

# LIVING RIVERS

VOLUME 1 • NUMBER 2 • FEBRUARY 2001  
A PUBLICATION OF GLEN CANYON ACTION NETWORK

## CURRENTS

### ROADSHOW for Restoration

When the Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec) first diverted the Colorado River, the word sustainability was not in the vocabulary. Now 85 years and forty dams later, the word can't be ignored. Societies reliant on such plumbing systems have suffered in the past, and numerous signs indicate that this, the most developed river system in the country, is well on its way.

Correcting the situation is a top priority for GCAN and more than fifty other groups sponsoring the Sustainable Water Project Tour this March, coinciding with the Fourth International Day of Action Against

Dams and for Rivers, Water and Life. The six-city tour will launch the basin's first citizens-based outreach effort to encourage water users and agencies throughout the basin to aggressively respond to the river's constraints and future human needs.

As early as 1977, BuRec recognized it had set up an unsustainable system, stating, "The average annual water supply of the Colorado River is inadequate to meet [Colorado River] compact allocations and [Indian] treaty entitlements. Deficiencies are expected to occur by the year 2000." Indeed they have. Every drop of Colorado River water is already being used, yet many users have title to additional water rights that the river can't deliver.

Even though the Colorado River no longer reaches the sea, cities throughout the Southwest are planing for additional diversions to meet

the region's thirty percent population growth anticipated over the next half century. Meanwhile, salinity levels in the Lower Basin have reduced irrigation efficiency, species have become endangered throughout the basin, and the river's internationally recognized delta has all but disappeared. Similar problems led to the demise of once-thriving Native American cultures utilizing extensive irrigation schemes in Utah and Arizona.

When restoration activists hit the road in March, they will be promoting available solutions to reverse the federal and state policies that allow billions of gallons of water to flow off industrial hay fields, tumble over desert fountains, or evaporate off water-ski parks.

"We want their missions to change from consumption, to conserva-

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### BABBITT'S BON VOYAGE Activists/Water Users in Las Vegas

The "2000 Annual Colorado River Water Users Conference," held in Las Vegas, Nevada, December 13-15, at Caesar's Palace Hotel and Casino seemed a fitting location for those who gamble that the Colorado River will continue to support more growth and development than it's capable. This year, however, a small but highly active agroup of environmentalists converged on the political festivities.

Among the most visible were Living Rivers' own Lisa Force, Program Director, and David Orr, Field Director of GCAN. The activists kept busy, asking difficult questions of speakers such as U.S. Representative George Radanovich, whose presentation was entitled "The Strangulation of Common Sense by the Endangered Species Act." Orr and Force also managed one-on-one conversations with then Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and former Commissioner of Reclamation Floyd Dominy.

Bruce Babbitt's keynote speech addressed dams, the Salton Sea, and the future of the Endangered Species Act. "We have a lot of dams in the country that have outlived their usefulness," he stated. "Out of 75,000 [dams in the U.S.], I have managed to tear down only twenty."

Although his written speech did not address Glen Canyon Dam, Secretary Babbitt adjusted his comments for the conference, traditionally attended only by water users, to include the statement, "Glen Canyon Dam is not in any danger of coming down." However, when speaking with Ms. Force after his speech, Secretary Babbitt indicated that he was pleased that environmental interests were involved in the Glen Canyon Dam and other Colorado River issues. Before leaving, he accepted a copy of Living Rivers Currents and a "Drain 'Lake' Powell Now!" bumper sticker.

The presumably precarious longevity of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) under the new Bush Administration was the central topic of Secretary Babbitt's presentation. He indicated that in the past, many have tried to blame the Act for river and land management problems. "They said 'the ESA is the problem. Let's go after the ESA,'" said Secretary Babbitt. "I want to counsel you on my way out, it won't work. They tried it. They got nowhere for two reasons: It ain't true and public support [for the ESA] is strong."

