

# Opinion: Lake Tahoe on the path to recovery

By Joanne Marchetta

In a stream not far from the stage on which a group of Tahoe's most staunch legislative supporters gathered on Monday for the 17th annual Lake Tahoe Summit, fish are swimming freely in a naturalized channel after a roughly 50-year hiatus. Incline Village residents have reported seeing the fish navigating clear, cold pools in Third Creek miles upstream from its inlet to Lake Tahoe. Trout, minnows and Tahoe's own land-locked salmon have returned after completion of a multi-agency restoration project spearheaded by Incline Village General Improvement District that targeted multiple fish barriers and eroding banks. The project restored the stream bed and floodplains to near-natural conditions, and pedestrian bridges were installed to reduce the informal creek crossings that were causing bank erosion.

With all the discussion and news about the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act and coverage of a historic Lake Tahoe Summit event this year at Sand Harbor, I wanted to give you the big picture of the plan to restore Lake Tahoe by describing how just one exemplary project has improved the ecosystem.



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While there have been many environmental successes of which we

can be proud, there is still work to do and residents and property owners are going to play an increasingly important role.

The Third Creek restoration project is just one of more than 400 environmental projects that have been completed basinwide since 1997, the year that TRPA and basin partners chartered the new environmental investment strategy for Tahoe – the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program. The program is one of the most comprehensive regional scale restoration efforts in the nation.

The EIP as we call it was first imagined soon after the first Regional Plan was adopted by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency in the 1980s. We saw that regulations alone were not achieving the ambitious environmental targets set for Tahoe. Most of the environmental damage comes from an outdated transportation network, the tens of thousands of existing homes and businesses built without water quality controls and the loss of 75 percent of Tahoe's marshes to development.

To restore Lake Tahoe's land, air and water will take more than growth control and design standards for new buildings.

This recognition and the need for urgent action galvanized support to charter the first Lake Tahoe Summit in 1997. Then President Bill Clinton and Vice President Gore convened here with state and local leaders and the heads of more than 50 organizations to create a collaborative partnership of the public and private sectors. Under the EIP, hundreds of projects have been completed improving water quality, reducing hazardous fuels, improving air quality through transportation and bike trail improvements, along with scenic and recreation enhancements. With each project, whether it be one property owner installing stormwater infiltration and erosion control measures or the opening of a new bikeway, there comes an instant recapturing of environmental glory.

On a spectator-packed hillside at Nevada's Sand Harbor State Park, some distance south of the pure, cold pools of Third Creek, about 1,000 people gathered Aug. 19 to help mark the accomplishments of this truly ambitious program. On stage were many of the same leaders who helped usher in the first EIP – Gore, and Sens. (Harry) Reid, and (Dianne) Feinstein among others.

Top officials from myriad agencies like the EPA, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers joined local leaders like myself not only to mark the 15th anniversary of the Lake Tahoe EIP, but also to recommit our efforts to the successful completion of the program.

After nearly \$1.7 billion of investment from the public and private sectors since that first Tahoe Summit the alarming decline in lake clarity has flattened and the average clarity is now the best it has been in 10 years. However, we know we are not done and there are significant challenges ahead. While much of the investment in the past 15 years has been in public restoration projects, private sector investments in erosion control and stormwater best management practices are still needed on approximately 25,000 properties. TRPA has improved regulations to encourage more home improvements and has created regulatory incentives that will bring sensitive land restoration with redevelopment.

Join us in answering Al Gore's call to action – become actively engaged and discover your part to ensure that Lake Tahoe's waters run clear, our forests are healthy, and we leave a legacy of conservation and cooperation for those who come after us.

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