

New life in tidal basin

Project turning wetland into successful breeding area

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DEL MAR – Viewed from Interstate 5, the large basin of water between the freeway and the Del Mar Fairgrounds may look like an oversized swimming hole that badly needs landscaping.

But to scientists who are watching the newly sculptured wetland, it's quickly growing into a successful breeding area for fish and marine invertebrates.

“This is doing really, really well,” said Steve Schroeter, a marine biologist with the Marine Science Institute of the University of California Santa Barbara, as he peered into a bucket containing gobies, a sea slug and shellfish.

“There's an upward trajectory of the number of fish,” Schroeter said.

The 40-acre tidal basin is part of a 440-acre restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon, which stretches from the fairgrounds to El Camino Real.

Southern California Edison is paying for the \$86 million project to make up for the environmental damage caused by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station it operates in North County.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS / Union-Tribune
University of California Santa Barbara researchers (from left) Steve Schroeter, Mark Page and Jenny Wolf counted sea life in an enclosure trap at the tidal basin between Interstate 5 and the Del Mar Fairgrounds.

UC Santa Barbara's Marine Science Institute has been hired by the California Coastal Commission to monitor the work.

Scientists are pleased with the progress and say the small fish and invertebrates that have taken up residence will attract other species.

"The theme is sort of food-chain support for birds and (other) fish," said Mark Page, another UC Santa Barbara scientist.

In January, before the basin was opened to tidal flow, there was no sea life.

Schroeter and Page use a contraption to sample organisms at various points, then calculate what the whole basin is producing. They saw a gradual increase, then an explosion.

"In July we had some, then in August there were a lot more," Schroeter said – about double the number.

They said millions of gobies, pipefish, slugs, crabs and other sea creatures have moved in. There are more in the new basin than in an older basin just south of it, which has little tidal flow.

The reason for that, Page said, is the tidal flow ensures a healthy oxygen level in the new wetland.

The lagoon restoration, which began in 2006, is expected to produce 150 acres of healthy wetlands when completed in 2009.

It involves excavating about 2 million cubic yards of dirt, about half of which was moved to create the new basin, which occupies the site of an airfield that moved to make way for Interstate 5 in the 1960s.

Eventually, the tidal basin is expected to become a thriving home for such fish as halibut, grunion and bass, as well as the smaller species of gobies, pipefish and shellfish that have already moved in.

Scientists also expect shorebirds to nest and migrating birds to rest there.

The restoration is about 75 percent complete, and two more basins east of I-5 will be open to tidal flow in late November.

Patrick Tennant, a marine biologist with Southern California Edison, said he's gratified.

"When you see the fish here at such high levels, it's kind of an affirmation that this is all paying off," Tennant said. "To provide it and see there's fish out there instantly means there were fish out there looking for it."

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Southern California Edison is restoring the San Dieguito wetlands to compensate for fish loss near the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

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