



SAN DIEGUITO RIVER PARK

THE HISTORY OF OUR CREATION



The story of the San Dieguito River Park, and how it came to be, and how it progressed, is the story of citizens like you who were concerned about preserving an important part of their community. These were real people, who didn't just stand by as valuable wetlands and natural open space were lost to development – they did something about it – and as a result, a regional park extending from Volcan Mountain in the east to the beach at Del Mar, an expanse of 55 miles, came into being, providing lasting benefits for animals and humans.

DEVELOPMENT PRESSURE

Ask yourself, if you learned that developments were being proposed that would degrade the natural environment, the rural character and the scenic beauty of your community, what would you do?

The 1970's were a time of awakening to environmental preservation in California. The California Environmental Quality Act was adopted in 1970, just after the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969, and the California Coastal Commission was created in 1972. It was a time when more citizens were getting involved in planning issues.

One of the first such in the north coastal part of San Diego was the planning of North City West from 1974-1980, which brought together many citizens who would go on to be involved in the successful Proposition A Growth Management Initiative in 1985. The planning departments of both the County of San Diego and the City of San Diego had each identified the San Dieguito River Valley as an important resource and greenbelt area for the region by the early 1980's, and had separately prepared resource studies and opportunities/constraint studies for the areas of the River Valley within their jurisdiction. The City of San Diego even adopted the San Dieguito River Valley Regional Plan for the area within the City of San Diego in 1984. However, much of the land that was studied was privately owned, and plans and studies do not have the power to stop private development. This became an increasing concern as growth boomed in the 1980's. Development proposals in both the west and east ends of the San Dieguito River Valley in the mid to late 1980's galvanized some communities to organize and find ways to stop rampant development that would impact areas near and dear to the hearts of local citizens.

AT THE LAGOON...

At the San Dieguito Lagoon, at the west end of the San Dieguito River Valley, the proposed development project that alarmed so many local citizens were a proposed 300-room hotel and shopping complex on the former dirigible base located directly west of the freeway south of the Del Mar Fairgrounds. That area is now a deep lagoon, created as part of the Southern California Edison restoration project as the result of a significant, multi-year, citizen effort.

Citizen efforts to restore the San Dieguito Lagoon had started in the 1970's under the leadership of Dr. Nancy Weare. After the City of Del Mar created the San Dieguito Lagoon Committee and adopted the San Dieguito Lagoon Resource Enhancement Program in 1979, part of the initial plan was implemented by the California Department of Fish & Game (now the California Department of Fish & Wildlife) in 1980-1983.



AT THE LAGOON CONTINUED

The project involved dredging channels and creating a new 70-acre water basin with a least tern island, and it showed how the entire lagoon area could look someday. The vision for a restored and expanded lagoon was embraced by local residents and many others.

The proposed hotel and shopping complex would have radically reduced the potential for the entire lagoon to be restored. The complex was proposed for property west of the freeway that was privately owned by an Orange County group known as Birtcher/Del Mar 88. A public meeting was held on May 9, 1987, by the State Coastal Conservancy and the State Dept. of Commerce to discuss the future of the site.

The public notice said that presently the property was included in the City of San Diego's and City of Del Mar's San Dieguito Lagoon Enhancement Program, but the property owners wished to develop a portion of their property for hotel and retail/commercial uses. As reported in the newspaper afterward, the meeting was attended by over five hundred concerned local citizens who testified against the hotel project with strong and wide-ranging opposition. Attendees carried signs that said, "Save Our Lagoon" and "Lagoons are rare, shopping malls are everywhere." Credit for organizing the opposition goes to the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley, in particular John Gillies, Alice Goodkind and Nancy Weare.

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After that meeting, the property owner conceded he was willing to sell, and talk turned to its potential acquisition. In 1989, the 22nd District Agricultural Association proposed that the State of California purchase the property for use for parking during the Fair each year. This, too, was objected to by citizens because they preferred for the property to be restored to wetlands as part of the Lagoon Enhancement Program. When the State Public Works Board turned down the 22nd DAA's proposed acquisition, that left an opening for the newly formed San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, which voted on July 14, 1989 to pursue acquisition of the Birtcher/Del Mar 88 property, and which completed the purchase on January 31, 1991, making it the first property that the JPA acquired for the San Dieguito River Valley Regional Open Space Park.



