

Coastal lagoons are priceless open space

By Kelly Sarber
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For many native San Diegans, the expanse of open space where Interstate 5 crossed the San Dieguito River Valley near the Del Mar Racetrack acted as an unofficial dividing line for the county. As kids crammed into our parents' station wagon in the 1960s, driving north past this greenbelt made my brothers and I feel like we were pioneers in covered wagons. It represented a rural gateway to a different world where funky, hippie beach towns flourished and chickens and horses were considered household pets.

Flash forward to today. There are almost no more rural tracts of land along the freeway anywhere. The coastline has been paved from Mexico to Oceanside save for five coastal river valleys whose swampy characteristics excluded development. So, when bulldozers began pushing dirt in the San Dieguito River Valley last fall, people were understandably angry that more condos, strip malls and McMansions were being built on what many considered one of the last, great expanses of open space along our coast.

But there's good news! All that dirt moving around isn't building anything for consumers but instead creating a large, nature park with new habitats for endangered species. This massive construction project will create over 150 acres of new wetlands as part of a 440-acre nature preserve with the side benefit being that this open space will be preserved for perpetuity. Hopefully, the 250,000 people driving by the site daily on I-5 have noticed the progress, with a huge lagoon now completed west of the highway which is as big as 40 football fields. Also emerging from the mud are new wetlands being constructed east of the highway that will allow the tidal flow from the open inlet at the beach to sustain the new eco-system once everything is connected.

As one of the most ambitious restoration project ever, the project creates mixed habitat, including the new, deep lagoon that will be open soon to new wetlands that will change water level dramatically with each passing tide. All aspects of the new eco-system have been designed to nurture each other – larvae growing in the new lagoon will feed the fish that then swim to the new wetlands to attract birds and mammals that live in new habitat created expressly for them on land. The Pacific Little Pocket Mouse, California Brown Pelican, Light-footed Clapper Rail and Western Snowy Plover are just a few rare or endangered species that the project plans to set out a welcome mat to attract.

Similar to remodeling a home where people continue to reside, birds, mammals, fish and plants that are current residents of the valley are being protected while their new “homes” are being expanded, improved and restored. This past nesting season was successful in demonstrating that the construction could be flexible enough to protect nature while still improving dramatically their environment. And like pesky relatives coming to see what their new home is going to look like, the project is starting to attract more birds, mammals and fish that thrive in this unique, coastal environment. In fact, six California Least Terns, one of our state's most endangered species, were recently seen on the property checking out the new lagoon and nesting sites almost like house hunters looking at prospective homes.

This unique, environmental project is being spearheaded by Southern California Edison and their dollars will restore a large section of the coastal eco-system to be enjoyed by future generations of wildlife, birds, plants, fish and people. Once completed, the park will act as an anchor for San Diego County's ambitious 55-

mile Coast to Crest Trail system that starts in the mountains of East County and ends at the shoreline in Del Mar.

The restoration project has pumped millions into the economy by using local construction, environmental and engineering companies. Southern California Edison is doing this massive environmental project to mitigate for impacts from its nuclear power plant in San Onofre. Monitoring of the site will continue for decades to make sure the environmental goals of protecting endangered species are realized.

Coastal lagoons in San Diego County have evolved into priceless parcels that benefit both the environment and the public, since most communities consider open space one of the premiere quality of life goals. But these public policy goals can be expensive and the long-term maintenance of large parcels of public lands can overwhelm already strained government coffers. Everyone loves open space, but who is going to pay for it? Future projects seeking mitigation (like the I-5 corridor expansion by Caltrans), should be encouraged to adopt other coastal lagoons so that the region can fully leverage the value these open spaces provide for recreational, environmental and aesthetic benefits for future generations of San Diegans.

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