

# ENDANGERED HABITATS LEAGUE

*Dedicated to Ecosystem Protection and Improved Land Use Planning*

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## *Where We Stand, 2000*

As we start the New Year, it is a good time to assess our progress, and define challenges and opportunities. As you know, it is the mission of the Endangered Habitats League to protect the "South Coast" ecoregion. Beginning in 1991, our work quickly progressed from the listing of individual species like the gnatcatcher to large-scale habitat plans. Inevitably, we also found that the wasteful patterns of dispersed and automobile-dependent development needed to be countered. In retrospect, and looking forward, here's "where we stand," county-by-county:

### **San Diego County**

This, the most biodiverse county in the continental United States, saw the issuance of annual reports on the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) in late 1999. The City of San Diego reported 156 acres lost, 131 acres of off-site mitigation, 79 acres of on-site protection, and 598 acres of acquisition. The County reported 582 acres of habitat loss, purchases of 6,905 acres, project mitigation of 1,098 acres, and creation of 1,848 acres of mitigation banks. Underlying these numbers were several trends. First, many timely acquisitions occurred. Important purchases included vernal pools on Del Mar Mesa, the "Lakeside Archipelago" gnatcatcher linkage, native grasslands in Alpine, riparian habitat in Lusardi Creek, and Otay River Valley parklands.

Another trend was major improvement in the MSCP. Through enormous effort of EHL and others, the vernal pools and rare plants of Carmel Mountain are now protected. Through an inspired ballot initiative, the citizens of Santee soundly rejected the Fanita Ranch project, which would have devastated Santee's MSCP plan. This coastal sage scrub and wetlands wonderland can now be protected. Also, EHL will advocate for additions to the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge to protect the endangered quino checkerspot butterfly.

Other emerging trends were worrisome, however. Several proposed projects in the County evidenced unacceptable preserve design, with habitat fragmentation. EHL will make correcting these designs and reversing this trend a top priority in 2000. Elsewhere in the County, EHL had to spring into action to defend critical resources. In Ramona, EHL pre-

sented evidence that impacts to golden eagles from an estate lot subdivision were unmitigable, at least temporarily halting the project. In Jacumba, out toward the desert, we pointed out the financial flaws in bringing sewer and water infrastructure to this distant area.

A great victory for wildlife occurred quietly. With EHL playing a lead role, 18,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management lands on Otay Mountain obtained federal wilderness designation. This will protect these lands from numerous threats, and ensure management for biological diversity.

The year 2000 will see make-or-break progress in the scenic East County. One of our biggest battles is to prevent the growth-inducing widening of Highway 94 in the South County. EHL presented alternative assumptions for traffic projections, and these may provide the basis for sound decision-making. The County's all-important General Plan 2020 Update will determine whether County towns and greenbelts remain or vanish. The amount of existing parcelization, the product of decades of bad planning, has emerged as a major obstacle to Update success. EHL continues to serve on the Advisory Committee. Also, ranch lands will be rezoned soon. EHL will fly in an agricultural economist to counter the pro-development San Diego County Farm Bureau.

One of our biggest challenges of the new year will be to keep up the momentum of the County's Smart Growth Coalition. While it made many excellent recommendations to counter sprawl, practical implementation is lacking. EHL is currently working with high tech and economic development interests on such practical proposals.

### **Riverside County**

In a place severely damaged by developer-driven sprawl, EHL is intensively engaged in the precedent-setting Riverside County Integrated Plan, to comprehensively and simultaneously plan for land use, habitat, and transportation. Over two years of work culminated late last year, when EHL, the Building Industry Association, and Riverside County Property Owners Association presented joint "Community Design Principles" to the Integrated Plan Advisory Committee. While these principles skirted the thorny issue of certainty

over where development will and will not occur, it did articulate a new paradigm: efficient growth, communities oriented to the pedestrian, and a mass transit system. Already accepted by the Advisory Committee, these principles will be considered by the Board of Supervisors in 2000.

Obstacles to "smart growth" in Riverside County are massive projects already approved (perhaps 100,000 units) but unbuilt, and the prevailing bias toward low-density housing. Devising incentives that bring higher density and infill projects to the marketplace is a challenge for the new year. In order to provide innovative transit solutions, EHL organized a symposium for the Integrated Plan team. Low cost, sophisticated bus systems were discussed. EHL is also advocating that projects proposed before the plan is completed be held accountable to Integrated Plan work products, and consistency with the evolving plan established.

