

NEWPORT BAY CONSERVANCY 2014 ANNUAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

2014 has been a year of progress and consolidation with two new staff and a strengthened Board in place. Much of our focus has been on bringing the new staff up-to-speed with our programs and activities and beginning to build clear strategic objectives. It has been particularly rewarding to see the energy and commitment of Heather Cieslak and Jeanne Stein in the way they have established their presence inside the Conservancy and with our partners.



Over 100 volunteers reported hours in the past 12 months. It is the dedication of this community of volunteers, many of whom have been with us for more than 10 years, that is the bedrock of the Conservancy. During 2014, 43 people completed our volunteer orientation program. The majority of these new volunteers are now logging hours as they engage in activities around the Bay. We also have 18 energetic volunteers participating in this year's full 10-week/20 session Naturalist Training Program and we look forward to seeing them take lead roles in our programs.

NBC is also fortunate in having over 200 Friends Members whose annual membership donations make a substantial contribution towards our ability to deliver our programs.

This report summarizes the accomplishments of the past year and highlights key challenges in the year ahead.

1. Strategy Development

Two major conclusions reached at our Board retreat in February were:

- 1.1 The need to build a broad consensus/vision of "The Healthy Bay". This will require sustained facilitation with the many agencies and nonprofits who have a role to play in ensuring the wellbeing of the Bay. Our highly successful June Monitoring Symposium (attended by approximately 65 people) represented the formal launch of this initiative, and we used this to build connections between representatives of several organizations who are willing to commit energy to building a consensus view of what a healthy, sustainable Bay would look like. As part of this initiative we will be partnering with the City of Newport Beach, whose Natural Resources team under Board Member Michelle Clemente will be completing the Data Catalog started several years ago by Roger Mallet, and taking the lead in creating a citizen science program to engage the local community and schools in support of the Bay.
- 1.2 The need for an overall restoration plan for the open space around the Bay. The Conservancy has been active in numerous restoration projects around the Bay for many years, in partnership with the Coastal Commission's Community-Based Restoration Program, OC Parks, CDFW and the City. This work has continued through 2014.

Given the scale of the overall task, and the multiple landowning agencies in the Bay, we believe that NBC is in a unique position to bring these bodies together to create an overall

multi-year restoration plan for the entire UNB open space. Under the leadership of Board member Sarah Kimball, we have begun this task by conducting walk-throughs on both sides of the Bay to evaluate past restoration projects, identify additional areas needing action, and develop priorities for action. OC Parks, The City, CDFW, the Coastal Commission and IRC have been heavily involved in this process, together with a significant Conservancy presence.

2. Programs and Activities

2.1 School Programs



We continue to offer a variety of school programs for students of all ages. Nine high schools and two colleges brought their students to the Bay in 2014 to participate in our Environmental Studies Program. A total of 641 students learned about the ecosystems, history, geology and native species in and around the Bay. This a significant increase over the 513 students served in 2013. Students from schools that participated in the full 4-day program presented their chosen environmental project proposals to teams of judges, mainly drawn from amongst our Naturalists, at environmental fairs hosted at the Interpretive

Center by OC Parks and NBC. Several additional Title 1 schools are eager to take part in the full 4-day program, and we are applying for grant support to enable them to do so in 2014/15. We are also involved in the Explorer program for high school students wishing to train for leadership roles.

In addition, over 1,000 elementary school children participated in interpretive tours at the Muth Center led by NBC volunteers.

2.2 Public Programs/Tours

Our water-based tours continue to grow in popularity. To date in 2014 we have hosted over 1,000 people on our docent-led weekend kayak tours staffed by a core group of around 20 of our NBC volunteers. We have also run outrigger tours for another 300 people, hosting corporate groups including Google, the American Planning Association and Marriott Hotels together with groups from The Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and Boy and Girl Scout Troops. Our monthly interpretive walking tours in Big Canyon, on Back Bay Drive and Shellmaker Island have had anywhere between



4-30 participants on each walk. Our Friends Tours, heading rapidly towards their 50th year of operation, were run during the first 3 months of the year, attracting 164 people, mainly local community college students.

2.3 **Peter and Mary Muth Interpretive Center**

The Center continues to see upwards of 40,000 visitors a year. Our 20+ Front Desk volunteers provide an invaluable service to these visitors, providing information about the facilities and resources in the Center, the surrounding County Nature Preserve and State Ecological Reserve, in addition to staffing the gift shop and Plein Air art gallery.

2.4 **Habitat Restoration**



We continue to be heavily involved in the restoration of Newport Valley via the weekly Stewards Day activities and the monthly ROOTS events. Our Naturalists also continue to play a significant role in the management and development of the native plant nursery at the Back Bay Science Center.

The Conservancy also continues to support the monthly 2nd Sunday restoration programs run by OC Parks, and has been active throughout the Bay in removing invasive plants and planting native plants. The long-anticipated Bayview restoration project has now been granted the necessary Coastal Commission clearance, and will begin this month.