Secretary Babbitt also expressed concern for the Salton Sea, a 13-by-15-mile natural depression in the Southern California desert, that accidentally filled with Colorado River water in 1905 and has since become the environmentally unsound habitat for millions of migrating birds. "I'm still worried about the Salton Sea," said Secretary Babbitt. "It illustrates how, just when you think you've got everything fixed, something else pops up," he said in reference to the host of negative environmental impacts resulting from continuous, inadequate agency restoration efforts.

A highlight of the conference was a rather tame 'debate' between Floyd Dominy, the flamboyant builder of Glen Canyon Dam, and David Wegner, former program director for Glen Canyon Environmental Studies. Mr. Wegner opened the conversation by stating, "As we as a society have developed, we've learned the value of water beyond development. We believe that data will show we need to rethink Glen Canyon Dam." The scientist indicated that society needs to have an honest debate over the value of Glen Canyon Dam and a serious evaluation whether decisions made in the 1960's are still relevant today.



Lisa Force, Living Rivers Program Director, talks with former Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt

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# JUST ADD WATER: Organizing for the Dying Delta

Representatives of the Republic of Mexico and the United States signed a historic agreement on December 12, 2000, bringing the long-held vision of a restored Colorado River delta one step closer to reality. However, the lack of any specific requirements for water deliveries from the US for restoration purposes has raised some concerns as to the strength of this agreement.

To increase the likelihood that the intent of this binational agreement could be implemented, GCAN and others are mobilizing a "One Percent For the Delta" campaign. The groups are asking the major users of Colorado River water to commit to providing the minimum flows considered necessary by scientists to begin the restoration process. "All that is needed to get this process moving forward is for the water users to pledge, at a minimum, 32,000 acre-feet per year, with an additional 250,000 acre-feet every four years to replenish the Mexican delta region," says David Hogan, Desert Rivers Coordinator with the Center for Biological Diversity. "That is less than one percent of more than 13 million acre-feet the United States diverts from the Colorado River annually."

News of the signing of the agreement was announced by outgoing Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt in a speech to the Colorado River Water Users Association in Las Vegas, where he indicated his interest in restoring the biologically impoverished area. Thirty days later, however, he signed a policy document that could impede progress. Known as the "Surplus Criteria" for the lower Colorado River, the policy calls for diverting water that might otherwise flow to the delta during years of high flows. The so-called "surplus" water will, under the new criteria, be drawn from Lake Mead reservoir for use by California.

The new plan reflects a compromise among the seven basin states to permit California to continue making excessive withdrawals from the river—well above its legal limit—for 15 more years, for storage in off-stream reservoirs. California has committed, in turn, to reduce its annual diversions by nearly a million acre-feet beginning in 2015.

"But the delta needs water now," adds Hogan. "We have to send a strong message to the Bureau of Reclamation to apply pressure on these water users to reduce their consumption in the near term, if the delta is to survive over the long term."

Department of Interior officials have declared their intent to organize the first binational meeting on the new delta agreement in Spring 2001. The purpose is to identify and discuss scientific, technical, and legal issues relevant to Colorado River estuary restoration. In addition to obtaining commitments from the water users, assurances also need to be obtained from Mexico that this water will actually flow to the delta, and not be diverted along the way.

The basinwide organizing effort now getting underway will encourage water agencies to participate in these proceedings in good faith and to voluntarily contribute their share of Colorado River water toward the goals agreed upon by the scientific community.

So far, opposition to any significant allocation for the delta has been fierce. Water users have enjoyed near-total control of the Colorado River's plumbing system for decades. But despite the many obstacles, environmental groups remain committed to the goal of restoring the fish, wildlife, and vegetation that made the delta a special place for thousands of years.

GCAN is calling on all water users in the basin to voluntarily allocate one percent of each user's allocated share to restore delta flows. GCAN will take to the road in March with its "Sustainable Water Project" to visit cities, water users, and agencies throughout the basin, asking for a commitment to sharing the responsibility for restoration. In addition to the initial one percent, we also are asking water users to ensure sufficient flows are maintained for the Cienega de Santa Clara wetland, and that they support additional water to the delta region when such water becomes available through purchase or voluntary agreement.

With a corresponding commitment to conserving water at the tap and at the sprinkler head, the consumers of Colorado River water can easily accommodate the needs of the thirsty denizens of the delta.

