To celebrate the San Dieguito River Park's 30th Anniversary in 2019, park staff wrote blogs highlighting key events during each year of the park's existence. Each year includes key people who have contributed to making the San Dieguito River Park what it is today.
San Dieguito River Park Turns 30!

In 2019 the San Dieguito River Park turned 30! To commemorate this milestone, River Park staff wrote a blog series – highlighting an exciting accomplishment (or maybe a challenging setback) for each year starting with 1989 when the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority (JPA) was formed.

The Beginning - 1989...

The SDRP did not appear overnight on June 12, 1989 when the SDRP Joint Powers Authority was formed as a unique multi-jurisdictional park agency to create the San Dieguito River Park, nor was the idea for a San Dieguito River Park new, but it was a vision long in the making that continues today to be a work in progress.

Back then, in the 1980s, the San Dieguito River Valley – from the coastal wetlands at the San Dieguito Lagoon to 55 miles inland at the oak-lined ridgetop of Volcan Mountain – was under threat.

Change was on the horizon and many people did not like what they could imagine. City and County planners were contemplating large development proposals and new roadways and freeway interchanges that would cut through the middle of farmland and lagoon wetlands, fill in the valley with hotels, shopping centers, housing tracts, and parking lots, and drive the river course underground. Making matters worse, the western valley was a patchwork of over 50 private landholdings and 4 different planning jurisdictions. At the east end, new homes were proposed on the privately-held slopes of picturesque Volcan Mountain.

Public response to these plans was strong and public meetings were filled to capacity with interest groups lining up on opposing ends to argue the merits. At the same time, others visualized a regional park - a respite of open space along the river valley – something that had been lost in Mission Valley to the south. Some elected officials spoke about the San Dieguito River Valley as “the Balboa Park of North County” (former San Diego Councilwoman Abbe Wolfsheimer) and “our last shot in an unplanned river valley to preserve some natural beauty” (former County Supervisor Susan Golding). What the river valley needed was representation supported by citizens and groups like Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 and the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley, and someone to take responsibility for negotiating a path through the morass of interests.

Eventually, a vision for a regional river park was put on paper and the JPA was formed to carry it forward – fully aware of the inherent challenges that lie ahead.

Shawna Anderson
Principal Planner, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 1989, Abbe Wolfsheimer-Stutz became one of the first Board Members on the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, representing the City of San Diego. Abbe served on the San Diego City Council 1985-1993, and is recognized as one of the SDRP Founders.

As a City of San Diego Councilmember, Mike Gotch supported the SDRP JPA and was its first Executive Director. He later served on the California State Assembly representing San Diego.
Any student of history can tell you about the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 or the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Both of these famous land acquisitions were vital to the expansion of the United States of America.

But those of us who have lived in San Diego County for long enough would also point out a land purchase in 1990 that changed the course of our local history for the better. After years of planning, the newly formed San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority acquired its first plot of land in December of 1990, known as the Birtcher/Del Mar 88 property. This 89-acre parcel of wetlands, in Del Mar just west of the I-5, held the key to all of JPA’s future plans for creating an Open Space Park that protected natural waterways and ensured the eventual restoration of the lagoon to its original size and beauty. The SDRP would also provide recreational opportunities such as hiking, bicycling, bird watching, and horseback riding in San Diego for years to come.

Things were indeed changing in 1990, but not without a fair share of compromise and negotiation on behalf of all stakeholders involved. On April 2, 1990, eight months prior to when the first land purchase was finalized, the San Diego City Council approved $1.3 million for wetlands acquisition. But when an offer of $1.345 million was rejected by Sam Langberg, the owner of Del Mar 88, plans came to a screeching halt. Without this important piece of land secured for public use, the future of SDRP would vanish in the wake of commercial development, hotels, shopping centers or private housing. Just as the skeptics had predicted, wrestling such valuable land away from private owners wasn’t going to be easy. With only $700,000 more needed to make the deal happen, funds from voter-approved Proposition 70 (which had passed in June 1988) were allocated to satisfy Langberg’s demands. He later admitted that the bargain-basement sale price of $2 million reflected his inability to develop the parcel into the commercial property he once envisioned. Faced with restrictive environmental red-tape, Langberg accepted the JPA’s offer and the San Dieguito River Park was born. Margaret Schlesinger, then Solana Beach Councilwoman said "It not only is the first to be acquired, it's the doorway of the park."

1990 was an important year for our local history; it was the year that San Dieguito River Park became more than ambitious plans on paper. Just as the famous land grants of the past stretched America’s borders from east to west, JPA’s continued efforts to preserve and protect the San Dieguito River Valley from Coast to Crest are being realized.

Brenda Miller
Office Manager, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 1990, Diane Coombs was hired as SDRP's second Executive Director, serving in that role until 1998. She is recognized as one of the SDRP Founders.

Karen Berger is a founder of the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy and their first Executive Director, and is recognized as one of the SDRP Founders.
As we celebrate the grand opening of the Pamo Valley segment of the Coast to Crest Trail this year, we look back 28 years to the very first newly constructed trails opened to the public in the San Dieguito River Park - the Clevenger Canyon North and South Trails.

Back in 1986, 2,000 acres of land owned by the Bureau of Land Management in the "San Pasqual Mountains" was leased to the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department on the condition that the City provided trails. It took a year for 60-70 Urban Corps members working full-time to build 14 miles of trails at a cost of $194,000. The grand opening was October 26, 1991. Over 10 miles of trails were constructed on the north side of Clevenger Canyon, dipping down from the staging area off of Highway 78 and crossing Santa Ysabel Creek before climbing up to a plateau, and over 3 miles of trails were constructed on the south side, ending in view points on both a west fork and east fork.

The canyon is named after John Clevenger and his family, who settled in San Pasqual Valley in 1872 to begin wheat and dairy farming. The Clevenger home was the oldest house in the valley until it was lost in the October 2017 wildfires. Much of the original 10 miles of the Clevenger Canyon North Trails were also lost in those fires and subsequent overgrowth of vegetation. San Pasqual - Clevenger Canyon Open Space Park continues to be managed by the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department and is still part of the San Dieguito River Park today.

Bryan Ward
Former Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 1991, the Clevenger Canyon North and South Trails were built by Urban Corps San Diego. Sam Duran served as Executive Director of Urban Corps at that time.

In 1991, David Kay representing Southern California Edison signed a partnership agreement with the San Dieguito River Park spearheading a 150-acre restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon as mitigation for the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.
1992 - Working Together

As the idea of a San Dieguito River Park was gaining speed in 1992 and lands on both ends of the park were being purchased, the reality of what was to unfold started sinking in. The areas around Lake Hodges were regarded as an important link between both the San Dieguito River Park and the outlying communities. Plans for the communities and the open space to work together were beginning to take shape.

In the summer the JPA had received $520,000 in state and SANDAG grants for trail routes within the Lake Hodges area. The project would include a trail under the I-15 near the lake and a 1,200-foot bridge for pedestrians and cyclists that would parallel the freeway spanning the lake providing access to both the River Park and the adjacent RB Community Park. The communities around the proposed River Park were quickly realizing the importance of having such a valuable natural resource right next door to them. Gone were the plans to build a private golf course on the shores of Lake Hodges in favor of recreational trails and environmental education opportunities.

Plans continued to emerge. The Rancho Bernardo Soroptimist grove was one of the first projects planned for later in the year. This would include the planting of an oak grove in the Bernardo Bay area as well as a marquee about the project and seating areas for visitors to enjoy. Another plan was to build the two-mile Highland Valley Trail that parallels Highland Valley Road to provide even more access for people from the community to come out and experience the area for the first time. These projects were to be built by the community for the community, and local Eagle Scouts from Carlsbad and Escondido took on the tasks of planting trees, constructing seating areas, and building bridges for the planned projects.

The historic 130-year-old Sikes Adobe on the east side of Lake Hodges was also being looked at for restoration and use as a farming history museum. As we know now all of these endeavors would take a lot of time, money and cooperation on behalf of all the parties involved. The groundwork was being laid and the communities wanted to be involved in the process, wanted to be good neighbors, and most importantly of all, wanted the park.

