



Last week Del Mar Hills third-graders had a chance to get up close and personal with their neighboring San Dieguito Lagoon.

Celebrating a very precious resource

By Gina McGalliard

Although many in San Diego feel that development is eclipsing the area's natural beauty, high profile preservation efforts are underway at the San Dieguito Lagoon in Del Mar. And the word is getting out. On April 16, third-graders from Del Mar Hills Elementary School took a field trip to the lagoon as part of a science unit on plant and animal adaptations. The trip was in conjunction with the city of Del Mar's San Dieguito Lagoon Committee, which holds its annual Lagoon Day on Sunday. The children met with scientists from organizations such as the U.S. Fish and Game Department and the U.S. Water Geological Survey.

"I think my biggest hope is for them to understand how important this ecosystem is and how fragile and important it is to preserve it for future generations," said Del Mar Hills science teacher Nancy Swanberg, who coordinated the outing. Lagoon posters drawn by the children will be on display at Earthsong bookstore in Del Mar through April 27.

A major objective of the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project is to open the mouth of the lagoon, enabling tides from the ocean to flow into it. The construction, which began in September 2006 and is expected to be completed in December 2009, will cost \$86 million and be solely financed by Southern California Edison, the largest electric utility in Southern California. The company will maintain the wetland until 2050, when San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority will take over. The project, constructed by Marathon Construction, will restore more than 160 acres within the 440-acre preserve. Another goal is to preserve native plants and wildlife, because the wetland will house more than 35 fish species, 25 invertebrates, many reptiles, coyotes, raccoons, opossums, rabbits, striped skunks, mice and frogs. Four new nesting sites for endangered birds such as the Belding Savannah sparrow and the California least tern will be created, in addition to the restoration of one non-functioning site. In May, the planting of more than 300,000 plants will begin.

Samir Tanious, the project manager from Southern California Edison, said that although the wetland cannot be restored to its original size because of surrounding civilization, the restoration project consists of creating over 150 acres of wetlands and the excavation and dredging of two and a quarter million cubic yards of material to restore natural habitats.

Kelly Sarber, a consultant for Southern California Edison, said the main culprit in destroying the lagoon was transportation corridor development, such as Interstate 5, which "acted to stop up a naturally occurring waterway down to the ocean." Sarber also said many years ago people considered wetlands to be undevelopable swamps instead of valuable ecosystems.

Tanious said he hopes the students "will take ownership of (the lagoon). They feel that they are part of the environment, and that's what they are living in. It's different seeing birds or fish in a book versus coming and seeing it on site."

Sarber said that although Del Mar Hills has been involved in the lagoon for the past eight years, this year was the first the children were able to see the lagoon first hand. She said in addition to gaining an appreciation of the environment, she hopes perhaps they might find future careers.

"We just hope that both the boys and girls see that there are careers in the environmental business," she said, "that it's great to be outside, and that there's also technology involved, it's not just heavy-duty construction...there's people that are experts in fish and game, so if you like animals, why not be a biologist for the U.S. Wildlife Service? If you're into water quality, they do that all year long. It exposes children to environmental kinds of careers, but also to see how it all works together."

In order to educate the community about the importance of the lagoon, the San Dieguito Lagoon Committee, a volunteer group for the city of Del Mar, will celebrate Lagoon Day 2008, a free event on Sunday, April 27.

The guest speaker will be Dr. Exequiel Ezcurra, Ph.D., provost of the San Diego Natural History Museum and director of the museum's scientific division. He will deliver a talk titled "From the Tidepools to the Star: How the San Dieguito Lagoon Fits into the Larger Ecosystem."

Dr. Ezcurra, who Lagoon Day chair Liz Dernertz described as a "very dynamic speaker," is well known among scientists. Prior to coming to the Natural History Museum, he was appointed by former President Vicente Fox in 2001 as the president of the National Institute of Ecology in Mexico. He was also instrumental in the California condor release program in Baja, California, and co-produced the award-winning movie "Ocean Oasis."

For more information on the lagoon, go to www.sdlagoon.com. For more information about the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project, go to www.sdrp.org. Lagoon Day will be held at the Powerhouse Community Center at 1658 Coast Blvd., and will begin at 7 p.m. Refreshments will be served. There will be open seating and no reservations are required. For more information, contact Liz Dernertz at ldernertz@pacbell.net or (858) 755-5904.