

# **Annual Report of the Newport Bay Conservancy**

## **November 2014 - November 2015**

### **NBC Board Commitment to Our Members and Volunteers**

The Newport Bay Conservancy bears a singular mission to protect the Upper Newport Bay and preserve this unique and sacred natural resource for the benefit of the public and generations to follow. For nearly fifty years NBC has relied on the steady effort and dedication of members and volunteers without whom none of our aspirations and accomplishments, indeed our entire vision for the well-being and sustainability of the Bay, would be possible. NBC continues to be the beneficiary of a strong tradition of volunteerism and a consistent history of community support.

### **2015 Board Retreat Goals and Commitments**

This has been a year of steady improvement and developing successes. The Conservancy Board began the new-year with a productive strategic planning retreat at which we reviewed our mission and evaluated our programs and capabilities. We committed ourselves to a number of ambitious projects necessary to ensure our relevance and potential success. We determined that we should revamp our public image, improve our marketing strategies and capabilities, increase our grant support, redefine our strategic planning, strengthen our Board and strengthen our cooperative and productive relations with our land-owning partners. Our board committees with the assistance of a number of volunteers have diligently pursued these goals. I am happy to say that we have made significant progress on all of these fronts which I will describe in more detail below.

#### **Revamp our public image and improve our marketing strategies and capabilities.**

First and foremost we committed to improving the public image of NBC as a knowledgeable and responsible custodian of the Upper Newport Bay. Revamping our public image would increase the public awareness of NBC and our important work and expand the base of our donations and grants. We accomplished this by keeping our website updated with relevant and exciting information and photos on Facebook showing NBC activities, by improving our marketing strategies and capabilities and by reaching out to the community through symposia and workshops that are focused on the Bay and its health.

At the suggestion of Board member and ex-Newport Beach City Councilwoman, Nancy Gardner, Howard Cork and I made a presentation to the Newport Beach City Council explaining NBC's mission to protect and preserve the Upper Newport Bay. This was the first time that NBC has attempted to raise the awareness of the City Council to the important role that NBC plays in helping to sustain this endangered wetland that is such a significant part of the economy and ambience of Newport Beach.

Our Marketing and Outreach Committee launched a program to improve NBC branding. All of our publications are now reviewed for consistent messaging, style and esthetics and will be revised and updated. We now have new T-shirts and Polo shirts for our volunteers with our logo prominent and visible to the community. We have new promotional banners announcing our presence at outreach events. Nancy Gardner and I met with representatives of "Visit Newport Beach," an organization whose purpose is to promote the City, to request their assistance in spreading our message to the

public. We now have new photos and information on Newport Beach websites and we are making our brochures available in hotel lobbies throughout the city. We also recommitted ourselves to the importance of Tracks, our most substantial outreach publication, in which we highlight the special features of the Bay through relevant and interesting articles and photographs. Two outstanding issues of Tracks have been produced this year by our Tracks Committee, Jim Cokas, Howard Cork, Peter Bryant, Kathy Kort, Bill Halladay and myself.

**Increase our grant support.** Our next commitment was to increase our financial health and operational effectiveness by expanding our financial support. We have revitalized our fundraising in the areas of grant writing, corporate giving, membership development, and fundraising events. A team led by our operations director, Heather Cieslak, with volunteers, Martha Wolf and Liz Grant, researched grant opportunities and submitted applications in a number of areas. This approach has brought in new grants totaling \$17,000. Our Fundraising Committee, led by Frances Cork and Nancy Gardner, has increased our support through a successful Mid-year Fundraising Drive and continued efforts to attract corporate and individual donations. A renewed effort focusing on corporate donors is currently underway.