David Hekel
Senior Park Ranger/ Trails Manager, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Lynn Benn is recognized as an SDRP Founder because she was the first to identify and advocate for the need to protect the San Dieguito River Valley through land acquisition.
1993 - $15M Award Helps Kick-Start Lagoon Restoration

“Have a good time saving the world, or you’re just going to depress yourself. People want to be part of something fun. It’s exciting to change the world.” — David Brower, Earth Island Institute.

Have you heard of the Earth Island Institute and its connection with the San Dieguito Lagoon? Earth Island was founded by the late environmental activist David Brower (1912-2000) who was the first executive director of the Sierra Club and also founded Friends of the Earth and the League of Conservation Voters. The name Earth Island came from famous anthropologist Margaret Mead, who urged respect for “The Island Earth.”

What's the connection to the San Dieguito Lagoon? In January 1993 when the SDRP was a new vision, Earth Island Institute and Southern California Edison (SCE) settled a Clean Water Act lawsuit with a $15 Million award by SCE to restore wetlands at the San Dieguito Lagoon (among other things). Earth Island had boldly acted alone to sue the utility company without the usual government partners who had declined joining the lawsuit. The eventual settlement helped kick-start the $80M lagoon restoration project resulting in over 150 acres of new wetlands that thrive today. SCE had recently committed to restoring the San Dieguito Lagoon as mitigation for the damage caused by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station cooling system that was entraining and killing thousands of fish and fish larvae every day. The San Dieguito River Park and its many supporters were ready and able as vital partners in seeing to the lagoon’s restoration and would have fun doing it too, just like David Brower had urged. Other exciting achievements in 1993 included opening the Highland Valley Trail and receiving a State Point of Historical Interest designation for the Sikes Adobe, both in San Pasqual Valley.

For more information about Earth Island Institute visit http://www.earthisland.org/.

Shawna Anderson
Principal Planner, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 1993, Earth Island Institute settled a Clean Water Act lawsuit with Southern California Edison to restore wetlands at the San Dieguito Lagoon. David Brower was the founder of Earth Island Institute (1982) and the first executive director of the Sierra Club (1952).
1994 - A Look Back at the Growing Stages

Looking back at the year 1994 we can all probably remember a lot that happened that year. Things big and small, for instance '94 was the year the TV show Friends first aired, it was also the year Nelson Mandela became South Africa’s first black president. This was also the year that a less renown, but no less beloved park gained much ground in becoming the community park we now know.

This year the planning stages for the River Park went from an idea of what the park would become to an approved Concept Plan adopted by the JPA in February 1994 that included the now well-used trail systems and preserved lands included in a Focused Planning Area. Thanks to these coalesced plans we now have many various ecosystem environments like the estuary in Del Mar and the coastal sage scrub land that you can enjoy walking through on your trip down one of the trails in the Escondido area.

Going northeast we can now enjoy the conifer heights and oak woodland savannas of Volcan Mountain Preserve. Its 5,535 foot mountain was fought for and began their journey to being acquired as a Preserve with the River Park. The County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation owned 700 acres of Volcan Mountain, and in '94 added another 1,200 more acres with the help of the Trust for Public Land. That year was the beginnings of the purchase of the western side of this mountain including, but not limited to the “Ironside Springs, the headwaters for the San Dieguito River” as P.J. Huffstutter wrote in The Union Tribune in 1994. Thanks to these efforts we can all enjoy this area as it stands now instead of it being a housing development or otherwise privatized because of its zoning just outside of the protected Cleveland National Forest.

Just as Diane Coombs, then Executive Director of the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority, said to The San Diego Union Tribune in an article from February 1994, “…it will be several decades before the whole thing is completed.” She was so right, as 25 years later we had yet another trail opening ceremony on January 26th in north side Ramona off Pamo Road for another 3.3 miles of trail that were added to the River Park's extensive trail system. We look forward to many more years of trail extensions, additions and enjoyment from this great park.

Felipe Franco
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park, JPA
In 1994, Susan Carter, who started at SANDAG as Project Coordinator for SDRP a few years earlier, became the JPA's Deputy Director and completed the SDRP Concept Plan. She retired in 2014 after 24 years raising millions of dollars in grant money and spearheading many important projects that benefited SDRP during her tenure.
1995 - River Park in Peril

In June of 1995, the dream of the ocean to mountains River Park was almost squandered. Even though the JPA has no power to change zoning laws or the resources to condemn private property, four Republican county supervisors exploited fears in east county ranchers and farmers by passing a 4-1 vote to recommend exclusion of all private property from the planning areas of the park and eliminate almost all County funding. What this meant for the park was that all areas of the park’s design east of Interstate 15 would be removed, including millions of dollars in property purchased for the park earlier in the year around Volcan Mountain. This would have reduced the park to a narrow strip of land around Lake Hodges and west to the river mouth in Del Mar, but even this remaining fraction would be threatened by the County funding cutoff.

In December, Supervisors Pam Slater and Ron Roberts submitted a proposal that would resolve several of these key issues surrounding the park. With a vote being held on December 12, the Board of Supervisors had the opportunity to end this controversy in a way that both preserved private property rights and ensured the future of the San Dieguito River Park. The proposal stated that no private property would ever be acquired by the park unless the landowner agreed to sell or donate the land and that any sale of private property would have to be approved by the governing body of that land, such as the county or a city. These provisions were incorporated into the San Dieguito River Park's Concept Plan.

Hilary Mills
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
During a particularly contentious time in SDRP history, County Supervisors Pam Slater and Ron Roberts submitted a proposal for a Private Property Rights Protection Policy to soothe concerns that private property would be condemned to create the park. She also worked closely with Southern California Edison to secure funds to restore the San Dieguito Lagoon. Among the many SDRP projects Pam supported over the years as County Supervisor and JPA Board member, she sought funds for projects such as the Grand Avenue Bridge Lagoon Overlook.
The San Dieguito River Park is unique in not only the diverse ecosystems that occupy the park, from coastal wetlands to oak woodlands, but also because of its multi-jurisdictional management areas. The park itself maintains open space in the County of San Diego as well as the cities of Del Mar, Escondido, Poway, San Diego, and Solana Beach. Due to this expanse of differing government entities, the JPA is comprised of two elected officials each from the County and City of San Diego and one elected official from each of the remaining cities the park encompasses. This newly created board wound up being so effective that in 1996 a Grand Jury report concluded that the San Dieguito River Park JPA should be used as a model for other multi-jurisdictional preservation efforts. It was also the same year in 1996 that this JPA entity would manifest itself globally through establishing the San Dieguito River Park website—adding to the minuscule 100,000 individual websites online at that time.

The goal of the JPA is to preserve and restore land within the Focused Planning Area of the River Park through protecting natural waterways and the natural and cultural resources and sensitive lands and provide compatible recreational opportunities, including water related uses, that do not damage sensitive lands. One of the recreational components is creating and maintaining multi-use trail networks for walking, equestrian, and bicycle usage. In 1996, the River Park constructed and opened to the public the Piedras Pintadas interpretive trail loop to provide users with a glimpse into the native Kumeyaay past way of life. The trail name itself, meaning “painted rocks”, pays tribute to the remarkable rock art that was created in the Rancho Bernardo area by the Kumeyaay some 500 to 1000 years ago.

Coinciding with many recreational opportunities, the River Park actively acquires land for open space preservation—thereby ensuring that land will never be used for urban development. In 1996, the state granted the County of San Diego $90,000 to be used for procuring 40 acres of land in Boden Canyon. Also, in the same year, the County purchased 120 acres of land on Volcan Mountain to be set aside as open space for future generations of trail goers to enjoy. Those adventurous to hike the somewhat strenuous pair of trails on Volcan will be taken to its summit and rewarded with sweeping views of Earthquake Valley and the Salton Sea.

Jake Gibbs
Former Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key People for 1996: Peter Bergstrom and Johnny Bear Contreras

In 1996, the County of San Diego purchased more land on Volcan Mountain for open space. Peter Bergstrom is a founder of the Volcan Mountain Foundation and is recognized as an SDRP founder.

