

# The Lake Merritt Institute

*And CENTER FOR URBAN RUNOFF AND WATERSHED RESEARCH*

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**BIRD BATTLES – MAY COOLER HEADS PREVAIL:** A recent news article focusing on the goose problem at Lake Merritt appears to portend nasty disagreements when hearings for the bird management plan begin later this year. It doesn't have to be that way. Rather than slinging unfounded generalizations and mud, why not discuss realistic approaches and compromises based on fact?

The Chronicle's Jon Carroll may have mounted a high horse for his January 18th article, but he should beware of tilting at windmills. His assertions that poison could be used, that dog based control measures would impact all the birds and that there are no goose feces on docks are fall unfounded, and serve only to mis-direct the issue. The Institute office overlooks the main boat docks and yes, there are goose feces (a lot of them) on the docks daily. The fact that they are hosed off into the Lake every day only means that they contribute to high bacterial levels in the water. As for poison, who ever mentioned that? I cannot imagine poison ever being considered for waterfowl at Lake Merritt. As for dogs, they are specifically trained not to bother species other than the one being controlled, in this case geese, and they never come in contact with them.

In an email response to an Institute member, Mr. Carroll impugned the bird disease problem and low oxygen levels in the Lake as excuses used by managers to justify controlling geese. Although this newsletter article is based on a verbal account of the exchange (this editor has not seen the actual email) it is sad that the dialogue appears to have gone down this road. The truth is that in 1999 the US Environmental Protection Agency declared the beneficial uses of Lake Merritt (including use by wildlife – including geese) to be impaired due to low oxygen levels. Subsequent monitoring and state review have confirmed this listing. At times the Lake has oxygen levels so low that dead zones develop along the bottom, which is not good. Is all the low oxygen due to too many goose feces? No.

Are too many goose feces a factor adding to the oxygen problem? Yes. Shifting the blame to other sources of the problem does not solve the problem. Pointing a finger to other leaks and saying leave my leak alone is like saying your end of the boat is sinking.

As for disease being a manager's scare tactic, avian botulism HAS occurred at Lake Merritt; several times. It is true that an overpopulation of geese is not the sole reason for these or other diseases that have happened and can occur again, and that other species are also a problem. But does this mean we should control all the other species and leave the geese alone to multiply



unchecked?

The City's response to this issue is appropriate. As recommended in the Lake Merritt Master Plan, a bird management study will be prepared by un-biased, outside professionals. It will focus on geese, but will also include pigeons, and will likely include other species (perhaps seagulls) as well. If all goes well (if the plan is based on sound science and not tilting at windmills or the extremism of animal rights activists) the plan will improve conditions for both birds and people. A sound plan will limit overpopulation of birds to levels that will lessen the potential for avian (and human) diseases. It will improve habitat for geese and other birds (perhaps by establishing areas for birds only – no people; and separate areas for people only – no birds). What Gandolf said can be good for the geese. "*You shall not pass*" barriers of low vegetation could be installed to keep them in their own areas. Then both sides will benefit. If the consultants do their job, they will recommend management practices designed to improve avian health (such as not feeding junk food to birds and limiting populations to healthy levels).

Let us hope that when hearings for the plan begin, they will be dominated by knowledgeable people dedicated to helping solve a problem, not just sweeping it under the rug.

**BAY TECH CHARTER SCHOOL – THEY CLEAN THE LAKE:** Its Friday, 3:30 pm. They would probably rather be playing video games or hanging out with their friends, but the After School Club from the Bay Area Technology School on Telegraph Avenue is out cleaning the Lake: Picking up trash from litterbugs. Under the supervision of Scott Roosevelt they get gloves, nets and trash bags from our "U-Clean-It" box at 1520 Lakeside Drive. Then they hit the beach, or the area north of the boathouse where too many homeless leave their bottles, cardboard and who knows what else. This school knows that community service builds character, and teaches students to respect public property, their property. A hearty thanks to this group. You are setting a good example for others and bringing pride to your school, and this community.

