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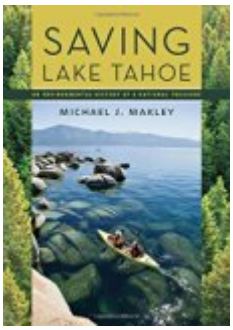

Michael J. Makley. *Saving Lake Tahoe: An Environmental History of a National Treasure.* Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2014. xi + 233 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-87417-934-7.

Reviewed by Jerry Frank

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

At the heart of Michael J. Makley's *Saving Lake Tahoe: An Environmental History of a National Treasure* lays the belief that "the lake's heritage must take precedence over the unrestricted use of private and commercial properties" (p. 1). The vast majority of the book offers a blow-by-blow account of the various attempts to manage a unique and highly desirable landscape that straddles two states and encompasses a complex bag of economic, legal, and environmental interests. The narrative focuses primarily on the 1969 creation of the first bistate regional agency—the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TARPA)—and the "innumerable problems" it has faced in attempting to manage this complex ecological resource (pp. 1, 3).

Saving Lake Tahoe, which is largely chronological, opens with brief accounts of the early economic pressures brought to bear on the Tahoe Basin, including burgeoning markets for the region's trout, grasses, and timber. Although regional economic development put pressure on all of these resources, the demand for timber—apparently driven by the discovery of the Comstock Load—was the most acute and led to an "ecodisaster" wherein key portions of the timbered land in the basin were clear-cut.

In the twentieth century, the economic base of the Tahoe region began shifting more toward tourism, a pattern hastened in 1937 when the state of Nevada legalized gaming. By the 1950s, Tahoe boasted Bill Harrah's casino, which at the time was the "world's largest single structure devoted to gambling." Still more national attention turned toward Tahoe when their bid to host the 1960 Winter Olympic Games was successful. "This singular event," claims Makley, "sparked Tahoe's becoming a worldwide destination" and initiated a cycle wherein money flowed into improving infrastructure and amenities around the lake, which attracted still more visitors, which kept the cycle alive (p. 37).

But, as Makley is quick to point out, the economic success that characterized much of Tahoe's post-World War II prosperity came at a steep envi-

ronmental price. Scientific studies of the lake, which began in earnest in the 1950s, demonstrated that slope erosion, lawn fertilizers, invasive plants, and raw sewage where all imperiling the lake and threatening to further diminish its remarkable clarity. In the end, it was the inability of rather modest local and regional efforts to protect the lake that cleared the way for the creation of a bistate authority in 1969.

The task at hand—balancing private property rights against environmental health of both common and shared resources—was exceedingly complex. And, as the author argues, the structure of TARPA has seldom been up to the challenge. Those in favor of economic development, including powerful casino interests, often controlled TARPA and pushed a pro-business agenda. This often pleased many, but not all, of the locals. Many concerned with the environmental health of the lake, including leadership of the Sierra Club and many elected officials from the state of California, were often at odds with further development around the lake and in favor of more stringent environmental protections. The difficulties in getting these interests to coordinate their efforts has led to a seemingly endless string of disputes, some of which have found their way to the Supreme Court.

There is much in *Saving Lake Tahoe* of value. It is certainly the most detailed look at the complex efforts to share this fragile and valuable resource. That said, there are deficiencies. Books that focus on policy issues must balance the details required to understand the fine points of the policy against providing a compelling narrative. In this instance, the complex history of TARPA combined with the author's close personal connection to the material often makes it difficult for him to step away from the weeds and offer broader analysis of the proceedings. Had he used a stronger analytical frame he would likely have had more success in this regard. Arthur F. McEvoy's *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries* (1986) comes immediately to mind. Lake Tahoe, which is both a private and common resource, presents a history of failed regulation. At the heart of that failure was the inability of a myriad of governing bodies to cooperate in such a way that management of the resource reflected the dynamic nature of the resource itself. Had the author engaged in a more rigorous way the deeper meaning and import of Tahoe's history by engaging more of the historiography of resource regulation, *Saving Lake Tahoe* could have had a greater impact. Still, for those interested in the decades-long battles to save this incredible resource, *Saving Lake Tahoe* will be of value.

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