**Redefine our strategic planning for the Bay.** Under the leadership of Past-President, Howard Cork, we have attempted to engage the UNB land-owners in developing a comprehensive strategic plan for the Bay. NBC is in a position to facilitate a vital and functioning Upper Newport Bay Coalition of partners to develop and advocate for comprehensive planning for the Bay, for trails, educational signage, restoration, visitor access and recreation. Accomplishing this goal will require the development of a consensus and shared vision of “The Healthy Bay” through sustained cooperation with the many agencies and nonprofits who have a role to play in ensuring the wellbeing of the Bay. In this effort we have partnered with the City of Newport Beach, whose Natural Resources Department under Michelle Clemente is completing the UNB Data Catalog and is taking the lead in creating a citizen science program to engage the local community and schools in support of the Bay. NBC is taking the lead in developing the specific plans including a Trails Plan, a Signage Plan, a Recreation Plan and a Restoration Plan.

**Restoration Plan.** Continuing in the tradition of conducting active restoration projects around the Bay in collaboration with the Coastal Commission’s Community-Based Restoration Program, OC Parks, CDFW and the City of Newport Beach, NBC has taken the lead in creating an overall multi-year restoration plan for the entire open space around the Bay. Under the leadership of Board member, Sarah Kimball, the Conservancy has provided financial support for initial surveys of all potential restoration areas conducted by UCI and CCC interns. The results of this work were presented by the interns to the NBC Board in August. The final hardcopy of the restoration plan is an impressive draft of a plan which will be reviewed and revised by each land-owning partner. NBC plans to maintain and update the plan and move it forward toward implementation. The restoration plan draft is currently housed and available at the Orange County Data Portal (DASH) administered by the UCI library.

**Strengthen our Board.** Efforts designed to strengthen the NBC Board have been focused on two concepts, improve the functioning of Board Committees and identify and recruit strong Board candidates who are well connected in the community. Committees were restructured into the following: 1) Fundraising and Development, 2) Marketing and Outreach, 3) Research and Education and 4) Restoration. In addition, it was suggested that the Bylaws and Board Development Committees be combined into a Governance Committee. It was also recommended that three NBC

Naturalists be on the Board at all times. These changes require adjustments to the Bylaws which have been introduced to the membership and will be discussed and voted on at the Annual Meeting.

Committee chairs were requested to develop “Action Plans” for 2015 describing committee goals for one year and three year periods. These Committee Action Plans comprise the NBC Board Strategic Plan for 2015. The Board Development Committee recommended that the NBC Board adopt a focus primarily on fundraising and strategic direction as more traditional Boards do. It was agreed that building a Board is a long-term process that requires time, patience, vision and effective persuasion, to find the right people and the right balance.

**Strengthen our cooperative and productive relations with our land-owning partners.** We continue to reach out to our land-owning partners through meetings with our staff and individual committees and through our land-owner coalition to discuss issues and projects of mutual concern and benefit. During the year we have held productive meetings with CDFW, OC Parks and the City.

## **2015 News and Accomplishments**

**Staff.** As a result of the resignation in June of our Volunteer Coordinator, Jeanne Stein, the NBC Board appointed a search committee and began recruiting for a replacement. Through August and September forty applications were received and ten of the strongest candidates were selected for interviews. I am happy to report that Adelle Bennett has been hired. Adelle brings to this important position many years of experience in corporate organization and project leadership, as well as a love of wildlife and nature. We wish her well and look forward to working with her.

Following the receipt of several unrestricted grants, including a \$10,000 grant from the Orange County Community Foundation, a decision was made by the Board to create a new position for a Program/Education Coordinator to assist with the increasing demands of our expanding educational programs. A new search has been initiated with the goal of filling the position by November 15.

**Volunteers.** The Conservancy is fortunate to have a force of talented and dedicated volunteers who contribute many hours of work to help make our programs successful. Our active volunteers have reported 10,866 hours over the past 12 months. During 2015, 50 people completed our Associates training program and are now becoming involved in various volunteer activities around the Bay. We have 13 Associates enrolled in this year’s 10-week Naturalist Training Program.

**Membership.** NBC has long depended on the more than 200 Friends Members who support our many programs with their substantial annual membership donations. Their response to our membership drives is a continuing reassurance of the support of our local community and the insurance that our programs and activities can be sustained at a consistently high level.

