Restoring the Lost Fishery: An Environmental History of Northern Nevada’s Pyramid Lake and Lower Truckee River Fishery

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on fisheries managers’ efforts to restore native cutthroats to northern Nevada’s Pyramid Lake for recreation, and the Paiutes’ battle to preserve them as a means of livelihood. Their efforts to reconstruct the fishery revealed the implausibility of environmental restoration, but more importantly underlined the motivations necessary to attempt it.

Chapter 2 describes how the Pyramid Lake Lahontan cutthroat—historically an important subsistence resource for Northern Paiutes—were initially exploited for profit in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and gradually destroyed as agricultural interests diverted the Truckee River’s water and industrial pollution contaminated the trout’s aquatic habitat. Fisheries managers in Nevada turned to artificial propagation to meet the demands of fishermen and replace the native fish industrialization destroyed. The Nevada Fish and Game Commission experimented with non-native introductions and like most of the West became proponents of rainbow trout and their recreational potential.

Chapter 3 narrates a history of the Nevada Fish and Game Commission’s project to restore trout to Pyramid Lake in the 1950s and 1960s after its native cutthroat became extinct in the early 1940s. For the Commission, restoring Pyramid Lake meant establishing trout and salmon populations—native or not—to feed the growing outdoor tourism industry. While the Commission made plans to restore natural spawning runs, these were unsuccessful, and the Commission relied on stocking the lake to maintain the fishery. However, these experiments failed and eventually cutthroats from other lakes in Nevada proved better occupants of the lake.

Chapter 4 describes the native cutthroat’s role in the water debate carried out in government agencies and in the courts in the 1970s and 1980s to decide whether or not water diverted from the Truckee for agriculture should be returned to the Paiutes to support their shrinking lake and dwindling fishery. Environmentalist groups like the Sierra Club joined the Paiutes in their effort to gain water that would allow for the native fishery’s restoration. Their vision clashed with that of agriculturists who feared losing water they depended on for their crops. However, after a lengthy struggle, the Paiutes won an important victory toward preserving their lake.

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surface seepage. The lake name comes from the inspiring cone or pyramid-shaped tufa formations found in the lake and along the shores. The lake scenery is remarkable, surrounded by rare rock formations, have an important role in the history of the Paiute Indian tribe also adds to its mystique and many myths and tales surrounding it. These days, Pyramid Lake is part of the “National Scenic Byways Program” and the only byway in the country located completely within a tribal reservation. Tourists can get a sense of the Lake's significance to the tribe with a trip to the area of Paiute Tribe Museum and Visitors Center. The Truckee River is western Nevada's largest river. It supports a large sport fishing population each year. Kim Tisdale, of the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), is the state’s Western Regions Fishery Supervisor; she commented that NDOW's goal is for a catch rate of one to two fish per hour in the Truckee. It diverts water into the Truckee Canal that would otherwise enter Pyramid Lake. The canal feeds Lake Lahontan reservoir in the Carson River watershed, where it is used for irrigation. It was the first project of the newly organized U.S. Reclamation Service (known today as the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation), organized by the Reclamation Act of 1902. As a result of the diversion, Winnemucca Lake lost inflow and dried up, and Pyramid Lake lost.