-Escondido Creek-Crossroads of a Community Lifeline for a Lagoon



Photo: R. Ganey



-Escondido Creek-Crossroads of a Community Lifeline for a Lagoon

January 2010



Prepared for

and

The Escondito CRE

Prepared by

Conservation Biology Institute

The Conservation Biology Institute provides scientific expertise to support conservation and recovery of biological diversity in its natural state through applied research, education, planning, and community service.





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Executive Summary

We call upon the waters that rim the earth, horizon to horizon, that flow in our rivers and streams, that fall upon our gardens and fields, and we ask that they teach us and show us the way.—Chinook Indian Blessing

The Escondido Creek watershed comprises a relatively small, but immensely significant part of Southern California. Within its approximately 54,000 acres, stretching from the foothills to the coast, lie the last remnants of an imperiled coastal scrub habitat that connects the northern and southern parts of a globally important ecological region. Though seemingly unspectacular to some, this coastal scrub habitat is vital to the integrity of San Diego County's open space network and to the persistence of some of Southern California's most endangered species, many of which occur nowhere else on the planet. Conservation of these natural lands is the key to preserving San Elijo Lagoon as the jewel of Southern California's remaining coastal wetlands. Moreover, conservation of this open space—an integral part of the larger open space network in San Diego County and Southern California—is essential to the sustainability of our natural, economic, social, cultural, and government systems, which depend on clean water, flood control, clean air, and scenic and recreational resources.

In the Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove area of the Escondido Creek watershed, over a dozen conservation stakeholders have recognized the importance of conserving natural lands to our quality of life. Thus far, these stakeholders—representing the Cities of Escondido, Encinitas, and Carlsbad and the County of San Diego, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), 5 water districts, a variety of private homeowners' associations, and 8 nonprofit land conservancies and other support groups—have worked together to protect approximately 7,300 acres of natural open space and create over 120 miles of existing and planned recreational trails. Moreover, as a result of regional land use planning efforts throughout San Diego County, USFWS, CDFG, environmental and development groups, the County of San Diego, and all of the cities rely on conservation here for continued economic development elsewhere. Now the fate of this region—threatened by increasing residential development—lies in the hands of individual citizens of the greater Southern California community.

This document aims to raise awareness, support, and financial resources for this region's sometimes overlooked or *escondido* (hidden) conservation values—its spiritual serenity, iconic vistas, diversity of recreational opportunities, the network of its waters draining to the sea and supporting the San Elijo Lagoon, and all the wild things that live here—these are the values that sustain us. These are the values that are now threatened unless we finish the work that our fellow San Diegans have begun to protect this place.

The challenge for conservation at this crossroads area is to complete the east-west and northsouth conservation connections between existing open space investments, to ensure that we don't lose any more of the conservation values that sustain all of us. This task could not be more urgent. Dare to imagine—what our landscape will look like 5 years from now.





Introduction

This is a true story about communities—residential communities, vegetation and wildlife communities, recreational and open space communities, faith-based communities—and a vision for their future that recognizes their interdependence. In most places, including one particular area of San Diego County, the sustainability of all these communities relies on the conservation of natural open space at their intersection (Map 1). These communities share a common watershed that links the coast to the mountains; they share the last remnants of an imperiled coastal scrub habitat that connects the northern and southern parts of a globally important ecological region; they share a future of stewardship and renewal; and they share a cornerstone of conserved lands, without which this network of communities would be impoverished. The integrity of these natural lands is the reason that San Elijo Lagoon is the jewel of Southern California's remaining coastal wetlands.

This story presents the community values we have stewarded and what we have to gain—and what we stand to lose if we are not proactive—in this unique part of Southern California. This vision represents a shared commitment to conserve forever the heart center of this network of communities, this crossroads.

Conserving the Community

California's Mediterranean ecosystem is the most endangered complex of communities on the planet. And yet, most Californians remain unaware that the place where we live rates as a global *hotspot* of biological diversity and conservation value. Recognized by conservation scientists worldwide, the South Coast Ecoregion of California and Baja California lies at the heart of this hotspot (Map 2).

