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COMMUNITY ESSAY: DEL MAR

Not your usual construction project

By Kelly Sarber

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If you are one of the 250,000 people estimated by Caltrans who drives daily on Interstate 5 near Del Mar, and among those who looks about and gets mad that somebody's building a Wal-Mart in the wetlands, you'll be happy to discover something more natural is emerging.

The San Dieguito Wetlands Project's construction phase to restore 150 acres of coastal wetlands back to its pre-20th-century condition is almost complete. What you probably won't see – unless they're jumping – are the estimated 8 million baby fish that now populate the new lagoon, opened to the ocean last January. Like a Ferrari that goes from zero to 100 mph in under four seconds, the new lagoon broke from the gate at a dead run, going from zero to 8 million fish in under seven months. While a puzzle to scientists, Mother Nature has ushered into our own back yard an explosion of sea life unparalleled in any other location.

This massive environmental asset in the form of a new 460-acre nature preserve is being paid for by Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric to mitigate impacts created through the providing of electricity to millions of people via the utilities' San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant. Cooling water for the plant's operation comes from large pipes delivered from the ocean, so some fish and invertebrates are lost. An environmental policy of mitigation is used to offset impacts by requiring companies to create and sustain new life at other locations.

Mitigation policy has started paying back dividends to San Diego County's environment by creating an ecosystem to nurture the many creatures intricately connected on our coast's circle of life.

With these 8 million newly hatched fish and invertebrates at the bottom of the food chain, Mother Nature has clanged a massive feeding bell that won't go unnoticed. We expect birds and wildlife to respond in numbers and varieties that may be astounding. The ongoing protection of crucial coastal habitat is important to California, since the state has lost nearly 95 percent of its coastal wetlands. This new project is considered one of the most valuable coastal habitats in California due to its size, proximity to the ocean, corridor value to inland resources and documented, long-term breeding activities.

The rejuvenated lagoon and surrounding wetlands will provide a mixture of habitats that will serve the thriving fish nursery in the lagoon, create a refuge for migratory waterfowl and introduce open space for recreation. The mixed-habitat approach is meant to be self-sustaining and a model for other wetland projects, which was why it was recently selected by the California chapter of the American Planners Association to receive a prestigious award.

Creating regulatory policy that can marry the private goal of meeting a mitigation requirement with the public goal of protecting a unique habitat is the glue that paved the way for this \$90 million restoration project to happen here. More than 40 years have elapsed since the Del Mar Lagoon Committee worked to save this wetland, which had suffered from decades of encroaching development, pollution and agricultural use. So when Edison and SDG&E began to search for an appropriate site for mitigation, a marriage of mutual benefit was formed with the result being the restoration of this incredible natural asset.

It was the persistence and hard work of many organizations that produced the exciting progress we see today. The

cities of Del Mar and San Diego, Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley, Supervisor Pam Slater-Price and San Diego City Council President Scott Peters are just a few who have been tenacious in their support of this project. By partnering with the San Dieguito River Park Authority, Edison and SDG&E have a long-term relationship in place to help oversee the project once the restoration is finished.

So, what's next?

Soon, sand will be moved to the beach to keep the tidal inlet open and the now barren wetland will be fully vegetated with 350,000 plants. The nature preserve's network of trails will follow the marsh shoreline, punctuated by interpretive wildlife viewing platforms. Wildlife and reptiles will be visible, plus many of the 200 species of birds that have been documented will be breeding, flying and feasting.


While mitigation is not an exact science and some people may not like these types of trade-offs, in this case it appears that Mother Nature likes mitigation and is showing her approval in this small slice of nature near the Pacific Ocean.

■ Kelly, a native San Diegan, as a kid used to sneak down to the San Dieguito River with her friends to raft through what is today the site of the new nature preserve. As an expert on environmental coastal issues, she serves as the public affairs liaison to the San Diego community on the wetlands restoration project for Edison and SDG&E.

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