2.5 **Research**

Our research committee has continued to sponsor and lead various marine species monitoring projects in the Bay, and is currently looking at ways of extending these activities to create more opportunities for our naturalists to experience structured scientific research methodology, and add value to our understanding of the Bay's ecology in doing so.

2.6 **Special Events**

Earth Day (our 24th at the Bay) in April saw upwards of 1,300 visitors to the Muth Center for the regular family-oriented and educational program of activities. Twenty other environmental organizations including Inside the Outdoors, Environmental Nature Center, California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the City of Newport Beach Natural Resources team hosted booths and celebrated the Day with us. We enlisted the help of over 30 NBC volunteers that day to welcome guests, paint children's faces, staff microscopes and craft stations, run a scavenger hunt and an opportunity drawing and much more.



Estuary Awareness Day (June) at the Back Bay Science Center was held in partnership with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and drew over 500 people this year, a big increase over recent years. Fifteen NBC volunteers helped with welcoming guests, leading pontoon boat trips, craft stations, informational booths and selling snacks.

Coastal Cleanup Day (also our 24th at the Bay) held in September was particularly successful this year and showcased what can be achieved by active collaboration between NBC and our agency partners. We saw close to 750 members of the public from over 30 different corporate, school, family and scout groups deployed over a dozen targeted cleanup locations both in the water and on land. This year was the first time for several years that we were able to clear trash from the saltmarsh along Back Bay Drive, thanks to the City closing Back Bay Drive to motor traffic during the event. Close to 50 NBC Volunteers welcomed each group, supervised all the cleanup locations, handed out commemorative t-shirts and tallied cleanup day results. An estimated 22,000lbs of trash was removed from the Bay during the 3-hour event.



Plein Air Exhibition and Display Sale (9th time) was held in July. This year's event was judged by our partners in SOCALPAPA as the best-run so far. The new format for the Friday reception was a great success. Over 40 children participated in the free painting class. Although over 1500 people attended the 2-day show, sales were down on the previous year. We think the main cause was the absence of several popular exhibitors this year.

3. Partnership Development

3.1 California Department of Fish and Wildlife, OC Parks, and the City of Newport Beach

We have actively worked on strengthening our relations with the State Department of Fish and Wildlife, Orange County Parks, and the City of Newport Beach throughout the year. At the start of 2014 we proposed the re-establishment of a UNB collaboration committee, comprising the local management from each of these 3 landowners around the Bay. Meetings have taken place bi-monthly and have identified a number of projects which would enhance the community's ability to enjoy the Bay whilst maintaining the protection of key habitats. These include a comprehensive plan to upgrade interpretive signage around the Bay, based on a proposal developed by NBC Naturalist Jim Cokas; a proposal to install a 2nd Osprey Nesting platform; an investigation of the potential to upgrade the unofficial trail below the Salt Dyke overlook; and the benefits of creating an overall trail/public access plan for the entire UNB open space.

There has recently been a complete change of personnel at OC Parks. We will miss Sue, Candice and Portia who have been great colleagues over the years, but welcome Scott Fegley and his new team to the Bay. We look forward to working with them as we help them review and refresh aspects of the Muth Center. Change always creates new challenges, but the strength of our relationship with the County at the Bay is an enormous asset to both parties. We have also been working with OC Parks



management to work through the implementation of their new volunteer management program that has been outsourced to the Irvine Ranch Conservancy. Because we work with several partners, not just the County, this has been challenging and has demanded flexibility on both sides.

As part of our advocacy role we decided to raise formally with the City our concern about safety issues on Back Bay Drive. Our suggestion that part of a solution could be to make the road one-way for both cars and cyclists caused no little controversy with the cycling community, although our principal stated concern was with the need to enforce the speed limit for all road users. Our representations led to a special committee being set up to make recommendations on reducing safety risks under the aegis of the Bike Master Plan committee, but when this failed to produce a workable proposal, the City decided to take the matter back into their own hands. Their declared intent is to maintain Back Bay Drive for all existing users. There is now a proposal to set aside funds to improve the road. We will keep close to this as the plans are developed.



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The City are also preparing plans for a major restoration of Big Canyon, and have sought our help in this, together with IRC to whom they have already awarded a contract to do some trail improvement and restoration in the Canyon. Linked to this we also facilitated a meeting between the City and CDFW to try to reach agreement on an overall plan for Big Canyon, including action to deal with the cattail-choked ponds. As always, funding is a key issue here.

3.2 Other Environmental Nonprofits

We have actively reached out to organizations such as Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, OC Coastkeeper, SPON and Laguna Canyon Foundation to form joint approaches on strategic topics such as our “Healthy Bay” initiative and on specific issues such as the plans for the Lower Castaways site and the implementation of the OC Parks volunteer management contract. The Board believes such relationships are key to us being able to influence major issues affecting the Bay and the Conservancy.

