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Learning about lagoons

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Old strawberry stand is an interpretive center

By Paula Story
January 28, 2006

About 30 years ago, a small shack just off Via de la Valle was one of the best places around to find produce picked fresh from local fields.

Today, the skeleton of the original Strawberry Stand on the north side of San Dieguito Lagoon has become part of a temporary nature center in a growing movement to educate the public on the importance of wetlands.

The Strawberry Stand Wetland Learning Center is now open to the public Saturdays from 10 a.m. to noon for docent-led tours, and by appointment for students and their teachers.

Through tours and posted signs, this speck of coastal land explains what's in store for the lagoon and the San Dieguito River Park, a corridor of open space that will one day extend some 55 miles from the ocean in Del Mar to the mountains near Julian and include about 80,000 acres of public parkland.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune
Evan Kleber, a docent with the San Dieguito River Park temporary interpretive center, pointed out a park site to Breda Nicolas and her daughter Natalie, 8, of Carmel Valley. Kleber is one of several volunteers.

“We consider it one of the best educational resources that the community could possibly have to show kids how important habitat is in particularly this unique environment,” Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park, said of the nature center as cars rushed by on Interstate 5 and Via de la Valle.

“Stand here and try to think about how it's going to be 100 years from now,” he said. “This will be 700 acres of natural habitat in the middle of, you know, like New York City.

“People will look back and say, 'How in the world did they ever preserve that?' I hope.”

Late this month or in early February, heavy equipment will rumble into the area. But instead of moving earth to build condos, malls or roads, the machinery will move soil that has become trapped over the years, filling in much of the lagoon and choking off life.

“A closed lagoon has kind of a life span,” Bobertz said. “But when we open it back up again, the tidal flushing action will keep it open and transport the erosional materials which wind up as sand on the beach. That's important for supplying the beach with sand. That's part of the system that development has interrupted.”

At the nature center, a short gravel trail leads from a gate off San Andres Drive, just off Via de la Valle. Signs along the trail tell visitors about water (where it comes from, how we use it and where it goes) and about the plants and animals that live in the wetlands.

A few more paces up the trail, several tall, skinny bat houses sit atop poles. One is mounted down low, where little hands and young eyes can see how these nocturnal flying mammals might sleep inside.

Mule fat plants, prolific and native to the area, were cut, roped into bundles and planted in the ground to form temporary trees for landscaping. Nearby, bales of hay are stacked as simple, ecologically friendly, temporary seating.

Signs there tell about the entire project and show some 38 species that Bobertz and others hope might one day again inhabit the healthy lagoon.

“About 95 percent of the wetlands areas of California have been lost. We've only got 5 percent left,” he said.

The old strawberry stand was chosen to be part of the temporary interpretive center because of its iconic status and its location.

Most of the funding to build the structure came from county funds of \$35,000, administered by Supervisor Pam Slater-Price. Another contribution, \$15,000, was used for the educational signs, and several smaller donations helped complete the project.

The Strawberry Stand Wetland Learning Center won two prizes in May from the American Institute of Architects Design Awards program for inspired design, low budget, sensitivity to the land and use of recycled materials.

“We loved this project,” the jury of award-winning architects said in its recognition of the center. “The economy of means – doing more with less, the recycled materials into a structure that treads lightly on its site and requiring no energy, is a return to the very roots of sustainability.”

Bobertz said: “We looked around for 'What kind of a facility can we build on a very small budget?' and it turned out that there was an old produce stand. It's been here since the '70s, I think, and people were used to bringing their kids down here and buying strawberries . . . and produce and so forth. So we thought we ought to use that community identity.”



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune

After unlocking the gate to the Strawberry Stand's interpretive center on wetlands, volunteer Evan Kleber did some cleanup in the temporary structure. The cardboard (foreground) indicated a homeless person had stayed overnight.



PETE CHENARD / Union-Tribune

Volunteers designed and built the nature center and its displays, stripping the strawberry stand to its wood foundation, beams and joists and extending it to give it a soaring, airy feeling. Frosted panels let light pour through the structure and evoke reeds swaying in a lagoon. The structure is laced together with wire for support and built on piers.

“Keep in mind that the whole premise behind this is that this is temporary, and it's temporary because they are going to dig out 2 million cubic yards of soil in the middle of the lower level of the valley, which is going to allow the tide to come all the way back here to provide the habitat to protect the wetland plants and animals,” Bobertz said.

“You need a tidally flushed system, and so all of that soil – 2 million cubic yards – is going to be put up on either side.”

That means the temporary site will eventually be about 20 feet higher than it is right now, and eventually a permanent visitors center will mark the beginning of the Coast to Crest trail system and nestle into the hillside that backs up to Via de la Valle.

The lagoon restoration project is expected to take two to three years to complete.

The nature center will be moved to a new site or incorporated into the new, permanent structure. Construction of that center is dependent upon securing funding.

For more information, log on to www.sdrp.org or call (858) 674-2270.

■ Paula Story is a freelance writer living in Fallbrook.

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