first week of June this year Patty and I walked the halls of Congress telling the story. Patty carried a box with (up to) four tortoises and I carried a briefcase full of brochures and facts. We made presentations in 241 offices. The tortoises made it possible.

With tortoises, one does not need an appointment. We would appear and ask for the Environmental L.A. (legislative aide). Shortly we had most of the office staff. While Patty talked tortoises and the need for the California Desert Land Acquisition, I talked specifics with the Environmental Aide.

Patty had developed two aids: a four page brochure with collage of pictures of the acquisition area, and a “Hello from Scotty” tortoise sticker that also said, “California Desert Land Acquisition.” Each picture of the collage conveyed the message, “Here God was born.” The stickers were for kids of all ages and the children of staff. We gave out 2000 stickers and our entire supply of 350 brochures.

We had been told, “You can’t visit 241 offices,” and, of course, you can’t unless one gets real organized. Here’s how we organized. Kathy Reich (Sen. Feinstein’s environmental aide) selected the key members of the Senate and House Appropriations Committee (particularly Interior Appropriations), then we added the majority and minority appropriation staffs, senators and members of congress with Sierra Club endorsements, and senators and members of congress with an LCV (League of Conservation Voters) score of 50% or better. The total was 241. These were then sorted by room number in descending sequence.

If the tortoises provided entry without appointment, the descending room number sequence let one spiral down through a building with a minimal doubling back. It was still far from easy. Neither Patty nor I truly enjoy dressing up. I could go back to white shirts, ties, and suits, but consider Patty’s problem of carrying a plexiglass case full of tortoises at arms’ length while trying to keep one’s panty hose from descending. At the end of the day, Patty’s arms could not unbend. One could start the day in shoes two sizes too large and the miles of corridors would make ones feet swell three sizes.

A week of this can be stressful. Three weeks are extraordinarily stressful. Will the airline refuse to take the tortoises? They have the right to refuse. Will the hotel have any problems? The tortoises enjoy being handled, but when is too much? They poop out too. There are concerns about the tortoises that must occasionally be left in the room (stolen? fire? etc.). Other concerns include, will there be enough stickers? Will there be enough brochures? Will our bodies hold up? Can we make the presentation still sound fresh.
The ultimate goal is passage in this congress of an appropriation bill providing $36 million to complete the purchase of optioned railroad (Catellus) lands.

Our immediate goal was to provide specific information on the land and the general knowledge that this was a very good deal for America. We wanted a large body of senators and members of congress to know that the purchase was worthy and timely and urgent. This we did.

Highlights:

Senator Feinstein at her Thursday Morning breakfast placed a tortoise on each of two tables, one with high school students from San Francisco and the other with students from Los Angeles. She spent a good bit of time describing tortoises, conservation and the need for the California Desert Land Acquisition.

We were asked to meet with the environmental aide in Congressman Bruce Vento’s office (D MI), when a voice from the inner office shouted, “It’s the tortoises”. (Congressman Vento had been at the White House with the tortoises when the California Desert Protection Act was signed on October 31, 1994). We all moved to his office for pictures. The next day when Scripts Howard News Service was doing a story on us, we did it in Vento’s office. They took a great picture of Bruce Vento, minority leader of the National Parks Committee, holding a tortoise.

In the second and third weeks we were getting a constant stream of “Hi’s” and “How are the tortoises?” from legislators’ staffs as we walked the halls.

In Senator Akaka’s (D HI) office the Chief of Staff immediately ushered us into the inner office where the Senator and Mrs. Akaka were talking to constituents. The Senator assured us we were not intruding and exclaimed on their love of wildlife. (From a previous trip we knew that Mrs. Akaka particularly loved turtles.)

Exploring the Owens Valley with Mom
By Blair Kurapatkin

Luck was with the sixteen of us on this gorgeous weekend during our Owens Valley Desert Study and car camp this past Mother’s Day weekend (May 8-9). While the rest of the Southwest was cold and windy, we enjoyed daytime temperatures in the low 80’s, an occasional breeze to cool things off, and perfect weather to sleep under the stars.

First thing Saturday morning, Mike Prather, Lone Pine resident and naturalist, took us to Owens Dry Lake where we viewed wetlands and abundant wildlife. Our bird sightings netted us 60 birds; among them beautiful White-faced Ibis, American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, and Semipalmated Plover. We learned about the issues surrounding the City of Los Angeles, DWP, and Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District’s various strategies to control dust and manage restoration of the lake as required by the EPA. Of serious concern, one of the plans to correct the dust is to pump water from under the lake, into the aqueduct, then back into the lake, which may negatively impact existing springs and wetlands.

