



Endangered Species Wars in Inland Empire Continue

The plight of endangered species remains precarious in the vast Inland Empire of San Bernardino and Riverside counties. While Riverside County has admirably put a problem-solving multiple species plan in motion, some San Bernardino jurisdictions are moving backwards, choosing a policy of systematic noncompliance with environmental laws, and working hand-in-hand with developers' attorneys.

At the center of the controversy is the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly (DSF), which represents a nearly-vanished sand dune ecosystem. This nectar-eating animal is only one of several endemic species inhabiting the dunes. Recent events include the following:

- A consortium of San Bernardino cities has hired a Washington, D.C. lobbying firm to attack the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in Congress, with the goal of pressuring the agency to "ease up" on protecting endangered species like the DSF. Even apart from this effort, observers in Washington report a misleading and poisonous campaign against agency personnel.
- The City of Rialto knowingly issued grading permits on habitat occupied by the DSF. Because the Fish and Wildlife Service had not permitted the taking of the species, a showdown was precipitated. The Justice Department was forced to go to court and obtain an injunction against the grading. EHL also filed suit against Rialto under the California Environmental Quality Act, for rushing project approval forward prior to the end of the public comment period and for failing to circulate environmental documents to the California Department of Fish and Game.

- The City of Fontana adopted the "biological analysis" provided by the developer of a proposed project. This analysis asserted that the project site was entirely unsuitable as habitat for the DSF. The City only reversed its position at the last minute when confronted with videotaped evidence of the densest DSF population ever discovered.
- The City of Colton prepared a Negative Declaration for the impacts of a highway through the most intact remaining DSF habitat, claiming that the document is only a "study."
- Ignoring evidence of significant impacts to habitat identified as a DSF recovery area, Riverside County adopted a Negative Declaration denying such effects. EHL went to court to prevent grading but was denied an injunction. However, when EHL challenged the Negative Declaration on a host of inadequacies, we prevailed on grounds of traffic impacts. Subsequently, when the County *resubmitted* the same denial of impacts to the DSF, we were put back in court.

EHL is committed to the battle for the Delhi sand dunes. As we repeatedly point out, the open space generated from species protection is also vital for the Inland Empire's future quality of life. And while we commend Riverside County's multiple species planning initiative, it will take a concerted and cooperative effort to successfully resolve conflicts over development projects that come up in the interim planning period. Perhaps only when the strategy of confrontation urged by Endangered Species Act opponents is acknowledged as counterproductive will common sense assert itself in San Bernardino County.

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“Smart Growth” Update

“Smart growth” is rapidly becoming a buzzword. Invented in Maryland, the term has been adopted by Vice President Al Gore. And given the many ills of suburbia — dysfunctional communities where “it takes a gallon of gas to buy a gallon of milk,” alienated youth, and insufferable traffic congestion — it may stick as a major issue. Already, Libertarian and right wing think tanks are firing salvos of op-ed pieces against the Vice President.

Smart growth is the opposite of sprawl. Instead of diffusing resources outward and eating up natural and agricultural lands, instead of abandoning inner cities and older suburbs, smart growth seeks reinvestment in already developed areas. If undeveloped land is needed to accommodate population growth, smart growth means the efficient use of land, with higher density, “livable” communities centered around parks, town centers, and, most importantly, transit.

EHL is playing an active role in advancing the cause of smart growth across southern California. In doing so, we continually stress the need to provide certainty for native habitats and for rural landscapes, as well as for livable communities. Central to “smart growth” is stopping rampant land speculation, and replacing landowner-driven General Plan amendments with rational planning.

Orange County. EHL retained a transportation consultant to bring practical transit improvements into the “Four Corners” study, a local government-run effort to relieve traffic congestion where Riverside, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, and Orange counties come together. We have made some progress thus far, such as bringing Metrolink rail extensions into the mix of options, and will continue to advocate for non-automotive choices.