In 1996 Johnny Bear Contreras helped create Piedras Pintadas Trail and the interpretive panels. He is a member of the San Pasqual Band of Mission Indians.
The Park in 1997

In 1997, I recall the atmosphere around the Park was optimistic. In the Park’s rear view mirror were the peaks and valleys associated with forming a new government agency, and the Park was confident with the success of important completed projects like the North Shore Trail I-15 Undercrossing and Highland Valley Trail. I was a newly hired ranger, the Park's 3rd full time ranger, and excited to have been issued a beeper. I relied on volunteers like Max Kiltz and Dave Leigh, and we were busy with the finishing touches on the Piedras Pintadas Interpretive Trail construction project. There was one SDRP truck: a used Ford F-150. When the truck was in use, Max would drive his Crown Victoria on the trail to haul volunteers, tools, and even dirt and rock.

The rangers utilized a field office which was at our current office location in San Pasqual. The main SDRP office was on State Street in Little Italy. Diane Coombs was at the helm along with Susan Carter. Park planner and mentor Vicki Touchstone was the expert, and office manager Cassy Larson kept everything running smooth.

The field office consisted of a wood shed with a desk and two separate sheds for tools and supplies. An extension cord ran from the tool shed to the office for a light and heater, and the bathroom was portable. The historic house on site was rented to Mike Thacker who is a long time Park supporter and docent. The garage on site was rented to custom wood worker Chuck Masters who would take breaks to watch birds and give technical advice.
South of the field office site was land that was recently transferred to SDRP but contained several long-established homeless camps. In 1997, the County of San Diego and San Dieguito River Park teamed up to clean up the site, and I not so fondly remember poison oak on my face that I acquired while in a rush to trim the access road.

In addition to the trails at Lake Hodges, SDRP partnered with the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department to manage the Clevenger Canyon Trails. The River Park ran work crews, patrolled, did maintenance on the South Trail, and were starting to evaluate the North Trail. The City provided the funds for work crews, signs, and gates.

The other big project that occupied SDRP field staff in 1997 was the Fish and Wildlife Partners for Wildlife project. SDRP fenced 26 acres in the flood plain east of Lake Hodges and removed thousands of invasive tamarisk trees. The area had to be fenced because there were still cows grazing the inlet to the lake and area upstream. The eventual weed control legends Mike Kelly and Cindy Burrascano advised the park on tamarisk tree removal techniques.

In 1997, the stage was set to move the Park forward. We had active trail maintenance volunteers, smart administrative volunteers, dedicated volunteer patrol, and talented volunteer docents all working towards establishing a Park. The political winds were shifting and the Park was taking on interesting conservation and trail projects. It was a good time to be a Park supporter.

Jason Lopez
Resources and Trails Manager, San Dieguito River Park JPA

Key Person for 1997: Jason Lopez

In 1997, Jason Lopez, the author of this blog, was a newly hired Park Ranger and is currently the Resources and Trails Manager.
1998 - Much Ado About a Lagoon

In 1998, the big news in the River Park was the issuance of a Notice of Preparation/Intent to develop the Environmental Impact Statement/Report by the San Dieguito River Park JPA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for a project called the “San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project”. I’d say the title possibly sells short what actually ensued, in that wetlands were not just restored, but created- and a lot of them. Just over twenty years later, some of us practitioners may have different names and alpha-numeric jargon for different elements of the project, but most just know it as the San Dieguito Lagoon, or “where I walk my dog every day” or “where I bird watch” or "where I do yoga". The NOP/NOI was the first formal introduction of the ambitious plan to create over 150 acres of tidal wetlands, connected permanently to the ocean via the maintained outlet at Dog Beach for the purpose of increasing coastal fish and wildlife habitat. The catalyst, and funding of course, was a CA Coastal Commission permit requirement on Southern California Edison for the mitigation of thirty years’ worth of effects on coastal marine life from the operation of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station. Edison would go on to complete construction of the project some 13 years later at a cost of nearly $80 million.

It's interesting to look back at the outpouring of comments and concerns by the many groups, most of which are still involved today, including non-profit advocacy organizations, local/state/federal agencies, businesses, and residents. It's also hard to imagine that as late as 1998, people were still submitting handwritten comments for the public record. This project and its associated document were somehow important enough to end up halfway across the country in the Northwestern University Library archives (where I found it for my research of this blog). If you’re interested what everyone (including maybe yourself or your organization) had to say, follow this link: https://bit.ly/2T8nhPH. But in the meantime I’ll give just a few highlights.

One business in particular, the San Dieguito Partnership, not only objected to the project, but threatened to sue - and did, along with a few others. I won’t bore you with how it all played out, other than to say the land the San Dieguito Partnership owned at the time is now owned by the JPA and is the future home of our new Coast Ranger Station – we just broke ground this week. This site is also where one of Edison’s largest created wetlands sits, in addition to the Birdwing Open Air Classroom, the Park Founders Tribute, and the Coast to Crest Trail, not to mention where some of those so concerned about the project back in 1998 now go to watch birds and walk their dogs.

Despite all the consternation from business, government entities, conservation organizations, and others, I think the majority agree it has been a great success. And even though, just as late as this week, I’ve heard one regulator and some scientists call the restoration a “disaster”, I think these two comparative photos of the lagoon from 1998 and 2018 say it all. Thank you for following our River Park turns 30 blog series, stay tuned for 1999 through present.
150 acres of new wetland, trails and habitat, 2018

Fallow weed field 1998

Kevin McKernan
Executive Director,
San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 1998, Dick Bobertz was hired as the third Executive Director. His leadership occurred during a productive 16 years for the River Park until his retirement in 2014, with the last couple years serving as a volunteer due to budget cuts.
What happened in 1999?

In 1999, the San Dieguito River Park JPA was celebrating its 10th anniversary, and there were so many active projects. The River Park had just been awarded a $3 million grant to fund the design and construction of the bicycle/pedestrian bridge across Lake Hodges and a grant for $212,000 from the City of San Diego to begin restoration planning at Sikes Adobe.

Another smaller but noteworthy project launched in 1999. It began on California Trails Day when volunteers came to improve the Highland Valley Trail Staging Area. The project included adding a seating area, plantings, a kiosk, and the River Park’s first interpretive walk with a self-guided booklet. It was named the Ruth Merrill Children’s Interpretive Walk. Ruth Merrill contributed greatly to the preservation of open space through her dedication to the River Park and Conservancy.

The interpretive walk travels along the Highland Valley Trail for about 1.5 miles round trip. On the walk, you find the discovery points that give you a wealth of information. Topics include native plants, animals and their tracks, ecology, local history, and much more! The interpretive walk has been used by thousands over the last two decades. The booklet was reprinted but the content always remained the same. This year the interpretive walk goes digital to support this ever-changing world. Click here or scan the QR code below to view the digital version of the Ruth Merrill Children’s Interpretive Walk.

“In every walk with Nature one receives far more than he seeks.”-John Muir

Leana Bulay
Manager of Interpretation and Outreach
Max Kiltz, trail builder extraordinaire, was a founder of the regular SDRP volunteer work crew called the Dust Devils. Max worked side-by-side with park rangers and his fellow Dust Devils for many years maintaining and building new trails throughout the River Park. He had a particular fondness for San Pasqual Valley and had a hand in building several of the SDRP trails there.
Besides breathing a collective sigh of relief that computers around the world turned from 1999 to 2000 without the world ending (and the story would no longer dominate the media), what else was happening in 2000? Well for one, I was hired as the Park’s new Environmental Planner eager to take on new projects for a worthy public cause. As I began my new career at the San Dieguito River Park in March 2000, I was immediately immersed in permitting and environmental compliance for several new projects.

The year 2000 represented an increasingly productive time in San Dieguito River Park history including planning a 10-mile long segment of the Coast to Crest Trail in the San Pasqual Valley, designing the Hodges Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge, and planning for restoration and new trails at the San Dieguito Lagoon. “What fun!” I thought, “Getting permits for building new trails will be easy compared to what I had been working on as a consultant.” In 2000 the River Park had amassed a respectable sum of grant funds to pay for these new projects. Having in-house expertise has enabled the River Park to do much of the analysis, documentation, leg work, permit compliance, and some design with its own staff rather than hiring out for all that work. In 2000, the Final Environmental Impact Report for the San Dieguito Lagoon restoration was certified by the JPA as well as the Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Mule Hill/San Pasqual Trail. Although challenging to plan and build then, these new projects are success stories today.

