

## **RECREATING A LAGOON**

### ***The Role of the Del Mar San Dieguito Lagoon Committee in Preserving and Restoring the San Dieguito Lagoon: Early History***

**By Nancy Weare**

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In 1972, a group of local residents (including\* Charles D. Keeling, Joe Lang, Margaret Porter, Rachel Reed, Stuart Resor, Walta Ross, Nancy Weare) concerned about the increasingly poor state of the lagoon, got together to discuss how they might reverse this trend. Their vision of a restored lagoon was brought to the City of Del Mar along with the request to become a standing city committee.

In 1974 the San Dieguito Lagoon Planning Committee was formed by the City of Del Mar with the purpose of preparing a plan for protecting, revitalizing and managing the lagoon ecosystem for the upcoming Coastal Act. Local residents on the committee included\*: Jack Bradshaw, Allan Carson, Don Coordt, Ed Coughran, Charles D. Keeling, Joseph Lang, Jeannie O'Toole, Margaret Porter, Herb Turner, Nancy Weare (chair), Gill Williamson and Jerry Winterer. In the same year (1974), the California Department of Fish and Game and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service recommended the San Dieguito lagoon for top priority acquisition. In 1976 the California Coastal Act was enacted and the lagoon was defined by the California Coastal Commission as a sensitive resource area worthy of special protection under this Act.

In 1977, the Cal Poly Design Group translated the San Dieguito Lagoon Committee's vision for a restored lagoon into a comprehensive report. This report, which included many graphics, helped convince the California State Coastal Conservancy to grant the City of Del Mar funds to prepare an official Enhancement Program for the San Dieguito Lagoon west of I-5. William Healy, Del Mar's Director of Planning and Community Development, was instrumental in guiding the Lagoon Committee to this goal. In 1979, the *San Dieguito Lagoon Resource Enhancement Program* was completed (Don Coordt was chair of the Lagoon Committee then) and adopted as an official planning tool by the City of Del Mar. The program received many national and local awards, including an orchid for environmental design by the American Institute of Architects Association (1987). Presentations by the Lagoon Committee helped to generate strong broad-based local and statewide support for the program objectives. As a result, the Enhancement Program received the endorsement of many state agencies,

local jurisdictions and community groups. (e.g., the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the Torrey Pines Community Planning Group, the Del Mar Rotary and Optimist Clubs and the Del Mar Chamber of Commerce). In 1986 the Lagoon Committee was invited to give a presentation at the first and only joint meeting of the Del Mar and San Diego City Councils (held at UCSD). In 1988 the Coastal Commission invited the committee to give a presentation, a first for small local community environmental groups.

A key issue in the Enhancement Program was how to keep the river mouth open because the health of the lagoon depended on good water circulation. With the cooperation of local government and state government agencies initial enhancement projects were carried out in 1980-83. Channels were dredged and a new 70-acre water basin, which included a Least Tern island, was constructed on land bought by California Fish and Game just west of I-5 near Crest Canyon. These initial projects allowed the river mouth to stay open for several years. The consequent revitalization of the lagoon ecosystem clearly demonstrated the excellent restoration potential of the San Dieguito Lagoon.

However, increasing frequencies of lagoon closures indicated that the tidal prism needed to be considerably expanded to maintain a healthy, well circulated lagoon. In 1986, a report of the Department of Fish and Game stressed the importance of preserving floodplain habitat areas and adjacent grasslands east of I-5. The report warned that it was doubtful if existing wetland values in the San Dieguito Lagoon could be maintained without these lands. Unfortunately, unlike most lagoons in San Diego County then, much of the land in the San Dieguito river floodplain both east and west of the freeway was not publicly owned. Restaurants, hotels and housing developments were being proposed for large pieces of property in the floodplain both east and west of I-5. It was still possible to develop the floodplain as was done in Mission Valley. Therefore the Lagoon Committee (members then\*: Pat Bone, Janice Carl, Don Coordt, Gloria Gobar, Alice Goodkind, Lee Haydu, Joyce Mattson, Lynn Mohns, Freda Reid, Wade Walker, Nancy Weare (chair), Gill Williamson) turned its attention to extending restoration plans east of I-5.

Members from the Lagoon Committee and other environmentally active residents from communities along the San Dieguito River Valley formed two organizations in 1986. These were the San Dieguito River Valley Land Conservancy (Nancy Weare, President

years, 1987-1993) and the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley (Alice Goodkind, President, years 1986-1998). These groups wanted to accomplish a far reaching goal...that of preserving open space and habitat areas and creating a trail system along the entire 55 mile long San Dieguito River Valley. The Conservancy would focus on acquiring river valley land through grants, donations and mitigation. The Friends would focus on education and political action. These groups, along with the Del Mar San Dieguito Lagoon Committee, encouraged the formation in 1987 of a multijurisdictional Task Force under SANDAG that would have the sole purpose of creating the San Dieguito River Valley Park. In 1989, this Task Force became a separate Joint Powers Authority. One of the important objectives adopted by the JPA was that: *“The San Dieguito lagoon/wetlands ecosystem shall be enlarged and restored east and west of I5”*.

In 1986 the Lagoon Committee also prepared a slide show that they presented to communities up and down the floodplain to engender support for restoring the San Dieguito River floodplain both east and west of the freeway. This slide show proved invaluable in making people aware of the importance of restoring the lagoon. In May 1987, at the urging of property owners and the State Department of Commerce, the California Coastal Conservancy held a public meeting to discuss amending the Enhancement Program to allow development of floodplain property near the lagoon. More than 600 people attended this meeting to voice their strong support for the restoration of the lagoon and opposition to the development plans. This support helped lead to the eventual purchase of the property for lagoon restoration in 1991.

The Spurlock Office working with the Lagoon Committee with the support of City Council representatives, John Gillies and Brooke Eisenberg, and County Supervisor, Pam Slater, prepared a concept plan for extending the restoration of the lagoon east of I-5 to about El Camino Real. Included in this plan was the extension of trails along the north side of the river and the addition of a Nature Center. This concept was endorsed by the City of Del Mar in 1989.

Much progress has been made towards attaining the goal of enlarging and restoring the San Dieguito lagoon/wetlands ecosystem since 1989. In 1991, the Coastal Commission selected the San Dieguito Lagoon as the top site for a 150-acre mitigation project by Southern California Edison. The JPA, wildlife agencies, restoration experts,

community groups including the Lagoon Committee, The San Dieguito River Valley Land Conservancy and Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley, and homeowners along the river valley all worked with SCE to develop the mitigation restoration plan. The restoration plan is an exciting one aimed at enhancing the biological, aesthetic and recreational values of this resource. The EIR process started in 1998. Restoration is now nearly complete.

The Lagoon Committee has remained highly active protecting the lagoon ecosystem and overseeing the restoration process since 1998 when I left the board. The dedicated committee members carrying out this work will write the newest chapter in the history of local efforts to make the San Dieguito a healthy and productive lagoon.... a community treasure that makes us all proud.