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Who's Minding The Yosemite Region?

The beauty and ecological integrity of Yosemite are fragile. They are vulnerable not only to actions taken within the Park but also to those outside its borders. A couple of stories about trips across Yosemite will help make my point.

While in college, I worked in Yosemite Valley in the summers. About once a week I'd leave the Valley after work, heading for Tuolumne Meadows and fishing in the high country. At that time, the road was two lanes until about White Wolf, but from there on, the only way to get to Tuolumne Meadows was via the Tioga Mine Road: 21 miles of more or less single-lane asphalt with sharp curves, steep hills and switchbacks. The trick to getting there without the radiator boiling was to keep my '36 Ford at maximum speed in second gear, up hills and through curves come what may. Around any bend there could be a car stopped in the middle of the road, all doors open, with peasants (that's what we Curry Company employees called all tourists) photographing an unlucky deer.

The excitement of the trip was heightened by knowing that each evening, about the same time I started the climb up, the Standard Oil truck was leaving Tuolumne Meadows heading down, driven by another college kid who was about as reckless as I. Somewhere in the middle we would meet and I would have to pull the Ford behind the nearest boulder in a big hurry. The potential danger heightened awareness; I can still recall stretches of the old road: the terrain, the glacial polished granite, white caps on Tenaya Lake.

The old Mine Road was not only fun in itself, it served as a buffer between the easily accessible Valley floor and the more remote Tuolumne Meadows and fragile high country beyond.

Now, the Tioga Mine Road has been replaced by a well-engineered highway that makes the drive one of easy curves and sweeping vistas. That the highway is carefully designed to fit the landscape missed the point. It's the effect of the road that counts. Now, when you get to Tuolumne Meadows you meet the same crowd that you sought to escape from in the first place. Replacing the Mine Road was a big mistake in park planning, eroding the quality and variety of experience.

I've been flying a long time, but still marvel at how wooden wings and a fabric-covered fuselage wrapped around a high-performance engine can carry you high and fast over impassable terrain and give you a bigger picture than can be gotten on the ground. That's what I was thinking as we flew over the southwestern corner of Yosemite on our way to a conference on "The

State of the Sierra." From 11,000 feet, the topography appeared flattened and the grandeur of Wawona Dome greatly diminished.

Although we could see the full magnitude of the Park's protected area, we could also see how Yosemite National Park, large as it is, is only part of a larger ecological, social and economic environment. Along the Park's borders we could see dams, penstocks of hydropower plants, aqueducts, transmission lines, open-pit gold mines, new roads, clear-out logging, newly expanding gold rush towns, new subdivisions and isolated houses scattered amid the chaparral and timber.

I was flying with Rick Skinner, a state deputy attorney general who has worked hard to protect the Lake Tahoe Basin. We thought it ironic that the Tahoe region, with all its problems, is in some way better protected than the environment surrounding Yosemite. A single agency has jurisdiction over the Lake's entire watershed. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) has set regional environmental threshold carrying capacities and has the responsibility and power to enforce land use and environmental regulations, even over the objections of state and local government. The TRPA governing board has a representative appointed by the President to coordinate federal agencies responsible for land management and environmental controls.

The central Sierra Nevada has no such protection, in that responsibilities for planning and management are split among the several national parks, national forests and Bureau of Land Management districts as well as county governments, which are supposed to regulate development on private lands.

For the central Sierra, who's minding the store? Who's keeping track of the cumulative effects of road construction, logging, hydropower and suburbanization, all of which are closing in and cutting in? Who's modeling the long-range future of the region, looking at global climate change, regionally produced acid and nutrient rain and other impacts of the burgeoning Central Valley.

Somebody should be doing all these things. A regional agency, something like that at Lake Tahoe, should be responsible for monitoring and planning in the entire Central Sierra region.

Whether seen from the air or from the ground, Yosemite is beautiful, fragile and vulnerable. The designation of Yosemite as a National Park was a far-sighted, creative act. Perhaps now it is time to look to the future again, to protect not only the Park itself, but the broader environment around it.