

## Versunkene Schönheit

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## Submerged Beauty

*Conservationists fight for the demolition of a dam that delivers drinking water to 85 percent of San Francisco. Even more crazy than the idea itself is the fact that it might become reality.*

BY JULIA GROSS

Perhaps I was indeed struck by lightning at some point, says Ron Good, if you ask him why in the world, since about ten years, he invests his time in a project that most people think is complete nonsense. And when he looks at you with his clear blue eyes behind his thick glasses, sitting on the sofa in his small house in Sonora, California with no shoes on, you can't be sure if the lightning story was meant to be a joke.

Especially the City of San Francisco is less and less inclined to laugh about Ron Good. For the Restore Hetch Hetchy initiative founded by Good has continued to progress with their seemingly absurd goal much further than anyone had expected: They want to tear down Hetch Hetchy Dam and allow the valley that has been submerged for 94 years to come back to its original state.

A beautiful, but also bold idea. The city of San Francisco gets 373 million cubic meters of tap water per year out of this reservoir. Drinking water so clean it does not even need to be filtered before it gushes out of taps 200 kilometers away from the dam in San Francisco - a rarity in the United States.

The water from Hetch Hetchy is so pure because the reservoir is located in the middle of Yosemite National Park. And in the opinion of Ron Good, that's not a place where a 100 meter high dam belongs. Especially not if under the surface of the nearly twelve kilometer long lake lies a spectacularly beautiful place like Hetch Hetchy Valley. With towering granite walls, waterfalls, an idyllic river, which once meandered lazily between trees and shrubs on the valley floor. A place that happens to look confusingly similar to a world-renowned spot 55 kilometers to the south: Yosemite Valley, immortalized in countless photographs, postcards and paintings. About three million visitors from around the world come here every year to admire a landscape that is so perfect the UNESCO labelled it as outstanding beautiful area called World Heritage Site in 1984.

"Some people say the reservoir is not that bad. They say it's like standing in the water up to their ankles – you're still able to enjoy the mountains and waterfalls of Hetch Hetchy." Ron Good is outraged and takes a deep breath. "I say it rather looks like someone who had his legs amputated below the knee. If the Statue of Liberty had 300 feet of water around it, only the torch would look out – what kind of monument is this, please?"

The decision to build the dam was very controversial in the U.S. Senate already in 1913 - the first time in U.S. history that a development project has been questioned. Even then, the territory belonged to the National Park. But because the city of San Francisco suffered greatly from the great earthquake of 1906, she finally got what she wanted.

"But now San Francisco doesn't need Hetch Hetchy anymore," says Spreck Rosekrans from the environmental protection organization Environmental Defense. Rosekrans, who obviously thinks crunching complex numbers is great fun, has simulated the entire water supply network of the city in a giant spreadsheet. "Except for extremely dry years, the entire demand can be met from existing reservoirs, which are further downstream the same river." In times of drought, the city would buy water in the area or rely on ground water resources. Conclusion: "There is no technical reason why San Francisco's water supply should not work without Hetch Hetchy."

And if we are to believe Rosekrans' colleague, environmental scientist Ann Hayden, there is no reason why a drained Hetch Hetchy Valley could not again become what it once was. Although a restoration project of this dimension would be a world premiere. "It would be especially important to let out the water gradually. That makes it easier to prevent an invasion of invasive species, species that are not typical for the region", Hayden explains. After two years grasses and herbs would cover the ground of the former reservoir, after 50 years the vegetation would be about the same as before construction of the dam. Except for the lichens that once thrived on the walls - these extremely sensitive organisms would probably need at least 80 years to recover.

In San Francisco, a city known to be liberal and environmentally conscious, many people regard such considerations simply silly. "We can also serve people breakfast on the moon, the only question is whether it is worth the trip," says Arthur Jensen, manager of the Bay Area Water Authority. And Dianne Feinstein, former mayor of San Francisco and now an influential senator, goes ballistic every time the project is mentioned. "I will make sure that this dam remains where it is," says the politician who is otherwise well-known for her environmental commitment.

Water in California has a different value than in Germany. The cities depend on a few rivers, and for over 100 years, they have fought bitterly over who has the rights to the use this water. Of course it is also about money: Depending on what you take into the calculation the restoration of Hetch Hetchy Valley costs between 0,5 and ten billion dollars. Numbers which also keep public support to the project below 50 percent - if the public has ever heard of it at all.

So why don't people like Hayden, Rosekrans and Ron Good give up on this most improbable of all projects? One would almost expect them to be driven by high ideals, or religious motives. Or that they maybe simply want to immortalise themselves. Instead, we obtain remarkably terse replies: "I've found that my knowledge of water systems could help this idea," said Rosekrans. With Ann Hayden, it is the knowledge of restoration, Ron Good had the right contacts through his longtime job at the Sierra Club. "Don't whine, do

something" Ron Good explains as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Of course, they all had their burn-out-phases. "But somehow always a happy coincidence happened and helped us," says Good. For example, when independently of Hayden's and Rosekrans' 150-page feasibility study, a study by the University of California was published and reached the same conclusion: That the reservoir at Hetch Hetchy is not needed anymore. Or when Tom Philip, editor of the Sacramento Bee newspaper, picked up the issue in a series of articles that won him the Pulitzer Prize. Or when two members of Congress persuaded California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger took to take a closer look at the project.

When Schwarzenegger announced the result of the investigation in summer 2006, it was a triumph and a dead-end at the same time for Restore Hetch Hetchy and Environmental Defense. The California Government considers the restoration of Hetch Hetchy feasible. But it required further, more detailed investigations that it will not finance. Additional seven million dollars are needed.

So the project was stalled again. But this time help came from completely unexpected places: in early 2007 Ron Good's phone in Sonora rang. A man who didn't reveal his name, explained that the budget proposal of George W. Bush provided seven million U.S. dollars for the detailed study of the Hetch Hetchy project. Then he hung up. Ron Good googled. The man had told the truth.

Congress and the Senate must approve Bush's proposal in the coming months. It's much easier to kick something out of the one trillion dollar-budget than make a small project like this stay. "But my goodness, really, this valley needs a special recognition," says Ron Good. "After all, this is not a Wal-Mart parking lot."