San Dieguito Lagoon
Interpretive Walk

San Dieguito River Park
Lagoon Trail

To enhance our conservation efforts, please return any gently used booklets back to the trailhead kiosk for other trail users to enjoy. Thank you for your cooperation.
MOBILE CONTENT

This booklet’s content can also be accessed via the San Dieguito River Park mobile app (sdrpmobile.org).

Scan this QR code with a QR reader on your smart phone to visit the mobile app, where you can read and listen to the content in English and Spanish. The app also contains park information, plant and animal identification tools, and trail maps. More content will also be added in the future.

Numbered QR codes along the trail correspond to the numbered content presented in this booklet.

DRIVING DIRECTIONS

This interpretive walk begins at the San Dieguito River Park Entry Monument on Jimmy Durante Blvd and heads east. Alternatively, refer to the numbered QR codes along the trail to find the corresponding content in the booklet.

Via I-5:
Exit Via de la Valle and head west (I-5 N: turn left; I-5 S: turn right). Turn left on Jimmy Durante Blvd. Turn into the Del Mar Public Works Yard on the right. Park where you can find a legal space.

From the parking area, walk on the bridge to the north side of the River and carefully cross to the other side of Jimmy Durante Blvd. The San Dieguito River Park Entry Monument marks the beginning of this interpretive walk.

Last revised December 2012
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The San Dieguito River Park would like to thank interns Elayna Flanders and Taylor Likins for their collaborative efforts in creating this interpretive walk. We would also like to thank Blanca Villafana for translating this booklet into Spanish. It was with their dedication, along with the guidance and inspiration from all the staff at the San Dieguito River Park, that made this booklet possible.
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SAN DIEGUITO RIVER VALLEY AND LAGOON TIMELINE

1789  Gaston de Portolá leads Spanish expedition to open a land route to Monterey, California. Juan Crespi’s diary is the first written record of crossing the San Dieguito River Valley.

1846  Proclamation of the California Republic Battle of San Pasqual (Mule Hill), bloodiest in CA during Mexican-American War.

1848  Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends Mexican-American War, with Mexico ceding California to the U.S.

1882  Southern California Railroad service begins – first constriction of the San Dieguito River mouth.

1889  U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map shows Lagoon extended more than a mile inland.

1916-1918  Major flood leads to creation of Lake Hodges Dam, spanning 156 feet high, 750 feet wide, and creating an 8.6-mile long lake.

1917  Navy acquires area north of Crest Canyon for airport site.

1926-1930  California Swamp Reclamation Act leads to filling of northern wetlands of San Dieguito River mouth and construction of a golf course.

1929  Malcom Rogers, pioneer archeologist of the San Diego Museum of Man, discovers well-preserved skull in sea-cliffs north of river mouth. The “Del Mar Man” is thought to be over 5000 years old

1936  San Diego County Fair opens.
1937  Del Mar Race Track opens.

1938  Airfield developed as municipal airport serving Del Mar Fairgrounds and Race Track. Roundtrip flight from Burbank: $16.

1941  WWII - Fairgrounds becomes barracks, galleys, and offices.

1943  Grand Avenue Bridge constructed to provide access to US Naval Auxiliary Facility, a station for anti-submarine patrol blimps.

1947  Navy quitclaims 80 acres of airfield to San Diego County for $1.

1952-1968  Airport building put to commercial uses, including one of the earliest computer manufacturers.
1966  Construction and opening of Interstate 5.

1972  California voters approve Proposition 20, the Coastal Conservation Initiative, leading to Coastal Act of 1976.

1972  Del Mar residents form plan to save Lagoon from urban developments.


1979  Del Mar adopts San Dieguito Lagoon Enhancement program.

1980-1983  Coastal Conservancy and the California Department of Fish and Game creates 70-acre ‘Fish Hook’ tidal basin on San Dieguito Drive.

1986  San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy established as a non-profit 501(c)(3) to raise funds to purchase lands for Park. Nancy Weare, first president of SDRVC.

1986  Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley established as a non-profit 501(c)(4) to advocate for the protection of the River Valley. Alice Goodkind, first president of FSDRV.