For the habitat portion of the plan, conservationists hope to acquire several "core areas" and then add to these areas and provide buffer zones over time. One vital piece fell into place recently, as quino checkerspot butterfly habitat will be protected through acquisition of the 1,000-acre Johnson Ranch. Over the next year, preserve designs will be finalized. In the meantime, EHL continues to fight bad projects. For example, we recently settled litigation over Greer Ranch, a project in the City of Murrieta that lies within a regional habitat linkage. We obtained significant widening of a riparian corridor, though this entire linkage (from Lake Skinner to Lake Mathews core preserves) remains problematic due to failure of the cities to participate effectively in the multiple species plan.

## Orange County

Expected early this year are revised preserve designs for the Southern Subregion NCCP. Our greatest challenge will be to protect the irreplaceable coastal sage scrub of Chiquita

Canyon. Long delayed due to wetlands mapping and assessment, this NCCP will either succeed or fail in 2000. The "Lost Wilderness" of Southern Orange County is a matter of national importance.

Meanwhile, the battle to stop the Foothill Tollroad continues unabated. This sprawl-serving road has no place in rational transportation planning, reinforcing every trend that has created unimaginable gridlock on the region's highways. EHL is working with other conservation groups on a petition for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to designate critical habitat for the endangered Pacific pocket mouse, one of the seven listed species that lie in the tollroad's path. We will also watchdog the federal agencies now preparing a suite of alternatives for environmental documents to analyze.

Because the tollroad is slated to destroy a state park — San Mateo State Beach — legislation authored by Senator Tom Hayden to restrict highways from going through all state parks would affect this highway. This bill recently passed out the State Senate and will go to the Assembly.

A negative trend emerged last year in the Central-Coastal NCCP. The NCCP Board of Directors has been failing its duty to provide oversight on changes to the preserve, such as those proposed in amendments requested by the Irvine Company. EHL will address this problem in 2000.

EHL remains in litigation in Orange County. We won the first round of the litigation on Saddleback Meadows, which would block a major wildlife corridor. The judge ruled that the County had incorrectly interpreted a tie vote of the Board of Supervisors as a victory for the developer. This is now on appeal. Also, we will continue to work with local groups to convince a school and a water district to sell Barham Ranch for conservation purposes.

## San Bernardino County

In the absence of a multiple species planning effort, EHL will pursue two strategies in 2000. First, we will continue to litigate every abuse of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) by local governments impacting habitat of the

### EHL Awards of Excellence

In recognition of their leadership in putting the San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program in place, EHL honored **Supervisors Dianne Jacob** and **Pam Slater**, and **Mayor Susan Golding**, with Awards of Excellence. These beautiful framed certificates, with original artwork of gnatcatchers and other coastal sage scrub wildlife by artist John Schmitt, were well received during presentations at public hearings. Over the course of many years, the honorees overcame obstacle after obstacle and left a remarkable legacy — many protected areas and a framework for an eventual 172,000-acre preserve system. We congratulate them on their achievement.

### ENDANGERED HABITATS LEAGUE

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

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**Michael Beck** Director-San Diego County

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**Pete DeSimone** Director-Orange County

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endangered Delhi Sands flower-loving fly. Our goal is to encourage jurisdictions and property owners to fund a regional preserve system for the Delhi Sands ecosystem through a mitigation fee system. Litigation pertaining to the fly and its habitat continues in Ontario, Colton, and in adjoining Riverside County.

Secondly, EHL is one of many interests participating in Santa Ana River Watershed projects. We have supported proposals to enhance wetlands within the Chino Basin, and to create a proactive conservation program for a fish proposed for listing, the Santa Ana sucker. The sucker may catalyze a major watershed effort.

The failure of San Bernardino jurisdictions to meet the challenge of multiple species planning is deeply disappointing. The rare alluvial fan sage scrub is at particular risk. EHL has commented on several projects that impact this habitat, but insufficient progress is being made.