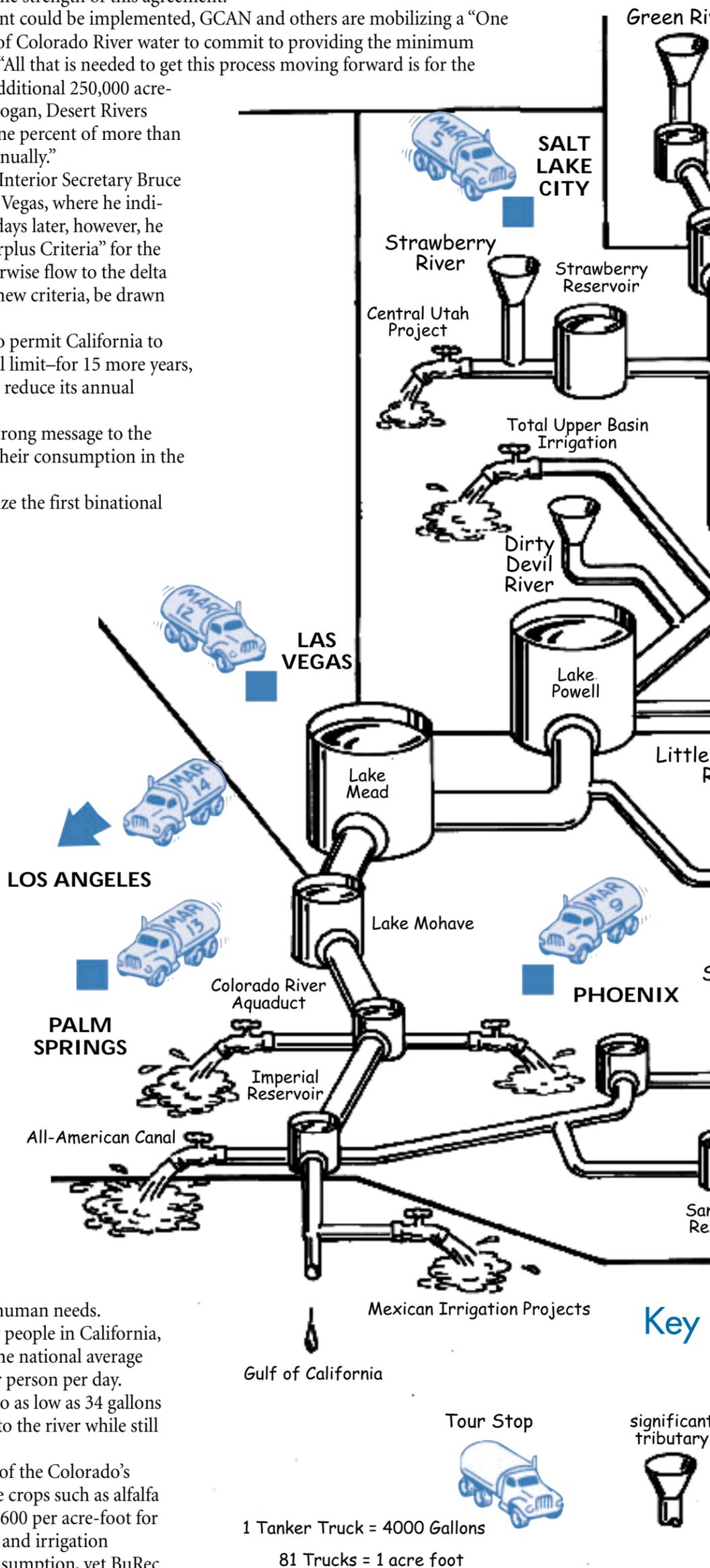
## Restoration Roadshow (continued from page 1)

tion," says GCAN president John Weisheit. "Their wasteful strategies are perpetuating a water crisis that need not be."

