

RHOD

Lake's water level dropping, regatta tradition might end soon

Rowing event might leave Lake Merced

By Melissa T. Miller

SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT

If Lake Merced's water level and general appearance continue to deteriorate, the Regatta might need to be moved elsewhere.

The "Novice Regatta," a rowing event that is considered to signal the beginning of the competitive high-school rowing season for the entire state, could be moved to another location if the lake gets any smaller.

Approximately 3,000 children and their families will visit Lake Merced March 3 to compete, as they have every year since 1985 when Pacific Rowing Club began hosting the event.

"We can squeeze into six lanes, but it becomes hazardous at the start and finish lines because the lake is narrow at the ends," said Karen Tarantola, an event organizer with the Pacific Rowing Club. "At one point, we could easily accommodate seven wide lanes, which are important to novice rowers. The lake may have had room for more than seven lanes at that time, but they weren't needed. Now, with the reeds and cattails encroaching at the sides, it's limited the width of the lake we can safely use. We are losing that safety margin at the ends the kids need to turn their boats around."

"If we lost the lake, it would be a tragedy," Tarantola said. "There is nowhere else to go in the city."

"Two Down, One to Go" is what rower Dick Allen calls the situation at the lake, where he says he's noticed a considerable decline of the water level in just the last six years. "Lake Merced has lost sail-

ing and fishing due to declining lake levels. Rowing is the one major activity left on the lake."

Rowing has a long and storied history at the lake. Lake Merced once had the distinction of hosting the largest and most prestigious high school rowing competition, the state championships, which has since been moved to the larger Folsom Lake, where there is rowing space and infrastructure to accommodate larger crowds. Sebastian Bea, a St. Ignatius graduate and silver medallist at the 2000 Olympics in Australia, put his first oar in the water at Lake Merced.

Rowers are the latest contingent of lake users to jump into the fray over the lake's declining water lev-

"Struggling for Survival," a Lake Merced photo essay, begins on page 12A.

els, which is currently estimated to be about half of its historic volume.

Fishermen have been complaining for years. In March 1988, the concessionaire who ran the boat rental and tackle shop at the lake's shore, and organized several annual fishing competitions, asked the city to work on correcting the declining lake levels. As a result, the San Francisco Water Department has been studying problems at the lake since 1992. Various agencies have been involved since, including the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC), Department of Recreation and Parks and the Board of Supervisors, but as of yet, no permanent solution has been found.

"The water level has definitely declined," said Tom Abbott, the head of the men's rowing program at St. Ignatius, who rows

Struggling for Survival



Members of the St. Ignatius rowing team hone their skills Friday afternoon.



Viewed from Harding Road, the sun peaks through the clouds, providing an opportunity for rowers to enjoy an afternoon of exercise on Lake Merced.

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on the lake six mornings a week. "The level of the lake water has dropped dramatically. SI has had to rebuild longer and longer ramps to get to the water. There is a lot more algae and bacteria, and things like leeches [are] in the water. Kids are afraid to go in.

"The lake still gets stocked with fish every year. But for the fish, I hear it's really a cruelty-to-animals situation," said Abbott, who has been rowing on Lake Merced for over 20 years. "There isn't enough oxygen or food in the lake because the water is too warm. So not only are the fish suffocating, but they are also reduced to bottom feeding because they are starving."

"The slope of the ramp going down to the lake is treacherous, and has become dangerous to the kids and the equipment," said Tarantola, a mother who got involved with Pacific Rowing Club when her oldest son began rowing as freshman at Lowell High, and has served in a number of positions for the club, including president several times. "It's a float-

ing dock. And with the lake level going lower, the slope of the dock gets steeper and steeper.

"The water smells bad. The water is obviously stagnant, and no one is fond of getting wet," continued Tarantola. "It's a tradition that if a team wins, they throw the coxswain, the tiny person in back of the boat telling everyone what to do, into the water. At Lake Merced, every [coxswain] strenuously objects."