San Diego County, known for its sparkling beaches and scenic backcountry, is home to more endangered species than anywhere in the continental U.S.—plants and animals whose existence is imperiled by habitat loss to a sprawling human population. Yet an



extensive *green infrastructure* makes San Diego County unique among other Southern California areas, with over 1 million acres conserved for open space and natural resources. Large, intact, and connected landscapes are crucial to maintaining hydrologic and other ecological processes, such as nutrient and energy flow through food webs, species population dynamics, gene flow, and species interactions.

Land conservation efforts recognize that our economic, social, cultural, and government systems depend on these natural ecosystem services, such as water quality and water supply protection, flood control, clean air, and scenic and recreational resources. When these processes are altered, our quality of life declines. This section addresses the interdependent conservation values for





Map 1. A Community of Communities—Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove.



both the human and wildlife communities of Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove, a unique community at a crossroads—a turning point—what will this landscape look like 5 years from now?

Community Character

Landscapes define the community for humans as well as wildlife. The Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove Town Council conducted a survey of residents in 2005 to better understand what they like about their community. The adjacent box indicates residents' priorities. Compared to surrounding areas of north San Diego County, the Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove community appears almost as an island of habitat surrounded by urban uses (Map 1), but with important

connections to habitat around Lake Hodges and the southeastern corner of Carlsbad. The 640-acre Questhaven Retreat, Home of the Christward Ministry, represents the peacefulness characteristic of this area. Indeed, this peacefulness persists more than a century after the Harmony Grove Spiritual Camp was founded in 1890.

Hub for Recreational Trails

What defines the Elfin Forest/ Harmony Grove community?

- Open spaceSeclusion
- Dark skies
 Tranquility
- clusion
- ViewshedWildlife
- Trails
 Escondido Creek
- Rural land uses

The Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove community lies at the crossroads of open space trails in northcoastal San Diego County, connecting approximately 62 miles of existing and planned trails through Encinitas, Carlsbad, and San Marcos, with 60 miles of existing and planned rural trails in the unincorporated area and 12 miles of trails in the Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve, a 750acre open space park (Map 3). The area is a virtual Mecca for a large and racially diverse user group of hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers from all over San Diego County. The Interpretive Center at the Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve also serves school kids and their families. Elfin Forest Road and Harmony Grove Road are part of the County Scenic Highway System—a route prized by bikers for its light traffic, fresh air, and spacious views along open valley floors adjacent to Escondido Creek, winding through gently sloping hills past sharp granitic escarpments. The more adventurous can even cross over into the San Dieguito River watershed to take advantage of the San Dieguito River Park's network of trails that stretch from the coast to the mountains.

On the northern border of the Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove focus area, the possibility of a trail head at the California State University San Marcos Sprinter Line station could become a reality. This would create a unique connection of mass transit to a large network of open space trails, offering easy access to urban residents in Escondido, San Marcos, Vista, and Oceanside. Such a connection with a major university could facilitate opportunities for research and stewardship within a representative portion of the Southern California open space preserve network.





Map 3. Recreational trails within the Escondido Creek focal area.



A River Runs Through It

With its headwaters in the foothills, Escondido Creek and its network of tributaries are the life blood for this tapestry of communities, linking habitats and providing clean freshwater to San Elijo Lagoon. The creek was the original reason that humans settled here—the indigenous communities of Kumeyaay Indians, Mexican ranchers, and our agricultural forebearers. Now this area supports a mix of urban and rural residential communities, including Valley Center, Escondido, Harmony Grove, Elfin Forest, Rancho Santa Fe, and Encinitas.