**WHAT DOES IT COST TO CLEAN UP LITTER?** A recent study in the City of Ventura revealed some startling statistics about what litterbugs cost us in taxpayers dollars. The study is part of a comprehensive litter cleanup and abatement program, a combined effort of that city's parks and roads departments. \$300,000 per year is being spent, in addition to an aggressive volunteer program in conjunction with Keep California Beautiful (KCB). With a population of 102,574 and an area of 21.41 square miles, the cost comes to \$2.92 per person, or about \$14,012 per square mile. In San Jose, the city has estimated their litter cleanup costs to be more than \$1 million dollars every year. That's a lot of money just to clean up after a few lazy people. *Litter louts are costing us big money. Why do we put up with them?*



*What begins as local litter often ends up in public waters, where it is carried far and wide downstream, polluting creeks, bays and the ocean along the way.*

*This trash washed into Lake Merritt on December 23<sup>rd</sup> after more than an inch and a half of rain.*

**LITTER ORDINANCE - A GOOD IDEA:** Recent proposals before the Oakland City Council for a litter tax are appropriate. The tax would not be that much of a financial burden on those businesses that generate the trash (hey, what's a clean street worth?) and would serve notice that Oakland is serious about keeping public property, storm drains, creeks and areas downstream free from trash. If this were Los Angeles, there would be a requirement to reduce trash in waterways to zero by 10% increments over ten years. Because this type of regulation may be coming to Oakland and other bay area cities in the not too distant future, this tax is a step in the right direction.

Its not just the areas around schools that are impacted by fast food restaurants and similar trash generation companies. Litter heads bring the stuff with them and dump it out car windows in city parks. In Lakeside Park around Lake Merritt, there are new contributions every day. A tax to pay for its clean up is a much more practical solution than trying to arrest the crooks as they surreptitiously toss their half eaten food out into a darkened parking lot.

**PLASTIC BAG POLLUTION – WHAT OTHER COUNTRIES ARE DOING:** Along with cigarette butts and Styrofoam, plastic bags are among the most common trash item we remove from Lake Merritt. More than just an eyesore, these nasty items are not biodegradable, breaking into smaller pieces, but never completely decomposing. They are often mistaken for food by marine animals, especially sea turtles. To fight this scourge, some countries have approved tough measures:

- In Bangladesh – plastic bags have been banned completely. The government is promoting bags made of jute, a natural fiber.
- In Ireland – individual consumers are required to pay a 15 cent tax per plastic bag. This has resulted in an estimated 90% reduction in plastic bag use in the first year.
- In the European Union – member countries require manufacturers/producers of plastic bags and other plastic waste to take them back and recycle them.
- In Taiwan and South Africa – both countries prohibit the thinner plastic bags. This encourages people to bring their own bags since retailers can't afford to provide the more expensive, thicker plastic bags for free.

Thanks to [www.earthsource.org](http://www.earthsource.org) for this information.

**DD FOUNTAIN TO BE INSTALLED:** It has taken quite a while, but another of the Measure DD promises is about to be fulfilled. A new aeration fountain will be installed at the mouth of Glen Echo Creek, by Grand and Harrison streets. Its flow will be of the same size and pattern as the fountain at East 18<sup>th</sup> Street, and it will replace the original Institute fountain that was installed there in 1999. The schedule calls for installation in March when once again pollutants from the Glen Echo watershed will be at least partially ameliorated by the dancing waters.



*Lake Merritt's first fountain was initially installed at El Embarcadero in about 1996. It was moved to the mouth of Glen Echo Creek in January, 1999, and appeared as shown here in the summer of 2002. It was removed in April, 2004.*

*Funded by Measure DD, a new fountain will be installed here in March, 2006.*

**MONTHLY BIRD REPORT – By correspondent Hilary Powers. January-Signs of Spring Already:**

The American Coots (black water birds with white beaks), normally the grumpiest of the lake's regulars, are beginning to groom one another tenderly, and the Goldeneyes (black-headed ducks with white cheek patches) are into their mating dances, swimming around the islands and pointing their beaks at the sky.

Participants on the fourth -Wednesday Golden Gate Audubon Society bird walk (meets by the globe cage at 9:30 a.m.) saw 42 species of birds this month. Two Red-breasted Mergansers (long slinky ducks with two crests, one behind the other) were swimming near the islands, along with a Ring-necked Duck (black head and back; no ring visible around the neck, but a nice white one on the beak). Also observed were the gray-backed Scaup, red-headed Canvasbacks, and the usual crew of Buffleheads, Grebes (four different kinds!), and Ruddy Ducks (the ones that look like little swimming teapots).

Across the street in the park, the trees were flitting with Bushtits (picture flying mice), and the Anna's Hummingbirds (the green ones) have begun to mate (we even got a good look at a hen hummingbird in her nest).

And the lake is once again the home of a White Pelican, apparently a rescue bird, being made much of by the park staff.



*Somewhere out here is a tufted duck.*



*Hmm, what's in there?*



*Ready, set, chase a fish.*

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