

Opinion

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Restoring coastal canyons, wetlands is crucial

By Tito Marchant,

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The bobcat that frequents the western end of San Diego's Tecolote Canyon Natural Park, a 600-acre coastal watershed haven that is a major tributary of Mission Bay, is enough of a wildlife celebrity that city of San Diego park rangers like to show visitors to their Nature Center a photo of it stealthily crossing Tecolote Creek on a narrow footbridge. Tecolote, like many other other nature reserves in San Diego County, is an example of community-based restoration and rewilding that has helped to bring back many of our region's urban wildlife, wetlands, watersheds and canyons from their degraded and often endangered states decades ago.

The three of us have a combined 100 years protecting and restoring these crown jewels of Southern California that provide havens for native plants and threatened and endangered wildlife, but also help to store carbon, and protect against floods and wildfires when properly managed. The science that guides our ecosystem restoration and rewilding projects in Batiquitos Lagoon, Rose Canyon and Tecolote Canyon helps us create natural pathways for bringing back wildlife as well as keeping our communities safer from the threat of wildfire and flooding. Batiquitos Lagoon is in Carlsbad and is a state reserve. Up until the mid-1990s, it was almost obliterated by development and construction of public transportation corridors that closed off its mouth. That program including opening the mouth to the ocean, restoring tidal wetlands, creating new endangered bird breeding habitat and preserving the surrounding coastal sage scrub habitat vital for endangered songbirds, such as the Belding's savannah sparrow.

Currently, the Batiquitos Lagoon Foundation and WILD-COAST are removing invasive

species such as eucalyptus and Canary Island date palms and replacing them with wildlife and insect-friendly plants that thrive in and out of the salt marsh. Restoration of native plants in the lagoon helps to promote more biodiversity, store more carbon, and significantly reduce wildfire risk. This is part of a larger effort to revitalize the lagoon to buffer against sea level rise and increase habitat for endangered wildlife such as California least terns and a more recent visitor, Eastern Pacific green sea turtles that feed on the lagoon's eelgrass.

Friends of Rose Canyon is a grassroots organization that has worked successfully for 20 years to protect San Diego's Rose

Canyon and to restore the plants that native birds, butterflies, bees and other wildlife evolved with and are adapted to. In the 1990s, the city of San Diego committed to protect Rose Canyon, Marian Bear Park and Tecolote Canyon as habitat preserves under an agreement with state and federal wildlife agencies called the Multiple Species Conservation Program or MSCP.

Since then, Friends of Rose Canyon have restored coast live oak trees since many had been lost due to decades of ranching. Each winter, enthusiastic volunteers from age three to 83 collect and plant Coast live oak acorns. Friends of Rose Canyon also offers free guided nature walks for local

schoolchildren to provide them with an early bond with nature.

Restoration efforts in Tecolote have taken a lot of work by local volunteers and park rangers who have spent countless hours pulling invasive plants and planting native species. These native plants attract insects, provide safe haven for birds during periods of drought, and help make the canyon more resilient to wildfire and flooding, both of which are a threat to canyon adjacent communities.

In our efforts to conserve and restore our backyard and beloved habitats in San Diego County, we have learned that rewilding these intricate and diverse ecosystems is more than worth the effort.

The return on our investment in time, effort and funds is invaluable as we've seen these canyons, watersheds and wetlands become havens for wildlife and people who understand that our exposure to these blue and green spaces benefits us and much it does the birds, bobcats, coyotes and sea turtles that call them home.

Marchant is the senior director of conservation and rewilding for WILD-COAST and lives in Encinitas. Knight is the executive director of Friends of Rose Canyon and lives in San Diego. Regan is a board member of the Batiquitos Lagoon Foundation and lives in Carlsbad.



This August 2024 photo shows the Batiquitos Lagoon in Carlsbad, where efforts to restore native plants are underway. NELVIN C. CEPEDA / U-T