

# New Melones

## Public Interpretation of the Archeological-Historical Record

**T**he construction of New Melones Dam was one of the most contentious federal public works projects ever undertaken (Fitting 1989; GAO Report 1983). Politics and activism took place on both state and national levels regarding its construction and final management. All this occurred during a time of evolving federal cultural resource law and regulation. (See sidebar, p. 31.)

New Melones Lake is located in the central Sierra Nevada foothills on the Stanislaus River. The project covers some 10,927 ha. The reservoir capacity is 2.4 million acre ft. with a surface area of 5,058 ha and, when full, has a shoreline of more than 161 km that extends some 38 km upstream of the dam. The construction of New Melones reservoir inundated the much smaller old Melones Dam and reservoir which covered 745.8 ha.

Federal lands at New Melones Lake contain more than 700 historic and prehistoric sites. Documented sites include prehistoric habitation sites, bedrock mortars, petroglyphs, lithic quarries, mortuary caves, historic mines, rail and wagon roads, homesteads, mills, and town sites.

These properties represent the remains of ancient hunting camps to 19th-century gold mining boom towns encompassing approximately 10,000 years of human activity (Moratto 1988).

New Melones Reservoir was constructed by the Corps of Engineers (Corps) and transferred to the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) shortly after its completion in 1980. The responsibility to complete the cultural resources programs was transferred to the Secretary of the Interior. The Washington office of the National Park Service's Interagency Archeological Services (IAS) was assigned the task of completing the archeological mitigation. Reclamation was designated the lead federal agency for compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, and was assigned to manage the historic properties, address the storage and management of the extensive collections, and develop an interpretative program.

New Melones Lake, now a unit of the Central Valley Project, one of the nation's largest federal water projects, has a long and convoluted history of archeological and historical research and mitigation. The project was authorized in 1944 and completed in 1978. Initial archeological surveys were made by the Smithsonian River Basin Surveys in 1948 (Fredrickson 1949). This work was followed by the National Park Service's IAS issuing a series of survey and excavation contracts during the 1960s and 1970s to the Central California Archaeological Foundation; University of California, Davis; San Francisco State College (now University); Greenwood and Associates; and Sacramento State College (now California State University Sacramento). In 1977 the Corps contracted directly with Scientific Applications, Inc. During the transfer of the project from the Corps to Reclamation in 1980, responsibility for cultural resources was transferred to the Department of the Interior with the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS, a

*Visitors center at New Melones Lake houses exhibits and artifacts that interpret 10,000 years of human activity in the vicinity of the lake and dam. Bureau of Reclamation photo.*



short-lived organization that was established during the Carter administration) responsible for the archeological mitigation program. HCRS contracted with INFOTEC Development, Inc. to complete the archeological mitigation. Throughout this period only the Corps was authorized to do any construction within the project area.

### **Reclamation Actions**

To address its assigned responsibilities, Reclamation has taken a multi-tiered approach by developing an artifact storage facility, a resource management plan, and an interpretative program. With the completion of IAS's archeological mitigation program, the curation of some 416,000 items, plus many lineal feet of archeological documentation generated by more than 25 years of investigations required an immediate resolution. A number of alternatives were explored ranging from approaching existing university run facilities to examining the possibility of a local county museum. The existing university facilities were not desirous to take on the management of such a large collection, plus there was a strong desire on the part of the local population to have the collections maintained locally. Reclamation discussed several alternatives with the local counties and historical societies and, as a result, made the decision to maintain the collections at New Melones Lake. This decision was based on the large, controlled space requirements needed to maintain and keep all items and records together. Agreements were made with both counties involved for the long-term loan of specific items for exhibits.

Using knowledge of the period, Reclamation took on the task of resolving the curation issue. Artifact and archival records for the project area are stored at the New Melones Artifact Storage Facility (NMAAF), a 204 m<sup>2</sup> section of a steel warehouse at the former Corps construction headquarters at Peoria Flat. Reclamation modified the structure in 1982 to contain the collections. It has been insulated, has a large roll-up door, a single door entry with dead bolt lock, an alarm system, electrical power, water, sinks, and a toilet. Skylights provide additional lighting and two rotating vents ventilate the space. Storage is primarily in archive boxes on steel shelving and in eight NPS-style museum cases. Enclosing the warehouse is a double perimeter chain link fence with locked gates.

Adjoining lands are now used as a state prison camp.

Management of the facility and collections is outlined in an in-house document entitled "Scope of Collections and Guidelines for the New Melones Artifact Storage Facility." The "Scope of Collections and Guidelines" is revised every two years and serves to define the holdings' present and future, and the management of the facility. It covers requests for research, collections standards, loan policies, and standard operating procedures. It also states what actions will be taken to meet the requirements of 36 CFR Part 79 (Curation of Federally-Owned and Administered Archeological Collections) and 411 DM (Managing Museum Property).

After several years of monitoring temperature and relative humidity, efforts are underway to reduce the fluctuations of these two variables. An internal super-insulated structure was installed for storage of records and photographs, as well as temperature sensitive artifacts. Funds were budgeted to seal and insulate the roof in fiscal year 1999. In addition, the floors have been sealed to reduce dust.

The collections were received in various states of storage. Collections from the last phase of mitigation were the best organized, but earlier collections and notes were for the most part in poor condition. Few collections had been stored using archival quality materials. A multi-year program with the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Davis, has been instituted to address the storage needs of the collections. This includes catalog checking (and re-cataloging where necessary), re-sorting, and re-packing with archival quality materials, and the formal accessioning of the collections. Over one year has been expended on this activity, and it appears that two more years may be required.

