

required that an environmental impact report be submitted to appropriate public agencies for approval prior to the commencement of any project that "could have a significant effect on the environment." Under terms of the act, environmentalists brought suit to halt or modify scores of environmentally damaging projects. The California Chamber of Commerce denounced the act as harmful to the state's economy. The San Barbara oil spill also ignited a long-standing controversy over the further development of offshore oil resources. Whenever the federal government attempted to extend leases for offshore tracts to private companies to drill for oil and gas—as Republican president George W. Bush did in 2005—California environmentalists argued that further development was a needless threat to the fragile ecosystem of the coast.

Californians in growing numbers were becoming convinced that the scenic regions of the state needed special protection from private development. In 1972 voters approved an initiative creating the California Coastal Commission to govern development of California's coastline and to preserve reasonable public access to it. The commission, which enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Democratic governor Jerry Brown, denied permits for several large developments and often required substantial modifications to the proposals it did approve. Business leaders soon charged that the commission was guilty of "bureaucratic and environmental zeal." It subsequently reversed direction under pro-development Republican governors and approved the construction of several large coastal hotels and housing projects.

Meanwhile, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), jointly operated by California and Nevada and authorized by Congress in 1967, tried to combat both the pollution of Lake Tahoe's pure, blue waters by sewage and the threatened destruction of the beauty of its surroundings by excessive and hasty construction. For years, however, the effectiveness of the agency was undercut by inadequate funding. Democratic governor Gray Davis, a supporter of the campaign to "Keep Tahoe Blue," increased funding for the TRPA; and Attorney General Bill Lockyer filed suit to ban from the lake jet skis, powered by heavily polluting two-stroke engines. Lockyer took the action, he said, to demonstrate that "environmental quality is part of our law enforcement duty."

Controversy also centered on California's parklands and wilderness areas. The number of California's state parks grew eightfold between 1970 and 2000, while funding for park maintenance and repairs declined sharply during the administrations of Republican George Deukmejian and Pete Wilson. Reversing decades of decline, Governor Davis allocated additional funds for deferred park maintenance and supported the largest-ever state park bond measure. At the federal level, environmentalists achieved one of their major goals in 1994 when Congress passed the California Desert Protection Act, the largest wilderness protection measure in the history of the continental United States. Sponsored by Democratic senator Dianne Feinstein, the act created two new national parks and extended federal protection over 7.6 million acres of desert lands. A Sierra Club spokesperson praised the act as "the sunrise for desert protection and the sunset for desert abuse."

Among the most spectacular lands under federal protection in California was the Yosemite Valley, which by 2010 was expected to be visited by more than 6 million people a year. On summer weekends the valley, only 1 mile wide and 7 miles long, was overburdened with visitors who trampled lush meadows and filled the roadways

with bumper-to-bumper traffic. Prospects for the park brightened in 1997 when federal officials announced a Yosemite Valley Implementation Plan to eliminate several roads, bridges, and more than 2000 parking spaces for day-use visitors. The Sierra Club applauded the plan, hoping it would ensure "the park's ecosystems are maintained for this and future generations." (See Color Plate 17.)

One of the most intense environmental battles in recent decades was fought over the few remaining stands of old-growth California redwoods. Environmental activists descended on logging towns in the Redwood Summer of 1990 and attempted to block the cutting of the virgin trees, only 5 percent of which remained after a century and a half of virtually unrestricted timber harvesting. The disruptive tactics of the activists failed to slow the logging operations, but they succeeded in increasing public awareness of the issue. In 1996, after a decade of controversy, an agreement was reached to protect the Headwaters Forest of old-growth redwoods in Humboldt County. The *New York Times* praised the agreement as "the most ambitious public-private effort so far to protect an entire ecosystem," but activist Julia Butterfly Hill (who spent 2 years living atop a threatened redwood tree) criticized the plan for being too little too late.

The protection of California's old-growth forests was imperiled in the early 2000s by the policies of Republican President George W. Bush. The Bush administration in 2004 streamlined the process for allowing private timber companies access to national forests, thereby jettisoning environmental protections in place for three decades. Opponents noted that the new process would permit logging of the last old-growth trees in northwestern California. In 2005 the Bush administration announced further plans to increase four-fold the number of trees that could be cut in the Sierra Nevada. Timber companies were pleased, but environmentalists warned that accelerated logging would devastate old-growth forests. "The old-growth trees are the structural backbone of the Sierra's forests," commented a professor of ecosystems. "They're essentially irreplaceable."

## Biodiversity

Environmentalists expressed growing concern in the early 2000s about threats to California's once-thriving biological diversity. California had more native species at risk than any other state. Twenty percent of the state's native animal species were classified as endangered or threatened, and one-quarter of all endangered plant species in the United States were located in California. Habitat destruction had taken a heavy toll. California wetlands, once extending over 5 million acres, were reduced by 90 percent during two centuries of "reclamation." The swampy marshlands and sloughs near Los Banos in Merced County once hosted wildlife as rich as the Serengeti Plain of Africa. Millions of waterfowl filled the sky. By the early twenty-first century, the wildlife population had been greatly reduced; species that formerly had been common were extinct or remained only as rarities.

Even the smallest of species showed signs of distress. Several types of California butterflies and other insects were in steep decline, caused perhaps by the accumulation of pollutants and pesticides at threshold levels. Frogs and other amphibians virtually disappeared from entire water systems. "You can hike the Sierra for days and weeks