

## Why rock this boat?

*Decertifying the California state rock, serpentine, because it contains asbestos won't alleviate the cancer that the substance causes.*

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Leaving no stone unturned in her quest to protect the health of Californians, state Sen. Gloria Romero (D- Los Angeles) has introduced a bill to decertify the state rock, because it can cause cancer. To which we can only respond: California has an official rock?

It turns out that it does. Most California school kids can tell you that the golden poppy is the state flower, but far fewer residents realize there are more than two dozen other state emblems and symbols ranging from the majestic (the California gray whale is the official marine mammal) to the bizarre (San Joaquin soil is the official state dirt). California not only has an official rock, it has an official mineral (gold) and an official gemstone (benitoite). But it's the rock, serpentine, that's now caught between Romero and a hard place.

Serpentine isn't particularly attractive and it isn't unique to California, but it does contain something valuable — asbestos. Lawmakers and mineralogists in the mid-1960s apparently wanted to promote the state's rapidly growing asbestos industry, so a bill designating serpentine the state rock skipped easily through the Legislature in 1965. That's usually how these state symbols get adopted: An interest group promotes it, and there's often a consensus behind it among conservation or scientific organizations.

Sometimes a political battle can break out. In the 1970s activists wanted to publicize the international threat to whale populations by recognizing the gray whale but ran up against an advocacy group for sea otters that thought the cuddly water weasels were more representative of the state because they're here year-round (gray whales migrate to Alaska and Baja California, making them somewhat akin to illegal immigrants). More often, though, the designations are so inconsequential that they sail through the Legislature unnoticed.

One group has recently taken notice of serpentine: mesothelioma sufferers. A trio of anti-asbestos organizations has sponsored a petition drive, called Swap the Rock, aimed at pressuring lawmakers to dump serpentine. When crumbled, the rock can release asbestos particles into the air that are implicated in certain lung cancers, which is why the state forbids using serpentine as a surface material for unpaved roads. Hence Romero's bill, SB 624, which says: "California should not designate a rock known to be toxic to the health of its residents as the state's official rock."

Asbestos is a killer, but serpentine's designation as the state rock has zero impact on the ongoing mesothelioma tragedy. And did we mention that while the Legislature is gathering moss on the rock issue, the budget is now 13 days overdue?