### **Resource Management Plans**

Resource Management Plans (RMPs) are being developed for various Reclamation projects. One is being developed for New Melones Lake, and cultural resources are an important element in the plan. RMPs are developed by soliciting public input. A series of workshops was held to elicit issues and needs that the public considered important. The plan focuses on the recreational needs, wildlife management, and cultural resource management for the future. The plan lays out the specific actions Reclamation will take

to manage cultural resources. Preservation is the primary goal for cultural resources, and research is considered as a preservation measure.

To assist in the management of cultural resources, the resources have been digitized into a GIS system. Three layers of the GIS mapping are devoted to cultural resources: line, point, and polygon data that refer to specific sites. Because this was one of our first attempts at using GIS for cultural resource data, we have need for improve-

ment. This will be accomplished in the near future and funds have been budgeted for this work. Our goal is to use Arc/Info for a GIS program that will include data on each recorded site on Arc/View that can be restricted for use by the resource management staff and researchers.

#### **Interpretation**

Interpretation of the archeological-historical record at New Melones has taken several different directions. The first phase was an interpretative

Issues raised by New Melones have affected many water development projects and have changed western water politics significantly by greatly expanding the public's involvement in the decision making processes. The following sample of statements encapsulates the range of interests and issues that arose around cultural resources.

"New Melones probably represents the worst of all possible situations. The rules were constantly changed by Congressional action. The legal basis for doing (cultural mitigation) work was enacted during construction of the project." (Ward Weakly, Preservation Officer, Bureau of Reclamation, *Union Democrat*, June 12, 1981.)

"Almost from the start, complaints were heard from archaeologists and critics, including some who were associated with the losing bidder, often claiming inadequacies in the research design." (*Modesto Bee*, November 15, 1979.)

"DOI has not complied with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act." (Statement of Knox Mellon, California State Historic Preservation Officer in a letter to Secretary of the Interior Andrus, 1980.)

"If Interior Secretary Cecil D. Andrus fails to increase the flow of water from New Melones Dam to protect upstream archeological sites, the Friends of the River is prepared to sue." (*Fresno Bee*, May 1, 1980.)

"The Friends of New Melones (a short-lived pro-dam group) . . . said a call from its antagonist, Friends of the River, for higher downstream water releases in the Stanislaus River is a 'selfish demand by white water rafters.'" (*Modesto Bee*, May 3, 1980.)

"A University of Alabama cave specialist fears federal archaeologists are going to ignore significant caverns in New Melones Reservoir." (*Modesto Bee*, May 5, 1980.)

"The Me-Wuk Tribal Council has informed federal officials it opposes removal of Indian remains from land scheduled to be flooded by the New Melones Reservoir." (*Sacramento Bee*, 1980.)

"The Western History Association is getting ready to petition the government. . . . There's going to be real political trouble." (Turrentine Jackson, Professor of History, *Union Democrat*, June 12, 1981.)

"The New Melones Dam project has generated intense controversy over many years. Numerous special interest groups have expressed varying views on the uses that should be made of the New Melones natural resources. These groups included archeologists, white water rafters, environmentalists, historians, and agricultural interests. Some of these groups advocated the construction of the new dam and subsequent flooding of the areas and others, like white water rafters, strongly opposed such actions. These conflicting interests, coupled with the extremely long time between the project's authorization in 1944 to its completion in 1978, along with new federal environmental and natural resource laws increased the conflict and controversy over the project." (GAO 1983.)

publication directed to the public. Under contract with Reclamation, Julia Costello wrote a booklet on the historical archeology and history of the town of Melones. Entitled *Melones, A Story of a Stanislaus River Town*, the booklet was edited, laid-out, and printed by Reclamation. Almost a thousand copies were produced. The first printing went quickly and an additional thousand copies were produced. This popular booklet was still in demand long after the second printing was exhausted. To resolve this demand, the plates for additional copies were transferred to the Calaveras County Heritage Council that reprinted the booklet and now sells it at cost. This popular booklet was a runner-up in awards for government publications in 1984.

The second phase of interpretation has been more diffuse, consisting of making long-term loans for interpretative displays at local museums and visitor centers and providing assistance when requested. Long-term loans of objects also were made to the Corps for their visitor center at Knights Ferry downstream of New Melones Dam.

The third and most complex phase has been the development of exhibits to highlight almost 10,000 years of prehistory, history, and natural history. Before any of this could begin we had to negotiate with the Corps for the construction of a visitors center. The Corps designed and built the structure over a period of several years. Included within their design were 1,500 square feet for exhibits that the Corps developed using the input of interpretative consultants.

Once the visitors center was completed, the design and construction of the exhibits could begin. This time-consuming approach was required because of the nature of the New Melones legislation. This process has taken several years and two contractors—one to design the exhibits and the other to build them. For Reclamation, the process has been a learning experience. Budgets needed to be developed for an arena where we had little experience. (We have constructed a lot of dams and canals, but not many exhibits.)

To guide the designers, Daniel Quan and Associates, Reclamation developed a story line for the exhibits. After a great deal of interaction with the designers, the exhibit plans were completed after two years of work. A separate contract was let for exhibit construction. Because the plans were so detailed and the specifications so well developed by the designers, the construction con-

tract could be based on cost and experience, thus avoiding costly proposals. Budget constraints required that the exhibit construction contract cover a three-year period. The contractor, Southern Custom Exhibits, Inc., built the exhibits in Alabama and transported them to New Melones via truck. During the construction period, Reclamation gathered photographs and artifacts, contracted for artifact replicas, edited videos, wrote dialog, and provided the inspection and final approval. The second and final phase was completed in July 1998.

Primary operation of the visitors center is by Reclamation rangers who specialize in interpretation. Trained volunteers assist the rangers and provide an important connection with the local communities. In the three months since opening, almost 4,000 visitors have toured the center.

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