3.3 Corporations and Grant-making Foundations



During 2014 we hosted a number of major corporations on interpretive tours and restoration projects in the Bay. These included Marriott, Google, REI, Volcom, DeutscheBank, Schneider Electric, St Gobain Corporation, and PIMCO. In every case these have led directly to donations and/or invitations to apply for grants from their charitable foundations. The amounts involved vary in size, but the relationships we are building with locally-based corporations are of great mutual benefit and we will invest effort in developing them.

4. Major Projects

4.1 Watershed Coordination

Our 3-year grant from the State Department of Conservation (DoC) ended on June 30. Due mainly to time lost in 2011 and 2012 through personnel changes, most of our efforts were concentrated in 2013 and the first half of this year. NBC was awarded the grant because of the DoC's interest in our proposal to pilot a system-level approach to watershed management. This was an attempt to overcome the current rather fragmented approach by the different regulatory and water management agencies. The learning from the project was that it will take longer than the period provided for in the grant to achieve alignment among the multiple organizations involved, given the sheer number of agencies involved and their particular legislative focus. We also realized the need to build a stronger consensus for what a healthy Upper Newport Bay looks like in order to effectively advocate for changing practices in the wider watershed. Useful relationships were also created with several of the key agencies in the Newport Bay watershed, which can be built upon over the coming years.



In June 2014, the Department of Conservation awarded us an extension grant to identify practical projects that could improve water capture and retention in the watershed. This project completes at the end of 2014.

4.2 Bayview Restoration



After several delays in the permitting process, we will be carrying out this restoration over the next couple of months. Covering 2 adjacent sites below the Mesa pocket park, the project has required close planning with the County and CDFW, as well as clearance with US Fish and Wildlife and the Coastal Commission. Some of the site has been subject to prior restorations that have not been successful in the long run. Our contractor, Endemic Environmental Services, has recently completed a

very successful project in Fairview Park, and we will be looking for volunteer support to sustain the native plantings through the dry season next year (do we **have** “wet” seasons anymore?).

4.3 **Tidelands to Uplands Exhibit, Peter and Mary Muth Interpretive Center**

Another project long in the making, installation of this significant new exhibit is now underway. The objective of the exhibit is to showcase the different habitats represented in the Bay and surrounding bluffs. We are working with Amy Erickson from OC Parks to create the interpretive materials for the installation. We are also discussing a comprehensive review of the educational resources in the Center with OC Parks, which will lead to decisions on the most appropriate use of the funds remaining in the IC Capital Campaign Fund.

4.4 **ISOPod**



Formerly known as the Sharkmobile, this mobile marine lab, partly funded by a generous grant from SC Edison, offers a unique experience bringing tidepools and sea life directly to children. The traveling exhibit is nearly complete and will be hitting the road by the end of the year to teach about our oceans and

promote stewardship of our environment. The City of Newport Beach will offer a variety of fee-based educational program options, ideal for grades 1-5, while the California Department of Fish & Wildlife will provide a limited number of free programs for Title I schools. NBC Volunteers are encouraged to complete the Tidepool Interpretive Program (TIP) Training to help City staff run the program.

5. **Priorities for 2015**

Carrying forward the strategic priorities at the start of this report is very important to us. We need to continue to build links between the many agencies and nonprofits who can help develop a vision for the Bay around which we can all rally our collective efforts. Having a unifying plan for restoration around the Bay will enable us to collaborate with our partners more effectively in this critical activity.

Fundraising also continues to be a top priority. 2013, although extremely difficult operationally as we existed for most of the year with no paid staff, did leave us in a healthy financial situation, due to a combination of low expenses and two generous individual donations. This has created funds that we have used to create an operational reserve and to invest in the staff needed to lead our fundraising efforts.



Dedication of Donor Plaque - Vista Point

We are now in the process of developing our fundraising plans in the areas of grants, corporate giving, membership development, and fundraising events. It is very encouraging to see a number of our volunteers on and off the Board stepping forward to help in this. Perhaps the single most important need is to proactively identify potential grant opportunities. A team led by Heather Cieslak has been researching this, and is taking the lead in creating grant applications. A special note of appreciation to Martha Wolf and Liz Grant who have taken the lead in this important area.

We are also beginning to think about our upcoming 50th anniversary, and how we should mark this milestone. We have connected with the UCI Special Collections archive to access their Frank and Frances Robinson and related archive materials. We also have many materials of historical interest that they are interested in potentially adding to their archive. There is a good book waiting to be written about the history of the campaign to save the Bay and the beginning of our organization!

Finally, I should like to sincerely thank all of our dedicated volunteers and Friends without whose active support and hard work none of this would have been possible. Here's to an even more successful 2015.

Howard Cork
President of the Board, Newport Bay Conservancy
October 25, 2014

Photos courtesy of Heather Cieslak, Howard Cork, Holly Fuhrer, Russ Kerr, Agnes Tu, Jeanne Stein and Jessica Wigger.

