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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Environmental Concerns

Sweetwater Lake is one of the few pristine, natural areas left in Colorado. Most of our water bodies are actually man made reservoirs, so it is wonderful to have Sweetwater to view what the habitat is like around an actual lake. This lake, its intrinsic surroundings, and several historic pastures have developed into a singular ecosystem. We would like to conserve this uniqueness as we plan for the future of this Colorado gem.

While seemingly a small lake compared to our reservoirs, it is actually one of the largest natural lakes in the state at 72 acres. Sweetwater Creek flows into and out of the lake, all of which is a tributary to the Colorado River. This Sweetwater Lake ecosystem provides refuge for a rich diversity of native wildlife and plant species.

Current Ecosystem

Around and in the lake one can find mammals including elk, deer, moose, bear, river otters, raccoons, marmots, rabbits, weasels, woodrats, fox, mink, skunks, coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, porcupines, pine martens, beaver, muskrats, bats, numerous squirrels (ground and tree), chipmunks, mice, moles, voles, and shrews. In addition, there are numerous reptiles (green snakes, garter snakes, bull snakes and others; countless lizards, etc.), and amphibians (tiger salamanders, boreal toads, and several frogs).

The lake has long been stocked with fish by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife. There are brook trout, brown trout, rainbow trout, and kokanee salmon. One can also find suckers. The amazing invertebrate (love the tree snails) and insect populations are innumerable!

The bird watching at Sweetwater is great. The different kinds are too many to list, but the local Audubon Society found 83 breeding species, not counting innumerable more who pass through or winter here. Some at-risk bird species that breed here include Black Swift, Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Golden Eagle, Swainson's Hawk, Virginia's Warbler, Brewer's Sparrow, and Lazuli Bunting. And on any given day, one can observe dippers, ducks, sparrows, juncos, flycatchers, solitaires, hummingbirds, and lots more. The declining Pinyon Jay is found nearby.

Of course, besides the great wildlife, there is an amazing variety of plant species. With the different habitats - lake, lake shore, wetlands, irrigated pastures, upland pinyon/juniper, shaded cliff sides, evergreen forest, and sagebrush flats - an amazing number of plant species can be found in just a small area. Colorado's own Harrington's Penstemon can be found all over here, along with mountain willow and more! Scrub oak, serviceberry, wild rose, chokecherries, Gambel oak, cottonwood, Douglas fir, and sagebrush are just a few of the flora that grow near the lake. Wildflowers are prolific, such as scarlet gilia, wild iris, lupine, arrowleaf balsamroot, kinikini, Indian paintbrush, cinquefoil, and asters. It's especially fun to see the prickly pear cactus and barrel cactus blooming in the spring.

The Problem

So, how do we protect all these native plants and animals, and the various habitats on which they depend, while opening the area up to increased recreation? The answer is, we can't. In order to protect all of this and have it for our children and grandchildren to see, we need to keep the human impact at a level equal to that which has been here for the past 30 or 40 years. This previous amount of use has evolved into a balance, letting the flora and fauna flourish.

Increasing the human presence above the 60 person per day average of the past, to the 250 person per day listed in the USFS scoping documents, would have a huge negative impact on the animals, the plants and the entire environment. We hope that CPW will follow their own rules for protecting raptors, waterfowl, songbirds and others from recreational and developmental disturbances.

Environmental damages foreseen include overused trails, light pollution affecting our dark skies, excess human waste, use of drones, and, of course, noise. More people in this area will cause an increased risk of the introduction and spread of non-native and noxious weeds. Mankind's consequences would lower the quality of the outdoor experience while also damaging the ecosystem.

Effects on Plants

More people equals injury to the plant population. Most outdoor visitors underestimate their own impact. Trampling from hiking and off trail explorations damages and kills plants, and also compacts the soil. Any bike use, even just around the campgrounds, will pack the ground even further. Compacted soil impedes seed germination and causes run-off, further degrading the soil nutrients. People enjoy picking flowers and collecting leaves which hurts the plants.

Campfires sterilize the soil. People cutting wood - even if it is supposedly not allowed - will affect the number of bushes and trees. Trees might be partially cut into and then left when felling is too hard, leaving an injured tree.

Weeds (less desirable species) can overtake the desirable plants.

The chances of wildfire will go up with the number of visitors. It only takes one careless match or cigarette to ruin the whole area and endanger nearby residents.

Any damage to soil, water, or air quality will damage the plant life. For instance, just the car exhaust will cause air pollution, which can hurt delicate herbs. Researchers have found that even plain old noise can have a lasting effect on trees and plants.

Wildlife Concerns

In addition, we would expect more negative and unsafe human/wildlife interactions.

