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The League's first major victory prevented construction of a bridge over Emerald Bay.

Emerald Bay: A Landmark Victory That Helped Shape Tahoe's Future

Most people know the League to Save Lake Tahoe, now known for decades as Keep Tahoe Blue, famously stopped a proposed bridge over Emerald Bay.

A dramatic early win that preserved one of Tahoe's most iconic vistas. But what's less known is what came next. In 1969, Emerald Bay received one of the highest honors in American conservation: designation as a **National Natural Landmark** by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Today, it's difficult to imagine Emerald Bay, one of the most photographed and beloved places in the Sierra, as anything other than a protected ecological treasure.

The designation represented far more than recognition of Emerald Bay's beauty. It marked a turning point in the effort to protect Lake Tahoe and served as a powerful validation of years of advocacy led by the League to Save Lake Tahoe.

Administered by the National Park Service, the National Natural Landmark program recognizes sites that represent the best examples of the nation's geological and ecological history. Emerald Bay qualified because of its exceptional glacial geology of steep granite walls, deep and remarkably clear waters, and a textbook formation shaped by ancient ice flows, combined with its unparalleled scenic value.

While the League was not the federal agency that granted the designation, its advocacy played a critical role in building the case for Emerald Bay's protection. At a time when modern environmental laws were still in their infancy, the League consistently elevated the bay's scientific, ecological, and aesthetic significance, helping shift public and political understanding of what was at stake.

The 1969 designation ultimately placed Emerald Bay among an elite group of landscapes recognized as nationally significant, not merely locally cherished.

The true impact of the National Natural Landmark designation, however, came in how it was used.

The League leveraged Emerald Bay's national recognition as convincing evidence that preservation should take precedence over development, strengthening its position in land-use debates and planning discussions. The designation also provided a foundation for future policy victories, reinforcing the case for stronger regional planning and land-use controls.

This recognition helped support arguments for bi-state cooperation and planning, contributing to the creation and strengthening of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA). It also bolstered later public land acquisitions and protections, ensuring that Emerald Bay's shoreline, surrounding lands, and eventually even its underwater resources would remain safeguarded.

In the decades that followed, Emerald Bay became part of California's state park system, and its waters were later designated as one of California's first underwater parks, an evolution of protection that can be traced directly back to the credibility and momentum created by the 1969 landmark designation.

More than half a century later, Emerald Bay's National Natural Landmark status remains a testament to what determined, science-based advocacy can achieve. It reflects a moment when citizens, working through the League, helped redefine Tahoe's future, shifting the narrative from exploitation to stewardship.

Keep Tahoe Blue continues to draw on this legacy today, using science, advocacy, and collaboration to protect Tahoe's lands and waters. Emerald Bay is not just a scenic backdrop; it is enduring proof that bold leadership and long-term vision can create lasting change.

Notes from the CEO: A New Chapter for Tahoe



Darcie Goodman Collins, PhD
Chief Executive Officer

As we step into 2026, I'm reminded that Tahoe's story has always been one of vigilance, vision, and community. The articles in this issue reflect that legacy and the challenges ahead.

More than fifty years ago, Keep Tahoe Blue helped stop a bridge from being built over Emerald Bay and secured its designation as a National Natural Landmark. That victory wasn't just about preserving a view; it set the precedent that science and advocacy can shape policy and protect what we love.

Today, that same principle drives our response to emerging threats. Recent research shows Lake Tahoe is heavily impacted by microplastic pollution; a sobering reminder that even the most pristine places are not immune to global pressures. Thanks to donor support and volunteer engagement, we're turning these findings into action: community science, education, and policy solutions that start at home and ripple across the region.

And while some threats arrive quietly, others loom large. The golden mussel, one of the world's most aggressive aquatic invasive species, could devastate Tahoe's ecosystem if introduced. Prevention is our strongest defense, and it depends on early detection, rigorous inspection, and public awareness. This is where leadership and community matter most.

2026 is more than a new year; it's a new chapter. Together, we can build on Tahoe's legacy of protection and ensure its future remains blue and thriving for generations to come.

Thank you for standing with us.

Announcements & Upcoming Events

- **Saturday, March 28 – Master Gardner's Workshop**, 10-11:30 am, our Keep Tahoe Blue Headquarters, the Spurlock/Evers Environment & Education Center
- **Thursday, April 2 – Big Year Wildflower Talk**, 5-7 pm, our Keep Tahoe Blue Headquarters, the Spurlock/Evers Environment & Education Center
- **Wednesday, April 22 – Earth Day**

New Science Reveals Surprising Sources and Scale of Microplastic Pollution at Lake Tahoe

Lake Tahoe is celebrated for its unparalleled clarity, yet new research makes clear that even our iconic waters are not immune to a global challenge: **microplastics**. Two recent scientific findings, one global and one local, reveal both the scale of the problem and how everyday household activities may contribute. Together, they underscore why scientific research, public education, and volunteer engagement are pivotal to protecting Tahoe's future.

In a groundbreaking study comparing microplastic concentrations across 38 freshwater lakes worldwide, Lake Tahoe ranked third highest in microplastic levels. While this may feel surprising given Tahoe's reputation for clarity, the result highlights Tahoe's unique environmental setting and how microplastics behave differently from traditional pollutants: tiny particles can travel long distances through air, water, and stormwater systems, accumulating even in high elevation, ostensibly pristine environments.

