

SAVING THE BAY – THE FIGHT TO PROTECT THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY

From the time of the Gold Rush, San Francisco Bay has been used in many different ways. Starting in the 1860s, huge quantities of mud and gravel from hydraulic mining flowed down the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, eventually settling as fine sediment in the Bay. By the end of the century, much of the shallow bay flats had filled in, setting a pattern of use that continued well into the 20th century. Three feet of sediment had dropped into the San Francisco Bay. Mercury-loaded sediment is still draining into the Bay today.

Mercury, used in mining to extract gold and silver came down the river system, passing through the Delta and into the Bay. Mercury travels into the food chain by bacteria, which converts to methyl mercury, a potent deadly toxin, which can permanently damage brain tissue, especially in fetuses and small children.

As the population of the Bay Area grew, the Bay was viewed as a resource that could be filled with trash and dry fill to create land for housing, industry, manufacturing, military, port, and airport facilities. The Bay was commonly used as a sewage and garbage disposal; afternoon breezes in the East Bay often carried the aroma of untreated sewage.

Between 1850 and 1960, an average of two square miles of the Bay were filled each year. In 1850, San Francisco Bay (along with San Pablo and Suisun bays) covered around 680 square miles; by 1970, 240 square miles of water surface had disappeared. Much of the remaining area is less than 12 feet deep and easily filled. The first effective sewage treatment plants on the Bay came on line in the 1950s, the first steps in an important process of cleaning up the Bay. Then, in the 1960s, the seemingly inevitable fate of the shrinking Bay turned a corner. Largely through the work of three women—Catherine Kerr, Sylvia McLaughlin, and Esther Gulick—public attitudes shifted, and the Bay began to be viewed as a natural resource to be preserved for future generations.

Prompted by the city of Berkeley's plan to expand by filling 2,000 acres of the Bay for housing and industry, Kerr, McLaughlin, and Gulick initiated one of the first grassroots environmental movements in the country. Most prior conservation efforts were oriented to saving wilderness; this was one of the first efforts to preserve an urban natural resource.

The women founded the Save San Francisco Bay Association, soon known as Save the Bay, in 1961. Employing public pressure as their main strategy, the fledgling organization convinced the Berkeley city government to drop its plans for expansion. However, the Bay was under the jurisdiction of nine county and 32 city governments, each with its own interests in the Bay. These local governments competed with each other to fill the Bay so they could expand their holdings and attract new business and tax revenues. Prevention of similar future efforts would require more coordinated

management. It would take a different form of land use control—a state-run coastal management agency that could look beyond local interests and consider the broader public concern.

Kerr, McLaughlin, and Gulick continued their fight by promoting the McAteer-Petris Act. Passed by the state legislature in 1965, the act created the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) as a temporary state agency to prepare a plan for the long-term use of the Bay. The BCDC was also charged with regulating development in and around the Bay while the plan was being prepared. Approved in 1968, the San Francisco Bay Plan was hailed as a model for developing policies with the participation of a large number of consultants, decision makers, and interest groups. In 1969, revisions to the McAteer-Petris Act made the BCDC a permanent agency, further defined its area and scope of authority, and established the permit system for regulating the Bay and shoreline. The McAteer-Petris Act was passed five years before the Clean Water Act.

When viewed in light of the times, Save the Bay's early accomplishments in preventing further haphazard development of San Francisco Bay take on even more significance. In 1961, there were few environmental laws on the books, there was no Earth Day, the "environment" was not yet a cause in the public's mind. Further, women were not seen as activists. The fight to save San Francisco Bay from uncontrolled development changed all that.

Mercury pollution remains among one of the biggest threats to the Bay today. The five main threats are agricultural pollution and runoff, industrial pollution (including chemicals), Legacy pollution (mining and hot sediments), urban stormwater runoff, and sewage. Today it is not safe to eat fish taken from the Bay, and after storm events, it is not safe to swim in the Bay. www.savingthebay.org

YOUR CHALLENGE:

You are a time-traveling expert team sent back in time to 1961 to use the skills and knowledge you have gained since the passing of the Clean Water Act, the Porter-Cologne Act, and other conservation efforts that were not in effect in the 1960's. You will coin the phrase "environmental consultant" and offer your services to the fledgling group "Save the Bay Association" led by Catherine Kerr, Esther Gulick and Sylvia McLaughlin.

Without letting them know who you really are, and without quoting water law, what recommendations would you make to this group that would, in effect, make the Bay a cleaner, healthier habitat today.