

# The Lake Merritt Institute

A COMMUNITY BASED, NON-PROFIT CORPORATION

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## **WATER, THE DROUGHT, AND LAKE MERRITT**

"Water: We turn a faucet, and it is there for drinking, something we take completely for granted. So commonplace is water in our daily lives that we are indifferent to it and have been for a long time. Years ago, Rachel Carson wrote that "in an age when man has forgotten his origins and is blind even to his most essential needs for survival, water along with other resources has become the victim of his indifference." Of all the resources that we rely on for survival in today's world, water is the least appreciated and certainly the most misunderstood. For generations, we in the industrial West have just assumed that fresh drinking water is ours to enjoy and to use with dazzling promiscuity in any way we wish. This shouldn't surprise us in an urban age when almost everyone buys their food as packaged commodities from supermarkets, in an era when many city children never see a cow except in pictures. Water is like beef, milk, and pasta, an integral part of our lives that we never think about – a great mistake." (From *Elixir* by Brian Fagan, 2011).



*Will a severe El Nino save, or deluge us?*

A great mistake indeed. As the California drought grinds on in its fourth year, we are reminded that water, like climate, peace, and sustenance, are not things that we should assume are ours to use indiscriminately. As cities across our state struggle to reduce their consumption and as farmers suffer, the drought continues. And although pumps and electricity have tamed gravity as water's controlling force, we have not tamed water from the skies, which is the ultimate source of fresh water. When the rains stop and the fossil ground water is depleted, the land and its people can become inhospitable, even parched, as is increasingly happening now in many parts of the world, including the American southwest (see "A Great Aridness" by William deBuys, 2011). To date, our engineering and wealth have excused some of us from this fate, but there are limits to both. Tree

rings tell us that droughts far greater than we have experienced have occurred in the past. Entire civilizations have fallen due to such changes in the climate. Which will win out – drought or engineering and wealth - is a question that should be continually asked.

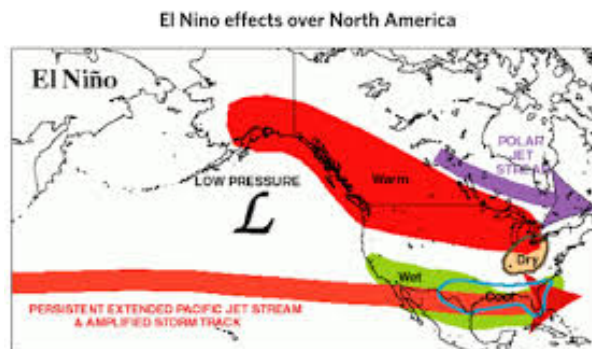
Merritt's Lagoon is a salt water lake, having a source of water other than the rain. As such, it is immune to the vagaries of our drought. Or is it? With minimal rainfall the water stays saltier, and perhaps this is why we have not seen widgeon grass for many years. But the real lesson of water/drought/Lake is that we cannot take any of these for granted. Yes, Lake Merritt will always be here (or at least until sea level rises 20 feet or more) as it has been since the end of the last ice age. But it may not be the same. Consider what the Lake was like before discovery by our ancestors; before sewage was diverted to treatment plants, before it's tidal levels were tamed by the flood control gates, before the Lake Merritt Institute began frequent removal of trash, and before measure DD again transformed the shoreline.

Consider now what the future may bring. We do not know, but we can hope. Hope that our volunteer base will continue to scoop up trash; hope that Measure DD improvements will continue; hope that litterbugs and storm drain dumpers will see the evil of their ways; hope that the county will relent and install remote control of the tide gates; hope that the city can find funds for a digital tide data recorder; hope that smokers will use ash trays; hope that Styrofoam peanuts will follow plastic bags into oblivion; and last but not least, hope that membership funding will continue to allow us to maintain the aeration fountains.

So be not indiscriminate. Take not the Lake for granted. Be hopeful and helpful. Water, the drought, and Lake Merritt will be better for these things you do.

## CLIMATE CORNER

Yes, there have been droughts before, and yes, the rains are likely to come again, someday, followed by other periods of no rain. Yes, there are natural cycles. But many who study such things are worried; concerned that this is different; that the forces which control where deserts are located are shifting them north as the Earth's climatic Hadley cells expand, dropping dry air further from the equator. El Nino may yet save many a farm this winter, but can just as easily bring calamitous floods and destruction. Who would have thought that many would be praying for such a deluge to happen. But what of the decades to come after El Nino? What of the people who do not know what an El Nino is, or how our climate is created? Are we as a civilization knowledgeable enough to understand when we are changing natural forces, to comprehend how, to act in unison for the best interests of all people, to accomplish what needs to be done, and humble enough to change our ways?



