



San Franciscans will be voting next week on [Measure F](#) to study the draining of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park. Hetch Hetchy, for those who don't know, is a spectacular, glacier-formed valley of equal proportion to its neighbor Yosemite Valley. Congress authorized a dam in 1913 to provide public hydroelectric power and a reliable source of water for San Francisco and peninsula communities. The project became a disaster, costing more money and taking more time (20 years) than anticipated. It also permanently marred one of the most beautiful valleys in the world. To make matters worse, Progressive Era boosters' dreams of supplying public hydroelectric power to San Francisco and breaking the private utility monopoly were dashed when San Francisco voters repeatedly voted down bond issues to start a municipal utility.

Robert W. Righter wrote an authoritative history of the dam, called [The Battle over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism](#). Some interesting historical tidbits from his book:

- San Francisco officials and engineers became obsessed with damming Hetch Hetchy due to its perfect bathtub shape, which would enable a dam to maximize water storage. In their zeal, they overlooked far cheaper and easier options. The East Bay Municipal Utility District, for example, ratified a bond issue in 1924 to dam the Mokelumne River in the Sierra Nevada and had it built and flowing by 1929, taking just 25% of the time and 39% of the costs of building the Hetch Hetchy system (\$39 million compared to \$100 million).
- John Muir, the leading environmental advocate for preserving Hetch Hetchy, never envisioned leaving the valley undeveloped. Contrary to some of the mythology about him being a pure wilderness advocate, Muir wanted tourists to enjoy the valley by

building hotels and roads to Hetch Hetchy.

- Dam proponents sold the project to Congress in 1912 with perhaps one of the earliest versions of a "glossy brochure." They traipsed around Capitol Hill with a thick volume of heavy, lacquered pages that contained artful photographs of dam reservoirs and the valley. Most importantly, the document contained an artist rendering of how beautiful a still reservoir in the valley would be to reflect the granite cliffs. The pictures helped convince congressional representatives who would never travel anywhere near Hetch Hetchy or the Sierra Nevada Mountains that a reservoir would actually improve the valley.

Measure F would authorize \$8 million for a study on the feasibility of removing the dam and finding alternative water and power sources. Opponents contend that the study is a waste of money and that the costs of removing the dam will be in the billions. Meanwhile, virtually all politicians are decrying the "insanity" of voluntarily incurring massive costs and sacrificing clean water and hydropower revenue for San Francisco. On the other side, proponents argue that restoring the valley could bring new economic activity through tourism and that San Francisco could do more to conserve water while building smaller dams downriver. They also have the moral argument that damming the river was a wrong based on outdated values.

I'm somewhat biased on this issue, having spent some incredible weeks in my childhood and young adult years backpacking in the area. On one hand, it's hard not to look at the dam and resulting reservoir and not feel sadness at what was lost, as well as excitement at how amazing a restored valley would be if the dam were removed. On the other hand, the dam is now a fact of life and provides important water and power benefits. Plus, the dam has kept the valley off the tourist path, leaving its surrounding trails, lakes, springs, and granite formations largely devoid of camera-toting people. Voters in the City will make their own call next week, but I for one will not be sad if they express a wish to remove the dam and restore Hetch Hetchy Valley.