



Healing the Body of the Bay Takes Patience

By Naomi Lubick, Science Interchange Reporter

(This article was published in the Marin Scope Community Newspaper of Feb. 19-26, 2002)

If you've driven across the northern rim of the San Francisco Bay, along Highway 37, you've seen the grassy marshes and possibly stopped to watch a shorebird hunting. Over 150 years ago, those marshes, which were once tidal wetlands, were blocked off from communicating with the bay itself--"diked" by miners and farmers who wanted arable land.

"All of that land used to be tidally influenced, part of the ebb and flow of the bay," says Marc Holmes, the baylands acquisition specialist for the San Francisco Bay Institute. "When the marshes were filled, they were shallow and easy to fill, essentially creating real estate."

Wetlands are so important to the ecology of the bay that, Holmes said, "it's like going into a human body and saying I'm going to remove the liver and the kidneys." Fisheries started to collapse, bird populations plummeted, and now, some of the most endangered species are those that depend on marshes and wetlands.

The bay holds approximately 50,000 acres of diked wetlands, of which about 10,000 are in the north bay. Some of that land may not be retrievable, but local, state, and federal government, environmentalists, and citizens are working together to restore these lands. "California has lost 80% of its wetlands," says Sonoma County Supervisor Tim Smith. "It can never go fast enough."

Sonoma contains marshes that served Cargill as salt ponds for decades, and which are now owned by the state government. Immediately adjacent to Sonoma Creek lies Skaggs Island, an old Navy site that is part of the approved boundary of the San Pablo Bay Wildlife Refuge. The 3,300 acres of Skaggs Island, says refuge manager Bryan Winton, are "a lynchpin site in the north bay if we are going to do restoration. ...It's the final frontier in the Bay Area." Because of its location next to the creek, Winton says, work on those wetlands would have a significant impact on tidal restoration.

Sup. Smith says it takes all levels of government to work on acquiring and restoring the baylands. The players involved at the moment range from county government to the Army Corps of Engineers, the State Department of Fish and Game, and the National Fish and Wildlife Service.

"Obviously there are areas that are easier to deal with than others," Smith says, "and lands in the public domain are the best places to start" for restoration. The Sonoma county plan maintains zones for agriculture and private ownership in these lands, and, he says, "our position has been to procure lands where appropriate. So much is already in public management. It's enough to handle."

But there's always room for more, says Holmes of the Bay Institute. "This is not just the Bel Marin keys and Hamilton Field and salt ponds," Holmes says. Discussion about creating a Marin

Baylands National Wildlife refuge has been controversial, but Holmes considers it part of the bigger picture, he says. "All those taken together is the goal."

It takes patience and careful planning to get to where you want to be, says Winton. "Restoration for formerly diked and drained lands, which are now 5 to 6 feet below sea level because the land subsided—it's going to take 10 to 15 years to develop the kind of sediment you need for a marsh," he said.

Holmes says that some of the diked marshes have also become habitat to migrating birds that would have never touched down in the original tidal wetlands. In order to keep those birds coming back, restoration of the tidal regimes will occur in some of the baylands, and some will remain ponds and marshes.

"The purpose of the restoration is to put the liver and the kidneys back in the San Francisco Bay," Holmes says, "and return their function and restore the populations of the bay." Nonprofit organizations, federal and local governments, and interested citizens have their work cut out for them to heal the body of the bay.

RESOURCES

Ecosystem Goals Project at the San Francisco Estuary Institute:
www.sfei.org/wetlands/wetlandsindex.html

Call 415-792-0222 for information about the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge's schedules for interpretive tours, and access.