## **Los Angeles County**

Though stalled in recent months, the Palos Verdes Peninsula NCCP continues to garner our attention as EHL works to force it out of the one-city box to which it has so far been confined. In order to prevent the County General Plan revision from being more of the same old thing, EHL is working to put Smart Growth planning on the table. At the Southern California Association of Governments, EHL instigated the formation of a "Livable Communities" committee, which will make recommendations for retrofitting the Los Angeles basin with walkable and transit-supporting communities. In order to tackle the massive problems that plague the County, EHL co-founded a new organization, the Southern California Transportation and Land Use Coalition, which will focus on transportation and urban reinvestment.

## **Baja California**

Our coastal sage scrub ecosystem extends far down the coast of Baja California. While extensively damaged in many areas by tourist development and agriculture, enormous conservation potential exists. Perhaps the crown jewel is Bahia San Quintin. Approximately the size of San Diego Bay, this bay is the largest salt marsh on the Pacific flyway south of San Francisco Bay. In excellent ecological health, Bahia San Quintin could be a model of sustainable development, such as the aquaculture of shellfish. However, a grotesque development project called "Cabo San Quintin" would destroy all that. Slated to bring major hotels, golf courses, dredging a marina, condominiums, and commercial development to the most sensitive part of the Bay — the long sandy peninsula — this nightmare is now being considered for approval by Mexican government agencies. A public forum was recently held where the project was pushed by investors who include the owners of Century 21 Mexico. During 1999, EHL

helped generate comments on the development, and during the year 2000, the campaign to save this place will be a top priority.

## **Smart Growth Policy Briefing**

The challenges of growth management, open space, and transportation exist at both the local and state levels. State policies contribute to poorly planned development through rules that govern land use planning, financing, and development decisions.

Learn more about how you can take action at the state level at the California Futures Network Smart Growth Policy Briefing on Tuesday, May 9th at the Convention Center in Sacramento. The briefing will be held from 8:30 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. with time in the afternoon to meet with state legislators. There will be a \$25 registration fee to cover breakfast and materials.

You will hear from state officials and organizations about current reform proposals, the opportunities for change, and how you can make a difference. You can network with other leaders across the state who are working for smart growth in their communities, and show your support for smart growth in California.

To register for the briefing and to find out more, contact the California Futures Network at (510) 238-9762 or [cfn@igc.org](mailto:cfn@igc.org). To learn more about CFN visit [www.calfutures.org](http://www.calfutures.org).

## **Park and Water Bonds**

Propositions 12 and 13 will provide desperately needed funding for land and water conservation in Southern California. Widely endorsed by conservation groups, these bonds are the key to the success of our habitat plans. If they fail on the March ballot, most of our objectives for the year 2000 will not come to pass.

## **Job Announcement**

The San Diego Foundation seeks a Program Officer to develop a comprehensive, new Environmental Initiative program and to administer related projects. Information on the Foundation and its existing Blasker environmental program are available at [www.sdfoundation.org](http://www.sdfoundation.org). Send resumes to the San Diego Foundation, Attn: P. Sinay, 1420 Kettner Blvd., Suite 500, San Diego, CA 92101. No phone calls.

## *Beasts and Botany of the Coastal Sage Scrub*

### *Spotted Towhee*

While birding along the trails of a coastal hillside, it's not only the California gnatcatcher that can make one think there's a cat lurking somewhere in the brush. The gnatcatcher, with its high faint mew, will bring to mind a forlorn kitten. By contrast, the spotted towhee's most frequently heard call is more like that of a fussing cat.

There is perhaps no bird better suited to the novice bird watcher than this gorgeous member of the sparrow clan. A skulker by nature, the spotted towhee is not easily seen. Unlike many other birds of the brush, though, this bird does not make a secret of its presence, for it is a noisy bird, on the move, fussing, scratching for seeds in the undergrowth. Hence, though it is a challenge to see, it is not impossible for the beginner to find.

Occasionally, and much to even the most jaded birder's delight, a male will hop up into some taller shrub where it can survey its kingdom and give vent to the prolonged buzz it considers a song. If the light is right, the blue-black sheen of its back will be set off by the white spots along its wings and back — elegant epaulets — and red glow of its eye. The bird's flanks are a rusty red, from which its eastern cousin takes its name, rufous-sided towhee. Indeed, many field guides still show this name for both species. But our singer knows who he is, and it will repay your efforts to seek him out.

—Jess Morton

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## **First Class**