Watershed—a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of a community.—John Wesley Powell The Escondido Creek Watershed, within the greater Carlsbad Hydrologic Unit, extends 26 miles from its rural source on Paradise Mountain, on the west side of Rancho Guejito, to the Pacific Ocean (Map 4a). Draining approximately 85 square miles, it traverses westward through downtown

Escondido before meeting up with the web of ephemeral tributaries draining the gentle slopes of Harmony Grove and Elfin Forest (Map 4b)—Copper Creek, Eden Creek, Meisha Creek, and Questhaven Creek. Farther downstream Escondido Creek defines the border between the communities of Olivenhain and Rancho Santa Fe before reaching its mouth at San Elijo Lagoon. Only about 1/3 of the creek's journey is bordered by natural habitat; the rest of the journey is bordered by urban and suburban development. Approximately 7 miles of the creek wind through the sage-covered hills of Elfin Forest and Harmony Grove, which buffer the creek from developed land uses and provide a natural filtration system.

The natural flow regime of a river system, such as Escondido Creek, is a product of the characteristics of its entire watershed and thus can be affected by any land use changes that reduce the integrity of the watershed. Natural hydrological cycles are necessary to maintain healthy nutrient levels, create openings in vegetation, recruit new growth in riparian habitats, and deliver clean freshwater to coastal estuaries. With this in mind, the acclaimed graduate landscape program at Cal Poly Pomona has decided to take on planning for the replacement and restoration of the concrete channel of the creek, supported by the Escondido City Council and The Escondido Creek Conservancy.

The Hidden Community—Escondido Creek's Wildlife

If one were to describe the requirements for the native scrub community—its plants and animals—the answers would be very much the same as those in the Town Council's survey of residents. The coastal hills and valleys of San Diego County support a mosaic



of native vegetation communities which comprise our Mediterranean ecosystem (Map 5). The most prevalent communities, at least historically, formed a mosaic of coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and grasslands. Live oak woodlands dot the landscape, providing food, shelter, and nesting areas for many species. The creek and diversity of riparian habitats—including live oak riparian forest, sycamore-alder riparian woodland, and willow scrub—provide more extensive cover, a greater structure and diversity of trees and shrubs, and a source of water, which attracts





Map 4a. Escondido Creek within the Carlsbad Hydrologic Unit.





Map 4b. Focal area within the Escondido Creek watershed.





Map 5. Vegetation communities.



insects, the food base for many birds and other wildlife. Many animals also use riparian habitats for dispersing between patches of scrub habitats. Thus, the web of drainages in the valley enhances the wildlife communities of the surrounding uplands.

Grizzly bears once roamed the Escondido Creek watershed! Now this complex of communities in the watershed supports at least 10 plant and animal species even rarer than grizzly bears, and at least 50 native species considered sensitive to human impacts. Many of these species live at the bottom of the watershed, in and around San Elijo Lagoon, and thus depend on conservation and stewardship of the upper parts of the watershed for their persistence.

The Regional Conservation Network

The green infrastructure of San Diego County—the National Forests, Wilderness Areas, and State Parks in the mountains and desert—was originally established decades ago, through the foresight and values of our founders. But land conservation in western San Diego County has a much more recent origin. California's Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program began in Southern California in 1993 as an innovative planning tool to balance the needs of endangered species and habitats with the needs of land users. Within western San Diego County, there are three NCCP programs—the South County Multiple Species



Conservation Program (MSCP), the North County MSCP in the unincorporated area, and the Multiple Habitats Conservation Program for 7 north-coastal cities (Map 6). Coastal sage scrub is the signature vegetation community for the NCCP program in Southern California because it supports rare and endemic species that occur no where else on earth and because Southern California has experienced a huge loss of this habitat. The tiny California gnatcatcher, a federally threatened bird species that noisily defends its territory against intruders, is the icon of this community.

Core areas of coastal sage scrub and scrub-oak chaparral for which the Elfin Forest is named lie at the crossroads of these three planning efforts, and their conservation in this particular spot of the county is recognized as critical to the success of all three plans. This area represents the *only* biologically viable core area for coastal sage scrub in north San Diego County, outside of Camp Pendleton (Map 7). As such, this area is the essential link between populations of California gnatcatchers at Lake Hodges (and coastal sage scrub habitats to the south) with patches of habitat (*stepping stones*) in Carlsbad and eventually to Oceanside, Camp Pendleton, and Orange County. This core of coastal sage scrub habitat supports *source* populations of many rare and endemic

Source population—a group of plants or animals in a location or habitat where reproductive success exceeds mortality, effectively supplying other, more depleted areas. species, including the California gnatcatcher, as well as many more common species. Source populations are essential to maintain populations in the lower-quality and smaller habitat patches that constitute the majority of the remaining coastal sage scrub habitat in north coastal San Diego County.





