

CHAPTER TWELVE: REGIONAL COORDINATION

INTRODUCTION

While many of the ecological and sociological challenges facing by the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve originate in the watershed, the TRNERR is also part of a larger entity that both influences and can be influenced by activities at the Reserve. This entity is known as the *bioregion*, or the California Bight, and it is defined by the area from San Quintin, Baja California, Mexico, to Pt. Conception, north of Santa Barbara. The bioregion is defined as an area characterized by relatively consistent floral and faunal assemblages, with areas of relatively steep species turnover at either end of the region, in the transition zones. Each reserve is charged with representing and being a leader for similar programs and protected areas in its bioregion.

The Regional Coordination Program seeks to establish communication and cooperation between the Reserve and other programs, agencies, and governments with similar scientific, cultural, political, and land-use issues within the bioregion. This also includes collaboration with other NERR sites. San Diego County alone is home to 8 separately defined coastal wetland areas, and there are many more as one travels up the coast toward Point Conception and down toward San Quintin. The vast majority of these wetlands within the bioregion do not enjoy the same level of resource protection, programs and staffing, research and monitoring projects, restoration efforts and governmental support as does the TRNERR. By this reasoning, the reserve is in a position to provide valuable support in the form of program ideas, training, monitoring and research results, restoration lessons, and many other resources that can multiply the benefits derived from NOAA's NERR Program funding and pave the way for better scientific knowledge, wetland protection and management throughout the bioregion. In particular, through its Education and Coastal Training Programs, the Reserve will strive to change the cultural mindset of the general public and decision-makers, both regionally and locally, to recognize the value of estuaries, thereby creating advocates for long-term coastal wetland protection and enhancement.

I. POLICIES

The TRNERR is more than just a land manager. It takes seriously the additional role of being a leader for estuary management throughout the California Bight. The Reserve can only expand influence regionally within the constraints of staffing and funding. Beyond its immediate borders and local area, the TRNERR is involved in research activities, consortia, technical advisory groups, regional action planning for natural resources, and internationally prominent organizations. However, the Reserve must also be cautious and strategic in its reach, without compromising local responsibilities.

II. EXISTING CONDITIONS AND PERCEIVED NEEDS

A. PROGRAM OVERVIEW

It was only three years ago that the Reserve finally filled all four coordinator positions at the same time (education, research, stewardship and CTP). In 2006, a Volunteer Coordinator was hired and added as a fifth member of the core team. In the past few years, the Reserve has been building a strong local base from which each program area is ready to expand the Reserve's regional influence over the next five years.

B. CURRENT PROJECTS AND REGIONAL COORDINATION EFFORTS

1. Research and Monitoring in Los Penasquitos Lagoon

Currently, the TRNERR research program, through SWIA and the LPL Foundation is contracted to ecosystem monitoring in Los Penasquitos Lagoon, located some 25 miles north of Imperial Beach in Del Mar. Monitoring is parallel to that conducted in the Reserve, and builds upon twenty of years study started by PERL. As most of LPL is in the State Park system, this presents a good opportunity for increased collaboration and sharing of resources.

Similarly, the research program is working with the USFWS to institute monitoring in south San Diego Bay, in the Wildlife Refuge. Again, as Refuge staff are already partners in the TRNERR, facilitating this effort. It is envisioned that one of the NOAA SWMP stations might be placed in San Diego Bay, for the mutual benefit of the TRNERR and USFWS programs.

2. SDSU Field Station Program (FSP)

The TRNERR has been an auxiliary field station of SDSU, and the Reserve is working to further develop this relationship. Staff at the TRNERR and FSP are increasingly sharing ideas and experience, especially related to wireless, real-time monitoring for research and education.

3. Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project (SCWRP)

This is a multi-agency state-funded organization that is focused on facilitating restoration of Southern California Wetlands. Reserve staff currently attend the local San Diego County task force meetings (Research Coordinator and CTP Coordinator) and TRNERR has received \$X million in funding from the SCWRP for restoration work. This organization is on the forefront of nearly all wetland restoration work going on locally and is an ideal forum for discussion of restoration goals and dissemination of lessons learned through projects in the region. The Research Coordinator is also a member of the Science Advisory Panel for the SCWRP.