Also happening in 2000, battle lines formed just east of I-15 at Lake Hodges about a proposal to build a golf driving range on public land in the San Pasqual Agricultural Preserve. The River Park joined many others in a losing battle to preserve the land use plan for San Pasqual Valley and keep the floodplain just south of Via Rancho Parkway from being developed. A few years later, the City Council downzoned the Valley to prevent further development of its agricultural open space. Today, the Agricultural Preserve continues to thrive with new wineries, organic farms, and hops producers.

Shawna Anderson
Principal Planner, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key People for 2000: Shawna Anderson and Wayne Brechtel

In 2000, Shawna Anderson, the author of this blog, was hired as Principal Planner, the position she still serves in today. No one appreciates, or gets more excited about receiving paperwork (permits) than our Principal Planner.
Wayne Brechtel started as the JPA's counsel in 1998 and continues in that role today. He was instrumental at defending the JPA when the San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project Final EIR was sued by coastal property owners in 2001. The JPA won that lawsuit on appeal and Wayne continues his excellent legal counsel for the JPA. He also volunteers his time and is currently using his fine wood crafting skills making office furniture for the River Park's brand new ranger station.
In the year 2001, the San Dieguito River Park was identified as a State Wildlife Corridor linkage by the California Department of Parks and Recreation. If you go to the California Parks [website](#) today, you will see the Coast to Crest Trail is a highlighted corridor on the Southern California map. The San Dieguito River Valley is an excellent example of preserving open space in the ever expanding urban landscape. Logan Jenkins, San Diego Union Tribune columnist, wrote, “At the close of the next century, the San Dieguito River Park, an ambitious conservation project stretching from Del Mar to Volcan Mountain, may be considered inland North County’s noblest achievement. Our great grandchildren will judge us for what we save, not what we sell.”

One example of the preservation of wildlife can be found around Lake Hodges. Even though the San Dieguito River Park is home to many wildlife species, the Lake Hodges area was declared a globally important birding area with over 215 species identified in 2001. With support from the Palomar Audubon Society the first Birds of Lake Hodges brochure was created. The Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley organization helped produce the first brochure depicting the Birds of the San Dieguito Lagoon. Both brochures are wonderful resources we share with park visitors today. It is so interesting and exciting for me to learn about and observe several species of birds and animals in the San Dieguito River Park.

_Brenda Miller_
_Office Manager, San Dieguito River Park JPA_
In 2001, the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley helped produce a Birds of the San Dieguito Lagoon brochure. Alice Goodkind is a founder of the Friends of San Dieguito River Valley and is recognized as one of the SDRP founders. She contributed much to SDRP including her artwork.

Phil Pryde was the first SDRP Citizen Advisory Committee Chair (1989-2008) and a strong supporter of habitat preservation for wildlife particularly native birds. He has served as Chair of the San Diego County Planning Commission and on the Board of Directors of the San Diego County Water Authority.
Hot on the heels of being designated a State Wildlife Corridor the previous year, in 2002 the River Park purchased or assisted in the purchase of three major properties in the river valley to be used for habitat conservation- the Helms (Proudfoot) property between Sutherland Reservoir and Santa Ysabel Open Space Preserve West, the Derbas property between Del Dios Highway and Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve, and Bernardo Mountain on the north shore of Lake Hodges.

The 410 acre Helms property was purchased by the San Dieguito River Park JPA and is immediately adjacent to another SDRP-owned property and the County's Santa Ysabel Open Space Preserve West. Santa Ysabel Creek cascades over large boulders through the middle of the property that SDRP now calls Santa Ysabel Gorge. A future segment of the Coast to Crest Trail will travel through these properties. The featured image is a view of the Helms property.

The Derbas property was originally proposed to become the Montreux development of 84 mansions approved by the Escondido City Council. The property is home to the rare Encinitas baccharis shrub and a pair of nesting golden eagles. Luckily, as Adnan Derbas said in an interview with The San Diego Union-Tribune, “I am willing to sell the land for conservation purposes at a substantial discount.” The first 92-acre parcel of the 345-acre Derbas property was purchased by the County of San Diego in 2002, with the remaining 253 acres purchased by The Escondido Creek Conservancy. In 2003, the County purchased the 253 acres of land from TECC. The SDRP JPA Board allocated money to the County to help with the purchase of the Derbas property, which is now part of Del Dios Highlands Preserve.

Bernardo Mountain was also planned for development in 2002. A combination of a state grant obtained by SDRP, a fundraising effort led by San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy and Palomar Audubon Society member William "Bill" Harbin, and a contribution from the City of Escondido led to the purchase of the 232-acre Bernardo Mountain. This land contains coastal sage scrub habitat that is home to threatened California gnatcatchers and possibly as few as the last six coastal cactus wrens in the Lake Hodges area.

Bryan Ward
Former Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key People in 2002: William "Bill" Harbin and Chris Khoury

In 2002, William "Bill" Harbin led a successful fundraising effort to buy Bernardo Mountain. He was a member of Palomar Audubon Society and San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy.

In 2002, Chris helped lead efforts to acquire Bernardo Mountain and was the guide in the video “A Walk in the Park” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7zoCMJFNUQ). Chris served as the president of the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy from 1999-2002 and is still active on the board and projects throughout the Park.
2003 marked my third year working for the San Dieguito River Park. I started out in 2000 working as a contracted Ranger Aide / Maintenance worker and progressed to a full time Ranger later that year. As the park continued to grow and purchase the land needed to build the Coast to Crest Trail, we were hard at work putting those trail segments together. The Mule Hill, Raptor Ridge, and San Pasqual Valley trail segments were completed the previous year, and the public was enjoying every bit of the newly built 10 miles of trail. 2003 also marked the year that the State of California added the San Dieguito River Park Coast to Crest Trail as an official California Trail Corridor in the State Recreational Trails Plan.

An additional 193 acres of habitat properties at Sycamore Creek in Poway as well as Volcan Mtn. in the Julian area were preserved through acquisition by the River Park at this time. Other habitat properties were also purchased in partnership with the County of San Diego. On the historic preservation side of things, the park was finishing the restoration of the Sikes Adobe Farmhouse. In turn, the park would receive awards for outstanding achievement and significant contributions to historic preservation from the California Preservation Foundation and the Save Our Heritage Organization.

The River Park embarked on another new project in August of 2003, with the volunteer assistance of the employees of the engineering firm Montgomery, Watson, Harza (MWH). The project was to convert an existing wood agricultural building (the Strawberry Stand, a local landmark) located next to Via de la Valle into a temporary interpretive kiosk. The site where this structure was located would be the site of a permanent River Park Nature Center someday in the future. The temporary structure utilized materials that would be re-used in the future permanent Nature Center. Funding for the project was provided by 3rd District County Supervisor Pam Slater-Price and other private donations. The site that the Strawberry Stand once stood just broke ground a couple of weeks ago to build the newest addition to the park, the Coastal Ranger Station, in which we hope will be open later this year.

David Hekel
Senior Park Ranger / Trails Manager, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key Person in 2003: David Hekel

David Hekel, the author of the blog for 2003, was hired three years prior as a Park Ranger and is currently the Trails Manager.
In 2004, San Dieguito River Park had 15 years of experience building relationships, achieving goals to preserve, restore and acquire land, and establish 55 miles of trail for public recreation throughout the 92,000 acres of the focused planning area between Julian and Del Mar.

The most outstanding accomplishment of 2004 was the purchase and protection of 73 acres along the San Dieguito River. The San Dieguito River Park and The Trust for Public Land, a national conservation group, purchased the land adjacent to the San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project. The land acquisition closed a critical gap in the 70-mile Coast to Crest Trail and enhanced the protection of the San Dieguito Lagoon, one of San Diego County’s remaining coastal wetlands.

On January 31, 2004, the Sikes Adobe Farmhouse became open to the public. Zenas and Eliza Sikes originally built the house around 1870. The Sikes house is one of the county’s oldest buildings and one of the last remaining adobe structures in the area. The San Dieguito River Park celebrated the award winning historic site restoration with an event, which attracted more than 300 people including a reunion of 25 descendants of the Sikes Family. Visitors were entertained with reenactments of life on the farm from actors and volunteers in costume from the late 1800s. The Farmhouse is a California Point of Historical Interest and a City of San Diego historic site. Tours are available at the Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead and the North San Diego Certified Farmer’s Market is open to the public on Sundays 10:30am-3:30pm.