Map 6. The Escondido Creek focal area in relation to conserved lands in western San Diego County.





Map 7. Scrub and grassland communities in western San Diego County.



Lifeline for a Lagoon—Connection to the Sea

California's coastal estuaries—linking marine, freshwater, and terrestrial wildlife communities are globally significant for their rich biodiversity, strategic location along the Pacific Flyway for migratory birds, and for serving as nurseries for commercially and recreationally important fish and shellfish. Coastal wetlands provide unique ecosystem services including water quality and flood control protection, and recreational and educational opportunities for all Californians; thus, their protection and restoration is important to keeping our beaches and bays clean and maintaining sustainable communities.

The San Elijo Lagoon—designated as an *Important Bird Area* by Audubon California—is one of a handful of functioning coastal wetlands in central and southern California. Because it is situated along the Pacific Flyway, it provides wintering and migratory *stepping-stone* habitats for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl such as the black-necked stilt, western sandpiper, marbled godwit, gadwall, and redhead. A large part of its viability is due to the condition of Escondido Creek and the watershed that supports it. Thus, continuing to maintain the integrity of its lifeline—Escondido Creek and the lands through which it flows—is critical to conserving the lagoon and its communities, including freshwater marsh and riparian scrub, salt marsh and remnant sand dunes, and coastal sage scrub and chaparral along its shores. And yes, a healthy creek is also important for maintaining clean beaches at Cardiff State Park, contributing to a healthy economy reliant on tourism.

At over 1,000 acres and growing as a result of proactive conservation campaigns by the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy, the San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve is home to more than 400 species of plants, 23 species of fish, 20 reptiles and amphibians, 24 mammals, and 296 species of birds, of which 65 have been documented to nest at the reserve. A few of the endangered species that rely on the lagoon and its freshwater



lifeline for their recovery include the light-footed clapper rail, California least tern, brown pelican, snowy plover, and Belding's Savannah sparrow.

Threats to the Community

The principal causes of species endangerment are the loss and degradation of habitat, fragmentation of remaining habitat areas into smaller, more isolated blocks, and *edge effects* that permeate the remaining habitat. Increased residential densities also put more pressure on native habitat as a recreational resource, often leading to inappropriate uses.

Edge effects—habitat degradation concentrated at the interface between natural and disturbed areas, such as increases in weedy species and pollutants, changes in species composition, interactions and dispersal, soil compaction, and changes in natural runoff patterns.

Southern California vegetation communities have evolved with fire, which typically burned Mediterranean shrub communities at 20-50 year intervals. However, overly frequent fires may *type-convert* shrublands to



annual grasslands. Nonnative annual grasses provide a fuel load that decreases the return interval between fires, creating a positive feedback loop that favors nonnative grasses over native species even more, posing an even greater threat to homes and wildlife, and requiring more intensive management efforts to maintain native species.

Nitrogen deposition from automobile exhaust also favors weedy annual species over native perennials, further accelerating type conversion. Thus, new roads associated with development not only fragment the habitat and contribute to mortality through road kills, but also degrade remaining habitat through air and water quality pollution. Water quality in the Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove area is also at risk of pollution from agricultural use of herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizer, broken septic systems, illegal dumping, and animal husbandry.

By far the biggest threat to this community is the increase in residential densities proposed by the County of San Diego's General Plan Update, which will result in greater pressures on the surrounding open space and contribute to its degradation. Of the two alternatives presented—the Land Use and Referral maps (Maps 8a and 8b, respectively)—only the Land Use map is consistent with the draft Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove Community Plan, which balances

development with conservation of natural landscapes. The biggest difference between the two alternatives is in the Rural and Semi-rural residential categories (box). The community, which is very active in land use planning, overwhelmingly supports the draft Land Use over the Referral map alternative, which would dramatically increase residential densities in the community.