This global ranking adds urgency to understanding where microplastics come from and how we can reduce them—especially in a watershed as sensitive and valuable as Tahoe's.

A Surprising Source Close to Home: Household Dryers

A recent local study published in *Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry* conducted by researchers at the Desert Research Institute in partnership with Keep Tahoe Blue and supported by community volunteers, measured how much microfiber material is emitted from clothes dryers.

Key findings:

- **Dryer vents release substantial microfiber pollution.** When dryers exhaust outdoors, they emit microscopic fibers shed from clothing. These include both synthetic plastics and natural materials, with totals estimated in the thousands of metric tons annually in the U.S. alone.
- **Volunteer engagement was essential.** Tahoe residents helped gather real-world data by placing small mesh capture screens over dryer vents, turning local observations into estimates with national relevance.
- **Both synthetic and natural fibers were present.** Although natural fibers make up a large share, synthetic microplastics were also captured, showing how routine laundry can introduce persistent particles into the environment.

Why This Matters for Tahoe

Taken together, these studies suggest microplastic pollution isn't limited to cities or industry. Even Tahoe's alpine waters show elevated levels, driven by atmospheric deposition, stormwater, and local sources. Sources can be surprisingly common. Everyday activities such as clothes drying can emit fibers that ultimately make their way into the watershed. However, reduction opportunities exist. Straightforward changes at home like buying natural fibers, improving lint capture, optimizing dryer use, or air drying when practical can reduce emissions at the source.

Volunteers: The Heart of Community Driven Science

Our volunteers are essential partners in shaping Tahoe's future. In the dryer vent study, local residents installed sampling screens and collected fibers from their own homes, making the science tangible and locally relevant; provided consistent, long-term participation and quantifiable data, allowing researchers to estimate annual emission totals with greater confidence; amplified public awareness, showing neighbors and friends how small actions at home can reduce pollution downstream.

Volunteer time and effort directly strengthen the research that informs policy, personal behavior, and advocacy.

What You Can Do at Home to Reduce Microfiber Pollution

Small changes in everyday routines can help limit the release of microfibers into the environment:

- **Clean your dryer's lint trap every load** to improve capture efficiency.
- **Check and maintain outdoor dryer vents** to prevent excess fiber escape.
- **Avoid over-drying clothes**, which increases fiber shedding.
- **Wash full loads when possible**, reducing friction and fiber loss.
- **Choose durable, high-quality, natural fabrics** that shed fewer fibers over time.
- **Air-dry clothing when practical**, especially synthetic items.

Reducing microfibers at the source helps protect Lake Tahoe's clarity—and supports long-term solutions to an emerging global challenge.



Microplastic Pollution at Lake Tahoe

Florida Sea Grant via Flickr

The Golden Mussel: A Threat We Must Stop Before It Starts

Lake Tahoe has avoided many of the invasive species that have permanently altered other iconic waterways. But the growing threat of the **golden mussel** is testing how prepared we are to protect Tahoe before irreversible damage occurs.

Native to Southeast Asia, the golden mussel is among the most aggressive aquatic invasive species in the world. It reproduces rapidly, attaches to nearly any hard surface, and thrives in a wide range of conditions, including water as cold as Tahoe's. Once established, it is extraordinarily difficult and costly to control. In regions where infestations have taken hold, golden mussels have clogged water infrastructure, altered ecosystems, and driven tens of millions of dollars in annual maintenance costs. If allowed into Lake Tahoe, golden mussels could turn Tahoe's iconic blue waters into a murky green.

For a lake as ecologically sensitive as Tahoe, the consequences could be devastating. Infestation would threaten nearshore ecosystems, undermine decades of investment in water quality and clarity, and permanently change the character of the Lake. Simply put, prevention is the only real solution.

What makes the golden mussel especially dangerous is how easily it can spread. The mussels themselves are very small, and often travel unseen on boats, trailers, equipment, and in small amounts

of standing water. That means Tahoe's strongest defense depends on early detection, rigorous prevention, and coordinated action across agencies and communities.

Recognizing this growing risk, Keep Tahoe Blue launched its **Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Defense Team** in 2025, a focused effort to strengthen Tahoe's front line against invasive species before they reach the Lake. The team brings together science, face-to-face education, policy advocacy, and on-the-ground coordination to support stronger inspection standards, monitoring, and public awareness throughout the region.

This work is intentionally proactive. Success looks like nothing happening - no infestation, no emergency response, no irreversible damage. But that kind of success requires readiness, credibility, and the ability to act early, often before a threat is widely understood.

This is where leadership support matters most. Preventing invasive species isn't reactive or visible work, but it is among the highest-impact investments in Tahoe's future. It allows Keep Tahoe Blue to engage decision-makers early, support science and monitoring, and advocate for safeguards that may be inconvenient, but are essential.

The threat of the golden mussel is a reminder that Tahoe's greatest risks often arrive quietly. Thanks to committed supporters, Keep Tahoe Blue is positioned to help ensure that Lake Tahoe stays the way you picture it, rather than becoming another cautionary tale.

What You Can Do

Protecting Lake Tahoe from aquatic invasive species depends on vigilance at every level. You can help by ensuring all watercraft and gear are **clean, drained, and dry** before entering Tahoe and by spreading awareness within your networks about the importance of early prevention. Together, these simple but critical actions help stop invasive species before they reach the Lake.



Golden Mussels

California Department of Fish and Wildlife