Recently, the SCWRP has funded three major Reserve projects. In 2003, they provided over \$200,000 for a Los Laureles Canyon Feasibility Study, looking at options and

recommendations for erosion control and stormwater management in this immediate sub-watershed, located in Mexico. The results of the study have now been folded into the more comprehensive City of Tijuana-funded Canyon Laureles Work Plan, a blueprint for implementation. (More details in Chapters 10 and 11.) In addition, the SCWRP has provided significant funding (\$3.8 million) for the Goat Canyon Enhancement and Habitat Restoration Project. The key feature of this project is the protection of estuarine resources from upstream sediment flows through the construction of a series of sediment retention basins. This was completed in 2005. Finally, the SCWRP is currently providing funds for the Tijuana Estuary Tidal Restoration Program, Phase II, a feasibility study of future saltmarsh restoration in the Reserve. (See Chapter 5 for more details on these last two projects.)

4. RAMSAR

The Reserve was designated a “wetland of international importance” on April 22, 2005 after much work by SWIA members and Reserve staff to achieve the designation. Under the United Nations, this will mean that the TRNERR site is internationally recognized and thus well-situated to receive enhanced support from elected officials, grant funding, key partnerships, and a much-improved local and international image. The TRNERR’s RAMSAR designation has already had a tangible benefit in terms of bolstering Pro-esteros (a Mexican wetland conservation NGO based in Ensenada) in their efforts at establishing a key Baja California wetland, Estero Punta Banda, as another RAMSAR designated site. This was successfully accomplished in February, 2006. There are efforts underway to also seek designation for San Quintin wetlands as well as South San Diego Bay. In addition, efforts are underway to potentially expand the Reserve’s RAMSAR designation to include Cañon Matadero and Cañon Los Sauces, making it a transboundary RAMSAR site of global importance, and opening the door to protect and enhance these key upstream canyons located on the Mexican side of the border.

5. Marine Protected Area Networks

The TRNERR is increasing its participation in regional networks of Marine Protected Areas. This is especially true for other federally designated MPA’s, such as National Parks and National Marine Sanctuaries. Reserve staff participate in national and international MPA program development, including the Commission on Environmental Cooperation’s (CEC, part of NAFTA) North American Marine Protected Area Network (NAMPAN) effort.

6. Southern California Coastal Ocean Observing System (SCCOOS)

The TRNERR is participating the regional association of this Integrated Ocean Observing System (IOOS) program, both as an end-user and provider of data. A focal area for the SCOOS program is the Tijuana River and the coastal waters offshore of the Reserve. Also, the RC is a Senior Advisor to SCCOOS. See Chapter 5, water quality section, for more details on the SCCOOS.

7. California Biodiversity Council

The California Biodiversity Council is semi-annual meeting of over 40 federal, state and local agencies. At the meeting, they discuss, coordinate, and assist in developing strategies and complementary policies for conserving biodiversity. Through the Council, members exchange information, resolve conflicts, and promote development of regional conservation practices. Members include California State Parks, Department of Fish and Game, State Water Resources Control Board, Cal Trans, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U. S. Forest Service, and local government associations. The Council is co-chaired by Resources Agency Secretary Mike Chrisman and Mike Poole, Regional Director of the Bureau of Land Management.

In September 2006, the California Biodiversity Council (CBC) held its meeting in San Diego, with the intention of focusing on border-related environmental issues. Much of the tour and meeting was focused on the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve and Border Field State Park.

Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the estuary's watershed lies within Mexico . As such, the Research Reserve (through its Coastal Training Program) has invested much time in improving land use practices within the City of Tijuana. Much of their initial focus has been on converting the community of San Bernardo to become a model of sustainable development in Tijuana. This community lies in the upper reaches Los Laureles Canyon, a drainage that is the source of huge amounts of sediment that annually threaten to smother the estuary. With its non-profit partners and the California Coastal Conservancy, California State Parks (the Research Reserve) is working with the City of Tijuana to control erosion, replant slopes, introduce pervious paver roads, manage sewage disposal and improve the quality of life in San Bernardo.

In their tour, the CBC members got a first-hand look at the challenges of San Bernardo (and the entire watershed). State Parks Director Ruth Coleman participated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the first park to be established in the upper half of the canyon. Playground equipment donated by a U.S. developer was enormously popular with the children of San Bernardo. The Council concluded their tour by visiting Border Field State Park and the National Estuarine Research Reserve. They saw the effects of sedimentation and recognized the importance of preserving this internationally important wetland.