1987  Multi-jurisdictional task force under SANDAG to form a park agency.

1989  San Dieguito River Valley Regional Open Space Park Joint Powers Authority (JPA) founded. Includes representatives from San Diego County and Cities of Del Mar, Solana Beach, Escondido, Poway, & San Diego.

1991  First major land purchase by JPA for Lagoon restoration.

1992  California Coastal Commission approves San Dieguito Lagoon as site for San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station mitigation.

2007  Witch Creek Fire burns 62% of River Park as far west as Rancho Santa Fe, including c.1870 Sikes Adobe Historic Farmstead.

2010  Opening of new River Park office and restored Sikes Adobe.


2012  22nd District Agricultural Association accepts California Coastal Commission’s Cease-and-Desist Order, acceding to many changes, including restoration of the south and east overflow parking lots off Jimmy Durante Blvd into wetlands.
1. Welcome to the San Dieguito Lagoon!

The San Dieguito Lagoon Interpretive Walk takes us along the northern edge of the lagoon in Del Mar. The Lagoon Trail is part of the eventual **55-mile long Coast-to-Crest Trail** that will extend West to the Pacific Ocean and East to Volcan Mountain near Julian. About 35 miles of the Coast-to-Crest Trail is completed, but for now it begins here at the Boardwalk. The recently restored San Dieguito Wetlands are a major part of the walk, which reveals the diversity of plants, animals, and habitats that make up the Lagoon’s ecosystem.

You are currently standing at the San Dieguito River Park Entry Monument. This monument was funded through a grant from the County of San Diego at the recommendation of Supervisor Pam Slater-Price. Its iconic presence helps give recognition to the San Dieguito River Park (SDRP) so that visitors know when they have arrived at the Lagoon and the Coast-to-Crest Trail.

This interpretive walk is approximately 2 miles (4 miles round trip) and is a flat and easy hike. It is not a loop trail; you may turn around when the trail ends or at any point along the way. You’ll find the trail is just as exciting on your journey back. There are three other Park trails close by that you may wish to explore later. (Please see the **Further Exploration** section at the end of this booklet.)

This walk will provide you with information about the Lagoon and how plants, animals, and humans can share and interact in the same environment.
2. Important Goals of the Park

The River Park realizes the importance of creating continuous corridors and protecting wildlife linkages to promote species biodiversity. SDRP has six main goals.

- First is preservation of open space.
- Second is conservation of sensitive resources through preservation, protection, and enhancement of sensitive areas.
- Third is protection of water quality and quantity through conservation, erosion control, pollution control, and restoration.
- Fourth is preservation of the natural floodplain by maintaining the 100-year floodplain and sheet flow areas.
- Fifth is retention of agricultural uses by encouraging responsible agriculture in appropriate areas.
- Sixth is creation of recreational and educational opportunities through creation of multi-use, non-motorized trails and providing interpretive panels, signs, and educational outreach programs.

3. Lagoon Boardwalk

The Boardwalk, constructed in 2007, is about 1200 feet long and ends with a viewing platform that provides views over the River. The San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy (www.sdrvc.org), an organization that works with the River Park to preserve the natural habitat, has created the “Donate a Plank” fundraiser.

Planks can be purchased for $100 each and feature a name or short message from the donor. The money is used towards preservation, restoration, and public outreach programs here at the Park. This is a wonderful way to support the Park and have your name here for many years to come.
4. Lagoon Restoration Project

The San Dieguito Lagoon has not always been the beautiful flourishing ecosystem that you see today. In the past, Californians did not realize the important role that lagoons play in preserving water quality while also providing a vast diversity of habitat types for many threatened and endangered species. At one point, this area was used as a dumping site for various waste products.

Protection of this natural resource began when a group of dedicated citizens recognized the Lagoon’s importance to their community and campaigned vigorously to defeat commercial development in the area so that it could be preserved for open space and ultimately be restored. These actions were pivotal to the creation of the San Dieguito River Valley Regional Open Space Park Joint Powers Authority in 1989. The first property acquired by the River Park was here in the lagoon area – property that had been proposed for a hotel. The Lagoon was soon protected as public open space following a series of important acquisitions, but it was not functioning as a tidal ecosystem.