We Need Climate Education: Nothing that civilization does happens without education. Raise a child without it and he will revert back to a more primitive lifestyle. Provide no information and bad things will happen (think of Romans using lead goblets). Provide inaccurate or misleading information, and people will go astray (think the using leeches to quell a fever). Consider now what the average student (adults included) is learning about climate disruption. Is your child being taught why our planet is warming, and what the consequences (now and during their lifetimes) will be? Do you understand why we are now locked into decades or centuries of sea level rise? Are our policy makers (and voters) educated enough to choose paths to slow the inexorable increase

of carbon in the atmosphere? Too often, the answer to these questions is a resounding NO.

What Kind of Education? Changing educational standards is a lengthy and compromising task; one that is currently not bringing climate education to the masses. Television and mass media have proven inadequate for the task, and indeed can be our worst enemy when presenting scientific certainty as a debate. Social media are useful, but do those leading it know enough to provide the right answers, or are they just promoting their own biases? How then are future generations to learn what is needed to understand our current drought, to discern how it is influenced by the impact of our use of fossil fuels on global climate, and to realize the scope and intensity of what needs to be done to avoid the catastrophic impacts of agricultural disruption, loss of water supply and ocean acidification?

Enter the Climate Museum: But what if every student could take a field trip to a climate museum? What if student by student, class by class, generation by generation, future members of our society could learn these things, unencumbered by political interference, corporate influence, or self-serving denialists? Then we would have the opportunity to slow climate disruption, to avoid the worst of its disasters, and to cope with what we have created. Little such museum education now exists, the best examples being in Germany, Miami, San Diego and Hong Kong. Too many exhibits have come, and gone. Too many exhibits leave us believing that driving an electric car, recycling or trading carbon credits will save us.

A new program is needed; one that can bring climate education to the masses, especially to youth via class field trips. We need climate education museums, centers where discussions can occur daily, scientifically vetted information can be disseminated, and where people can come together to create policy and action. In the future, watch these pages to follow the possible progress of such an endeavor.

**WELCOME NOW:** Welcome your new co-directors of the Institute, Carl Bailey, and James Robinson. Both have years of experience with cleaning the lake and maintaining the aeration fountains, *which are the nuts and bolts of running the Institute and mainly what we are paid for by the City*. They are now learning the accounting, membership and other details. And you can help, if you have any super, lake related photographs that you simply must share, email them on over.

### **ADVICE FROM A LAKE**

- Stay calm
- Take time to reflect
- Shore up friendships
  - Be full of life!
  - Be clear;
- Make positive ripples
- Look beneath the surface.

(2008, [www.YourTrueNature.com](http://www.YourTrueNature.com) and 2008 EarthSunMoons).

Look for this advice on new, gray hats that Institute employees Jesse, James, and Carl may be wearing around the Lake. Such advice can also be found on T-shirts (see citation above).

### **BIRD COLUMN: Mussel Bandits at Lake Merritt**

The July fourth-Wednesday Golden Gate Audubon bird walk watched two adult raccoons work their way nonchalantly around the island nearest the nature center, pulling mussels and other eatables off the rocks along the edge of the water. A first - we knew the park houses a number of coons, but they'd never let themselves be seen in the open before. At one point, they crossed under a bush containing not one but three barely-fledged

Green Herons, so young their heads were still fuzzy and their beaks a mottled orange. The coons didn't look up and the herons didn't look down, but a Snowy Egret swooped into the same bush, sending two of the herons flapping into the undergrowth and the third into the water (where it safely waded to shore).

Both White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants were fishing in flotillas, while Caspian Terns (the big white ones with the cocktail-frank beaks) cruised overhead and dive-bombed for breakfast. Meanwhile, a juvenile Belted Kingfisher (recognizable by having orange flanks but no orange belt) sat lookout on one of the old snags on the island - a surprise, as kingfishers rarely put in an appearance while the cormorants are nesting.

Out by the lawn bowling not-very-greens, the crows were holding a convention, so we headed over there in hopes of finding some sort of raptor whose life they were making a misery. We arrived in time to see a Red-shouldered Hawk plunge out of the tree and barely miss a crow, which it proceeded to chase up into the branches - a pleasant reversal of the usual harassment pattern.

A light day in terms of species count - only 29 - but no one on the walk felt short-changed. It was chilly and windy but still all in all a good day at Lake Merritt, where when you get right down to it, every day is a good day....

## RECENT SCENES FROM THE LAKE



*Carl removes trash: Feathers, and more feathers.*



*Thank goodness the city banned most plastic bags. Otherwise we might resemble this scene in the Philippines!*

*Editor's note: We still find too many bags in the Lake.*

*Remember: Real men don't use plastic bags (real women as well).*

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