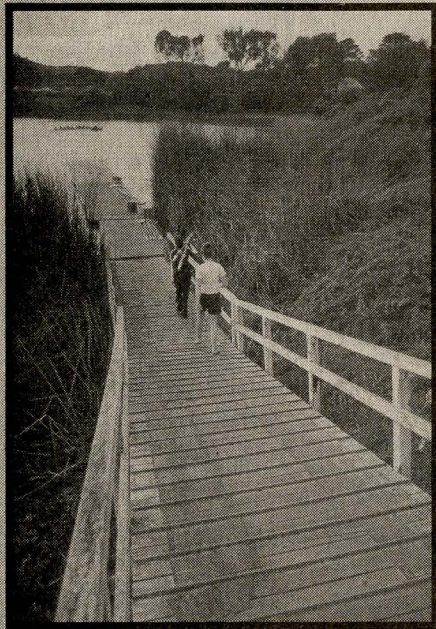
Though a coalition of various groups who have interests in the lake and the water that feeds it, including representatives from the SFPUC, the agency that has jurisdiction over Lake Merced's water levels, the golf courses, and environmentalists, have been meeting as the Lake Merced Task Force for the last year to find solutions that will satisfy all lake users, California Trout (CalTrout) filed a petition in January against several local and state water agencies, as well as all the surrounding golf courses, the Colma cemeteries and large grass keepers including Golden Gate Park, San Francisco State University, and the San Francisco Zoo, to bring all parties to a bargaining table to expedite the finding of a solution.

CalTrout's petition alleges that it is the pumping of the groundwater that resides in a natural aquifer that runs from underneath Golden Gate Park to the San Francisco International Airport by these various entities that is draining the lake dry. CalTrout wants recycled water to be used for irrigation projects as soon as possible. Currently no recycled water is available in San Francisco.

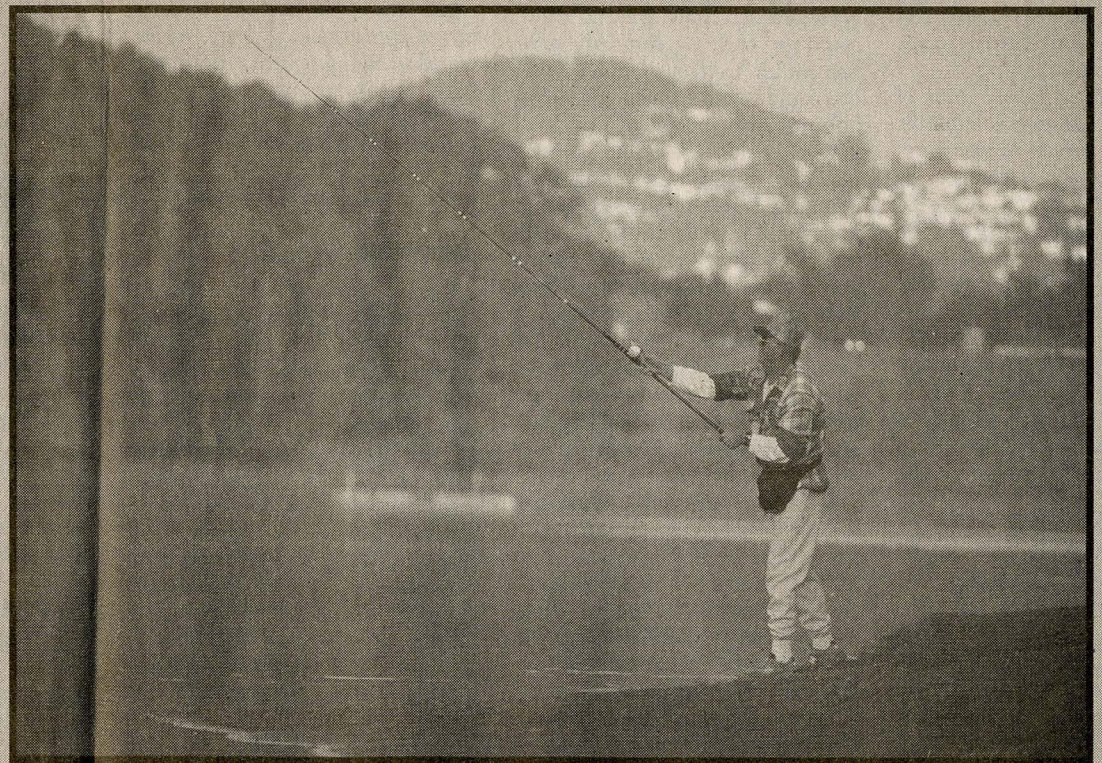
The water levels at the lake are currently at levels of 17 to 18 feet, down from the SFPUC mandated levels of 25 to 27 feet, set forth in a SFPUC resolution made in 1950, which determined that to be the minimum acceptable level to satisfy all the uses of the lake, which not only include recreation, but being an emergency 10-day supply of drinking water for San Francisco. At present levels, the lake is dropping more than six inches a year. As water levels drop, the rate at which the lake is lowering could become accelerated.

