



December 19th marks a sad event in American environmental history. It was 100 years ago today that President Woodrow Wilson signed the Raker Act, authorizing the City of San Francisco to build a dam that would flood the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park in order to deliver water supplies to San Francisco.

Contemporary accounts—including those of John Muir—attest to the stunning beauty of the Hetch Hetchy Valley. (Muir wrote: “Hetch Hetchy Valley is a grand landscape garden, one of Nature’s rarest and most precious mountain temples.”) In its natural state, Hetch Hetchy was considered an ecological twin of the world-renown Yosemite Valley that lies, relatively undisturbed, a few miles to the south.

San Francisco’s construction of the O’Shaughnessy Dam on the Tuolumne River flooded the Hetch Hetchy Valley under 300 feet of water, turning it into a municipal reservoir. Public access to this portion of Yosemite National Park has been limited for decades and, compared to its natural state, there’s not a lot see or enjoy there in any event. John Muir considered the destruction of the Hetch Hetchy Valley to be his biggest political failure, and a national tragedy.



Painting of Hetch Hetchy Valley by  
Albert Bierstadt

More recently, however, a serious debate has emerged over whether the dam should be dismantled, and the Hetch Hetchy Valley restored to its original splendor. That notion appears to be steadily gaining political traction: University of California scientists, environmental organizations (led by the non-profit [Restore Hetch Hetchy](#) organization), political figures and government agencies have all suggested that the restoration of Hetch Hetchy is both economically feasible and environmentally sound. (Earlier this month, former California Attorneys General John Van de Kamp, a Democrat, and Dan Lungren, a Republican, co-authored [an op-ed piece in the Los Angeles Times](#) advocating the dam's removal and the restoration of Hetch Hetchy Valley.)

Nevertheless, the idea remains very controversial, and is fiercely resisted by San Francisco's city government, many of its residents, and several of California's most powerful political figures, including U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein.

But this is not a controversy that figures to disappear. To the contrary, a vigorous public debate over the continued existence of the O'Shaughnessy Dam and reservoir, and the feasibility of their removal, is both timely and welcome. Without question, the idea of building a major dam and reservoir project in the heart of one of America's most popular national parks would be dismissed out of hand if it were proposed today. So doesn't it make sense, 100 years after one of the nation's most environmentally destructive water projects was approved, that a new generation of Americans takes the time to seriously consider whether that decision—and the sad environmental legacy it spawned—should be revisited?