

2013 Annual Report, Newport Bay Conservancy

Overview

2013 has been a year of stabilizing our finances, establishing a viable staffing structure, and ensuring our programs and activities are maintained at a high level. These key objectives have been achieved and we end the year with high hopes for 2014.

Educational Programs

A total of 15 high school environmental studies programs (560 students) were conducted in during the past 12 months. In addition, Santa Ana and Century high schools participated in the Year-Round Program, with a total of 72 students participating. Both these programs continue to attract a high degree of enthusiastic support from participating schools. We will be exploring ways to facilitate the involvement of local colleges in the running of these programs.

The ever-popular weekend docent-led kayak tours enabled us to give around 700 members of the public an up-close-and-personal experience of the bay and the surrounding marshes. We also continue to assist in the Marine Life Inventory programs at the Back Bay Science Center, and with the elementary school programs at the Muth Interpretive Center.

Habitat Restoration

The Newport Valley restoration work continued through the year in collaboration with the Coastal Commission's community-based restoration program. This is a multi-year project which will eventually establish coastal sagebrush and riparian habitats throughout this valley which runs between Jamboree and the Bay. Thousands of volunteer hours have gone into this project, with NBC volunteers contributing a significant proportion. Endangered California Gnatcatchers are regularly seen in the valley and are being closely monitored for nesting activity.

NBC has also played a lead role on upgrading and extending the native plant nursery at the Back Bay Science Center. Lane Koluvek has fitted-out the greenhouse and constructed composting bins, and Dean Lambert has taken the lead in supervising the production side of the operation. All of this has led to a significant increase in the output from the nursery, to the extent that we are now able to offer native plants to OC Parks to assist in their planting programs.

Finally, we are waiting for a Coastal Commission permit to enable us to start the Bayview restoration project. We had hoped to get this underway during the last planting season, but gaining agreement from all the agencies involved to the plant palette took a little longer than expected.

Research

A very successful symposium was held in the spring, on the theme of Pollinators. Over 100 attended for the day. The range and quality of speakers was exceptional, and feedback from those attending was uniformly positive. Thanks to Peter Bryant for pulling this together.

We also hosted a water quality seminar at the Back Bay Science Center organized by Peter Fuhrer which was extremely well-attended.

Peter Bryant led a study of bivalve populations in the Bay during the year. The findings will provide a valuable baseline for future monitoring, in particular whether the evident increase in populations of exotic and invasive species such as the Japanese Littleneck clam continue, and their effect on the native ecology.

Special Events

Earth Day was another resounding success, with between 1500 and 2000 people visiting the Interpretive Center. As always, the childrens entertainments, live music and the foodtrucks proved extremely popular.

The 9th annual Plein Air art exhibition was judged by SocialPapa to be the best yet. Although numbers of visitors seemed lower than last year, the artists reported a higher level of people who seemed intent on purchasing. Thanks in particular to Rita McCoy, Donna Flower and Lucinda Wright for all the behind-the-scenes work in planning and organizing the event.

Estuary Day saw better attendance than last year, and Coastal Clean-Up Day went off smoothly. Both OC Parks and the Department of Fish and Wildlife decided to invite fewer groups this year, partly to avoid having more participants than trash for them to collect. Nonetheless, I understand over 8000lbs of trash was removed from the Bay.

A highlight for many volunteers was the joint volunteer appreciation event, hosted by Matt Yurko and CDFW at the Back Bay Science Center in September. After a reception followed by a buffet at tables set-up on the Bay side of the Center, we adjourned as the sun set to the outdoor amphitheater for awards and appreciations. The BBSC staff had rigged lighting around Shellmaker which gave the whole place quite a tropical feel. Over 90 NBC volunteers attended, plus other volunteers who support CDFW, Matt's restoration program, the City and OC Parks. We provided a small gift for all present.