It wasn’t until 1991 that the California Coastal Commission (CCC) required Southern California Edison (SCE) to restore 150 acres of wetlands for activity at the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station (SONGS). SCE had made modifications to the cooling systems in Units 2 and 3 and caused damage to sea life impacting fish larvae.

*San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station (SONGS)*
Because of these negative effects, SCE was required to mitigate for their impact on the environment. In 1993, SCE selected the San Dieguito Lagoon as their mitigation site. After 10 years of planning, the creation and restoration began. The project included creation of 115 acres of tidal wetland and keeping the river mouth open. Its completion was officially celebrated in 2011.

5. Grand Avenue Bridge History

![Aerial view of the Del Mar Naval Auxiliary Air Facility c.1940s](image)

On the south side of the Lagoon, near the mouth of Crest Canyon, the Grand Avenue Bridge was built between 1942 and 1943 to provide access to a dirigible airport that was created in the wake of the U.S. entering WWII. The Navy acquired about 80 acres of land north of the site of the Grand Ave Bridge for the airport. The blimps would use Del Mar as a re-fueling station and would continue their anti-submarine patrols off the coast of California. The facility was decommissioned in September 1945 and acquired by the City of Del Mar. It is an example of structures built during the war with local materials. The bridge was 152 feet long, just 100 feet shorter than the blimps.

In 2000, the Grand Avenue Bridge was fated for demolition as part of the San Dieguito Wetland Restoration Project. The Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley, an advocacy group founded in 1986, spoke up about its historic significance, convincing the River Park to retain 2/3 of the bridge as a viewing platform.
The **Del Mar Fairgrounds** has had a long and vibrant history here in Del Mar. In 1880, when James A. Garfield was elected President, the U.S. flag only had 38 stars, and San Diego only had a few thousand residents. This was also the year that the first agricultural fair was organized in San Diego County. Between 1900 and 1935, horse racing provided a steady source of funds for the area. Local fairs became State agencies in 1904 in order to promote and encourage local agricultural and home industry. Throughout the 1920s, the area surrounding the San Dieguito County Fairgrounds became an airport called **San Dieguito Airfield**.

In 1936, when San Diego County was awarded a grant to build fairgrounds in Del Mar, all the local residents’ spirits were soaring because of the project’s effect on the local economy. The combination of the County Fair and the Del Mar Turf Club provided the area with a vast array of entertainment, and attendance steadily rose at the Fairgrounds through the late 1930s.

Many of the Hollywood elite became involved: Bing Crosby and Pat O’Brien (who both have buildings on the fairgrounds named after them) and Jimmy Durante (the name of the street that passes along the fairgrounds). The high spirits were soon dampened; in 1941, the U.S. entered WWII, and the Fairgrounds became barracks, mess halls, and classrooms for the troops.
In 1946, the Fair resumed and the blimp landing area built by the Navy remained until the anticipation of the Interstate 5 construction in 1966. Today, the Del Mar Fairgrounds attract millions of people from Southern California. It hosts numerous shows, concerts, festivities, and fairs that people come from all over to be a part of. The county fair and Del Mar horse races are held annually every summer and other events are held throughout the entire year.

7. The River Valley’s Preservation History

The preservation and protection of the River Valley began as a grassroots effort in the early 1970s. In 1986, the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy was formed as a private, non-profit organization working to acquire land and raise funds to assist in restoration and preservation efforts. The Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley was also established in 1986 as a non-profit, serving as political advocates to actively promote the conservation, restoration, and enhancement of the San Dieguito River Valley resources. It wasn’t until three years later, in 1989, that the Joint Powers Authority formed, bringing together San Diego County and the Cities of Del Mar, Escondido, Poway, Solana Beach, and San Diego.
8. Restoration & Creation of the Lagoon

Due to the extensive damage to the Lagoon, some areas needed to be created and others just restored. The bulk of this project was completed during 2006-2011 and cost approximately $86 million in total.

The restoration project includes many different parts: first, a large subtidal basin was created as a fish nursery for local species. This was an important part of SCE’s restoration project because of the SONGS facility’s large impact on fish larvae. Next, berms were built to direct the river flow and maintain velocity out to the ocean, while preventing freshwater from entering into the salt-water marsh habitats.

