



Scientific Study Released; EHL and Elected Officials Call for Preservation of Global “Hotspot” in Orange County

On October 24, 2001, at a well-reported press conference, the Endangered Habitats League released a scientific study on the imperiled natural resources of southern Orange County. The study was conducted by the Conservation Biology Institute and titled *On the Global and Regional Ecological Significance of Southern Orange County: Conservation Priorities for a Biodiversity Hotspot*.

The study underwent extensive peer review and was endorsed by prominent university scientists. It found that just inland of San Juan Capistrano lies a “remarkably intact representation” of one of the 25 “hotspots” — concentrations of threatened biodiversity — on the planet, in many ways the best hope for survival of the Southern California coastal ecosystem. As these lands are now proposed for massive and incompatible development by the Rancho Mission Viejo Company, the study can help guide public policy in determining the best future for Orange County’s citizens.

The location of the event was Upper Newport Bay, apropos because that special wetland had once been considered for conversion to boat slips. The study’s lead author, Dr. Wayne Spencer, summarized the study for reporters and members of the public. Community leaders — Councilman John Gelff of San Juan Capistrano and Councilman Wayne

Eggleston of San Clemente — eloquently called for preserving these lands as a “promise to Orange County’s children.” Local businesspeople discussed the links between open space, clean water, and economic health. Special guest Mrs. Joan Irvine Smith asked the landowners to consider what type of legacy they wished to leave. The Los Angeles Times and Orange County Register provided extensive coverage, including a map of the four “core biological units” that the study identified as necessary for conservation in an essentially intact form to sustain the flora and fauna.

The study will be widely distributed, and can ensure that decision-making in the upcoming Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) process for this region has a strong scientific foundation. It is EHL’s view that saving this historic and scenic landscape — the “heart and soul” of Orange County — is imperative both for the golden eagles that soar overhead and for future generations of Californians. Please follow and participate in the campaign to save these lands.

The Executive Summary of the study begins on page 2. The entire report and its maps can be viewed and downloaded at: www.consbio.org/ocstudy

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Executive Summary

**On the Global and Regional Ecological Significance of Southern Orange County:
Conservation Priorities for a Biodiversity Hotspot**

Conservation Biology Institute
October 2001

This report summarizes available scientific information establishing the crucial role that Southern Orange County could play in efforts to conserve biodiversity at both global and regional scales. The report outlines a conservation framework for the area, using principles of conservation planning to delineate four core biological resource units. These four resource units must be conserved essentially intact, without further internal fragmentation by development, to continue supporting key species and ecosystem processes. We present this information in support of the Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program for the Southern Orange County NCCP subregion.

South-coastal California is a biodiversity “hotspot” of global importance. Hotspots are those areas harboring the greatest concentrations of living species, especially those species found nowhere else on Earth (endemics). Together, 25 global hotspots identified by leading conservation scientists support more than 60 percent of the Earth’s total species diversity, on only 1.44 percent of its surface. Concentrating conservation efforts in these relatively small areas therefore gains the greatest biodiversity value from limited conservation funds.

Much of Southern California’s unique biodiversity is concentrated in the foothills and terraces along the Pacific coast, from Orange County to the Mexican border. Having thus far escaped the urban sprawl that has reduced and fragmented

natural habitats throughout southern California, southern Orange County supports a last best representation of this globally unique ecosystem. In concert with adjacent federal lands (Cleveland National Forest and Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton), this large undeveloped block of natural habitat supports the broadest remaining array of natural environmental gradients and ecosystem processes in the south-coastal landscape. Southern Orange County and adjacent public lands support core populations of many imperiled wildlife species. The area’s outstanding biological attributes include the following:

- Seven federally threatened or endangered species and critical habitat (areas designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as essential to species survival and recovery) for three of these.

- Approximately 50 to 56 percent of the total remaining population of coastal cactus wrens — the single most important breeding area for this rare endemic bird.
- Approximately 15 to 25 percent of the California gnat-



San Diego River Park Update

catchers in the U.S. — the country's largest contiguous population of this threatened species.

- Portions of the last remaining undammed and undiverted major drainage in all of southern California — San Mateo Creek is the most pristine coastal stream south of the Santa Monica Mountains and supports the southernmost population of the endangered steelhead trout.
- A tremendous diversity of nesting raptors (hawks, owls, eagles, and falcons) — with over 330 recorded nest sites and 15 species — including a critical foraging area for one of the last remaining golden eagle pairs in Orange County.
- Significant areas of native California grasslands, an imperiled vegetation community that exists here in natural mosaic with other diverse habitats — as much of south-coastal California once appeared.
- Healthy populations of mountain lions and mule deer, which require large and intact wildlands to survive.
- Some of the largest remaining populations of certain rare plant species within some of the last and best examples of such rare ecological communities as southern alkali marshes and alkali grasslands.

