

Opinion: TRPA thresholds mostly being met

By Claire Fortier

Seven years, countless meetings and 2,500 pages later, the TRPA draft Regional Plan update and supporting documents are finally ready for your reading enjoyment. While not the action-packed read of a Harry Potter or dark pleasure of "Fifty Shades of Grey," the four tomes of the TRPA have some unexpected plot twists.

Key among those surprises is the Threshold Evaluation Study, a report I consider the prelude to the Regional Plan because understanding what worked well environmentally after the 1987 Regional Plan helps inform us what needs attention in the new plan. This review, which was done at the behest of California, examined 151 standards of measurement for nine threshold categories, which include fish habitat, wildlife habitat, vegetation, soil conservation, scenic resources, air quality, water quality, noise and recreation.



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What the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency found was comforting, concerning and confounding.

First comforting: 63 percent of the thresholds mandated under the TRPA compact have not further degraded the environment nor were impacted by humans in the basin. Moreover, 29 percent of

indicators were considered improved or improving.

Only 8 percent were labeled as trends of concern. Those focused on water quality and noise. But more on those later.

In the meantime, the fish seem to be swimming and spawning unhampered. With the recent introduction of the Lahontan cutthroat trout, a major TRPA milestone was realized. But the cutthroat presents a new conundrum – every new project or rebuild, from water quality collection to road repairs, will now have to consider its impacts on our newly “endangered” species.

The peregrine falcon is back, as are the osprey and northern goshawk. The goshawk seems to have surprised scientists. They are more seasonal visitors than constant residents, returning when their kind of food is plentiful and leaving when its not.

The vegetation of the Tahoe basin appears to be blooming quite well. Although old-growth forest, essentially eliminated during the Comstock era, is meeting Mother Nature’s schedule, it’s not adhering to the man-made threshold schedule. It could take a century or more before new growth becomes old-growth.

The other surprise is that the endangered Tahoe yellow cress is only endangered in wet weather or high lake levels. During dry seasons and low lake levels, the yellow cress is as plentiful as the dandelions in my front yard.

Soil conservation has shown great improvement, except in one area, stream restoration zones. Restoring those zones is one of the critical issues in the proposed Regional Plan. But it is very difficult to convince someone to remove their home or business from an SEZ, particularly if it has been there for decades, without significant incentives.

Breathe deeply: our air is even fresher than before, thanks to cleaner burning cars and fewer visitors.

Scenic thresholds are improving, but exactly what that means eludes me. While there are benchmarks for scenic improvement, I still believe beauty or ugly is in the eye of the beholder. While no one in Tahoe is seeking Las Vegas gaudy as a standard for our lake, I do believe this threshold is simply leveraged for anyone who does not want change in the basin.

In short, seven out of the nine thresholds are in good shape and getting better.

Which leaves us with the concerning ones. The first is water quality. Aside from the Secchi dish standard, or mid-lake water clarity, there are significant near shore problems. With all the scientists involved at Lake Tahoe, few, it seems, are dipping their toes in the water that most people see, feel and play in on a daily basis. There is some move afoot to focus on near shore, but this needs far more attention than we have given to it.

The other area that is out of compliance is noise. This topic is extensive and one I hope to address in much more detail. But, in short, any noise, even a single event like a noisy motorcycle or the South Lake Tahoe's air fest, puts us out of compliance with the noise standard.

Noise was a significant area of concern in the threshold peer review, where scientists from outside the basin looked over the threshold study. They thought the noise standard was simply impossible to obtain and poorly measured.

Which brings me to my final category: confounding. What is absolutely confounding to me is the recreation threshold. While every other threshold has a multitude of qualifiers, recreation has two: Are there recreational opportunities and are they available to most people? The answer to both is yes. In other words, as long as people can get to the lake or the woods that threshold is met.

Compared to standards that the goshawks and yellow cress

enjoy, recreation seems an afterthought. But the message is clear. Thresholds were never intended to include humans in the mix, and that is a fundamental flaw of basing all planning on threshold attainment.

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