

Hey folks,

Here's the latest TRPA newsletter by e-mail. I'll get the hard copy out asap.

The good news is, things are looking up to get Spring Lake Dae removed. We had a public meeting in San Marcos on April 1, and the overwhelming majority of folks there thought the most sensible thing for SWTSU to do would be to remove the dam. The funny part is that school administration present had to admit that they hadn't even considered such an option. The locals were kind of impressed with their ability to brainstorm.

I guess the neatest thing about this battle is the fact that it's a whole lot easier to kill legislation than it is to pass it (as we have only too well learned) and in this case, if we kill the appropriation of money to repair the dam the university may have no choice but to get rid of it.

Also, we have the support of the local conservatives, who are very concerned about spending \$10,000,000 on a dam that basically serves no purpose but being a pretty&

Texas Rivers

The April, 1999 newsletter of the Texas Rivers Protection Association
P.O. Box 219, Martindale, TX 78655

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The Legend of Aquarena Springs

Early Americans called it the Sacred Springs or the Dancing Waters. It was a place at the headwaters of what we now call the San Marcos River where subterranean water gushed forth from a large cavern. The water danced in such a way that one of the small fish that lived there became known as the Fountain Darter.

But white settlers had their way of taming such things as dancing waters. Our mission, in those early days was to subdue the earth. Some settlers were even known to cut down an entire pecan tree to harvest its nuts. The preservation of wilderness or nature was foreign to our great grandfathers.

So a dam was built. The waters ceased their dance. The dam was used to power machinery, like so many of the dams built on our rivers a century ago. A gin, an ice house, perhaps other uses. Until it became cheaper to power that machinery by other means.

And then the turbines stopped turning, but the lake remained.

Years went by. More men came with visions for the lake. Glass bottomed boats were brought in. A submarine theater was built. Eventually swimming pigs entertained crowds of spectators in the 60's, 70's, and 80's. But like the era of hydropower, the era of small tourist traps was ending. Now we have Fiesta Texas and Sea World to entertain our kids. Swimming pigs cannot hold a candle. So eventually the lake and its surrounding buildings were sold to the local state supported university.

Immediately after taking possession of the property, Southwest Texas State University (SWT) raised the level of the lake. One administrator stated that the extra water just made the lake look better. But the raising of the lake had another, devastating consequence. The extra head pressure of that new water had a marked effect on the river flow downstream. In the same way as turning off a hydrant, with enough pressure the springs could be fully suppressed. This organization (TRPA) notified the proper authorities, assuming the lake would be lowered in short order. Unfortunately, the proper authorities let us down and it wasn't until the TRPA hired lawyers, and technical experts and filed suit that the lake was returned to its original level.

SWT tried to maintain the property as a resort for a year or so, but attendance was not sufficient, the loss of money was too great and eventually the resort was closed.

So the University changed gears. Rather than owning a resort, they would consider the lake to be a laboratory and a showplace. Exhibits housing the endangered species that live in the river were built. Finally, a plan was conceived to enter into a kind of partnership with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TP&W) to create a River Center on the property which would draw visitors from all over the state. Interpretive exhibits were planned to show the public how aquifers and springs and rivers work. The plan was to build the new River Center in the same spot as some of the existing resort buildings.

Then came the big flood of October, 1998. Many of the old resort buildings received as much as four feet of water. This prompted TP&W to rethink the placement of new facilities at the River Center. Under the new plan, all of the old buildings except the hotel (which is on higher ground) are to be torn down. Even the paved parking lots on the peninsula are scheduled to be removed to allow a more natural ground cover to be established. The grounds of the River Center are to be much improved over what is there now. But what of the sleeping, dancing waters? Is there any hope that they can be freed from the tons of water and silt that compress them?

Yes, there is hope for the sacred springs. That same flood that will remove buildings and parking lots, also greatly damaged the White Man's dam.

How many obsolete dams strangle our rivers today? How many decaying concrete structures impound untold tons of rotting vegetation and sediment. How much silt lies at the bottom of long dead creeks and rivers? How many fish have we killed? How many kids? How many firemen?

Many of these old dams are not only harmful to the environment, but very often they create deathtraps known by experts as hydraulics. A swimmer (or a rescuer) caught in the currents below these structures often drowns.

Like so many of these hundred year old structures, Spring Lake Dam is decayed. Built much like a fence, with cedar posts planted into the Blue Clay and with dirt and cement added, it was unprepared to withstand the force of such a flood. Now large caverns have formed under her spillway. Large chunks of concrete are missing. Rebar is occasionally exposed to the unwary swimmer. In short, the dam is in need of major repair.