The results of the tour and the next day's CBC meeting continue to grow. The CBC has established a committee to identify specific actions and funding to: build sediment basins on both sides of the border; add package sewage plants in San Bernardo; and manage tires and trash on both sides of the Border. California State Parks has partnered with different agencies to apply for 2 U.S.EPA grants totaling \$1.7 million dollars. Most of the money would be directed toward improving conditions in Los Laureles Canyon. Organizations became aware of Los Laureles through media reports of the CBC meeting and are asking for ways to help. Engineers without Borders have pledged \$50,000 to build a package sewage plant. The Integrated Waste Management Board anticipates granting up to \$200,000 to develop a

mechanism to consolidate trash at the lower sediment basin.

8. California's Wildlife Action Plan, California Department of Fish and Game

The draft California Wildlife Action Plan (WA Plan) (*California Department of Fish and Game 2006*) identifies the species and habitats at greatest risk in California; describes the major stressors affecting wildlife and habitats; and presents statewide and regional conservation actions needed to restore and conserve ecosystems and wildlife populations. Those recommended conservation actions that are applicable to the Tijuana River NERR include: improve the implementation of the Natural Community Conservation Plans, in this case the San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program; protect and restore coastal wetlands; control invasive species; protect sensitive species and important wildlife habitats; institute fire management practices to restore ecological integrity, while minimizing loss of property and life; and provide recreational opportunities compatible with wildlife habitat needs. With respect to coastal wetland restoration, the WA Plan identifies the restoration of the south arm of the Tijuana Estuary as one of the most significant coastal wetland restoration projects being planned in California and recommends its implementation. The WA Plan also recommends that public agencies invest in efforts to protect and restore ecologically intact river systems with a focus on those drainages that remain largely unchannelized; those that support riparian vegetation communities; and those with functioning floodplains (or where construction and development in riparian areas is limited enough to reestablish functioning floodplains). The WA Plan further recommends that public agencies adopt management policies that safeguard natural resources and wildlife habitat, even as they manage for multiple uses or for mandates that emphasize other objectives.

III. PLAN OF ACTION

Goal 1: Expand the reserve's leadership role in the bioregion by reaching out to other groups who are engaged in similar efforts for collaboration and exchange of information.

Tasks:

- Continue to provide opportunities for exchange of information and ideas with other estuaries in the bioregion, including tours, meetings, symposia, etc.
- Use the unique natural setting of the Tijuana River Estuary as a focal point for public education days, school science projects, research exchange programs, public meetings, and events that involve the local community.
- Provide written support to newly forming reserves, such as the proposed Estero Punta Banda.
- Seek out opportunities to demonstrate the value and uniqueness of this local resource through public presentations, traveling exhibits, and other offerings.

Goal 2. Establish closer linkages with sister National Estuarine Research Reserves, National Wildlife Refuges and other ecological reserves, particularly within our bioregion.

Tasks:

- Establish and improve personal contacts and regular communication with other Refuges and Reserves, placing particular emphasis on the Elkhorn Slough NERR, San Francisco Bay NERR, South San Diego Bay Wildlife Refuge, and the Channel Islands Marine Sanctuary.
- Develop mechanisms to share ideas and information (on-line, newsletters, monthly conference calls, annual visits, etc.).
- Investigate and cooperate on bioregional projects as needs dictate (bird monitoring, water quality, etc.).

Goal 3. Change the cultural perspective on the value of coastal wetlands to create a passionate constituency that will support estuary protection and enhancement.

Tasks:

- Expand the TRNERR education program to school districts throughout the San Diego Region.
- Develop and distribute estuarine science curriculum that can be used by agencies and schools throughout the biogeographic region (also provide training support as needed). Adaptable material may also be developed and shared by the Coastal Training Program.

Goal 4. Maximize protection offered to the Reserve and other areas of interest in the bioregion through national and international ecological and coastal special-area designation programs, such as RAMSAR.

Tasks:

- Explore the potential benefits of the new RAMSAR designation and possible expansion of the RAMSAR site boundaries.
- Explore other possible designations.