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Wednesday, May 16, 2007



Dan Schurman (left), executive director of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, lead conference attendees on a field trip along Irwin Creek, which is undergoing restoration to eradicate Ludwigia, an aggressive invasive aquatic plant species.

Betti Faust

After 18 years, Laguna lovers convene once again

By Betti Faust

"People see the Laguna as just a little strip of wetlands and water, but it is so much more than that," said Jennifer Barrett of the Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department when asked about the greatest challenges facing conservation and restoration work within the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

"The whole urban area is the watershed for the Laguna" Barrett continued, referring to the most populous urban region of Sonoma County which includes Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, Cotati, Sebastopol, and Windsor.

Barrett and many other public officials, academics, citizens groups, and other experts in the fields of hydrology, geomorphology, geology, remote sensing, ecological conservation, biology and population genetics were in attendance at the State of the Laguna Conference and Science Symposium, held at Sonoma State University March 29 through April 1. The finales of the four-day event were field trips that got participants out-of-doors and into the Laguna.

Public awareness and education were oft cited by participants as significant challenges to the myriad conservation efforts underway in the region. Cotati Mayor Geoff Fox anecdotally recalled comments from a meeting just a few days prior to the conference in which a group of some 15 Cotati citizens expressed their incorrect understanding that the Laguna is a mere channel for flood control within human developments.

The truth is that the Laguna is significantly more.

Every single drop of water that falls within the 250-square-miles of the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed eventually drains into the Laguna, which is the largest tributary to the Russian River.

The watershed houses hundreds of plant and animal species, including threatened and endangered ones, within many ecosystem types that include grasslands, perennial wetlands, floodplains, marshes, riparian forests, Valley Oak woodlands, mixed conifer

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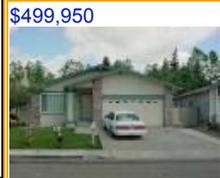
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uplands, and only one remaining upland marsh.

The Laguna's headwaters begin at the southern reaches of the City of Cotati, where the restoration efforts of the Cotati Creek Critters are focused. Mayor Fox said the Critters "have done a lot with a little" in terms of funding. "Our best resource is the people who live and work right along the Laguna," he continued, citing that much of the work is a volunteer effort. Fox paid Critter founder Wade Belew a comical compliment, saying "he is like the MacGyver of creek restoration... he can take a Swiss Army Knife and a role of duct tape and plant 2,000 trees."

The Laguna watershed has three internationally recognized biodiversity hotspots: redwood forests, Central Valley vernal pools, and manzanita shrublands. A biodiversity hotspot is defined as an area that holds half of one percent of the earth's species diversity, and in which 2/3 of that diversity has been negatively affected by humans.

There is a long and desultory history of human impacts within the watershed. The channelizing of waterways and draining of wetlands and marshes for human settlement and agricultural uses has profoundly altered Laguna ecosystems, which continue to be challenged by new development and increasing water demand to accommodate our growing populations.

Another serious threat to biodiversity within the Laguna is non-point source pollution, which is dispersed and therefore difficult to pinpoint contamination coming from overzealous use of a vast array of household and outdoor chemicals. Automobile fluid leaks are also a culprit.

The late 1980s and early 90s marked the low point in the health of the Laguna ecosystem. In response, the public convened the first State of the Laguna Conference in 1989. It was a one-day event held in Sebastopol. According to Dan Schurman, current Executive Director of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, the conference was meant to explore "how as a community we will care for this resource."

That conference 18 years ago birthed the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, which had a rocky beginning because of the disparate interest groups involved at every level of use, management, and preservation of the watershed and waterways.

To this day facilitating communication and collaboration among the cacophony of public and private organizations with a stake in the watershed remains a challenge. Joe Honton of the Laguna Foundation tried to explain the layers of complexity that determine who is in charge of the Laguna.

Among the regulatory bodies are the California Department of Fish and Game, U.S. EPA, California State Water Resources Control Board, North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, the Army Corps of Engineers and Sonoma County as well as city agencies.

There are also numerous non-regulatory interests including nonprofit organizations, Land Trusts and Open Space Districts, community volunteer groups, and of course private land owners (local farmers and ranchers, business people, and residents) as about 90 percent of the land in the Laguna watershed is privately owned.

The staff of the Laguna Foundation is positioning the organization as a unifying agent among all of these interest groups. To this end, they are building a nexus for education and research called The Laguna Learning Center at the historic Stone Farm owned by the City of Santa Rosa. In addition, they just released a management plan entitled "Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna."

A pervasive sentiment among the restorationists at the conference was expressed by Honton, who said, "If we restore it, they will come." He was speaking of totem animal species such as white pelicans, bald eagles, California river otter and western pond turtles whose habitats are beginning to rebound in response to the preservation and restoration of the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

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