David Vidal
Former Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 2004, Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead was restored and opened to the public for the first time. Zenas Sikes and his family built and moved into the home around 1870.
We all know that water plays a big part of our lives. It helps sustain habitats as well as erode them away. It can make our roads dangerous and our views and vistas more colorful with blooming vegetation. Looking back at the year 2005 here in San Diego we saw more than double our normal rainfall, according to the San Diego County Water Authority. But nowhere was water more damaging that year than when the Levees at Pontchartrain broke from the rainfalls from Hurricane Katrina.

We know that we have to stay ahead of possible damages from water. Here at the San Dieguito River Park, we know that it is just as important to maintain and restore our wetlands and waterways. Both because we want to conserve the native habitats that depend on them and because we want to prevent uncontrolled erosion and uncontrolled flooding.

Also in 2005 the California Coastal Commission gave the final approval for the San Dieguito Lagoon Wetlands Restoration Project which is a project that is in the monitoring phase to this day. The construction phase of the project was completed in 2011.

Later in December of 2005, James Steinberg reported in the San Diego Union-Tribune newspaper that escrow finally closed on the River Park’s purchase of the 353 acre Habib parcel east of Lake Sutherland and north of the 78 highway. Which brought the park one step closer to protecting more land near water banks and another step closer to having a continuous trail from Del Mar to Julian. The trail is otherwise known as the Coast to Crest (CTC) Trail and in 2005 it was officially recognized by the California Trails Association.
In continuance with the River Park’s efforts to protect and conserve more water related lands it also purchased another two parcels totaling 150 acres in June of the same year. The two properties, the Boudreau property and the Crowder property, are both in the San Dieguito River flood plain.

On another note in 2005 was the first year of planning the connection between SDRP CTC Trail to a separate regional trail system in coalition with the City of Poway. That link will provide a connection to the Trans County Trail System (TCTS) through the City of Poway. This trail corridor would be one of the north to south trail link segments built, that would connect to the TCTS in between California Coastal Trail and Pacific Crest Trail, which also connects 2 out of the 5 west to east trail corridors in our county. As Dick Bobertz, Executive Director of the River Park from 1998 to 2014, said, “The new linkage, highlighted on the map within a yellow circle, almost doubles the length of continuous regional trail system available to trail users by joining the 23 continuous existing miles of the San Dieguito River Park system to the 14 miles of the Trans-County system through 8 miles of the Poway Trail system.” Those trails providing regional trail access to most of the city’s 50,000 residents.

Dick further said that “when all of the regional east/west trail systems are completed and linked with north/south connections, County residents and visitors will enjoy a connected county-wide regional trail system of over 300 miles that will constitute an alternative transportation system.”

While 2005 reminded us of the devastating effects that water can have, we know that careful and consistent maintenance and preservation of the habitats around our watershed and wetlands is important in prevention of ecosystem degradation and in promoting the growth of our breathtaking native flora and fauna. We can now enjoy even more extended trail systems to explore these protected native open space preserves.

Felipe Franco
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park
Susan Golding was a County of San Diego Supervisor and later San Diego Mayor and is recognized as one of the SDRP Founders.
After fifteen years of planning and two years of waiting for multiple government agencies to issue dozens of permits, construction was finally scheduled to start on the San Dieguito Lagoon Wetland Restoration Project. As mitigation/compensation for the loss of fish eggs and larvae attributed to the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station 33 miles north, Southern California Edison took on the 86 million dollar project. Completion of 440 acres of wetland restoration would eventually make the lagoon into a fish hatchery, refuge for migratory waterfowl, and a place of recreation for hikers, bicyclists, and bird watchers. After many years of this area being used for multiple other things besides nature conservation - including agricultural fields and a landing strip - it was long overdue for the mouth of the San Dieguito River to get its life back.

But the San Dieguito Lagoon Restoration Project wasn’t the only major project that was scheduled to start in 2006! In Del Dios Gorge, two miles of trail and a pedestrian bridge were scheduled to start being constructed in the fall of 2006. A $500,000 construction grant from the state of California provided partial funding for the bridge. And in this same year, the River Park had also been awarded an additional $2 million grant for what would eventually be the stress-ribbon pedestrian bridge over Lake Hodges by I-15. This grant, awarded by the San Diego Association of Governments, was in addition to $5 million in state, federal, and SANDAG funding for the bridge.

Other notable things that happened in this year include SDRP receiving a finalist nomination for a Regional Golden Watchdog Award from the San Diego County Taxpayers Association for leveraging $5 million of local taxpayer funds to obtain over $50 million in federal and state grants, a staging area being established at east end of Crosby Estate for Santa Fe Valley Trail and Del Dios Gorge Trail, and being awarded a Certificate of Outstanding Merit for producing the video, Voices of San Pasqual, by the San Diego Archeological Center at the 2006 Archaeology Film Festival.

Hilary Mills
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 2006, the restoration of the San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project began. As a founder of the San Dieguito Lagoon Committee, Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley, and San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy, Nancy Weare was instrumental in the push for this project. Nancy is also recognized as one of the SDRP Founders.
2007 - Progress, Tragedy, and Recovery - The Year of "The Fire"

If you've been following these River Park 30th Anniversary posts by year, you've noticed that the years leading up to and including 2007 were a time of great progress and expansion in the San Dieguito River Park. And although that progress continued through most of 2007 with extensions of the Coast to Crest Trail through Santa Fe Valley, ramping up for the Lake Hodges Pedestrian/Bicycle Bridge and restoration down at the San Dieguito Lagoon - the year was punctuated in October by the devastating Witch Creek Fire. In addition to the 247,800 acres burned, over 1,000 residential structures lost and 2 fatalities (source: Wikipedia), the River Park experienced a loss or damage to nearly all of its assets, including its administrative offices, nearly all equipment and vehicles, Sikes Adobe (which was just recently restored), dozens of trail amenities, and hundreds of acres of restored habitat.

Showing the resilience and resourcefulness of the park, its volunteers, partner organizations, and government member agencies, the River Park rebuilt over the next few years and despite the setbacks, continued on with its major projects already underway.

Some of the images post-fire:

Sikes Adobe - notice wooden windmill somehow escapes the flames showing how random wildfire can be
The River Park “Fleet”
Kevin McKernan
Executive Director, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 2007, the "Donate a Plank" fundraiser project kicked off at the San Dieguito Lagoon Boardwalk. Pictured is Bob Sensibaugh on the Boardwalk viewing platform. Bob is a founder of San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy and is recognized as one of the SDRP Founders.

Craig Adams was the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy's first paid Executive Director and was instrumental with assisting in the Park’s fire recovery.
San Dieguito River Park (SDRP) has transformed and evolved tremendously over the past almost 12 years since the devastating Witch Creek Fire engulfed the San Pasqual Valley, Lake Hodges, and Santa Fe Valley trail systems. The fire burned 247,800 acres and devastated wildlife habitat. At the start of 2008, all the trails in the burn area were closed and trail users were asked to stay out. The surviving wildlife was already stressed and any remaining vegetative cover and food was critically needed for their continued existence, and this became an important consideration for the management of the trails and surrounding open spaces moving forward.

Staff and local experts busily implemented an action plan titled “Post-fire Assessment of Emergency Actions Needed for Recreational Access and Habitat Restoration.” SDRP staff, along with Craig Adams Executive Director of the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy and Jerri Stallcup from Conservation Biology Institute, developed the plan in order to protect remaining habitat, create new habitat, protect natural fire recovery processes, and reopen the beloved trails. SDRP rangers focused on keeping the off-trail areas from being disturbed to allow for a natural recovery process to unfold.

An important area of emphasis in the recovery was aiding the development of habitat for our local bird species, especially California gnatcatchers and coastal cactus wren. The action plan stated the following:

“The conserved lands around Lake Hodges and in San Pasqual Valley have been core population strongholds for gnatcatchers and cactus wrens in San Diego County, supporting 235 pairs of gnatcatchers and 90 pairs of wrens in the 1990s.