San Diego County. EHL serves on the Housing Committee and the Environment Committee in a supervisorial “Smart Growth Coalition.” We are also active in the General Plan 2020 Update, a comprehensive look at the County’s future. Our position is that growth should be directed into municipal boundaries, and that a real countryside should be retained.

Riverside County. The precedent-setting “Integrated Plan” for habitat, transportation, and land use is commencing. We intend to participate intensively in a process that could reshape Riverside County from monotonous, low density bedroom communities into a smart growth model. It is likely that stakeholders will play a major role in the outcome. EHL and other conservation groups have already formed an ad hoc committee to explore potential common ground with other interests.

Los Angeles County. We persuaded a Southern California Association of Governments Technical Committee to look at incentives for local governments to adopt transit-oriented development.

We will keep you informed of these efforts.

State Legislature Considers Bill To Save State Parks From Highways

Increasingly, the crown jewels of California’s natural heritage — its state parks — are being targeted by highway builders. State parks are perceived as the “path of least resistance” for road construction by local agencies whose poverty of vision is exceeded only by a disdain for alternative modes of transportation.

Chino Hills State Park, roughly at the northeastern edge of Orange County, is being studied by a local government task force for bisection and ruination by a major highway. The most expensive acquisition in state park history, Chino Hills State Park preserves resources such as rare walnut woodlands and provides extensive outdoor recreation for nearby urban areas.

San Onofre State Beach, the tenth most heavily used unit of the 250-unit state park system, lies at the northern boundary of Camp Pendleton and is home to a record seven endangered species. The proposed Foothill Transportation Corridor would literally obliterate much of the park, take a disastrous toll on wildlife, and induce enormous sprawl.

Highways through eight other state parks are currently being or have been proposed, including: Calaveras Big Trees, Prairie Creek Redwoods, Malibu Creek, Topanga, Emerald Bay, and Montera.

To the rescue of our state parks has come Senator Tom Hayden who has introduced SB 1277 that would prohibit highway construction contrary to the vital mission of state parks. Unless this bill passes, those who so erroneously see state parks as “vacant” will increase their efforts.

ENDANGERED HABITATS LEAGUE

The Endangered Habitats League is a non-profit organization.
All contributions are tax-deductible.

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Palos Verdes Peninsula Update

The City of Rancho Palos Verdes, lead agency for the Palos Verdes Peninsula NCCP, released clues to its long-awaited preferred “alternative” design for the peninsula’s habitat reserve. As expected, it will contain modifications to the design proposed by the two principal private landholders several months ago. Also, as expected, it does not preclude any of the major development projects that have been mooted for the area. This “preferred alternative” is considerably further from the biologically preferred alternative than it is from the developers’ alternative, but it does have the advantage of including one (probably narrow) wildlife corridor not in the latter.

Although the map for this new alternative will not be released until June, it almost certainly will contain allowances for a golf course/residential development that would effectively divide the main habitat reserve in two. If this development were to be approved, the integrity of the habitat reserve would be seriously compromised. From a biological perspective, the City proposal contains other flaws, too, but they pale in comparison.

San Diego County Faces Momentous Rezoning of Agricultural Lands

Some years ago, a lawsuit was filed challenging San Diego’s zoning of its farm and ranch lands as inconsistent with the County’s General Plan. The litigation has now forced the County to rectify these problems, and as a result, the County has proposed a rezoning of some of the most scenic landscapes in Southern California. At stake are the ranches near Julian, the pristine South County countryside toward the Mexican border, and North County farms. While these crucial land use decisions would best await the comprehensive update of the County General Plan now in progress, a court order makes this impossible.

EHL commissioned a professional review of the County’s environmental document, including review by an agricultural economist, and found it grossly inadequate for deciding what is best for farming and ranching. For example, evidence for appropriate parcel sizes is anecdotal.

County staff has proposed 40-acre lots where realistic ranching use would probably require 320 acres. The San Diego County Farm Bureau, most interested in land speculation, has proposed rezoning the entire area for 10-acre estate lots, whose impacts on, for example, the scenic Santa Isabel Valley, would be nothing less than obscene. Hearings begin in June. EHL will be actively engaged.