"Getting Lake Merced fixed is so important to me that it was one of my campaign issues," said Supervisor Tony Hall. "This CalTrout suit has definitely put a little heat under all the parties. I hope that we can broker a solution in the next few months."

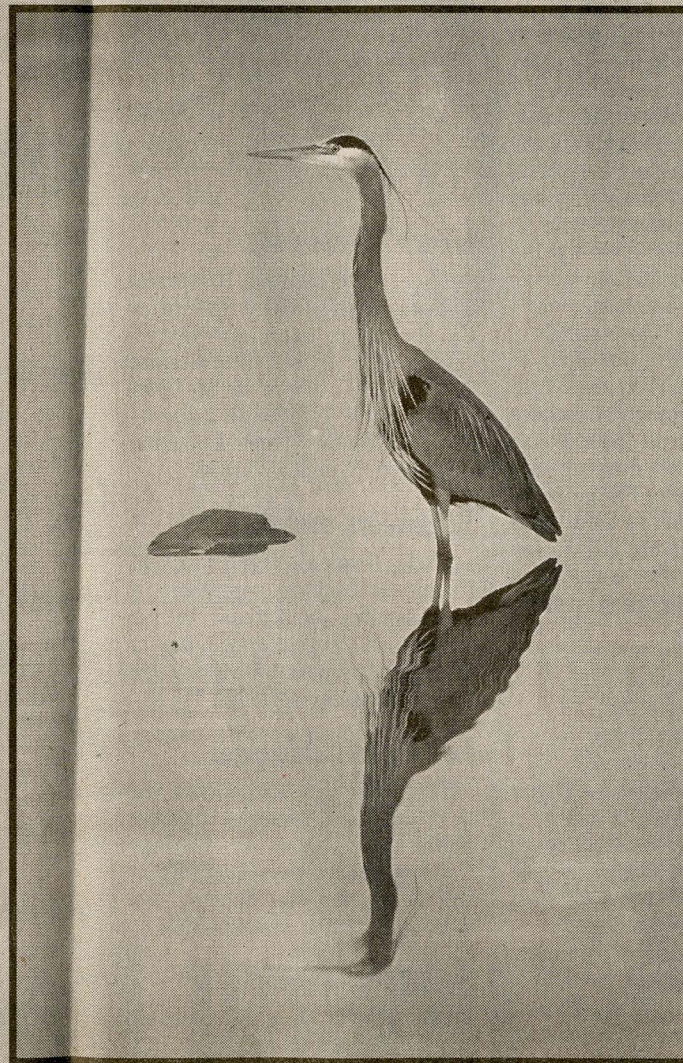
CalTrout, a group dedicated to preserving California's freshwater ecosystems, is best known for the lawsuit to restore Mono Lake in Los Angeles County. The group's lawsuits, known in legal circles as Cal Trout1 and Cal Trout2, helped set major precedents that many hope will be instrumental to restoring Lake Merced.



Lake enthusiasts journey down one of Lake Merced's many piers.



Jim Wilson casts his line into Lake Merced's North Lake, as he has done for 20 years.



A wading bird is reflected in the tranquil surface of Lake Merced.

Lake Merced meeting set

Friends of Lake Merced, the Committee to Save Lake Merced and other organizations will hold a public meeting at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, March 3, at the Boathouse Restaurant, 1 Harding Drive.

The purpose of the meeting is to have representatives of California Trout provide information regarding CalTrout's petition to the State of California seeking to raise the water level at Lake Merced. Information will be provided as to how citizens can assist in the efforts to save Lake Merced, including future participation in the proceedings by CalTrout.

For more information, visit www.caltrout.org and www.lakemerced.org.

Photography by
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