Thus, the fate of the River Park’s populations will have regionwide implications for the MSCP and MHCP, and possibly the Southern California NCCP program as a whole. In fact, we are facing the very real potential for local extirpation of populations of gnatcatchers and cactus wrens, 2 of the 3 focal species initially prioritized by the State of California’s Natural Community Conservation Program (NCCP) in Southern California.”

The cost of replacing the trail system was largely covered by FEMA and the Park was fortunate to be assigned to a gentleman from South Carolina who was referred to as FEMA Bob. His assistance in navigating the process cannot be understated. River Park staff was able to negotiate some upgrades so as to be better prepared for future fires, including a more fire proof design for the office, and metal incorporated into bridge and fence rebuilds.
After a casual encounter with Andre Macedo, a biologist from the City of San Diego, he helped the River Park get access to the San Pasqual Water Reclamation Plant which became the Park’s new temporary headquarters. The site was perfect and came with a protected storage area that housed hundreds of bales of rice straw that was shipped from Sacramento for erosion control. During the winter of 2008, erosion control became a primary duty of the park rangers since all the drain pipes were becoming overfilled and most slopes and drainages were unstable. Performing erosion control was critical to the reestablishment of native plants and holding the trails together. Below is a photo of the nursery at the temporary headquarters.

Another major resource and support to the rebuild was the Urban Corps of San Diego. Under the direction of Sam Lopez, they contributed multiple crews to help implement trail safety and stabilization projects and assisted with restoring habitat. In 2008, Urban Corps also pursued additional and substantial funding to help rebuild the Park and do habitat restoration work.

In the fire, SDRP lost mostly all of the tools and equipment (one truck was in the shop) and the main office and storage sheds. In 2008 there were new trucks, trailers, tractors, and a chipper purchased (same ones we use today), as well as hand tools, power tools, posts and fencing, seeds and plants, etc. There were FEMA accounts, grants, donations, insurance, and multiple other accounts all navigated to provide the funds needed to reacquire all the needed equipment and re-build the Park. Office Manager Jan Lines tracked it all and baked cookies for the staff and volunteers every Tuesday - she was incredible.

Before the fire, SDRP was constructing the Del Dios Gorge segment of Coast to Crest Trail, the David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge, the Cloverdale Creek Wetland Creation Project, and our coastal operations were up and running. In addition to re-building the Park, we still had on-going projects to manage and implement in 2008, and the staff and volunteers were able to deliver. We experienced a huge outpouring of support from the community and received reassuring and encouraging emails daily. The San Diego Foundation, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service all committed to providing substantial funding for habitat restoration. It is incredible what can be accomplished with a plan, community support, and a well-organized, motivated staff!

I am very proud to have worked for the San Dieguito River Park during this time. One could assume that this was the busiest year in the Park’s history.

Jason Lopez
Resources and Trails Manager, San Dieguito River Park
Key Person in 2008: Jacqueline Winterer

In 2008, Jacqueline helped inspire Grand Ave bridge overlook. She served as the President for the Friends of the San Dieguito Lagoon from 2006-2013 and currently serves as the Vice President.
In 2009, despite still recovering from recession, wildfires, no official office space, and a shortfall of member agency funding, the San Dieguito River Park, the JPA, and its partners had a huge year of monumental successes.

At the San Dieguito Lagoon, Southern California Edison finished construction of their restoration project creating and/or enhancing 150 acres of tidal wetlands. Alongside that, the JPA completed construction of the urban runoff treatment ponds and 1.4 miles of the Coast to Crest Trail.

Inland, the Lake Hodges Pedestrian and Bicycle Bridge was completed and funding was secured to construct the cantilever pathway from the south end of the bridge to the staging area at Bernardo Bay Natural Area. Also, 32 acres were added to Sycamore Creek Preserve through donation and a mitigation deal was consummated with the Navy providing for perpetual management.

All in all, 2009 was a transformative year for the JPA and San Dieguito River Park, with new grants and other funding sources on the horizon for the reconstruction of Sikes Adobe, the JPA headquarters, and a multitude of trail, bridge, and habitat repairs.

Kevin McKernan
Executive Director, San Dieguito River Park
In 2009, the David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bicycle Pedestrian Bridge opened. David's generous donation to this project was critical. He also served on many SDRP committees and was a County Planning Commissioner from 1988-2009.

2010 - Reopening of Sikes Adobe and the Main Office

The year 2010 had many accomplishments for the San Dieguito River Park JPA. The David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bicycle Pedestrian Bridge had won many awards, and numerous grants were awarded for habitat restoration and new and improved trails throughout the Park.

Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead post-fire reconstruction was completed and reopened to the public on 6/26/10. The house had been fully restored in 2004; then the Witch Creek Fire destroyed everything but the original adobe walls. The reconstruction cost nearly $700,000 that was funded from Federal Emergency Management Agency grants and fire insurance. The furnishings were purchased from a grant through the Community Enhancement grant program from the County of San Diego. The reconstruction followed the same floor plan as the original house and still reflected the Sikes family home as it was in the late 1880s.
Also, the River Park’s headquarters reconstruction was completed. During the 3 years following the fire, Park staff was using a temporary office space at a nearby water treatment plant. The new main office was occupied on 10/22/10, the third anniversary of the Witch Creek fire.

Photographed October 22 (aerial), and November 3, 2010.

Leana Bulay  
Manager of Interpretation and Outreach, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key Person in 2010: Leana Bulay

In 2010, Leana Bulay, author of this blog, was hired as a Park Ranger. Leana is currently Manager of Interpretation and Outreach.
On October 8, 2011, the San Dieguito River Park celebrated the opening of a short trail with a long horizon – the Old Coach Trail – linking the Coast to Crest Trail in San Pasqual Valley to the City of Poway’s vast trail system including the regional Trans-County Trail. The 200 feet of new trail, built by JPA rangers and Dust Devil volunteers, started from the Coast to Crest Trail floodplain area (just past the river crossing) to a new staging area at Evergreen nursery off of Highland Valley Road and links over 75 miles of hiking, biking, and horseback riding trails. The inaugural hike led in 2011 by then Poway councilmember Jim Cunningham, leaders and volunteers from the San Dieguito River Park, and friends and donors, started in Poway and ended ten miles later at a celebratory ribbon-cutting at the new trailhead. This trail was the first in the County to link two regional east/west trails.

The San Dieguito River Park also received many accolades in 2011 including two Orchids, one for the David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bicycle/Pedestrian Bridge and one for the JPA’s new administrative office, awarded by the San Diego Architectural Foundation at their annual Orchids and Onions awards program. An ambitious effort to remove invasive eucalyptus from the Del Dios Gorge was also in full swing in 2011 with helicopters hauling them out of the river gorge.

Shawna Anderson
Principal Planner, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 2011, current Interpretive Ranger Bryan Ward was hired permanently as a Park Ranger after being a temporary ranger the year before.

Jim was instrumental in the establishment of the Old Coach Trail segment thereby connecting the Coast to Crest Trail with Poway's trail network. He was a former JPA Board member and Major of Poway.
In early 2012, continuation of the Del Dios Gorge Riparian Restoration Project began downstream from the Del Dios Gorge Bridge. In total, approximately 21 acres of extremely dense eucalyptus trees were removed, allowing native riparian vegetation to grow.

Plans were underway to develop and construct the Birdwing Open Air Classroom. The classroom provides an outdoor facility for River Park rangers, teachers, or scientists to teach students about the importance of wetlands, aquatic species habitat, migratory birds, and the effects of climate change.

A new 1.7-mile trail was constructed on the southeast section of the Wetland Restoration and was named the Dust Devil Nature Trail in honor of the important Park volunteer group known as Dust Devils, many of whom helped build this trail. The Dust Devils work side by side with Park Rangers on a weekly basis; Tuesdays inland and Fridays coastal. This group provides invaluable help with important projects throughout the Park such as building and maintaining trails and restoring and managing habitat.
Also in 2012, the San Dieguito River Park App for smart phones was launched. The web-based app allows users to view trail maps, photos and information about birds and plants of the park, and the San Dieguito Lagoon Interpretive Walk in English and Spanish– the first interpretive walk in the park using QR (Quick Response) codes. The San Dieguito River Park is working to bridge the gap of nature and technology.