Tidal salt marsh habitats were created, providing specialized habitat for many species including endangered birds such as the Light-footed Clapper Rail. Four new nesting sites were constructed for the Least Tern and Snowy Plover, and a fifth site was rehabilitated. Least Terns and Snowy Plovers are federally-listed as endangered & threatened, respectively.

Public trails and interpretative programs were produced, allowing the community to become involved and educated about the area. Four natural treatment ponds were developed to filter pollutants and invasive species from urban runoff while also limiting the amount of fresh water being released into the salt water marsh habitat. Finally, the tidal channel inlet was opened by dredging the mouth, allowing salt water to flow in and producing specialized habitats. The River is now able to flow outward, carrying with it sand for the beaches and providing the ocean with needed nutrients.
Another aspect of this restoration project is restoring native habitat by removing non-native invasive species such as ice plant and pampas grass, and re-vegetating the area with native plants. Many non-native plants have been introduced to this area and are quick to out-compete for vital resources. This affects not only native plants but animals too.

The wildlife found in an area is dependent on the plants that grow there. Plants provide shelter and nesting materials for animals and can also be a direct source of food. They also provide food to wildlife indirectly through predator-prey relationships. This makes it extremely important that native species be restored to the area to promote a diverse and healthy ecosystem.

Two non-native invasive species: Highway Ice Plant (left) and Pampas Grass (right)

9. Crest Canyon Hiking Trail

If you look to the south across the Lagoon you will see Crest Canyon in the distance. Crest Canyon has undergone several native habitat restorations. It has seen huge success and is home to the endangered bird species the California Gnatcatcher. This trail is easy to moderate and spans 1.15 miles.

Although the trail resides within the River Park, the trail is actually managed by the City of San Diego and City of Del Mar. It features an approximately 250’ vertical climb through the coastal bluffs of the San Dieguito Lagoon. This canyon is not accessible from this side of the Lagoon. You must exit this trail and turn left on San Dieguito Dr, just south of Jimmy Durante. There is a small kiosk marking the trailhead and parking is available along the side of the road.
10. I-5 and the San Dieguito Lagoon

Interstate 5 was constructed under President Eisenhower, who saw the importance of having a network of highways for national defense purposes. With the dramatic rise in the number of people living in Southern California, the need for the freeway’s expansion has increased. However, the freeway restricts movement of animal species across the valley. The recent expansion of the freeway and future plans to widen further can have a dramatic impact on the plants and animals living here.

The local wildlife suffers from habitat destruction and various forms of pollution. Although recently restored, the Lagoon’s ecosystem remains fragmented from decades of development including the freeway, railroad tracks, roads, and commercial and residential development that limit the available habitat and species survival.

The Coast to Crest Trail begins here, at the Lagoon and moves eastward. We have created a crossing under the freeway so that wildlife and people alike may cross freely underneath.

11. Fish of the Lagoon

The San Dieguito River flows down from Volcan Mountain to the ocean, carrying with it necessary nutrients for marine life. The ocean water also flows inward creating different specialized habitats in the Lagoon. This mixing of fresh and salt water creates what is called brackish water.

Habitat types vary according to temperatures, salinity, oxygen levels, and sea bottom substrate types. The marine life within the Lagoon all thrive in different habitat types. The channels and basin within the Lagoon create a safer environment for juvenile fish, providing food, habitat, and protection
from predators. Since the onset of the restoration project, wetland fish populations have significantly increased in numbers and diversity.

Over 20 different fish species have been observed in the Lagoon. Juveniles of a number of these species have been observed, including California Halibut, Giant Kelpfish, Kelp Bass, Staghorn Sculpin, and four species of Gobies, providing evidence that the habitats created within the Lagoon do act as a fish nursery.

Fish play a critical role in the food web by eating algae, plankton, plants, and small invertebrates such as shrimps, crabs, snails, clams, and worms. The smaller fish are consumed by larger fish, which are in turn preyed upon by numerous fishing birds, including Great Blue Herons, Ospreys, Kingfishers, and several species of terns, including the endangered California Least Tern. Fish may also play a role in recycling nutrients that they derive from plankton in the water column and from invertebrates (clams, snails and worms) that live in and on the bottom of the Lagoon.
12. Swallows

What are the small bird species flying just above the water’s surface? You are most likely seeing some type of swallow. There are six different swallow species found here at the Lagoon. These include the Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Violet-green Swallow, Tree Swallow, Bank Swallow, Barn Swallow, and the Cliff Swallow.