We lunched on a shady bridge over the Owens River, imagining what it will look like when its flow is increased. Next we visited the site of the 1872 Lone Pine earthquake where Mike was able to demonstrate how the area must have looked before the quake and the subsequent topographical changes. Regrettfully bidding Mike goodbye, we drove by the historic Alabama gates of the aqueduct and into the Alabama Hills to explore and hike. Happy hour and dinner was followed by a rousing campfire, that lulled most of us into early retirement to our tents.

Mother’s Day morning started leisurely with freshly brewed Starbucks coffee, Champagne Mimosa’s, pink grapefruit, homemade coffee cake, and Eggs Benedict, to the amazement and rave reviews of all. Then we drove up Whitney Portal Rd. for a hike down Lone Pine Creek to Lone Pine Campground. Within a few hours we descended 3,000 feet from pine forests to desert with rushing creek water always in sight and hearing distance. Back at camp we packed up, said our good-byes and headed home, happy to have had such a terrific study, exploration, and social experience.

Many thanks to all participants, your enthusiasm and camaraderie are the leaders’ reward! A special thanks to Mike Prather for graciously giving us his time, knowledge and energy.

Loon Days At Walker Lake
By Marjorie L. Sill

Beautiful warm weather greeted us during the annual Spring migration of loons, white pelicans, gulls and gulls making for a wonderful backdrop when over twenty-five people, including a couple who now live in Australia, joined the Desert Committee outing to Walker Lake in Nevada for Loon Days this past April. Everyone was thrilled with the opportunity to camp at this magnificent desert lake under the looming presence of snowy 12,000 foot Mt. Grant. The lake was so still and clear that it made it easy to bird watch while out on our scheduled two hour boat ride.

We were fortunate to have a guide accompany us from the Nevada Dept. of Wildlife who really knew his birds and was enthusiastic when discussing the various species and their habits. Another topic included what steps were necessary to procure an adequate supply of water to save the lake and its resident cutthroat trout from extinction.

On Saturday evening, we drove into nearby Hawthorne to view a Nevada Wilderness slide show. On Sunday, many chose to visit the Stillwater Wildlife Refuge just east of Fallon to take advantage of the opportunity to see more birds before heading home.
Sierra Club Members Adopt-A-Cabin
BY LYEJA DE JESUS

Unless you are an off-road enthusiast, you are probably unaware that scattered throughout the Southern California deserts are a number of old abandoned cabins, preserved and maintained principally for recreational use. Most are the remains of old abandoned mining operations. Others are the former dwellings of homesteaders and squatters who have moved on to greener pastures. Desert lovers will agree that this network of cabins, and the people who use them, is one of the few things that unifies and civilizes the desert, and is part of what makes the desert the fascinating place it is.

On lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the Ridgecrest area, an adopt-a-cabin program is underway. Much like the ubiquitous adopt-a-highway program, recreational users “adopt” a cabin and help with cleanup, repairs, and ongoing maintenance. In exchange for their sweat and hard work, volunteers are rewarded with the satisfaction of a job well done and the occasional use of the cabin. Use is on a first-come first-served basis, and BLM asks that users limit their stays to two nights.

Far from luxury hotels, some of these rustic outposts, however, do boast running spring water, working flush toilets, and propane stoves and heaters. Most, unfortunately, are in sad need of repair. Damaged windows and doors, rotted roofing, and dilapidated flooring provide little protection from the elements — never mind simple safety. Another concern is Hanta Virus, a rare, sometimes fatal disease, that is carried by rodents and passed on to humans through contact with their droppings.

Genesis of Friends of Minietta Cabin

One volunteer group is the Friends of Minietta Cabin (FOMC). Its establishment began with a CNRCC outing led by Don Peterson and BLM Wilderness Chief and Sierra Club member Steve Smith — both from Ridgecrest. There the program was outlined with several participants expressing interest. Following the outing, a core group headed by Don Peterson gradually took shape. This group included five of the original CNRCC outing participants and was soon joined by three newcomers. Nine volunteers met at the first on-site meeting of FOMC in mid-April.

Minietta Cabin is located in Thompson Canyon of the Argus range in Panamint Valley. At one time, it was the center of a bustling mining operation and, according to Owens Valley residents, was occupied until the 1960s. Indeed, defunct electrical outlets dot the inside and evidence of modern plumbing exists. However, artifacts remain that suggest the site is much older. An archaeologist is currently in the process of assessing its historical value.