AT THE LAGOON CONTINUED

Among the many folks who attended that large public meeting and went on to promote the creation of a regional park and open space preserve in the San Dieguito River Valley, and the creation of an agency, the Joint Powers Authority, to implement and oversee the regional park, were members of the newly formed San Dieguito River Valley Land Conservancy and the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley. Members from the San Dieguito Lagoon Committee (formed in 1974 by the City of Del Mar) and other environmentally active residents from communities along the San Dieguito River Valley had formed two organizations in 1986 that focused on the coastal area. These were the San Dieguito River Valley Land Conservancy formed June 2, 1986 as a nonprofit 501c3 organization for the purpose of preserving natural open space along the entire river valley from the sea to the mountains, and the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley formed December 22, 1986 as a nonprofit 501c4 organization to provide political action and education supporting that goal. The original founders of these two groups knew from the beginning that there was a need for both organizations – one to focus on land acquisition and the other to be political activists.

Early founders of the Conservancy included Lynn Benn, Karen Berger, Nancy Weare (President 1987-1993), Joyce Mattson, John Gillies, Margaret Schlesinger, and Jan McMillan. Early founders of the Friends were Alice Goodkind (President 1986-1998), Poppy DeMarco-Dennis, Dr. Joanna Lewis and Brooke Eisenberg. Following Alice Goodkind as President was Jacqueline Winterer who has served for many years as a faithful and passionate advocate for the lagoon and the River Park.

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. As a 501c3, the Conservancy would focus on acquiring river valley land through grants, donations and mitigation. The Conservancy's mission statement calls for the Conservancy to conserve, restore and enhance the entire San Dieguito River Valley system, including both the wetlands and uplands, for its scenic, open space and recreational value, as well as for the scientific, historic and educational opportunities that the area provides. The Friends, as a 501c4, would focus on education and political action. Their stated purpose is to conserve, restore and enhance the scenic, ecological and open space resources of the river valley system, emphasizing the importance of ecological resources.



AT THE LAGOON CONTINUED

Lynn Benn contacted the State Coastal Conservancy in 1985 to see if they could assist local residents to preserve the coastal open space. She called Karen Berger to invite her to the meeting, and is famously remembered for saying, “Do you want to help me buy the River Valley?” Melanie Denninger and Janet Diehl with the State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) were the trainers for the fledging Conservancy. They taught these local citizens a nonprofit primer on how to set up a conservancy. Karen brought in Bob Sensibaugh when the SCC later held a workshop on Conservancies and Trusts. Bob Sensibaugh was the fledgling Conservancy’s strategist. He had been a Navy Captain, and was a graduate of the Harvard Business School and was able to bring those skills to bear in developing a strategy and work program for the Conservancy.

Of special significance is the leap that these two organizations took to look past the immediate threat in the lagoon, and to realize that if they were to preserve the river in the condition it was at that time (the river was already dammed in two places upstream to create Lake Hodges and Lake Sutherland) that they needed to incorporate the whole river valley into their planning and acquisition efforts. Their conceptual planning began at the watershed level with a focus on the viewshed of the River Valley, from the water’s source on Volcan Mountain to the mouth of the river at Del Mar Beach.

AT VOLCAN MOUNTAIN...

On Volcan Mountain near Julian, at the east end of the San Dieguito River Valley, a development was proposed in 1987 for a pristine area of the mountain by a foundation called First Fruit, Inc. The first alarm bells were raised when local folks (notably Vicki and Peter Bergstrom, John and Lynn Horton, Lou and Jan La Dou, Francis Hemsher and Clint Powell) first heard about a proposed 24-unit development on Volcan Mountain at a 1987 Julian Planning Group meeting. First Fruit founder Peter Ochs wanted to build this housing development to fund the foundation’s religious non-profit work. Ochs was Chairman of Fieldstone Co., a large Newport Beach based company building housing developments in Orange and San Diego Counties, and he had the resources to build attractive, high-end homes on the mountain. These individuals, and other citizens, were very disturbed at the idea of a housing development on Volcan Mountain, and organized local residents, school groups, church groups and many others to write letters in opposition, and organized transportation to the Planning Commission meetings in San Diego.



AT VOLCAN MOUNTAIN...

The Volcan Mountain Preserve Foundation (now Volcan Mountain Foundation) was officially formed in 1988. The first board members were Frances Hemsher, president, Peter Bergstrom, Lynn Horton, Anne Hubbell and Clint Powell. They hired John Price, an environmental planner from Orange County, as a consultant to help them incorporate and to provide strategic advice. The small group of citizens raised money to pay Price by selling t-shirts with Lynn Horton's design that included the tag line "Volcan, NOT your ordinary mountain." They also sold "Save Volcan Mountain" posters, featuring a beautiful watercolor of the mountain by artist James Hubbell, that included the famous quote from John Muir, "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop away from you like the leaves of Autumn."

