

National park status always eluded Lake Tahoe



Lake Tahoe was considered for national park status multiple times. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

One of the perks of being director of the National Park Service is being able to check in on the land you manage. So it should be no surprise Stephen Mather was in Lake Tahoe on Friday giving a talk about his agency.

But Lake Tahoe isn't a national park and Mather died in 1930.

Steve Hale – aka Mather – regaled hikers at Van Sickle Bi-State Park about the multiple unsuccessful quests to make this area part of the park system. Mather was the first director of the park service after it was established in 1916.



Steve Hale as Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service. Photo/Kathryn Reed

On a visit to the area in 1919 Mather came across hundreds of people inside and outside a Fallen Leaf Lake lodge listening to a talk about birds. He was taken aback that people would be so enthralled by such a thing.

Watching the spectacle gave him an idea. That one incident is what led to what is now the ranger talks at national parks in the United States.

Mather wanted to start by introducing the American public to the animals in the parks, while he also realized there could be so many more educational talks.

It was in 1920 that Yosemite National Park launched the ranger programs.



The waterfall at Van Sickle Bi-state Park on Nov. 25.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

This hike on Nov. 25 was part of the Tahoe Rim Trail Association's quest to get people outdoors instead of shopping on Black Friday. Eighteen people partook in the jaunt through the South Shore park to the new bridge at the waterfall.

Hale (as Mather) stopped along the route a few times to transport people back to the last century. When he wasn't giving a history lesson it was one of the four TRT guides – usually trail leader Jim Mrazek – talking about the state park the group was hiking in.

Development at Lake Tahoe is primarily what kept derailing the various attempts to make it a national park. The shoreline was deteriorating in the late 1800s as loggers denuded the forest in order to build silver mines in Virginia City.

The California Assembly wanted the feds to take over Lake Tahoe in 1883, but that proposal failed.

In 1899 the basin was on the congressional radar. According to Hale/Mather, the deal unraveled after an article came out in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on Feb. 27, 1900, detailing how the land swap would benefit the Bliss family and the railroad interests more than the public.



Jim Mrazek, TRT guide, talks about the bridge that was built this year. Photo/Kathryn Reed

William Stewart, a senator from Nevada was a leader of this particular charge to make Tahoe a national park. The newspaper article, though, exposed how Stewart wanted to build a 12-foot-high dam in Tahoe City to benefit agriculture interests in his state.

The park idea for Tahoe died.

Five years later the area became a national forest.

But the idea of Tahoe as a national park flourished one more time – this time in 1913, the same year Hetch Hetchy was approved. To this day damming this pristine area to provide water for San Francisco still rankles many people.

Agricultural and commercial interests eventually outweighed all conservation efforts to make Lake Tahoe a national park.