General Plan Update 2020				
ACRES	Referral	Land Use		
Rural 1 du/20	1,750	2,965		
Semi-rural 1 du/2,4,8,16	4,100	3,030		

Coastal wetland systems such as San Elijo Lagoon are extremely sensitive to these types of changes within their watersheds. Changes in land cover, surface and ground water quantity, and water quality associated with development and agriculture can adversely affect coastal wetlands by altering hydrology and estuarine salinity, increasing sediment and pollutant loads, creating passage barriers for fish and other wildlife, and fragmenting connectivity with upstream habitat. In highly urbanized watersheds, nuisance runoff from irrigated landscaping can decrease salinity in downstream estuaries to the detriment of salt marsh species.





Map 8a. General Plan Update 2020–Draft Land Use map.





Map 8b. General Plan Update 2020–Referral map.



The Challenge for Conservation

Existing Investments

Over a dozen conservation stakeholders—representing 3 cities and the County, 5 water districts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game, a variety of private homeowners' associations, and at least 8 nonprofit groups—have invested in approximately 7,300 acres of natural open space in the Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove area (Map 9 and box). This represents decades of hard work and tens of millions of dollars invested in the focal area alone, not counting the conserved lands around Lake Hodges and in the San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve, both of which connect to the focal area. As a result of these conservation investments, the focal area is anchored by large blocks of protected habitat:

- on the southeast—around Lake Hodges and Olivenhain Reservoir—and on the northwest the unincorporated area between Carlsbad, Encinitas, and San Marcos
- on the northeast—Lake Wohlford and Daley Ranch—and the southwest—San Elijo Lagoon

In addition to current land owners and those that own lands connected to the focal area, there are many others in San Diego County that rely on—and benefit from conservation of lands within this unique core. As a result of regional planning efforts (NCCPs), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game, environmental and development groups, the County and all of the cities in San Diego County rely on conservation here for continued economic development elsewhere. Conservation also enhances the value of lands

Stakeholders	Acres
Center for Natural Lands Management	624
Cities	718
County	1,984
Private	2,223
San Diego Conservancy	133
San Elijo Hills	403
The Escondido Creek Conservancy	154
Water Districts	1,091
Total	7,330

Conservation within Focal Area

held sacred by the San Pasqual Band of Kumeyaay Indians. For these reasons, and to abate the aforementioned threats, the Escondido Creek Watershed Alliance—including the cities of Solana Beach, Encinitas, and Escondido, County of San Diego, San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy, and The Escondido Creek Conservancy—signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2007 to enter into watershed-wide conservation efforts.

The Escondido Creek Watershed Restoration Action Plan prepared by the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy in 2005 identifies actions that will *protect, restore and enhance the quality and beneficial uses of water, habitats and other natural resources of the watersheds ... and the adjacent coastal shoreline.* These include protection of habitats within the watershed through fee title acquisition or conservation easements—for example, the Action Plan prioritizes protection of creek-side properties to create a *bluebelt* between the City of Escondido and San Elijo Lagoon. The plan also calls for management and land use regulations that eliminate sediment and pollutant sources and active restoration of wetland and upland habitats.





Map 9. Conservation stakeholders within the Escondido Creek focal area.



Linked Opportunities

The challenge for conservation at this crossroads area is to complete the east-west and north-south conservation connections between the existing conservation anchors by The demonstrated commitment of past and future partners, *supplemented by the financial support of individual human benefactors*, is critical to the first step in conservation—acquisition of additional key parcels to secure our investments.

acquiring and managing land in the center of the focal area and land along the Escondido Creek corridor, respectively (Map 10). Indeed, without this critical open space connection in Elfin Forest and Harmony Grove, the long-term viability of the existing conservation investments would be threatened. Conservation stakeholders in the Elfin Forest/Harmony Grove focal area have the most to gain from additional conservation and the most to lose. An increase in open space will further buffer the existing conservation investments and maintain their conservation values. Management of conserved lands will reduce the risk of fire and incompatible land uses.