Twenty percent of the Colorado's flow is presently utilized to meet human needs. According to the United States Geological Survey, per capita water use by people in California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico ranges from 20 to 120 percent above the national average of 101 gallons per day. Israel, by contrast, manages on only 75 gallons per person per day. Conservation and reuse strategies could bring water usage in the region to as low as 34 gallons per person, per day—meeting population increases, putting water back into the river while still providing for our needs.

Farmers too can mend their ways. Agribusiness utilizes nearly 80% of the Colorado's flow. Much of this is for flood irrigation for water intensive and low value crops such as alfalfa or cotton. This occurs because although people in Los Angeles may pay \$600 per acre-foot for Colorado River water, farmers are only paying \$13. Altered crop patterns and irrigation technologies are available to generate double-digit decreases in water consumption, yet BuRec and others are not making conservation a priority.

"Last year we rallied at Glen Canyon to usher in the Century of River Restoration," adds GCAN'S Weisheit. "Now it's time to take this message to people and agencies throughout the watershed, to conserve water, revive the river, and meet our responsibilities to future generations." Weisheit's team will be traveling with an empty water tanker truck dubbed "Vaquita Rescue." It will take collections to deliver fresh water to the endangered vaquita porpoises in the Gulf of California, and to the endangered species of the Colorado River delta. This rolling water tank will also symbolize the hundreds of millions of similar-sized tanks of water wasted needlessly each year by municipal and agricultural water agencies.



# ROADSHOW FOR An Ecosystem, not

# PIPE DREAMS: Albuquerque's Taste for Imported Water

Few travelers who pass over the Continental Divide on New Mexico's US Highway 84 are aware of the subterranean tunnel beneath them, a pipeline more than twenty miles in length. Water that Nature intended to replenish the Colorado River's estuary at the Gulf of California instead is diverted to alfalfa fields and subdivisions in the Rio Grande River Valley.

The Azotea Tunnel, near the Colorado-New Mexico border, was constructed in the 1960s by the Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec) to deliver water from the San Juan River's headwaters across the divide to the Chama River—a major tributary of the Rio Grande River. Boaters on the Chama and Rio Grande float on imported water that is used to augment New Mexico's meager supply.

For years, the City of Albuquerque and City of Santa Fe have been paying into a BuRec fund to acquire this water. Neither city has yet used its contracted water, however, because ample existing groundwater supplies have not required developing the necessary infrastructure to divert their San Juan-Chama allocation from the Rio Grande.

But the current growth boom in Albuquerque has led City Hall to propose constructing an expensive water treatment facility that would allow the city to begin using its contracted water. Santa Fe's existing water supplies have been depleted by recent drought conditions, and the State of New Mexico is threatening to block new development projects in the county unless the city begins drawing its San Juan-Chama allocation.

To complicate matters, imported water has been used in recent years to supplement flows in the Rio Grande below Albuquerque where irrigators have virtually drained the river dry, threatening the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow with extinction. Farmers have managed to avoid cutbacks on deliveries by relying on San Juan-Chama water to maintain bare-minimum instream flows, but should Albuquerque begin utilizing its significant share, the survival of the river's ecosystem could be further jeopardized.

