

Using water for leisure activities is becoming uncool in California

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An electric-powered pontoon boat skims across Lake Mission Viejo, past homes and private docks, Oct. 9, 2014. The lake is the centerpiece of Mission Viejo, California, where membership dues allow residents to use the lake for recreation, fishing, boating and concerts. Photo: Mark Boster/Los Angeles Times/MCT

Southern California's Lake Mission Viejo is stunningly picturesque. When it comes to water use, however, some say it is also particularly wasteful. Multimillion-dollar homes surround the 1.2 billion-gallon lake, which was created solely for recreation. On sunny afternoons, local children frolic on the lake's flawless sandy beaches as sailboats sway across the blue waters.

The manufactured lake was created in the 1970s. It has since become a big part of south Orange County's identity. Indeed, it is even pictured on Mission Viejo's city seal.

Back when it was first created, California was in the middle of a drought. Then first-term Governor Jerry Brown criticized officials for filling the lake "while others use buckets to collect water in their showers."

Now, almost 40 years later, California is suffering through another severe drought and Lake Mission Viejo is once again under scrutiny. State officials are beginning to ask whether its sparkling waters might be put to another use besides recreation: filling bathtubs and drinking glasses in the most parched regions.

How To Fill A Very Expensive Lake

Private lakes for a few wealthy suburbanites are an old-fashioned and glamorous approach to town planning, critics say. Many feel they are inappropriate for these dry days. They say that lake water should be available for indoor use, not outdoor leisure.

The association that owns and operates the lake is talking with state officials about ways to use less water while keeping the lake filled. However, the very presence of the vast watery playground raises questions about California's use of water.

Much of the city of Mission Viejo was developed by a single company, the Mission Viejo Company, beginning in the 1960s. In 1973, the company announced plans to spend \$5.6 million to build a lake with about 3.5 miles of shoreline.

When it came time in 1977 to fill the lake, California was in the midst of one of the worst droughts in state history. Many were angered by the company's plan to import up to 40 percent of the lake's water from Northern California. Northerners were not happy with the plan. According to news reports, they were counting water by the glass.

In response, the California Water Board ordered Mission Viejo Company to stop filling the massive hole it had dug for the lake.

Nonessential Water Use Questioned

A year later the drought ended, and the board allowed the company to fill the lake with water from the Colorado River.

Today, the lake is part of a "complete, year-round resort," with beaches, parks, clubhouses and a stage that hosts summer concerts. High-end homes along the lake can sell for more than \$3 million.

The lake is not open to the public. To use it, residents must join the Lake Mission Viejo Association and pay dues of more than \$200 annually. The association now includes more than 24,000 households.

However, state officials are once again raising concerns about "nonessential" water uses. Recreational lakes are seen by many as a particularly bad example of wastefulness in a time of drought.

Not All Water Needs Are Being Met

After three dry years with no relief in sight, Governor Brown has asked Californians to reduce their water use 20 percent. Some parched communities are living on the verge of drought and have been forced to truck in water. Many other local water districts, including the Santa Margarita Water District in which Mission Viejo is located, have issued restrictions that limit car washing and water used for lawns. If the drought worsens, state Water Board scientist Max Gomberg said, private lakes could face restrictions as well.

“When there’s not enough water to meet all the needs, some needs have to be put ahead of others,” he said.

Santa Margarita Water District officials are working with the lake association to find ways to cut back. The lake, which has a 124-acre surface, loses about 88 million gallons of water to evaporation each year — enough to fill more than 130 Olympic-sized swimming pools. When levels drop, it is refilled with fresh, drinkable water, making it one of the district’s largest water users.

Association leaders are considering cutbacks in other areas of the resort to offset the lake’s water use.

When Is It Water Abuse?

If the drought worsens, the association might not be able to make that choice. The Santa Margarita Water District has already implemented Stage 2 water restrictions. Stage 3 would force the association to obtain a permit to replace water lost to evaporation, while Stage 4 would ban such filling altogether.

The idea of tampering with the lake’s water can be a touchy subject for some longtime association members. They bristle at the suggestion of reducing or changing the lake levels.

“We love coming down here where there aren’t too many people,” said Carlos Lopez, an association member whose 4-year-old daughter, Dayleen, splashed in the water. “She’s a fish. I’d have to take her down to the beach, and that’s a pain.”

Mission Viejo is the largest man-made lake in the Greater Los Angeles Area that is solely recreational.

Drought or no, the lake makes no sense to some. According to water conservationist Conner Everts, creating a “giant swimming pool for the few” with precious publicly owned water “makes no sense at all.”

In a state with a lot of inequality when it comes to water, Mission Viejo stands out for its level of “water abuse,” Everts said. “You want lakes? Move to Minnesota.”

Quiz

- 1 Select the sentence that BEST explains how water from the lake could be used differently.
- (A) State officials are beginning to ask whether its sparkling waters might be put to another use besides recreation: filling bathtubs and drinking glasses in the most parched regions.
 - (B) Today, the lake is part of a “complete, year-round resort,” with beaches, parks, clubhouses and a stage that hosts summer concerts.
 - (C) Recreational lakes are seen by many as a particularly bad example of wastefulness in a time of drought.
 - (D) Private lakes for a few wealthy suburbanites are an old-fashioned and glamorous approach to town planning, critics say.

- 2 Why does the author include the following sentence in the article?

Then first-term Governor Jerry Brown criticized officials for filling the lake “while others use buckets to collect water in their showers.”

- (A) to explain that California was under severe drought conditions when the lake was being built
 - (B) to show the inappropriateness of a lake that uses around 1.2 billion gallons of water
 - (C) to explain that the construction of the lake has led to significant water wastage
 - (D) to show that most Californians were against the construction of the lake when it was first built
- 3 Select the paragraph from the section “How To Fill A Very Expensive Lake” that shows that many people consider the lake to be a bad idea.

- 4 How is the controversy surrounding the recreational lake in California developed and refined by the author?
- (A) By contrasting the use of water in the lake with the effects the drought is having on Californians.
 - (B) By explaining the need to use the lake water for both recreational and household uses.
 - (C) By highlighting the huge amount of water used in the lake for leisure activities.
 - (D) By criticizing lake and town officials for the wasteful planning and management of suburban areas.