A Message About “Green Power”

By Kari Smith

Until recently, not too many consumers ever had much reason to think about where the electricity came from when they flipped on the switch to turn on the lights. Since last April, however, more and more Californians are discovering that every time they watch TV, use the microwave, or play the stereo, they are making a decision that can help or hurt the environment.

If you haven’t yet bothered to switch to one of several “green” brands of electricity now available in the market, every year your household contributes about a ton of carbon dioxide (CO₂), a pollutant linked to global climate change. According to the vast majority of atmospheric scientists, climate change will result in extreme weather patterns that will cause environmental havoc. The largest cause of global climate change is the burning of the fossil fuels for electric generation.

Today, however, choosing your power suppliers is one of the easiest ways to not only slow global warming, but also to clean up the air. The notion of consumer choice in the electricity business represents a revolutionary change that could help reform an industry that is the single largest source of air pollution in the United States — and the world. Buying generic power — which is what you get if you do nothing — increases smog in Los Angeles, further erodes the view of the Grand Canyon, and kills thousands of fish off the coast because the San Onofre nuclear power plant uses ocean water to cool the reactor core. In fact, the annual emissions associated with generating electricity for the average California household is equivalent to that created by driving a car from Los Angeles to New York City.

Fortunately, consumers no longer have to rely on dirty sources. They have a choice. And one of these choices is clean, renewable energy from solar, wind, biomass, or geothermal plants. California’s new competitive market gives each and every one of us the unique opportunity to make a real contribution to our environmental health. And it’s so easy — just a five minute phone call to one of numerous providers offering a green power product.

For more information, contact <ksmith@sirius.com>. For a listing of the green power products currently available on the market, see the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies’ (CEERT) website: <www.cleanpower.org>.

Beasts and Botany of the Coastal Sage Scrub: Alkali Vernal Wetland

To the untrained eye, for most months of most years, the alkali valleys of western Riverside County appear as vacant fields of dried grasses with an occasional twig left over from some long-gone perennial. Only scattered patches of starkly white silty clay and the gray mounds of seep weep (*Suaeda moquinii*) hint otherwise. During winter and spring rains, though, incredibly beautiful vernal alkali wetlands emerge. What was once brown becomes a vibrant green and yellow mosaic of wildflowers and moisture-dependent herbs. One of the richest diversities of rare plants in California is in bloom.

Alkali vernal wetlands are found chiefly along the San Jacinto River between Mystic Lake and the City of Perris and in the upper Salt Creek drainage west of Hemet. This unique community consists of an assemblage of alkali scrub, alkali playa, alkali annual grassland, and alkali vernal pools. Over 200 vernal pools have been identified in the vicinity of Hemet alone. These habitats support many rare plant populations. San Jacinto Valley crownscale, an endangered species, is found nowhere else. Here also are the largest remaining populations of the rare little mouse-tail, Coulter's seaside daisy, and the threatened spreading navarretia. Once more widespread, Parish's saltbush — thought possibly extinct as recently as 1995 — is known from only three small populations. Other rare plants include thread-leaved broadiaea, Orcutt's grass, Davidson's saltbush, smooth tarplant, and vernal barley. These areas are also home to the western spadefoot toad, the threatened vernal pool fairy shrimp, and colonies of burrowing owls. The alkali flats may also be important to the recovery of the federally proposed mountain plover and endangered San Bernardino kangaroo rat.

Once occupying about 32,000 acres, alkali vernal wetland is today one of California's most endangered habitats. By 1993, after extensive agricultural conversion, urban development, and alteration of the hydrology, fewer than 7,000 acres remained, of which nearly half was disturbed. Discing and other threats are gradually eroding the natural diversity of this habitat and opening the door to ever increasing non-native plant establishment. Today, less than 20 percent of the remaining habitat is in good condition and nearly 70 percent is threatened by urbanization and flood control projects. Perhaps the Riverside County multiple species plan will be a vehicle for preserving and restoring these lands.

— Fred Roberts

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