

Geologists protest bill to remove state rock

Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle, 7-16-10

It takes real effort to impugn the reputation of an inanimate object, but there is a movement gaining traction in Sacramento to strip the California state rock of its lofty title for what geologists say is a trifling offense: It contains asbestos.

The stone in question, serpentine, has been the state rock since 1965, but a group led by Sen. Gloria Romero, D-East Los Angeles, wants it removed from the symbols list because it often contains the carcinogen linked to 2,500 deaths a year in the United States.

Romero has introduced SB624, which would strip the olive green stone of its title, but she is now running up against a gaggle of geologists and natural history buffs who have removed their spectacles, thrown down their lab coats and are rallying to the rock's defense.

Serpentine, they say, is intricately linked to California's tumultuous geologic history, was closely associated with gold deposits during the Gold Rush, provides habitat for rare plants and insects and, last but not least, is beautiful.

"It's a wonderful state rock because it has got this great natural, social and scientific history in California," said Jon Christensen, an environmental historian who is the executive director of the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University. "It is found all over the world, but it is especially associated with continental margins where tectonic forces and subduction have been strongest, like California."

The spat over the stone turned surly this past week as accusations of shady partisan backroom dealing were tossed around the state Capitol. The rock flinging even overshadowed budget mudslinging.

Campaign formation

The "drop the rock" campaign was actually started two years ago by Linda Reinstein, the co-founder of the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization. Her husband, Alan, died in 2006 of mesothelioma, an incurable cancer caused by asbestos.

"My husband is dead," Reinstein said. "I just want to do something positive with the loss of his life for California."

Romero sponsored the bill - which would eliminate not only serpentine, but the entire state rock category - because, she said, California has the highest rate of mesothelioma deaths in the nation and it is inappropriate to celebrate the source of that disease.

"This isn't against serpentine. It's about asbestos," Romero said. "Why in a health-conscious state like California do we have a state rock that is related to asbestos? This is a teachable moment. It's time to be sensitive to the fact that people suffer and die from this substance. It's time to drop the rock as a symbol."

Serpentine is a metamorphic rock that forms underneath the ocean, where it is squeezed by colliding continental plates and forced upward. It can be found in the Sierra Nevada foothills and in 42 of California's 58 counties. It was often found by miners near gold deposits.

Rare habitat

It was named from the Latin *serpentinus*, meaning serpent rock, because of its jade color and often smooth surface. As such, it is sometimes associated with magic and the occult. Its chemical composition is such that only uniquely adapted native plants grow in serpentine soil and, thus, rare insects like the threatened checkerspot butterfly are associated with those outcroppings.

Fire-resistant chrysotile asbestos is one of 20 minerals that can often be found within the rock. Considered a wonder substance in the 1960s, asbestos was mined extensively for use in building construction, household appliances and for insulation. In 1965, lobbyists for the makers of asbestos products were among those who urged state legislators to recognize serpentine as the state rock.

Health authorities have since found that asbestos can cause cancer and other diseases when the fibers are inhaled. It is no longer mined in the United States.

Twitter gets involved

The proposed bill, approved by the state Senate, is now working its way through the Assembly. But it went pretty much unnoticed until June when it was mentioned on Twitter, then in blogs. Pretty soon a lively discussion had erupted between geologists and environmental scientists, many of whom are now crusading against the bill.

They claim Romero's bill wrongly states that all serpentine contains cancer-causing chrysotile asbestos. In fact, naturally occurring asbestos that remains undisturbed in the ground presents no risk, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

"I start my California geology class talking about the state symbols and, out of all of those, serpentine is the most emblematic of what California is," said Garry Hayes, a Modesto Community College geology teacher who was among the first to protest the bill online. "It has educational value, and if it remains our state rock, people are going to learn about it, including its connection with asbestos."

Politics being what they are, other agendas have somehow slipped their way into the debate. John Sullivan, the president of the Civil Justice Association of California, has accused trial lawyers of hatching a fiendish plot to file more asbestos lawsuits by ruining the reputation of the state's stone.

Absurd allegations

"Lawyers are suing everybody they can find, listing every possible culprit sometimes from decades past, when they have a client who is sick from asbestos," Sullivan said. "With this bill, it is conceivable that if someone went to elementary school and played soccer in Placerville where there is serpentine in the hills, that the school district could be sued, so I don't think our concern that this would foment more litigation is misplaced at all."

The Consumer Attorneys of California, whose political action committee has donated nearly \$15,000 to Romero's political campaigns over the past decade, recently expressed support for the bill. Nevertheless, J.G. Preston, the press secretary for the consumer attorneys, said the allegations are absurd.

"They have created this out of whole cloth," said Preston, pointing out that asbestos litigation invariably relates to problems associated with building materials and construction, not naturally occurring elements. "There is no

nefarious lawsuit craze behind this. In fact, there is nothing in SB624 that would have any implications for litigation at all."

Ultimately, the effort by politicians to oust the state rock may be the best thing that could have happened to science, said Christensen, whose research at Stanford focuses on serpentine grasslands.

"Now there is a wonderful, vigorous conversation going on online about a rock," Christensen said. "It's been fun to see it erupt, particularly among geologists and mineral collectors and fans of natural history."

California state symbols

Bird: California quail

Freshwater fish: Golden trout

Saltwater fish: Garibaldi

Flower: Golden poppy

Gemstone: Benitoite

Grass: Purple needlegrass

Insect: California dogface butterfly

Mammal: Grizzly bear

Marine mammal: Gray whale

Mineral: Gold

Reptile: Desert tortoise

Tree: Sequoia