

Future looks bright for Tahoe yellow cress

By Tom Lotshaw

In the late 1990s, Tahoe yellow cress, a small flowering plant that grows only on the sandy shores and creek mouths of Lake Tahoe, was teetering on the brink of extinction. Surveys done in 1996 found the plant gone from all of the beaches it had once occupied in Nevada and growing at fewer than 10 sites in California after a lengthy period of high lake levels.

In the years since, populations have rebounded, and today the plant has a much brighter future. That's due in part to a collaborative, basinwide conservation strategy that was launched in 2001 with regulatory and land management agencies, private property owners, and the public all working together to protect a species found nowhere else in the world.

The strategy is working. Last October, after a lengthy review, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that Tahoe yellow cress does not warrant listing as a federally endangered or threatened species, saving the basin and its property owners from a new level of federal regulations to protect the unique native plant.



A basinwide conservation strategy has helped Tahoe yellow cress rebound to where it is no longer considered endangered or threatened. Photo/Tom Lotshaw

The Tahoe partnership's work to protect Tahoe yellow cress has "truly exemplified the most basic function of the Endangered Species Act—to protect and conserve ecosystems and the species that depend upon them," the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said. "They have continued to raise the standards for the next generation of conservation and convinced us that Tahoe yellow cress has a bright future on the beautiful shores of Lake Tahoe."

The plant has always had a precarious existence, growing only at the margins of a single lake where it became geographically isolated at some point during Lake Tahoe's 2-million-year history. To grow and reproduce, populations must shift up and down the beach each year with ever-changing water levels. The plant also faces continual threats from beach trampling and beach raking at Tahoe's heavily-visited shoreline.

Public agencies have worked to protect the sandy beaches and the creek mouths where Tahoe yellow cress grows and have also repopulated sites with plantings. But with half of Tahoe's 75 miles of shoreline privately owned, private property owners are also playing a key role in protecting the plant.

The Tahoe Lakefront Owners Association has worked with its many members for 20 years to help provide sanctuary for the plant, and to get people to recognize that it's a positive thing, not a negative thing, to have it growing on their private property, Director Jan Brisco said.

"I think we're getting closer to having that safe harbor. We've had many people step up wanting to become Tahoe yellow cress stewards and offering their property for surveys or

plantings so we can keep the plant alive and thriving along the shores,” Brisco said. “Every spring I go out to my members with information to remind them when they are cleaning up to be careful about the plants. We are really excited how well we’ve done to be where we are today.”

Tahoe yellow cress is part of Tahoe’s unique natural environment, and a shining conservation success story for one of the many rare and unique plants struggling to survive in California and Nevada.

“It’s such a great group of resource managers, scientists, and private property owners who have come together to protect this plant,” said Alison Stanton, an independent botanist who has helped guide the Tahoe yellow cress conservation strategy and restoration work since 2002.

Despite the success of the conservation strategy and the more than a dozen partners in the Tahoe Yellow Cress Adaptive Management Working Group, the hardy little yellow plant that calls Lake Tahoe home will always require protection and awareness due to its extremely limited range and habitat.

“It’s a unique plant growing at a single lake so the stakes are high for it. Our work is not done. We have to continue to implement the conservation strategy and the stewardship program or we’ll find ourselves right back in the same place,” Stanton said.

*Tom Lotshaw is the public information officer for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. This story first appeared in **Tahoe In Depth**.*