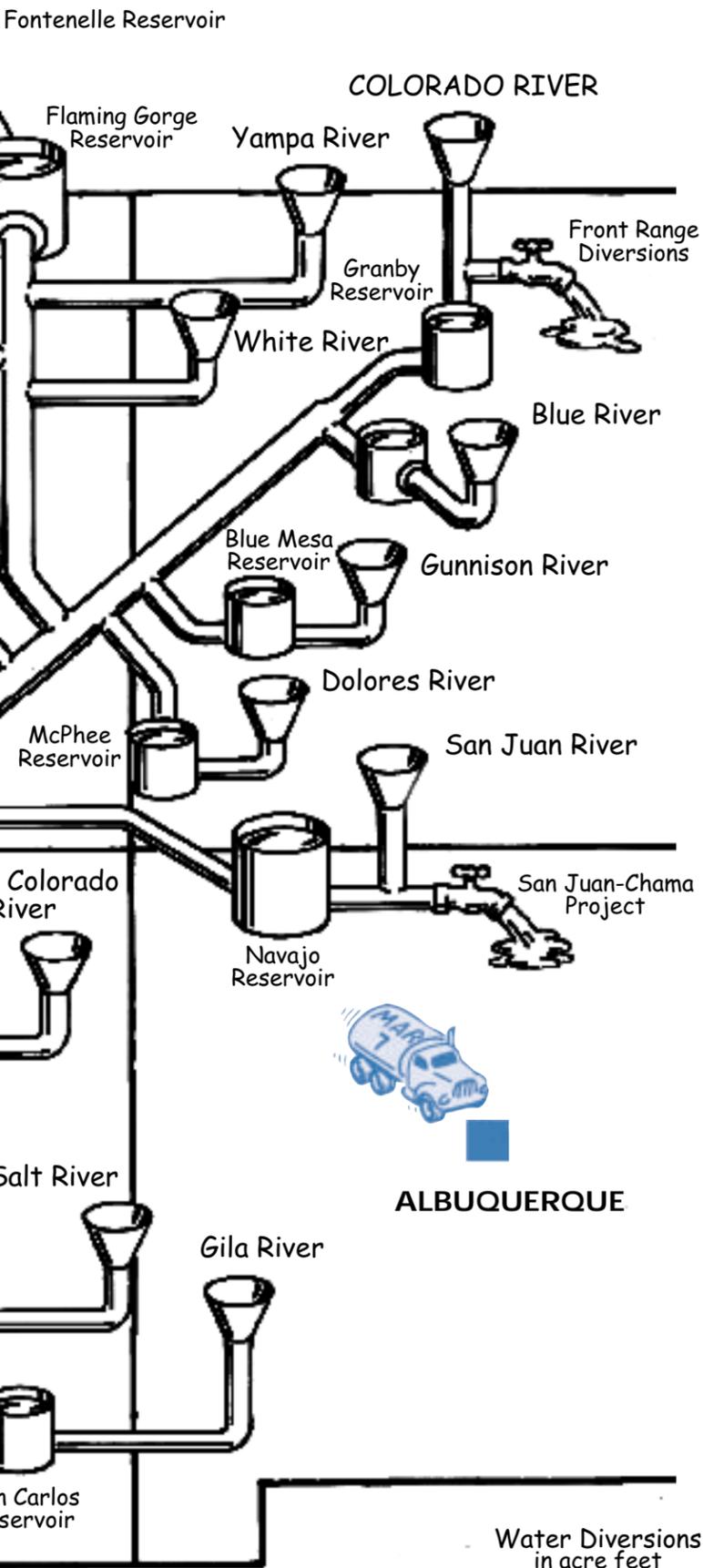
Albuquerque's proposal to divert its contracted water threatens the minnow in the short term, but continued growth and lack of conservation in the basin threaten the entire river in the longer term. While the city has begun implementing some significant conservation measures, there is much more that can be done.

Groups in the basin such as the Alliance for Rio Grande Heritage and Rio Grande Restoration are calling for adoption of the "Citizens Alternative" to the city's development plan, and are focusing on the opportunity to achieve significant additional reductions in water usage instead of building additional capacity.

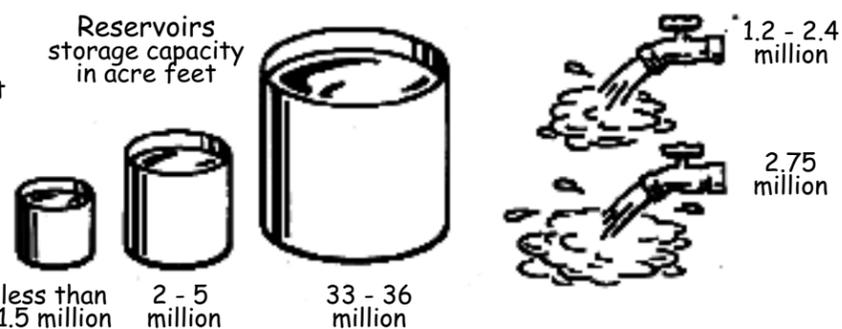
Since the tunnel was built, the Rio Grande and San Juan watersheds have become inextricably linked. One river—the San Juan—is being sacrificed in an effort to bandage the other. Two major developments are planned in the San Juan's beleaguered watershed: the Animas-La Plata reservoir project and the Navajo-Gallup Pipeline. Conservation strategies, not more water development, must be put in place in both basins and this will be a major theme of GCAN's upcoming road show as it rolls through New Mexico March 6-7.



