

HISTORY OF SAN ELIJO LAGOON ECOLOGICAL RESERVE



1957 Aerial View of Lagoon (Photo: Ticor Collection, SD Historical Society)

BACKGROUND

San Elijo Lagoon, a primarily shallow-water estuary, is one of a few San Diego County coastal wetlands. It lies along the coast between the cities of Solana Beach and Encinitas, extending inland to the community of Rancho Santa Fe. The reserve covers nearly 1,000 acres of diverse habitat composed of six distinct plant communities, including coastal strand, salt + fresh water marsh, riparian + coastal sage scrub and chaparral.

EARLY HISTORY

Native American tribes hunted and gathered along the shores of the estuary at least 8,500 years before European settlers arrived. **Shell middens**, the refuse of hunting-gathering societies, show the earliest inhabitants relied heavily on coastal resources, including foods such as scallops, clams, shark, barracuda, bonito, and abalone. The ocean provided such a rich and constant source of food. These early people stayed at the coast for long periods. More recently, the Kumeyaay occupied the area. They traveled seasonally to take advantage of resources both along the coast and inland.

In 1769, the Portola Expedition named the area San Alejo in honor of Saint Alexius. In the early 1800s Spaniards and other Europeans settled the region and established cattle ranches. The California Gold Rush brought an ever-increasing influx of people. Settlers established the community of Olivenhain, along Escondido Creek, as an experimental farming community. Farmers plowed and planted the riparian corridors upstream of the estuary. It was the first time habitation had radically changed the vegetation and terrain

surrounding the lagoon. Non-native plants were introduced that later proved highly invasive.

Between 1880 and 1940 dikes and levees were built that allowed duck hunting, salt harvesting, and sewage settling ponds. The most permanent changes were the construction of the railroad, Pacific Coast Highway, and Interstate 5. Each required supporting berms that restricted water circulation and the natural influx of ocean water.



Image: In 2003, Nature Collective (formally known as San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy) removed billboards, which had shadowed pristine estuarine views for decades. (Photo: Nature Collective archives)

Other problems associated with construction include increases in sediment from surface erosion and road fill failures. Fine sediment can negatively affect reproductive and rearing success of aquatic populations.

In the 1960s various developments were proposed to transform the lagoon: condominiums, a golf course, a marina, a closed saltwater lake, and even a theme park with water rides. But the community ultimately said no. Citizens, scientists, lawyers, and neighbors who loved the lagoon and its wildlife formed San Elijo Alliance which successfully fought for its preservation.

In 2007, County of San Diego, State of California Fish & Wildlife, and Nature Collection (formally known as San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy) signed a 25-year cooperative agreement for the operation and maintenance of San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve. It supersedes the original agreement of May 1981 between the State of California Department of Fish and Game and the County of San Diego, which had expired.

TIMELINE

1769

Spanish Portola Expedition names the area San Elijo (in honor of Saint Alexius).

1848

California Gold Rush brings settlers west. Cultivation upstream causes changes to the watershed.



1881

A standard-gauge railroad is built across the lagoon, constricting the inlet.



1895

Lake Wohlford Dam is built and reduces waterflow through Escondido Creek.



1912

Pacific Coast Highway is constructed across sand dunes.



1937

Berms and shallow ponds for duck hunting are constructed.

1940

The cities of Encinitas, Escondido, and Solana Beach discharge treated sewage into the lagoon, a practice that continues until 1973.

1965

Interstate 5 is built across the midsection of the lagoon.



1969

Private developers begin housing construction around the lagoon.

1971

Lake Dixon Dam is built, further reducing water flow into Escondido Creek.

1973

Endangered Species Act sets the stage for the designation of sensitive habitat lands in and adjacent to the lagoon.

1976

Coastal Act of California provides protection of coastline.

1977

Management agreement for the reserve is reached between County of San Diego and State of California.

1983

San Elijo Lagoon Ecological Reserve is formally dedicated

1987

501 (C)(3) nonprofit San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy is established.

1988

San Diego County builds the first Nature Center

1993

San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy begins periodic dredging of the lagoon inlet

2007

County of San Diego Parks, California Fish & Wildlife and Nature Collective (formally known as San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy) sign a 25-year cooperative agreement for the operation and maintenance of the reserve.

2009

LEED-Certified San Elijo Lagoon Nature Center, owned and operated by County of San Diego Parks & Recreation opens.