

# State rock is both toxin and natural wonder

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Most readers, on learning that the Legislature is considering a bill to demote the state rock, will probably be surprised to learn that California had such a thing in the first place.

But it does. Since 1965, serpentine — the greenish, mineral-rich stone common throughout the state but especially in the northern mountains — has held pride of place as a California emblem next to the poppy, the redwood and the grizzly.

That might not last. Sen. Gloria Romero, a Southern California Democrat, has taken up the cause of anti-serpentine crusaders. Her bill to eliminate the state rock, SB 624, passed the Assembly Natural Resources Committee last week.

And once you get over laughing about the fact that there's a debate over the state rock, and shaking your fist at the fools in the Legislature who are wasting their time on such trivia instead of the budget crisis, there's a serious point underlying the drive to strip serpentine of its honor.

Serpentine is a primary source of asbestos — which was considered an invaluable material for insulation in its day but is now known to be a carcinogen. It was its industrial value that the state honored back in '65. Today, that looks like a slap to those who've suffered lung cancer or other ailments related to asbestos, and they're pushing the repeal. Who can blame them?

But if modern science is an argument against serpentine for its health effects, modern environmental sensitivities ought to celebrate it.

In the north state's Klamath Mountains, which are thick with serpentine, ecologists celebrate the unique botanical diversity that is in part due to plants that have evolved to grow in nutrient-poor serpentine soils. The state Department of Fish and Game says there are some 100 species of serpentine-adapted plants in the Klamaths. According to the California Academy of Sciences, those plants include a number of rare conifers in the dryland forests, while in wet areas serpentine creates "acidic bogs" that are home to carnivorous plants including the cobra lily.

Acid bogs and carnivorous lilies — what's not to love? And we owe it all to serpentine. Maybe the out-of-fashion rock deserves its honor after all.