The endangered Silvery Minnow of the Rio Grande



## To The Plumbing System



## FOR THE COLORADO not a Plumbing System

## COW-LORADO River Storage Project

While the humpback chub, southwest willow flycatcher and vaquita porpoise are suffering from development of the Colorado River, cattle continue to fare quite well. Whether it's irrigated pastures or industrial hay fields, the livestock industry remains the greatest beneficiary of federal and state programs diverting water from the Colorado.

From the Colorado Rockies to the Mexican border, alfalfa and other cattle feeds dominate much of the irrigated landscape. Alfalfa ranks just behind cotton in acreage cultivated in Arizona, and in Southern California, the largest consumer of Colorado River water, the Imperial Irrigation District devotes over 60% of its acreage to cattle feed.

But acreage planted represents only part of the story. Alfalfa is the most water-consuming crop grown, requiring almost twice as much water per acre as cotton, four times as much for carrots and eight times as much for lettuce. Accordingly, the value of alfalfa per acre-foot of water used is quite low.

Cotton generates nearly twice the revenue per acre-foot of water used as alfalfa, and lettuce upwards of thirty times. This waste is magnified further when recognizing that producing a pound of beef protein requires up to fifteen times more water than producing an equivalent amount of plant protein.

The problems associated with water management on the Colorado are not of supply, but a willingness to waste most of the river's water on subsidies for the cattle industry. Such inefficiencies can easily be remedied by changing cropping patterns, changes that GCAN and others want to see mandated by Colorado River water agencies.



# SAVING A LIVING LAKE with Conservation

Guest Column  
By Jean Brocklebank



A long time ago in a beautiful eastern Sierra basin, a living lake was dying—the victim of a municipality hundreds of miles away with a voracious thirst. Mono Lake—a real lake, not a reservoir, and a destination point for millions of migratory birds—was slowly dying of thirst. Los Angeles had dams on four of the lake's life-renewing streams, diverting the water for the city's parched throat. The lake was getting too salty and too low. The island refuges, used by nesting birds, were exposed to hungry predators, and dusty alkaline shores created air pollution. The line was drawn in the sand after the lake had lost forty vertical feet in 35 years; the surface area had declined by 30%, from 54,924 to 37,688 acres. No more, we declared! In 1978, a few citizens, led by the late David Gaines, started a crusade to save this ancient lake. Thus was born Mono Lake Committee, a great example of citizen action.

I was raised in Los Angeles and learned to love that special lake when visiting my father in Bishop (60 miles south) every summer. My environmental spirit soared at the possibility of saving a place I truly loved. Proudly, I became a charter member of that amazing group 25 years ago. We knew we could do battle with the water brokers. Were we naive, simplistic, and over-heated with enthusiasm? You bet we were! We wanted to cut L.A.'s diversions by 85 per cent.

We started by getting the attention of everyone we could reach. Surprisingly, during the first "bucket walk" (Sept. 1980) we had both *National Geographic* and *Smithsonian* magazines record our act of returning the lake water we had collected in bottles headed for Los Angeles.

Ultimately Mono Lake Committee grew to 20,000 members, becoming a major political, legal, and consumer force. Finally, in 1994, the California Department of Water Resources ruled that the City of Los Angeles Department of Water and Power must dramatically cut its diversions, to allow the lake to fill to 25-feet below pre-diversion levels. This process is anticipated to take another 15 years, but I am pleased to report that the lake is again rising.

The Mono Lake Committee promoted conservation strategies to make up for the 83,000 acre-feet of water L.A. had previously diverted from the Lake annually. These strategies more than replaced the water the city can no longer divert. These are the same types of conservation strategies that can be implemented region-wide so that other natural areas, like Glen Canyon and the Colorado River delta, may also be restored.