Swallows are *insectivores* and eat during flight. Some species are seen year round, and others migrate here during their breeding season. Cliff Swallows are the most common ones found here and breed in large colonies by building conical mud nests. They collect small amounts of wet soil and form it into a ball-like structure. They then build a large enough enclosed nest with just enough room for them to get in and out. You may see some as you walk under the freeway underpass.

13. Nesting Sites

What is the white fenced-off area in the distance? This is one of the Lagoon’s five nesting sites for the federally-listed endangered *Least Tern* and threatened *Snowy Plover*. Since these bird species like to make their nests on the ground in exposed areas, their eggs are extremely vulnerable to predation. Fences were put in place to help protect them from predators.

The white coloration you see on the ground is sand excavated from the channel inlet mixed with crushed shell. This dredged sand was used to create a specialized habitat for these threatened and endangered bird species. The best place to see the nesting site is from the Dust Devil Nature Trail.
Dust Devil Nature Trail
Just beyond the nesting site there is another public hiking trail – the Dust Devil Nature Trail, named after the Park’s dedicated volunteers who helped build it. This is a beautiful trail with a wildlife viewing area overlooking the seasonal freshwater marsh habitat. The trail contains three different loops totaling 1.7 miles.

14. Habitat Types

Southern California is known as a biodiversity hotspot with its wide range of habitat types containing hundreds of different species. Along the Lagoon Trail you have already come across many of the following habitat types: coastal wetlands, salt marsh, sandy nesting sites, coastal sage scrub, freshwater marsh, riparian, native grasslands, and southern mixed chaparral.

Each habitat type plays an important role in keeping the coastal ecosystem functioning. Many of the different habitats create specialized homes for native plants and animals. A specialized area that is specific to each individual species is called their niche. Many species are unable to adapt to a new environment, and if their niche habitat is destroyed, they are unable to survive.

The San Dieguito Lagoon is home to many threatened and endangered species that utilize the specialized habitats found here. For example the salt water marsh habitat provides home to the Clapper Rail, an endangered bird species.

Two major habitat types: Coastal Wetland (left) and Coastal Sage Scrub (right)
15. Wetlands

Wetlands are nature’s water filtration system. They are made up of low meadow, high marsh, shallow marshlands, and open water. As the river flows in, and as rains wash storm water through a wetland area, the roots of many wetland plants and microbes act to filter and absorb pollutants. They also slow the water’s velocity so that heavy metal toxins can settle into the sediment layers rather than be carried to the ocean.

In a big storm event, or when a flood creates high water, a wetland provides area for water to spread out and slow down before it erodes adjacent lands or invades properties at higher ground. Slowing the river flow also replenishes the marshlands and beaches with new sand transported from inland areas.

The natural processes of tidal action and river flows meet in a coastal lagoon here at the River Park. These restored natural lagoon cycles make the water cleaner for people at the beach, and help keep pollutants out of the food chain we share with fish and animals. Wetlands contribute to a healthy ecosystem.
Invasive plants and animals are introduced species that can thrive in areas beyond their natural habitat or range of dispersal. They out-compete native species for resources by quickly adapting, being aggressive, having a high reproductive capacity, and not having any natural predators in their new environment.

They were introduced to the area when settlers discovered the San Dieguito River Valley. They were brought as sources of food, medicines, and materials for building and railroad construction. Some invasives were transported accidentally by way of wheels, animals, and clothing.

Although the River Park Rangers do a wonderful job of removing these non-native invasive species, the Lagoon is not immune to invasive plants and animals. Some examples of invasives found here are the zebra mussel, ice plant, and yellow mustard. The Park is constantly working on restoration projects and relies heavily on volunteer support. If you would like to be a part of preserving and restoring this natural resource please visit our website at www.sdrp.org.

