

LOGAN JENKINS

Water project that won't be aids park that will

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Toilet-to-tap's ghost town is the god-sent refuge for the Witch's largest burn victim.

A decade ago, the city of San Diego water department plunged into a futuristic experiment in the western San Pasqual Valley. High-tech stills squeezed super-pure drinking water from placid ponds of sewage.

I – and other curious visitors – quaffed the brave new water without qualm. This, many of us dreamed, was our semi-desert region's answer to alchemy. Liquid lightning in a bottle.

Thanks to a politicized panic attack, the reclamation project was scuttled, flushing millions of smart dollars – and millions of gallons of dirty water – down the john and out to sea.

The pastoral outpost on Highland Valley Road closed up shop and went to sleep.

Fast forward to late October and the night the Guejito and Witch Creek fires mated like infernal wildcats.

Thousands of humans suffered grievously, but who can match a blistering burn over 62 percent of an 80,000-acre body?

That was the mortification inflicted on the skin of the San Dieguito River Park, for more than 20 years now the vessel of North County's transcendent dream: a 55-mile (as the crow flies; 75 as the boots plod) Coast-to-Crest trail linking the Pacific Ocean to Volcan Mountain near Julian.

The damage was more than a denuded landscape. The restored 1880s Sikes Adobe in south Escondido – incinerated. The park's headquarters, a rustic 1920s house in a finger canyon off the San Pasqual Valley – vaporized. Twelve bridges – bombed. Ten years' worth of benches, kiosks, interpretive signs – ruined. Twenty miles of post-and-rail fences – erased. Following rainstorms, miles of trails – eroded.

The park had come so far in its first 20 years. Thirty-five miles of trails. Nearly 80 percent ownership of the corridor that had been methodically cobbled together through grants, donations, arm-twisting and beseeching.

Then, in one hellish mating, the park's recorded history – ashes. Like any traumatized property owner, the park had to rise out of the ashes.

Unlike the mythical phoenix, however, the rebirth would be painstakingly midwifed by insurance

companies, government agencies, private foundations and FEMA, the much reviled federal emergency agency.

“The first couple of weeks were overwhelming,” said Dick Bobertz, the river park's executive director.

Above his desk, Bobertz told me, he had posted a column I wrote some 10 years ago projecting the park's steps toward the ecstatic journey when the first group of hikers march in a straight line from the beach to Volcan.

“I was hoping to get you back ahead of schedule,” Bobertz said with a slight catch in his voice.

As it is, it will take two years to restore the park to where it was before the fires. At the same time, Bobertz plans to keep adding to the 35 miles of completed trail.

“I'm not going to retire until we have a trail from the mountains to the ocean without interruptions,” pledged Bobertz, 63.

In nine months, the left-for-dead park's resuscitation has been remarkable. Insurance companies will pay for the rebuilding of the headquarters and the restoration of the Sikes Adobe under the able direction of architect Ione Stiegler. The FEMA is kicking in almost \$2 million for bridges and other man-made assets.

To preserve endangered species like the cactus wren and gnatcatcher, the park won nine grants totaling \$500,000 to restore pockets of habitat.

As for the vast bulk of the land, nature is the lone insurer.

“We just have to hope for rain,” Bobertz said.

In reality, the land may have been altered forever. Non-native invasive plants are a grave concern, as is persistent drought.

“We don't know how good – or how bad – it's going to be,” Bobertz said.

In the desperate days after the fire, Bobertz's first job was to find an office for the park's administrative staff and five rangers.

A mile or two from the burned-out headquarters was the deserted San Pasqual Water Reclamation Plant, the abandoned site of the flushed toilet-to-tap program.

Within days, the river park arranged to move into the spacious offices. Furniture was donated. An office cat rescued before the October fire made itself at home.

As we were driving back from a trip to a damaged cantilever bridge at the entrance of the Fenton Ranch, I asked Bobertz about the San Dieguito park's relationship to the region's other river trails.

Though San Dieguito is way ahead, blazing the path, “we see it all as one trail system,” Bobertz said. He pointed out that the county has four other east-west river valleys envisioned as future trails: the San Luis Rey, Peñasquitos, San Diego and Otay.

“We were the example” that showed people that it could be done, Bobertz said.

These four lateral lines on the map someday will link with a north-south coastal trail and the Pacific Crest Trail to the east, Bobertz predicted.

“The grand vision is that someday we'll have a regional trail grid over the entire county with local trail systems forming connections for hikers and bicyclists.”

It struck me as terribly modern, an urban/suburban/backcountry grid along the land's ancestral lines of least resistance.

Like enlisting nature to clean dirty water, the simplest, oldest solutions for our endangered species read the most like science fiction.

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