SWT has estimated that complete repairs will cost in the area of ten million dollars. Bust the stop gap, immediate repairs will cost half a million. They are in the process of asking the Texas Legislature for that money.

But imagine, for a minute, that SWT didn't own Aquarena. And imagine that the administration of the university decided that a dam across the river in the vicinity of its campus would be a pretty thing to build. Imagine them going to the Texas Legislature and asking for ten million dollars to build such a dam. What, do you suppose the Legislature would tell them?

Dams are like nuclear power plants, they have a finite life. Concrete gets old and cracks, reinforcing steel rusts, and the relentless force of the river takes its toll. Eventually, if the structure doesn't fail first, the lake fills in with silt and the useful life of the structure is over. If

that structure serves a necessary purpose like providing a water source for a community or powering generators for electricity, then that community might choose to rebuild the dam. Even if the purpose of the lake was recreation, the community might choose to rebuild it.

The question for taxpayers to ask is, is it worth ten million dollars to rebuild Spring Lake Dam? Do we have to have a waterfall to look at while we eat stuffed crabs, or would a pretty rapid be sufficient? Is it essential that we have glass bottom boats to ride, or would it be even better to have a freshwater geyser, the dancing waters, back at the headwaters of our beloved river. As one local anthropologist has said, people travel thousands of miles to see a stinking geyser shoot into the air, and it (only does its thing once an hour. How many people would come to San Marcos to see a freshwater geyser that danced continually?

And what better a thing to have at a River Center than a river instead of a lake? What better way to study a spring than to look at one?

Our sacred springs have been shackled too long. What the October flood started, we should finish. The dam should be removed. Cost of removal or breaching of the dam will be a fraction of the cost of repair. If desired, some sort of rapid could be left, perhaps even designed with recreation in mind.

Some will try to argue that the dam must be maintained to save the endangered species that live in the lake. But those species were here long before the dam was built and will be here long after it's gone. Studies will obviously have to be performed to decide how slowly the lake will have to be lowered to give endangered species a chance to migrate, but none of the species require a man-made structure in order to exist.

Your help is urgently needed. Contact your Governor, your State Senator and your State Representative and let them know that you do not want your tax money going toward the repair of the Spring Lake Dam. Their (addresses and phone numbers are listed within this newsletter. And please do not assume that your letter will have no effect. Elected officials do make note of their constituent's opinions. (With just a very limited request for letters, some of you have already called and written officials on this issue, and they have heard your voice.

It's time to lower the lake, release the springs and let the river roll.

Tom Goynes

To Contact the Governor:

The Honorable George Bush
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, TX 78711

512-463-2000

To contact your State Senator, write:

The Honorable (Full Name)

Texas Senate
P.O. Box 12068 - Capitol Station
Austin, TX 78711

or call, fax or e-mail:

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To write your State Representative:

The Honorable (Full Name)
 Texas House of Representatives
 P.O. Box 2910
 Austin, TX 78768-2910

If you need help figuring out who your State Senator and State Representative is, contact me and I will try to steer you in the right direction. Sometimes that information is in your local phone book.

Remember, those phone calls and letters do make a difference, so let your elected officials know today how you feel.

Tom Goynes
 512-392-6171
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Texas Rivers Protection Association Membership Application

To join or renew your membership, fill out the information below and include a check for your dues.

Name _____
Hm Phone _____
Wk Phone _____
Street _____
City _____
State _____
Zip _____

E-mail _____
Fix # _____ ^ if late faxes are OK

Regular Membership: \$10 _____
Protector: \$25 _____
Guardian: \$50 _____ W _____
Ranger: \$100 _____

Is this a renewal? _____
Check if new address _____

All members receive notices and newsletters and get to vote at general meetings. Protectors also receive a cloisonne pin with our emblem. Guardians receive the pif and either a logo cap or logo t-shirt. Rangers receive all three. Guardians need to indicate their choice (cap or t-shirt) and Rangers and guardians wanting t-shirts should indicate their size (M, L, XL, Or XXL)

Protectors, Guardians, and Rangers

Please send the following: Protector _____ Cloisonne Pif _____
Guardian _____ Pin and _____ cap or _____ t-shirt size _____ M _____
L _____ XL _____ XXL _____
Ranger _____ Pin and _____ cap and _____ t-shirt size _____ M _____ L _____ XL _____
_____ XXL _____

Check here if you do not wish to receive any merchandise _____

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