Bears. Several years back, the voters in Colorado chose to end the spring bear hunt (against expert advice). Since then our bear population has been growing. The last time that I know of someone actually being bitten by a bear in the Sweetwater campground was in the late 70's, but there are more bears now. From the deck of the restaurant, we liked watching the sows bring their cubs down to the shore, across the lake.

In the past, wildlife officers had a habit of tagging problem bears in the nearby resorts and towns, and then releasing them in remote locations. Sweetwater was one such spot. We fondly refer to the tagged bears as our "Aspen bears" and know to give them some extra space. Now CPW wants to bring 250 people a day into our area. What happens to the bears when there are no more remote locations?

Wolves. Again, Colorado voters (ignoring the professionals' recommendations) voted to have wolves reintroduced. And since there really isn't enough feed for them, the newly introduced wolves are ranging widely. We are only being told which watersheds they are in, and ours is one of them. Not sure that this will work so well with increased tourism.

Moose. Just a few weeks ago, a person was chased down the road by the inlet to Sweetwater Lake by a moose. In Alaska, more humans are hurt by moose than by bears. We love seeing the moose drift into our area, but are not sure how this is going to mix with increased human pressure.

Mountain Lions. We don't see them very often - I have only seen six or so in my 40 years on Sweetwater - but

their tracks in the snow down the driveway let us know that they see us much more regularly. The population seems to be healthy, and hunters bring a few out each season. Will the big cats react favorably to such an increase in human activity in their range?

Coyotes. We have lots and lots of coyotes who serenade us all night. The main problem we've had with them over the years is occasionally when a pack decides to lure a dog or cat away from its home, and then attack it. How will a family who is camping at the lake react if this should happen to their beloved pet? Leash laws are important, yet often ignored.

Skunks. I have fond memories of the time my brother hid behind a bush to jump out and scare us while we were staying in a cabin at Sweetwater Lake. He didn't know that a skunk was already hiding behind that bush and got quite a surprise! Needless to say he had to strip outside before we would let him into the cabin to shower and scrub down! Now, with "dry cabins" in the plans instead of houses, where will folks like him wash up?

The smaller mammals are cute, and people don't exercise enough caution. First, they will get too close to take photos. Then, a visitor might hold food out to them, or even reach out to pet one. Adults and children are in danger of getting bitten. Unfortunately, some mammals, such as skunks, bats, raccoons, and foxes can carry rabies. These seemingly mundane human/wildlife interactions can be dangerous. And the lake is located over 30 miles from the nearest medical facility.

Water Quality

An additional environmental worry is water quality. The expanded human use will be detrimental to the whole watershed. Increased boat/paddle board activity will alter bird species behavior and drive some away. Run-off from campgrounds and parking lots will injure the lake. Increased road use could mean more magnesium chloride needed on the dirt road which could wash into Sweetwater Creek and spread impacts downstream.

Also, it is important to keep the irrigated pastures in that use. This use has been going on for over 100 years! These pastures and the ditch that feeds them have been here since at least 1915 when the ditch was registered. The elk long ago counted on these pastures for calving and food; the mule deer have their babies along the edges; and many birds feed on the insect diversity the fields bring in. The USFS has proposed building roads around the pastures; putting RV pads within them; and cutting off the irrigation. This leads to habitat fragmentation and degradation. This road will interrupt traditional migration patterns, winter food sources, and calving grounds. An already declining elk population will be further impacted, along with songbirds and others.

Soil Quality

Additionally concerning is the influence of so many people on the soil. More buildings, parking areas, and people result in more compacted soil. This equals more runoff, affecting the lake. But it also deteriorates the soil so that native plants can't grow as well. Trash and human (and dog) waste can affect the soil quality.

Conclusions

Developing this area into a state park will mean increased stress on the animals due to decisions made by the very entity - Colorado Parks and Wildlife - who is tasked to protect them. This could mean nest abandonment; excessive use of energy from reacting to humans; big-carnivores leaving the area; and poor reproductive success. A park will cause breakdown, damage, and division of habitat. It will reduce and impair the interesting variety of plants, especially if the pastures are graded and dried for RV pads. A park of this size would be detrimental to the water and soil quality. We can all look forward to a loss of biodiversity at Sweetwater Lake! Ultimately, a state park bringing 250 people a day would destroy the very habitat that the people are coming to see in the first place.

Less harm to the environment can be accomplished by not developing amenities that will attract so many people. In order to conserve the unique plant and animal ecosystem at Sweetwater Lake, an alternative plan should be developed that keeps the visitor use to the previous level of about 60 people per day, while still inviting new people to see this beautiful area.

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(still owns land on Sweetwater)

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