_Brenda Miller_
_Office Manager, San Dieguito River Park JPA_

In 2012, the Dust Devil Nature Trail was opened. The trail is named after the Dust Devils, a group of volunteers who love to maintain and build trails and volunteer on a weekly basis as a vital work crew supplementing the SDRP park ranger work force.
The San Dieguito River Park has greatly benefited from the volunteer Mountain Bike Patrol program that Senior Park Ranger David Hekel, himself a mountain biker, started in June 2013. The park has always had volunteer trail patrol members, some of whom rode mountain bikes, that help provide extra eyes and ears on the trail and report any issues and trail user counts back to the park rangers, but this was the first time we specifically reached out to the increasing numbers of mountain bikers that regularly rode our trails. The park provides specialized training and gear to these volunteers, like how to perform bicycle maintenance and repairs, proper trail etiquette, and SDRP MTB Patrol volunteer jerseys. The program was recognized at the following year's California Trails and Greenways Conference with a Merit Award.

Another accomplishment in 2013 was the completion of the half-mile Horsepark segment of the Coast to Crest Trail at the San Dieguito Lagoon. This created a 2.5 mile long segment between El Camino Real and Jimmy Durante Blvd.

Also, in 2013, the River Park partnered with the San Diego Natural History Museum to conduct a turtle trapping survey to determine whether the Southern Pacific Pond Turtle was present in the San Dieguito River through Del Dios Gorge, below Hodges Dam. While we ended up not finding any pond turtles, we were able to remove a couple dozen non-native turtles, mostly Red-eared Sliders, and give them to the San Diego Turtle and Tortoise Society to adopt out.
The first wedding ceremony at Sikes Adobe in over a century was held in January 2013. Two of Zenas and Eliza Sikes children got married in their home in the 1870s.

Last but not least, one of my favorite events I've hosted as a Ranger for the River Park was in 2013. It was a sunset/full moon hike up to Bernardo Mountain summit attended by 20 people.

*Bryan Ward*
*Former Interpretive Ranger, San Dieguito River Park*
In 2013, Park Ranger Felipe Franco-Ortiz was hired and continues to contribute his knowledge and skills to many park projects as a vital member of the ranger team.
2014 would provide some great learning opportunities within the San Dieguito River Valley. Our executive director at the time Dick Bobertz along with Poway City Councilman Jim Cunningham and San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy board member Bill Simmons were finishing the final segment of their more than 72-mile trek of the Coast to Crest Trail that started in May of 2013. Beginning at the crest of the park on Volcan Mountain, they broke the hike up into 10-mile segments. The mission was to gain a greater understanding of the park in its entirety and to bring awareness of this incredible asset we have in San Diego. Inspired by this journey I too would make the same 72-mile trip only this time by mountain bike in February of the following year.

By mid-year the River Park's Birdwing Open Air Classroom was completed and opened to the public. This 80-seat amphitheater featuring rows of concrete benches that was shaded by perforated stainless steel, giving it the look of a “bird's wing” from a distance would be a great addition to the parks continued goal of educating visitors of the importance of our natural environment. Overlooking the scenic views of the carefully restored wetlands of the San Dieguito Lagoon it does just that. This trailside classroom has hosted many outdoor lessons from the wetland’s importance for migratory bird habitat, aquatic species habitat, the effects of climate change, and much more. It is also a great spot to just enjoy the lagoon and do a little bird watching.

The first-ever BioBlitz was held on the north shore of Lake Hodges in 2014. A host of professional and citizen scientists embarked on a 24-hour blitz of the lake in order to gain info of the biodiversity that exists within that 350-acre area. More than 200 people participated in the event. Some of the endangered bird species like the California Gnatcatcher and Coastal Cactus Wren were spotted as well as over 262 plants, 300 species of insect, 15 reptiles, and five species of bats which came as a surprise to most of the participants. Overall it gave participants and the public at large greater insight on the reasons behind the continued need for conservation and biodiversity.

This year also marked the year that the seed was planted for the San Dieguito River Park Ranger Station at the lagoon. The proposed station would be 1,400-square-foot with office space, meeting room, employee and public restrooms, and a fenced yard. It would be located at the San Dieguito Lagoon Staging Area close to the trail and the Birdwing classroom.

David Hekel  
Senior Park Ranger/ Trails Manager, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key People in 2014: Brenda Miller and Senator Toni Atkins

In 2014, Brenda Miller was hired as the SDRP Office manager.

State Senator Toni Atkins, District 39, was instrumental in securing a 100-foot wide river buffer along the Del Mar Fairgrounds from the 22nd District Agricultural Association.
In 2015, the San Dieguito River Park acquired 2 passenger vans and officially launched the Watershed Explorer Program. The program offers 5-day fieldtrips throughout the San Dieguito Watershed. Youths can enjoy the adventures and experiences to places such as: Volcan Mountain, Lake Sutherland, the San Diego Archaeological Center, Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead, Lake Hodges and the Birdwing Open Air Classroom at the San Dieguito Lagoon. The program was made possible through the partnerships with the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy, San Diego Archaeological Center and Volcan Mountain Foundation.

In June 2015, The California Coastal Commission approved The San Dieguito River Park’s plans to build a Coastal Ranger Station. The 2,400 square foot Lagoon Ranger Station is located at Via de la Valle next to the San Andres Drive trail parking/staging area. The building overlooks the San Dieguito Lagoon and will provide SDRP staff offices, an enclosed garage and work yard, and the River Park’s first public restroom. The Coastal Ranger Station will provide a much needed work area in the Coastal section of the park. In 2019, the Coastal Ranger Station began construction and we are all excited about it and anticipate its completion in early 2020.
In 2015, SDRP applied for a River Parkways grant from the California Natural Resources Agency for construction of the Pamo Valley Trail near Ramona. The Pamo Valley trail is 3.3 miles and connects two existing trails in the Cleveland National Forest, the Lower Santa Ysabel Truck Trail and the Upper Santa Ysabel Truck Trail to form 12 contiguous miles of Coast to Crest Trail. Pamo Valley is owned by the City of San Diego Public Utilities Department and leased for cattle grazing. Santa Ysabel and Temescal creeks flow through the picturesque valley and eventually drain into Hodges Reservoir. The valley is also home to the endangered Arroyo Toad and least Bell’s vireo along with other sensitive species. Careful planning went into aligning the trail to avoid wetlands and other sensitive habitats and minimize impacts to native plants.

Brian Wilson
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
In 2015, current Executive Director Kevin McKernan was hired.
In the year 2016, there were many accomplishments for San Dieguito River Park. During late winter and early spring, Park staff and Volunteers planted 13,198 plants throughout the River Park, in 15 different sites. Out of the total lump sum of those native plant species that we planted, 7,000 of those plants went to Bernardo Mountain habitat management project areas. This was made possible thru the NRCS (National Resources Conservation Service) grant, and we also harvested and bought some native plant seeds which added to a total of 148 pounds that were also spread throughout the River Park within those 15 sites that were chosen for revegetation management of native plant species to those areas and removal of nonnative plants within those areas.

The San Dieguito River Park JPA was excited to announce that the California Natural Resources Agency awarded a $285,140 River Parkways Program grant to build the Pamo Valley segment of the Coast to Crest Trail. The funds paid for materials, supplies, subcontractors, and other construction-related costs to build the 3-mile long segment of Coast to Crest Trail in Pamo Valley near Ramona. The JPA thanks its partners: the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy, City of San Diego Public Utilities Department (land owner), and REI, for helping secure this important milestone. Construction was done by River Park Rangers and volunteers, as well as work crews from California Conservation Corps and Urban Corps, and private contractors such as Black Sage Environmental, Poway Fence Company, San Diego Fence Company, and other companies. The grant also funded a staging area, interpretive signage, and habitat restoration near the trail. Trail construction started fall 2017.