Based on these biological facts, principles of conservation biology and planning, and guidance provided by the Southern Orange County NCCP Science Advisors, we mapped those areas most critical to retaining these resource values in the region. Four core biological resource areas (Arroyo Trabuco, Chiquita, San Juan, and San Mateo) must be conserved essentially intact, without further internal fragmentation, significant reduction in size, or degradation by development, to retain these resources and the ecosystem processes they depend upon. Conserving private lands within these four areas would consolidate a large ecosystem reserve in conjunction with adjacent existing protected areas, such as the San Mateo Canyon Wilderness Area, Cleveland National Forest, Caspers Wilderness Park, Rancho Mission Viejo Conservancy, and Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary.

The findings and recommendations of this report should help guide NCCP planning for the Southern Orange County NCCP subregion, which is the last best hope to conserve a large, ecologically intact representation of the globally unique coastal foothills and terraces ecosystem. This hope can be achieved through the NCCP process as long as society agrees that these resource values are irreplaceable.

View the entire study at:
www.consbio.org/ocstudy

Steady progress continues on preserving and restoring the Upper San Diego River for wildlife and compatible recreation. This has been a major project of EHL for the last two years.

The newly formed San Diego River Foundation brought together a coalition of San Diego River friends from headwaters to the beach to host Mayor Dick Murphy in mid-September. This meeting was the kickoff of renewed efforts to complete and fund a comprehensive River plan. The very next week, the coalition gathered for a River tour with dignitaries.

Assemblymember Christine Kehoe's Select Committee on Park & River Restoration organized the trip, which started at the Flood Channel with a ceremony. Rep. Kehoe surprised those assembled by presenting a check for \$1.5 million to the City of San Diego (Mayor Murphy accepting) to restore the San Diego River. These funds will be applied to major land donations now in progress.

Palos Verdes NCCP Takes on New Life

After lying fallow for a year, the NCCP in Los Angeles County has sprouted new life. In a decision that startled many observers, the Rancho Palos Verdes City Council has taken a position long called for by EHL, denying a local developer use of publicly owned habitat around City Hall for a golf course. Long known to be a wildlife corridor and recruitment ground for California gnatcatchers elsewhere, the site has been deemed by EHL to be critical to a successful NCCP preserve design.

By hanging on to this high quality coastal sage scrub, RPV has ended years of speculation about its intentions. It seems probable that RPV has decided that the NCCP holds more promise for the future of the City than do more golf courses. The NCCP appears alive and well, and may soon bear substantial fruit.

ENDANGERED HABITATS LEAGUE

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

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Olympic Peninsula

The white-cheeked blaze over grey waters
of the hurrying horned puffins along the spit
at Dungeness dunes and the gale-sown wedge of wind
cleaving the Narrows frame this green land.

Water ever redefines the raw reaching lines,
scarifies ragged crown, bludgeons down onto stony shore
or, when shed forever ago, claws as glaciers shrug.
Here the grey skies sparge the tears of creation.

In the wet meadows, black necks rise where geese
watch for the hungering weasel and swift peril of falcon.
Thrush songs tumble up from grey hollows, cold melody
curved to clinging crystal in a late season.

The blue dance of butterfly, caught in sudden sunlight,
touches expectant meadow with freshness of new summer
where once ancient forests were ripped from the land
leaving only the grieving promise of broken soil.

Sheltered by blind grass and splintered brush
the burying beetles, crimson spots on black backs,
find their place in the dead body of the weasel
and, contented, abide safe in the shadow of death.

Indifferent cities, green surrogates under pallor of grey,
inculcate careless concrete and impeccable wilderness.
Like elders before us, the woods fade into tintyped time.
We wonder what became of childhood under the falcon's sky.

This is a world of crossed image, the untamed nature
of untrained eye. Fertile hills, scalped of all but green,
breed beneath the vast white thorns of the mountains
sheathed in the green-bringing bulk of the clouds.

Our rivering roadways spill onto this stream-etched land.
Forested slopes yield, succumbing to splendor of trees.
Slain meadows sire new life. Lakes unfurl from seized rivers
In unseen subservience. And even the scars are beautiful.

-Jess Morton

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