Of a number of buildings, the main cabin is all that remains. It is 800-900 square feet and consists of three rooms and a bath. Outside the back door is an intact root cellar, a “laundry room” area, and a rustic mortar-and-stone barbecue. Two gravel “driveways” lead up to the cabin. However, because of road conditions, access is limited to 4-wheel drive or high-clearance vehicles. Directly behind and above the cabin are the ruins of Modoc Mine.

The purpose of FOMC, under the umbrella of the BLM Adopt-A-Cabin program, is to clean up the cabin, make repairs, and be involved in its general upkeep. By so doing, it hopes to preserve this piece of local history, and make it safe to be used recreationally. It is also hoped that maintaining the cabin will discourage vandalism and encourage other recreational users to contribute to its upkeep.

Volunteers still needed!

Currently, thirty cabins are involved in the BLM Adopt-A-Cabin program. Of these, twelve are actively being maintained by volunteers. More volunteers continue to be sought for the “orphans.” As for Minietta Cabin, FOMC welcomes all Sierra Club members and other interested parties to participate in this worthwhile cause.

The next FOMC meeting is tentatively scheduled for early Fall. For more information, contact Don Peterson at (760) 375-8599 or donpete@ridgecrest.ca.us.

Friends of Minietta Cabin (FOMC) on deck of the cabin they are restoring.
The Old Woman Mountains — An Ongoing Adoption Saga
By Vicky Hoover

In the Spring of 1999, the San Francisco Bay Chapter Wilderness Subcommittee conducted our ninth trip to the Old Woman Mountains. At least we think it was the ninth (our documentation may not have been up to snuff in those early years). Little did we know back in 1987 when, with rash enthusiasm, we volunteered to adopt the Old Woman Mountains Wilderness Study Area (WSA), that we’d still be traveling to this Mojave desert mountain range a dozen years later!

Adopting the Old Woman

In ‘87 our subcommittee blithely committed to adopting three of the desert WSAs. If that weren’t enough, we then threw in the Turtle and Whipple Mountains for good measure. During Christmas/New Year’s of ‘87, our first trip made a ten day whirlwind tour that introduced fourteen stalwarts from our Chapter to all three areas. Although we’ve been back to all since then, we soon came to realize that the vast distance of the Bay Area from three desert mountain ranges was too much to handle. So gradually we came to specialize in the Old Women.

On Top of and Around Old Woman

Our Easter ‘89 trip actually saw us on our newly adopted range’s high point—Old Woman Mountain. Easter ‘90 brought us onto an assignment that took us completely around the WSA so that we were able to inventory all the various vehicle tracks that the [then] opposition group, California Desert Coalition, claimed should remain open to vehicles. We documented these claims proving that some were legitimate, some dubious, and some spurious (they simply did not exist)

Looking Up the Skirts of Old Woman
In Spring ‘93 we backpacked in from an eastern approach and made it up to the Old Woman Statue—the prominent granite outcropping that gave the range its name. Getting up to the top of the “statue” is a formidable rock climb, and we contended ourselves with skirting the outcropping or, in the words of Alan Carlson, “looking up the skirts of the Old Woman.”

In Spring ‘95, after joining the big celebration in Joshua Tree National Park in honor of the passage of the California Desert Protection Act, we conducted a short backpack to the west side into Scanlon Gulch.

In Spring ‘97 and ‘98, we backpacked into Brown’s Wash on the west side—the second time in the company of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wilderness manager, Jill Miller-Allert, from the BLM’s Needles Office. Using GPS units supplied by the BLM, we mapped the location of tamarisk invasions concentrated in one important gully.

This year we went down on the spring equinox weekend and assisted Jill and other BLM staffers to place a gate across a road to an inholding on the north side of the range. A locked gate would close this wilderness route to public vehicle travel and still allow the inholder to have access. Using the post hole diggers and other tools in the hard ground was strenuous, but satisfying, and fun work. We were fortunate that our weekend campsite at the edge of the wilderness surrounded us with the picturesque granite rock towers that are so typical of this range—beautiful. The finishing touch was attaching to the gate the proud and solemn sign: Wilderness Access: Foot and horse travel only beyond this point.

Till I’m An Old Woman

We plan to make these service trips an annual event! No need to be a member of the S.F. Bay Chapter to participate—just bring your sense of adventure, positive attitude, and love of wilderness and join us next Spring in the Old Woman Mountains. Besides, who knows how long these journeys will go on?

Till I’m an old woman?
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