Muth Interpretive Center Support

Despite the occasional blank space on the front desk roster, our volunteers have once again done an excellent job in providing concierge services to visitors to the Interpretive Center. We have expanded the range of merchandise on sale. This service makes an enormous contribution to the many visitors to the Center. We provided funding to upgrade the audio-visual equipment in the Watson Theater, which has made the running of the 2 interpretive videos more reliable!

The design for the new Tidelands to Uplands exhibit has been completed and we are waiting for approval of the contribution coming from OC Parks to begin installation.

Newport Bay Watershed

At the beginning of 2013 we appointed Krista Sloniowski as Watershed Coordinator, funded by a grant from the California Department of Conservation. The goal is to help design projects across the watershed which will contribute to improved water quality and reduced erosion/sedimentation/water loss within the system. Ultimately, the Bay will be a major beneficiary.

This is a complex project involving as it does a long list of independent bodies with differing agendas. The good news is that Krista is getting a lot of positive support and is currently finalizing a first-cut definition of the key biological indicators of the health of the Bay ecosystem, the chemistry needed to support this, and the hydrology required to maintain water quality and clarity.

Working With Our Partners

Developments have taken place with all of our partners during the year. In June, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife announced their intent to begin charging entry fees for the Ecological Reserve. It transpired that State regulations set back in the late '80's laid-down such a fee for several of CDFW's reserves, including Upper Newport Bay, but these have never been implemented at UNB.

The Conservancy, together with Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, sent a detailed letter to the Director of CDFW protesting this decision, as did the City of Newport Beach. This led to a very constructive meeting of the main parties involved in the Bay (CDFW, OC Parks, City of Newport Beach, the Newport Aquatic Center and NBC), which in turn led to the creation of a joint working party to examine the issue and seek to identify alternative ways funding could be raised for the benefit of the Upper Bay. In the meantime, CDFW are looking into the legislative issues involved. We are actively involved in this work and expect to have something to report before the end of the year.

More recently, we learnt that OC Parks had reached an agreement with the Irvine Ranch Conservancy to outsource management and administration of their Adopt-A-Park volunteer program. During the past couple of weeks since this news broke, I have been involved in a series of discussions with OC Parks senior management, IRC and the Laguna Canyon Foundation who are also seeking clarification of how this agreement will be implemented. It is clear there are many details to be worked out, and OC Parks have stressed their intent is NOT to affect the relationship they have with organizations such as our own, but is primarily directed at improving the training and management of volunteers involved in many of their parks who may not be part of an established nonprofit with good-quality training and oversight arrangements.

There will be further joint discussions with OC Parks and IRC to work through how best to collaborate in the interests of all parties.

Finally, the City of Newport Beach has awarded a contract to IRC to undertake some limited trail improvement and invasives removal/replanting in the City portion of Big Canyon. A meeting between ourselves, Matt Yurko, IRC's project team and the City took place some weeks ago, and we have offered to help with the raising of volunteer support for this project. It is good that some work is being started to improve Big Canyon, which is obviously in need of a lot of remedial work.

Tributes

During this past year the Bay has lost two of its strongest supporters in Jay Robinson and Ray Williams. Both were actively involved in the Upper Bay's affairs over many years, and Ray Williams also played an active role in the Conservancy over the past 40 years. They will be missed.

I also want to pay tribute to the many volunteers who have stepped-up over the past 12 months when we have been short staffed. Far from having to cut-back on our programs we have actually been able to run more associate training classes (3) than for the past couple of years, maintain all our ongoing programs, restart the 1st Thursday naturalist nights, run a full 10 week Naturalist training program, and restart the Tracks newsletter (due out this month!). We have only been able to do this with an enormous amount of effort on the part of many of our regular volunteers. On behalf of the Board I want to thank all those who have helped us through a particularly challenging time. I also want to recognize the contribution made by Patrick McCaffrey who left last month and I know we all wish him well for the future.

In this context, I am delighted to welcome Heather Cieslak and Jeanne Stein to NBC as our new Operations Director and Volunteer Coordinator respectively. I am confident that their experience and energy will enable us to hit the road running for 2014.

Howard Cork
President of the Board, Newport Bay Conservancy
November 4 2013