Three Common Invasive Species

Zebra Mussel
(*Dreissena polymorpha*)

Ice Plant
(*Carpobrotus edulis*)

Yellow Mustard
(*Sinapis alba*)
17. Treatment Ponds

During the Lagoon restoration, it was realized that a high volume of urban runoff from surrounding areas would let out directly into the Lagoon. As a way to naturally filter pollutants and minimize the amount of freshwater entering the saltwater marsh habitat, a series of four natural freshwater marsh treatment ponds were created. The method of treatment was to utilize a series of linked ponds using a natural swale, through which the runoff would flow, leaving in the ponds the sediment, pesticides, invasive propagules, nutrients, bacteria and chemicals.

The Park has partnered with San Diego Coastkeeper to conduct monthly water quality testing to gauge the ponds’ effectiveness. If you would like to volunteer please visit our website at www.sdrp.org.

Letter A represents the entry of urban runoff into Treatment Pond One. It is then diverted through culverts to direct flow into Treatment Ponds Two, Three, and Four where it is filtered before being released into the salt marsh habitat (Letter B).
18. Tides

Lagoons are areas of constant change, ranging anywhere from bird migrations to tidal flow to precipitation levels. A tide is described as the alternating rise and fall of the sea level with respect to the land; it is produced by the gravitational pull of the moon and the sun.

There are two types of tides that occur in different locations all over the world. There are semi-diurnal tides, which have two high tides and two low tides per day, and diurnal tides, which have one high tide and one low tide per day. Additionally, there are two different levels of measurement for tides, called spring tides and neap tides. **Spring tides** create high tides that are very high and low tides that are very low and occur when the moon, sun, and Earth are all aligned. **Neap tides** are much weaker because they occur when the moon, sun, and Earth are perpendicular to each other, resulting in a different gravitational pull.

The Lagoon is considered a mixed tide where the semi-diurnal tides alternate with periods of diurnal tides. This creates a constantly changing landscape where animals and plants alike must survive through periods of no water and periods of an overflow of water. The plants and animals that live in the Lagoon have evolved to compensate for this constantly changing habitat.
19. Birds at the Lagoon

Did you know over 200 bird species have been observed at the Lagoon? The Lagoon’s specialized habitats provide birds with many different resources including shelter, food, and reproductive opportunities. As a result of the number of different habitats in the area, the Lagoon supports a large diversity of bird species.

Several species live in and around here year-round, while others use it only during certain seasons or months. Some birds only spend Winter here; some come to breed and raise young in Spring and Summer; others only stop over to rest and refuel during their migration along the Pacific Flyway. The assortment changes from month to month so there are always new birds to discover.

Four endangered bird species can be found here. They are endangered due to their requirements of specialized habitats that are becoming rarer. These species are the Belding’s Savannah Sparrow, the Clapper Rail, the California Gnatcatcher, and the Least Tern.

For information on our monthly bird counts please visit www.sdrp.org.
20. Mile Marker Program

The Mile Marker Program was initiated by the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley and jointly funded by the Friends and the San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy. The Program is currently planned to extend along the Coast-to-Crest Trail for 32 miles inland, marking every mile and half-mile, beginning at Highway 101 at the coast. At a later date they will be extended east to the end of the trail at the river’s source at Volcan Mountain.

Further Exploration

The River Park stretches all the way to Volcan Mountain, and there are hiking trails all along the way. Each one has unique habitat types and wildlife. You can find maps of all our hiking trails at sdrp.org. While you are in the Lagoon area, please visit our other local hiking trails — Crest Canyon and the Dust Devil Nature Trail. You can pick up trail maps for both at the kiosk off San Andres Drive. We hope you enjoyed your adventure here at the Lagoon and will tell your family and friends to visit!

Read More About It:


Volunteer at the San Dieguito River Park!

Expand your knowledge of the River Park with our Rangers. Witness beautiful landscapes, work outdoors, and enjoy one of our most valuable resources – the natural environment!

- Trail Maintenance
- Habitat Restoration
- Trail Patrol
- Museum Docent
- Interpretive Docent
- Internships
- Scout Projects
- Research

Please visit www.sdrp.org/volunteer.htm for more information or contact Ranger Leana Bulay at (858) 674-2275, ext. 14/Leana@sdrp.org
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The San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority was created to preserve the biological, cultural, and scenic resources found within the San Dieguito River Valley, while also providing compatible recreational and educational opportunities for the enjoyment and enrichment of the public.