

Opinion: It pays to invest in the environment

By Joanne Marchetta

At Lake Tahoe, we know our natural resources are one of our most valuable assets, and that's why we have worked for decades to conserve and restore them. The natural wonders of the Jewel of the Sierra and the opportunities they afford are why we live here, and why millions of visitors travel here to enjoy the Tahoe basin each year.

People around the world are coming to a similar realization about the Earth's natural resources. They are working to understand the true economic value of nature and the resources and services it provides, and to better incorporate those values into policy decisions for a more sustainable future.



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This is a shift away from the historic mismanagement of natural resources for short-term gain, but otherwise long-term detriment. This happened at Tahoe during the Comstock era and the building boom in the run up to the 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley. People are instead today taking the longer view of nature as a form of wealth, and realizing our health and prosperity will depend upon conservation and the wise management of resources.

A recent *Washington Post* article called out a new study from the National Academy of Sciences publishing a formula for computing the price of nature. This idea of “natural capital” espoused by the Nature Conservancy and many other groups means recognizing and valuing the many ways that we all benefit from healthy, functioning landscapes and ecosystems, and pricing those values into decisions about their use, management, conservation, and restoration.

Even without the economists’ latest formula, we know it makes sense to invest in the health of Tahoe’s environment. People who support the Lake Tahoe region have long recognized and treasured the value of Tahoe’s natural splendor, and are working cooperatively to conserve it and restore it as our greatest capital asset. Tahoe’s natural wealth is immense and awe inspiring. Our mountain lake is one of the deepest and clearest lakes in the world, holding 39 trillion gallons of incredibly pure fresh water. We have majestic mountains world-renowned for skiing, hiking, and mountain biking, expansive forests, streams, marshes, and wildlife. Tahoe’s natural splendor makes it a national treasure, a special place on Earth. It’s the “natural capital” that drives the economic activity our communities depend upon.

Environmental restoration and recreational enhancements are the focus of the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program. It’s one of the most ambitious restoration programs in the nation, and is a model for collaboration and environmental investment because of its success. Since its launch in 1997, local, state, and federal governments and private sector partners have invested \$1.8 billion into projects to improve water quality and forest health, restore environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife habitat, fight invasive species, and improve recreation opportunities.

Broad recognition that nature is Tahoe’s greatest capital asset is also why we’re seeing bipartisan support for the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2015. Versions of the bill have

cleared committees in both chambers of Congress, and we are optimistic our legislators will compromise to enact this important piece of legislation. It would authorize up to \$415 million in federal funding over 10 years for important environmental restoration and conservation work to continue at Tahoe, and to leverage these values with continued local, state, and private sector investment.

Environmental conservation and restoration are front and center in our Regional Plan. The plan is working to remove outdated legacy development from environmentally-sensitive areas, and to restore those areas so they filter polluted stormwater runoff while at the same time revitalizing our town centers.

The health of Tahoe's environment is also the primary focus of our strategic initiatives at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. The work of our partner agencies to remove hazardous fuels from our forests will improve forest health and reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire. Ramping up our control program to fight invasive species will keep them from doing more harm to our lake. Reducing stormwater pollution will improve water quality and restore lake clarity. And re-examining and updating our threshold standards, development commodities system, and permitting programs will facilitate the kind of redevelopment our environment and communities need.

At Lake Tahoe, there is no doubt that nature is an irreplaceable capital asset. The health of our environment and our economy are directly linked. Please join us in continuing to invest in the conservation and restoration of Tahoe's environment. We know it's the right thing to do, for those of us who enjoy Tahoe's splendor today and for future generations.

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