

JMS Reports

PRODUCED BY STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM & MEDIA STUDIES AT SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

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San Diego River: Local governments and environmentalist groups share a vision of unifying parks and open spaces

POSTED BY LEONARDO CASTANEDA · MAY 23, 2014

Click on the image above for an interactive look at the San Diego River, with videos and recordings about the history, current state and future of the river.

San Diego is a city known for its iconic landmarks, such as the Hotel Del Coronado, the skyline seen across the San Diego Bay and the entrance to the Gaslamp Quarter across from the Convention Center. However, one of the city's most important distinguishing features—the San Diego River—is rarely discussed or featured in promotional materials to attract tourists.

Today, the river is drier, less hospitable and more neglected than when it was the heart of the region. Efforts to create a series of interconnected parks, with biking and walking trails and protection of the natural habitat are underway. However, the river cuts through the jurisdiction of various local government agencies, private owners and nonprofit foundations, which has posed a challenge.

A geographic cornerstone

The San Diego River empties out into the Pacific Ocean along the Ocean Beach Dog Beach.

The San Diego River begins near Julian, and is surrounded by state and county parks. From there, it snakes its way southwest through Santee and across the Mission Trails Regional Park, turning west at the junction between interstates 8 and 15 near Qualcomm Stadium. The body of water then travels parallel to the I-8, cutting across Mission Valley and eventually emptying into San Diego Bay, between Mission Beach and Ocean Beach.

For the majority of the region's history, the river was central to the local population, earning it the nickname the "Birthplace of California" because Father Junipero Serra's missionary expedition first established what became Old Town San Diego along the banks of the river.

"The San Diego River was invaluable to the early settlers of San Diego," said Matthew Schiss, marketing director for the San Diego History Center. "It dictated where they lived, it dictated the early paradigms the Kumeyaay, the Spanish and the Mexican periods existed within."

When the San Diego region became part of the United States, the residents decided that instead of going to the river, they would bring the river to them. According to Schiss, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers moved the mouth of the river from the San Diego Bay to where it empties now, into the Pacific Ocean in Mission Bay.

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As San Diego grows, the river shrinks

The San Diego River is filled with trash, debris and sediment from the surrounding urban development

Since then, San Diego's development has taken its toll on the river. According to the [San Diego River Park Master Plan](#)—a planning document adopted by the City of San Diego to guide development along the river—mining has stripped the river of sand and gravel, and encroaching development threatens its natural habitat.

The river has also been dammed extensively, creating reservoirs key to San Diego's water supply.

"What pretty much flows through the San Diego River is largely runoff and small trickles from what isn't being diverted for human use," Schiss said.

The City of San Diego isn't the only agency drafting a master plan to create a clear guide for the future of the river. According to Robin Shifflet, development project manager at the San Diego City Planning Commission, each jurisdiction the river crosses on its way from Santa Ysabel to the Pacific Ocean makes its own master plan.

Even within their jurisdiction, local governments are limited with what they can accomplish. According to Shifflet, of the 17 miles of river in San Diego City, two thirds of the area is privately owned. The city itself only owns Mission Bay from the ocean to Interstate 5, the area around Qualcomm Stadium, and Mission Trails in the east.

That means that a comprehensive plan for the river's 52 total miles must reconcile the needs of private owners and several agencies and organizations, including:

Santee has begun the process of creating parks and open space along the San Diego River. Volunteers planted 2,000 trees earlier this year. Photo by Leonardo Castaneda.

- Fifteen different community planning groups.
- The City of Santee: On Jan. 20 it planted 2,000 trees along the river as part of an effort to develop parks and open space alongside it.
- San Diego County: It has plans for a series of trails in the Lakeside part of the river.
- San Diego River Park Foundation: Its Conceptual Plan is a detailed blueprint for the future of the river commission from California State Polytechnic University Pomona's Department of Landscape Architecture 606 Studio.
- San Diego Coastkeeper: The organization monitors the quality of water in the region and recently awarded San Diego's watershed a rating of "good."
- San Diego River Conservancy: This independent government agency seeks to accomplish many of the same goals as San Diego City and the San Diego River Park Foundation, and it's mission including acquiring land to do so.

Working together

Despite the potential for overlap and conflict, the agencies tend to agree on the overall vision for the river, emphasizing open spaces, parks, and walking and biking trails.

The City of San Diego Master Plan crosses several existing community planning groups and parks, making cooperation across organizations key to successful development. From the San Diego River Master Plan.

“In the City of San Diego we see an open space along the river where you can walk from Ocean Beach all the way to Mission Trails Park and along this pathway, the San Diego River Pathway, would be a series of parks,” Shifflet said. “As you travel along you could pull off and go into a park and recreate, or meet up with friends. We see it as a beautiful regional park going through the center of the city

That vision is nearly identical to what Santee plans for its part of the river, which matches the San Diego River Park Foundation’s overall countywide vision. Those agencies, plus the San Diego River Conservancy, also emphasize the protection of natural watersheds. This would help protect the river’s natural habitat, which in turn protects the areas alongside the river from floods such as the one in 2010 that closed down Fashion Valley’s parking and stranded tourists staying in Mission Valley.

The only local government agency without an in-depth plan to build riverside parks and recreational areas is San Diego County. However, most of the section of the river it oversees is already in rural areas and in existing parks.

Private doesn’t mean anti-improvement

In the City of San Diego, unlike the county, most of the river is developed and privately owned. However, according to Schifflet, community workshops held during the course of five to six years—plus an economic impact study showing a positive impact on home prices if the river park system was established—have led to community support for river development in the City of San Diego.

Precedent does exist in the city for that kind of public-private partnership. In the 1990s, landowners and public agencies of the City of San Diego collaborated in creating a plan to revitalize the San Diego River in Mission Valley. Concentrated in the area between State Route 163 and Interstate 805, the plan was to restore the natural wetland of the river, with flood-control segments and recreational areas such as bike trails and fishing areas.

Known as the “First San Diego River Improvement Project,” the lead designers were Wimmer Yamada and Caughey, with San Diego State hydraulic engineering professor Howard Chang as a special consultant. Improvements to the Mission Valley part of the San Diego River were first envisioned in the 1980s. However, the project didn’t actually come about until, after years of waiting, a public-private partnership was created. In 2011, the project was awarded a Landmark Award of Excellence by the American Society of Landscape Architects. It stands as an example of how successfully the river can be revitalized when stakeholders work together.