Several years ago, the San Dieguito River Park's staff, spearheaded by former Deputy Director Susan Carter, pursued directional freeway signs for the River Park. A proposal was written to Caltrans District 11, describing what was desired, including the specific text and mile marker locations. Caltrans first responded that the Park didn't qualify for the signs because there wasn't enough trail usage to justify them. After River Park staff spoke to key Caltrans employees about the true usage of the Coast to Crest Trail systems and the David Kreitzer Lake Hodges Bike/Ped Bridge, Caltrans agreed to install the signs. Next time you are driving down I-15, keep your eyes out for the new signs.

San Dieguito River Park Rangers installed two 36-inch convex mirrors on both ends of the I-5 freeway trail undercrossing at the San Dieguito Lagoon. They were added to ensure trail users enjoy their experience on the trail and feel safer continuing on in either direction around the blind corners, hopefully preventing any collision with other trail users. These newly installed safety features were made possible through a donation by Dwight Worden, JPA Board Member.

Felipe Franco
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key Person in 2016: Dwight Warden

In 2016, past and current JPA Board Member and Del Mar Councilmember Dwight Worden donated money for the I-5 undercrossing mirrors mentioned in this blog. He also served as the JPA's legal counsel from 1989 to 1998.
Lots of exciting things happened with the River Park in 2017. The whole state of California breathed a sigh of relief, as it was the first year of above average rainfall after several years of drought. This meant that for the first time in several years, Lake Hodges filled up, and there was water under the David Kreitzer Bicycle and Pedestrian Bridge. This much-needed rain also meant the hills were covered with annual wildflowers in the springtime! California poppies, Canterbury bells, sun cups, tidy tips, blue dicks, lupines, shooting stars, red maids, fiddleneck, and blue-eyed grass were just a few of the wildflower species we spotted around the park.

But along with all that rain, invasive species like black mustard came in strong too. Rangers and volunteers spent countless hours in our habitat restoration sites trying to remove invasive species to make room for the native plants. One way to suppress these weeds is through laying down mulch. Agriservice, Inc in Oceanside (and specifically Mary Matava, President and Agronomist at Agriservice), generously donated 120 cubic yards of mulch to the River Park that spring to be used at the El Camino mitigation site, a coastal sage scrub restoration site at the San Dieguito Lagoon.

Exciting things happened concerning SDRP’s trails too. The Pamo Valley segment of the Coast to Crest Trail, a long awaited trail segment near Ramona, broke ground in late summer. Its completion would link two existing segments of the Coast to Crest Trail, the Upper and Lower Santa Ysabel Truck Trails (both managed by the US Forest Service).

And on the coastal end of the park, a long awaited wetland restoration project managed by the Del Mar Fairgrounds was finally completed. During restoration of the approximately 10 acres of coastal salt marsh habitat, a small section of the Coast to Crest Trail near Jimmy Durante Boulevard had to be re-routed and re-constructed. The trail was re-opened during a ribbon-cutting ceremony once the wetland restoration was completed in July.

Other notable things that happened in 2017 include the launching of a trail patrol app and the securing of a key property for conservation. Regarding the app, Jack Bochsler and Jordan Carlson volunteered their time and expertise to develop the app, which lets trail patrol volunteers log a patrol and add pictures or comments of hazards and other things they see on the trail. This information is sent to River Park staff, providing real-time data on our trail system. This helps rangers to respond to issues or hazards more quickly, keeping the park safer and more enjoyable for all users.

As for securing a key property for conservation, the JPA closed escrow on October 19th, securing a 6.44 acre inholding in its Sycamore Creek Preserve in Poway. Thanks to a very generous donation by long time River Park supporter Freda Reid, the JPA was able to negotiate a down payment on this former home site which sits right in the middle of the 168-acre preserve. The preserve is documented habitat for the endangered California Gnatcatcher, provides an important wildlife corridor, and will now be preserved as habitat indefinitely.

Hilary Mills
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Key Person in 2017: Hilary Mills

In 2017, current Park Ranger II Hilary Mills was hired as a Park Ranger I.
Another year of efforts in the River Park have proven fruitful. Progress in Pamo Valley continued through the summer sun. The River Park received another $25,000 from the National Resources Agency for the Coast to Crest Trail in Pamo Valley.

Specialized forestry contractor crews, archaeologists, biologists, volunteers, and rangers worked carefully to provide a new trail through an area of sensitive habitat and historic lands. An additional 3.3 miles of Coast to Crest Trail was built in Pamo Valley near Ramona, and approximately 90% of the trail was fashioned near 2018’s conclusion.

While exploring this new segment of trail during the wet season, pay attention to the macro. Some may be privileged with the sighting of a rare Arroyo Toad, one of the many species the River Park is working hard to protect.

The Coastal Ranger Station is closer to construction! The station is located next to the San Dieguito Lagoon Staging Area and will be equipped with a nursery, garage, and fleet parking. The maritime element of San Dieguito River Park will have a facility to allocate resources for coastal environmental preservation and protection. Build progression improved when the station was re-designed to align with the SDRP budget, in addition to a generous $10,000 donation from Jeff Barnouw.

Nate Collins
Park Ranger, San Dieguito River Park JPA
Founders Tribute at San Dieguito Lagoon.

Key People in 2018: All the Park’s Founders

FOUNDERS TRIBUTE

San Dieguito River Park Founders Tribute project, funded by the County of San Diego Neighborhood Reinvestment Program, was completed, consisting of the video “Creating Legacy: the Founding of the San Dieguito River Park” and sculpture placed adjacent to the Coast to Crest Trail. A video debut and art unveiling ceremony was held on September 20, 2018, at the new Del Mar Town Hall.
Here we are, 2019, the River Park’s 30th year. If you’ve been following our 30th anniversary blog series this past year you may have noticed that several projects were mentioned repeatedly over the course of a few years. First the project concept may have been approved, or funding received, then in the next year (or two) you may have read about construction starting and in the following year, project completion. This blog series has not only highlighted all of the River Park’s success stories over the past 30 years, but also unintentionally demonstrated how complex and time-consuming seemingly simple projects can be in a regional open space park with a vision of establishing a 70-mile long trail system. The Pamo Valley trail segment for example, started in the planning stages in 2008 and promptly finished in 2019.

I am proud of all the River Park staff (some of whom were not born when the Park was initiated) that took on the task of researching each year in the Park’s history and writing a blog for us. It was a good history lesson and a chance to reflect, celebrate, and inspire. If you’ve been following the blog series, we hope that you’ve found it entertaining, informative, and rewarding for those that have been involved with the Park’s development either from the very beginning or whenever you joined the effort along the way.

So, in 2019, our 30th year, in keeping with the tradition of success, we held a ribbon cutting for a new Coast to Crest Trail segment in Pamo Valley, broke ground on the coast ranger station after 5 years of planning, permitting, and fundraising and as of today, closed escrow on a land acquisition of the last remaining privately held acreage in the Sycamore Creek Preserve, formerly known as the Blum property. Oh, and not to forget that little birthday shindig we held this year on the hottest day in June at the Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead - a River Park palooza - bringing back our 1/5/15K races of the past, community fair, volunteer appreciations, farmer’s market, and a silent auction to help pay for it all.

Stay tuned and stay involved as we look forward to the next 30 years of success with all the support of our member agencies, non-profit and community partners, and dedicated volunteers.
No golden plated shovels at this ground-breaking, just getting to work breaking ground on the new Ranger Station at the lagoon.
Functional, aesthetic architecture facing the wetlands - Board Meeting and tour of the Ranger Station underway.

Sycamore Creek Preserve Acquisition

Chris Khoury and Linda Corey, long-time River Park supporters and key donors toward the acquisition of the Sycamore Creek Preserve with the property in the background.

Flier from the 30th anniversary celebration
SAN DIEGUITO RIVER PARK

RUN/WALK/HIKE
15K/5K/1K/TOT TROT
JUNE 9, 2019

Sign up at: www.sikesadobe.org
Discount Code: celebrate30years
Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead, 12655 Sunset Drive, Escondido, CA 92025
Contact: brenda@sdrp.org | (858) 674-2275 (Ext. 10)

15K 8:00am
1K 8:05am
5K 7:50am
Tot Trot 8:35am

30 YEARS

Kevin McKernan
Executive Director
Key People in 2019: Brian Wilson and Nate Collins

Brian Wilson and Nate Collins were both hired as Park Rangers in 2019.

Thanks for sharing the last 30 years with us!