After several hearings at the County Planning Commission attended by many local residents opposed to the project, Peter Bergstrom and John Horton, Directors of Camp Stevens, and Cory Jones from Camp Virginia, decided to see if there was a "win-win solution". They met with County Parks Director Bob Copper in Fall 1988 to see if there was a way the property could be acquired. Peter said, "If we lose this piece, we've lost the whole mountain". When asked why Volcan Mountain was important to preserve, he said, "Volcan Mountain is to San Diego as Alaska is to the United States. Most people won't go there, but you don't have to go there to appreciate the comfort it gives you that there is still wilderness, that something "whole" is there that has not been defaced."

The timing was good because the state voters had approved Proposition 70 in 1988 and there would be money available for land purchases from that source. County Parks Director Bob Copper supported the acquisition, which would be the first of many more to come in order to preserve the mountain. When asked how they had accomplished so much, so quickly, John Horton said, "Ordinary people can do extraordinary things".

In addition to those already mentioned, Ken Wright & Carol Schloo-Wright, Sally Snipes, Larry Hendrickson, Toni Marquette, Gary Gernandt, Bill Porter, Michael Beck, Jay Evarts, Luana Lynch, David & Susan Schierman, Carol Pike and many others were involved in the formation and early work of the Foundation.



AT VOLCAN MOUNTAIN CONTINUED

At a retreat at Camp Stevens in 1990 the Foundation board and others created the Volcan Mountain Foundation's 100-year plan to preserve all of the 52,000 acres of Volcan Mountain. As of February, 2017, 34,000 acres have been preserved by the VMF and its partners San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy, San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, County of San Diego and California Fish and Wildlife Department.

In 1990 a San Diego Foundation grant provided the funds to purchase materials to build a gateway to the new Volcan Mountain Wilderness Preserve. This Gateway was designed by James Hubbell and is at the entrance to the Volcan Mountain Wilderness Preserve hiking trail off Farmer Road. The Board wanted to create an entrance to the Preserve that would make people stop and realize that they were entering a very special place.



Coordinated by Vicki Bergstrom and Caryn Brause, it took almost a year to complete. Volunteers came out every Sunday morning and Jim Hubbell was there guiding the project and adding his special touches.

Other artists who contributed to the project were Bill Porter who did the beautiful metalwork on the gate, and Mirko Mrakajec whose wood carving graces the wooden pieces on either side of the gate. This wood came from Palomar Mountain. Those who were there recall that when a County official came to view the work, he determined that one section of the carving that Mirko called "the Universal Man" looked demonic. He asked that it be removed. Instead of being offended, Mirko just went back and carved it into a frog!

AT VOLCAN MOUNTAIN CONTINUED

Vincente Guerrero, a skilled stone mason from Mexico, did the rock work on the kiva-like sitting area. Brennan Hubbell created the tall metal sculptures as you pass through the gate. Gene Thompson built/carved the original sign along the path to the Gateway. The stone bench just beyond the gateway was created in memory of Lynn Horton, an early president of the Foundation, and the bronze inset is her artwork (at that time the County did not permit including her name on the bench).

Greg Schuett, principal of Cuyamaca Outdoor School was one of the dedicated volunteers. Shortly afterward he joined the Board and served as Board president for many years afterward.

Creating a regional open space park, and raising money and buying land took a lot of work on the part of citizens like yourself, as well as elected officials who wanted to make a difference, to accomplish. In the mid-1980's, Karen Berger and Bob Sensibaugh were tireless in their efforts to meet with decision-makers about preserving the San Dieguito River Valley. Concurrently, Diane Coombs, Open Space Chair of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 (C-3), an important, local, urban planning organization, led field trips and wrote letters to SANDAG urging the agency to take action to create a multi-agency task force and to create a joint powers authority to carry out the Park's mission.

Under the urging of these groups, along with Del Mar's San Dieguito Lagoon Committee, SANDAG took action in 1987 to create a multi-jurisdictional Task Force (later Executive Committee) for the purpose of exploring the creation of a regional park in the San Dieguito River Valley. The idea for the task force was initiated and shepherded by SANDAG Deputy Director Stuart Shaffer. When the Task Force Executive Committee was created it was led by co-chairs San Diego Councilmember Abbe Wolfsheimer and County Supervisor Susan Golding.

In 1989, this group approved the creation of a separate Joint Powers Authority from the same member agencies (the County of San Diego and the Cities of Del Mar, Escondido, Poway, San Diego and Solana Beach) to serve as the vehicle to oversee the acquisition, design and ongoing operation of the regional open space park.