Map 10 highlights the areas that have already been conserved in the focal area (about 7,300 acres) as well as those lands targeted for conservation, totaling approximately 3,000 acres. This latter category includes smaller parcels of *bluebelt* lands bordering Escondido Creek, ranging from 3 acres up to 100 acres, as well as several larger ownerships, including 3 ownerships exceeding 500 acres each. So about half of the land targeted for conservation could be protected with only 3 transactions! Imagine Map 10 with the red areas (areas important for conservation) turned to gray (developed), and you can visualize the threat we face. Now, dare to imagine Map 10 with the red areas turned to green (conserved), and you can appreciate the incredible opportunity—the landscape linkage—that lies within our reach. This is our crossroads and the lifeline to the lagoon.







Map 10. Conserved lands within the Escondido Creek focal area..



The Conservation Community—Partnerships

Partnerships are never as important as where land use is at stake. Passions and funding must be mobilized through strategically coordinated initiatives that take advantage of the varied interests of multiple stakeholders. Funders must understand the framework (*big picture*) and common goals within which their contributions will be used and leveraged among other partners and contributors.

Within the last two decades, San Diego County has seen passionate growth of conservationbased communities and volunteers, with over 50 conservancies and land trusts working in part or all of the county, assuming a sense of place, ownership, and stewardship of the natural lands we call home. These nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations understand that a system of natural open space lands enhances our quality of life, and that local, state, and federal government agencies do not have the resources to adequately steward the over 1 million acres of lands they administer in San Diego County. At least 8 of these organizations and their constituents— Friends of Daley Ranch, San Diego Conservancy, Friends of the Creek, Center for Natural Lands Management, Endangered Habitats Conservancy, Conservation Biology Institute, San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy, and The Escondido Creek Conservancy—are working within the Escondido Creek watershed to ensure that we don't lose any more of the conservation values that sustain all of our communities. Table 1 presents an outline of selected partners, past and future, organized according to their potential contributions to acquisition, management, restoration, recreation, and education.

There will always be more work to do, more intricate connections to understand, renewed resources to delight in, and better stories to share, to ensure that this crossroads of communities endures and Escondido Creek continues flowing freely to the sea. But it is clear that the sustainability of the Escondido Creek communities relies on a system of interconnected open space reserves at this crossroads, conserved in perpetuity. The urgency of more conservation cannot be overstated, as the ever-growing human footprint of development is beginning to preclude opportunities for protecting a functional open space system.



Table 1. Potential Conservation Partners and Roles

Acquisition and Conservation Easement Funding						
California Coastal Conservancy	The Nature Conservancy	The Trust for Public Land				
Endangered Habitats Conservancy	The Conservation Fund	Department of Defense				
The Escondido Creek Conservancy	California Wildlife Conservation Board	SANDAG (Transnet mitigation)				
Kumeyaay Indians	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Section 6 funding)	Individual donors				
Management and Land Use Regulations and Funding						
California Coastal Commission	Water Quality Control Board	Calif. Dept. of Fish and Game (NCCP Local Assistance Grants)				
Cities of Escondido, Encinitas, San Marcos, Carlsbad	County of San Diego (DPLU and DPW)	U.S. EPA				
San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy	San Diego Gas & Electric	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers				
The Escondido Creek Conservancy	Center for Natural Lands Management	San Diego Conservancy				
Elfin Forest Volunteer Fire Dept.	Rancho Santa Fe Association (Community Foundation)	Conservation Biology Institute				
SANDAG (Transnet mitigation)	Water Districts—Olivenhain, Vallecitos, Santa Fe, San Dieguito, County Water Authority					
Restoration and Enhancement Funding						
Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project	The San Diego Foundation	Academic community (research grants)				
San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy	Natural Resources Conservation Service					
SANDAG (Transnet mitigation)	Elfin Forest Education and Capital Improvement Fund					
Recreation and Education Funding						
Audubon California chapters	California Native Plant Society	Biking, hiking, equestrian clubs				
Local schools (education grants)	San Diego Conservation Resources Network	County of San Diego Dept. of Parks and Recreation				

