

COMMENTARY

Once again, San Francisco officials are limiting public access to the majestic Hetch Hetchy Valley

BY GUEST COMMENTARY
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Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park, May 20, 2019. Hetch Hetchy is the source of San Francisco's drinking water.

IN SUMMARY

Spreck Rosekrans, Restore Hetch Hetchy: San Francisco's Water Department has persuaded Congress to deny long-promised access to unreachable areas of Yosemite National Park. This power play ban environmentally benign boating on Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, and reverses the guarantees of access made by San Francisco in 1913.



By Spreck Rosekrans, Special to CalMatters

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In the waning moments of 2019, San Francisco's Water Department persuaded Congress to deny long-promised access to unreachable areas of Yosemite National Park.

This power play would ban environmentally benign boating on Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. The move reverses the guarantees of improved access and recreation which San Francisco made in 1913, when it pleaded with Congress to pass the Raker Act and allow it to build the reservoir in Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park.

After trying for 20 years to get permission for a dam in Yosemite, San Francisco promised in 1913 that the Hetch Hetchy area would be managed for "water supply *and* park purposes," and that any notion that visitors would be excluded was "absurd."

During hearings on the bill, that dam's proponents assured its author, Congressman John E. Raker, that the federal government would retain control and could allow boating.

In the course of promoting the legislation, San Francisco also made promises about roads, hotels, and campgrounds at Hetch Hetchy, none of which have come to fruition.

Today, only a single circuitous trail provides access to a small fraction of the valley's perimeter. Only 1% of Yosemite's visitors venture to Hetch Hetchy, a

place pioneering naturalist John Muir described as a “rare landscape garden, one of nature’s finest mountain temples.”

Canoes, kayaks or an electric-powered, park-operated tour boat could provide access to the spectacular canyon. Hikers and picnickers of all ages could disembark at Tiltill Creek and leisurely stroll to Rancheria Falls.

Rock climbers would flock to Hetch Hetchy’s granite monoliths. And enthusiastic anglers would be able to fish for trout throughout the reservoir and in the free-flowing Tuolumne River just upstream.

But now, thanks to a last-minute tweak in the \$1.4 trillion, 2,000-page spending bill passed by Congress shortly before the end of its 2019 session, those visitors may effectively be kept from exploring the Hetch Hetchy canyon.

The ban comes in a side report to the must-pass bill, not in the bill itself, so its legal standing is ambiguous. But San Francisco’s attempt to renege on its original promise is clear.

For a century, San Francisco’s Water Department has used Hetch Hetchy Valley as a storage tank and kept its gorgeous canyon almost entirely to itself. The access gate closes daily. Lodging is nonexistent and camping is unavailable. The only boat permitted on the water is San Francisco’s own.

The attempt to ban all boating is a response to the Department of Interior’s consideration of quiet, eco-friendly craft, *not* gasoline-powered boats like the one that San Francisco itself uses on the same water.

San Francisco’s excuse for wanting a boating ban is to protect the reservoir’s water quality. That’s a worthy and necessary goal. But many other urban water agencies in California and elsewhere allow boating on reservoirs without compromising water quality.

San Francisco’s bureaucrats simply want to limit access and recreation at Hetch Hetchy. They know that if park visitors are able to explore Hetch Hetchy’s spectacular terrain, many will want to see the reservoir emptied

and water storage moved downstream, so the valley can be restored to its natural state. They are right.

Last minute congressional shenanigans are no way to determine how to treat a stunning landscape in one of our flagship national parks. The American public, including a new generation of San Franciscans, need to reexamine Hetch Hetchy and to determine its best use in the 21st century and beyond.

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