

Lago de Chapala, partner on the Pacific Flyway

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Mono Lake has much in common with its Living Lakes Partner in Mexico, Lago de Chapala. Both are very old lakes, both were once considerably larger, both are ringed by mountains: in California the Sierra Nevada, in Mexico the Sierra Madre. Both have been over-utilized as water sources for large sprawling cities, Los Angeles in California, and Guadalajara in Jalisco, Mexico. Both lakes once had extensive wetlands as part of their habitat, and today they are working to regain them. Having nearly experienced ecosystem collapse at the hands of humans, both are now recovering and have the worldwide support of environmentalists.

Not surprisingly, both Lake Chapala and Mono Lake are also important migratory stops for shorebirds and waterfowl on their routes to overwintering sites, as they are both part of the Pacific Flyway, a major bird migration route—beginning in the Arctic and ending in western Mexico. Chapala is approximately 1,500 miles south of Mono as the Black-necked Stilt flies, and it is conceivable that some of the very birds that stop at Mono make their way through Mexico to land at Chapala's shores for the winter. Both lakes host over 300 species in their lake basins, and in fact, share many of the same bird species, including the American Avocet, Western Sandpipers, White faced Ibis, and many others.

However, at Chapala, toxic pollutants and chemicals are still at dangerous levels in the lake and its main tributary. Consequently, bird numbers are considerably higher at Mono Lake than at Chapala, where it has been decades since the “thousands upon thousands” of waterfowl once enjoyed by visitors graced its shores.

Yet, like its United States counterpart, Lake Chapala is fighting for its continued survival. For more information on efforts to save Lake Chapala please visit the Amigos del Lago website at www.amigosdelago.org.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMIGOS DEL LAGO

Lake Chapala in 1976 on the left, and in 2002 on the right. Recent wet years have raised the lake back up towards the boardwalk.

Poconip from page 16

singer-songwriter Gillian Welch called “Wrecking Ball”, where one of the lyrics says “an’ I was a farmer in the poconip of a weed that I recall was like a wrecking ball”. Hmm ... this looks like it warrants further investigation.

Webster’s Dictionary does have the word “pogonip”, with a “g” instead of a “c” and is defined as “A dense winter fog containing frozen particles, formed in the deep valleys of the Sierra Nevada.” The word “pogonip” has been around for awhile, and seems to be used prevalently in the northern parts of the Great Basin, especially in Nevada.

The Shoshone Native Americans call the pogonip fog “pakenappeh” or “white death” and early settlers, dreading the pogonip, took cover when the fog rolled in. Cases of pneumonia increased, and it was reported that Native Americans and settlers alike stayed indoors, only venturing outside with mouths and noses covered so as not to inhale the deadly vapors.

Tracking down where the term “poconip” came from has proven problematic—the native Mono Basin Kutzadika^a Paiute have no written language and do not use poconip in their oral language. Further investigation revealed that they are just as puzzled by the usage of the word as I am, and in fact, are amused that some people refer to it as “white death.” The Kutzadika^a traditionally spent the winter months on the eastern shore of Mono Lake, where the now-extirpated Jeffrey Pine forest provided shelter above the cold fog and the

temperatures were warmer. Being nomadic people by nature, when the poconip showed up, they simply migrated to a more hospitable climate.

Raymond Andrews, a Kutzadika^a Paiute ancestor, talked to the tribal elders to find out what their word for the Mono Basin fog was. “Paginabi” is the accepted name, even though you won’t find it in any literature. Translating the word is confusing to the lay person: some of the meaning has been lost in trying to translate an oral language into a written language, and some of the language has simply been forgotten. All Kutzadika^a words that have “pa” in them describe some form of water. Paoha Island is an example of this: “pa” means “mist” and “oha” means baby, so their translation is a place “where the water babies live.”

Paginabi translates to a form of “ice fog”—non-threatening and simply a part of nature’s cycle in the Mono Basin. The nomadic Kutzadika^a way of life intertwined with the weather cycles. They didn’t try to change it, they didn’t complain about it, they simply adapted to it—doing their best to survive, pushing one generation after another into the future. The same fantastic displays of rime occurred then, and I’m sure the ancients marveled at its beauty as we still do today. ❖

Douglas Dunaway is the Committee’s Membership Coordinator. He keeps a not-so-secret-anymore stash of sweet tarts at his desk to help get him through stacks of mail each day.