Often we think we are powerless against the perceived voracious Goliath of river and lake destruction. And, indeed, it takes time and persistence to accomplish our goals. If time is part of the equation for those who dream of restoring landscapes, then let's get busy, now! The longer we wait, the more we will have to do.

Take a look at the Mono Lake Committee's excellent web site (<http://www.monolake.org>) and be sure to spend some time on the Living Lakes link.

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## WATER WASTEFUL Ski Parks

In *Desert Solitaire*, the classic book about Edward Abbey's season in the desert wilderness of Utah, there is an enjoyable chapter called "Down the River." The chapter is about a river trip Abbey took down the Colorado River through Glen Canyon with his good-natured friend Ralph Newcomb. This trip occurred just before the completion of Glen Canyon Dam and the flooding of that cathedral-like canyon. Abbey lamented how such a simple, carefree river activity has since been replaced by whining power boats that pull skiers endlessly around a stagnant reservoir in a repetitive clockwise direction under the watchful eye of law enforcement officers.

But existing reservoirs are not enough for the water-skiing crowd of the Desert Southwest. Now they have taken their sport to their own backyard by excavating depressions into fragile desert landscapes; filling them with water to conveniently continue their clockwise direction around a track, similar to the chariots of Rome's Circus Maximus.

Such a lifestyle is highly questionable. In desert climates, evaporation rates from reservoirs are extremely high. For example in Phoenix, the evaporation loss is 8 times greater than the annual rainfall, which is 10 inches per year. For a typical Phoenix-area swimming pool, that equates to 17,560 gallons of water lost to the atmosphere each year. Imagine the loss of water from a water-ski reservoir that has 30 acres of surface! Take a 4,000-gallon water truck, as used for GCAN's Sustainable Water Project Tour, and that equates to 14,342 trips per year to keep such a ski reservoir filled.



ShadowLake Estates water-ski park in Indio, California.

The environmental costs of these facilities don't end with the waste of precious water. Many powerboats and jetskis run on polluting, two-cycle motors that foul both air and water. Thrilling, perhaps, but the cost of cleaning up the mess will be high.

As we look toward water conservation strategies to revive the Colorado and other rivers in the Southwest, clearly such wasteful parks should no longer be built. Evaporation losses are a key reason for advocating the draining of the water-ski park behind Glen Canyon Dam, and such waste should be considered before building any new water-ski infrastructure.

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### Babbitt's Bon Voyage (continued from page 1)

Mr. Dominy responded that there were "no naysayers in the 50's and 60's, no Don Quixotes running around tilting at dams. Capturing water and putting it to work for man was a good thing." Overstating the importance of power generated by Glen Canyon Dam, he stated that the loss of electricity from decommissioning the dam would be serious. "If you don't regulate [the Colorado River], it doesn't have much use," he concluded.

Mr. Dominy was scheduled to debate David Brower, GCAN co-

founder and longtime opponent of Glen Canyon Dam, who passed away six weeks prior to the meeting. But Mr. Brower was there in spirit as GCAN and local Sierra Club activists from Moab circulated a publication conceived by Brower to publicly launch a Sierra Club outreach campaign to drain Lake Powell.

After the presentation when Mr. Dominy introduced himself to David Orr, Dominy stated that he had built Glen Canyon Dam. "Yes," smiled Orr, "I know. And now we're here to take it down."

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LIVING RIVERS CURRENTS is a publication of **GLEN CANYON ACTION NETWORK**, a people's movement to protect and restore the integrity of the Colorado River watershed. Through grassroots organizing, research, advocacy and litigation, **GCAN** works to prevent further damage to the ecosystems of the Colorado River watershed, to reverse the damage that has already occurred, and to enhance public awareness regarding river and wildlands protection and restoration. For information about membership please visit our web site, or contact our Moab office.

LIVING RIVERS CURRENTS Design & Printing: West Coast Print Center



Printed on Vision 100% tree-free paper made from the Kenaf plant.

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