## **Exercising our Mission**

### **Educational Programs and Activities.**

**School Programs.** We continue to offer a variety of school programs for students of all ages. Our Environmental Studies Program is popular among high schools and colleges. This high school education program exposes students, often for the first time, to a wetland environment and to the

ecosystems, history, geology and native species that occur in these habitats. More than 500 hundred high school students came to the Bay through this program during the year. Teams of students who participated in the full 4-day program presented their environmental projects at a fair and competition hosted at the Muth Interpretive Center by OC Parks and NBC and judged by NBC Naturalists and volunteers. We anticipate supporting more Title I high schools which are eager to take part in the full 4-day program with several grants we have received specifically for this purpose. Thanks to the efforts of volunteers, Lane Calvert and Denise Blocher, and Heather Cieslak, the NBC Explorer program for high school students wishing to train for leadership roles has been re-established. Our interpretive tours for elementary school children led by NBC volunteers at the Muth Center continue to be successful with more than 1,000 children participating in 2015.

**Public Tours.** Our water- and land-based tours continue to grow in popularity thanks to our outreach efforts on our website and specific promotion by Visit Newport Beach and placement of our tour information in local hotels.

**Kayak Tours.** In 2015 we hosted 951 people on our Naturalist-led weekend kayak tours staffed by a core group of NBC volunteers.

**Outrigger Tours.** Demand for our successful outrigger program has continued to increase this year thanks to effective outreach to corporate groups and organizations by our staff. More than 843 people have paddled up the Bay and learned first-hand from our Naturalist guides about the unique environmental value of the UNB. Some of these groups have included Enviro Law Group, Disabled Veterans, Johns Hopkins Alumni and Marriott-Bayview Employees. This educational program along with the kayak tours bring in direct revenue to NBC.

**Walking Tours.** Our monthly interpretive walking tours in Big Canyon, on Back Bay Drive and Shellmaker Island continue to attract visitors to the UNB with 462 participants during the year.

**Friends Tours.** Our popular Friends Tours which have been led by our Naturalists for nearly 50 years draw participants who learn about UNB habitats, plants, animals and birds. More than 185 people took the tour in 2015.

**Muth Interpretive Center.** The Muth Interpretive Center serves as the major focal point for visitors to the Bay. More than 40,000 visitors pass through the Center each year. NBC volunteers staff the front desk six day a week providing information about the facilities and resources in the Interpretive Center, the surrounding County Nature Preserve lands and the State Ecological Reserve estuary. Our volunteers also staff the gift shop and the Plein Air art gallery providing income that benefits NBC.

**Naturalist Training.** Our annual Naturalist Training Program is in full swing with 13 students participating and a roster of distinguished speakers. This year we have opened the course for the first time to our land-owning partners.

**Habitat Restoration.** NBC volunteers and Naturalists are involved in habitat restoration projects around the Bay removing invasive species and installing native plants. These include the restoration of Newport Valley during the weekly Stewards Day activities and the monthly ROOTS events, the monthly 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday restoration programs run by OC Parks, and assisting in the management and development of the native plant nursery at the Back Bay Science Center. Our volunteers also have

been intensely involved with the Bayview Restoration Project maintaining a schedule of weeding, watering and monitoring the site (see below).

NBC Board member, Dick Zembal, Natural Resources Director at the Orange County Water District, has advocated for intertidal and wetland restoration as a result of potential sea level rise and loss of wetland habitat. Sea level rise will significantly impact the Bay's ecosystems and especially its endangered species. The NBC Board and its Restoration Committee will be exploring options to address these problems through public symposia, specific initiatives and grant funding.

**Research.** Our Research Committee continues to design and conduct research projects in the Bay. Current projects include monitoring plankton in the Bay. Identification of planktonic species accomplished by DNA Bar Coding will contribute to our understanding of the Bay's ecology. This program attracts student scientists and NBC Naturalists who experience structured scientific research methodology. Several new research projects are being considered by the Research Committee including monitoring the effects of the predicted El Nino event on marine organisms and chemical contaminants in the Bay.

**Mini Grants.** The NBC Research Committee initiated another Mini Grant program this year seeking proposals that would contribute to our better understanding of the Bay and its ecosystems. Board member, Danielle Zacherl, administered the program and reported that two grants would be awarded this term. The recipients were Dr. Joseph Carlin, Department of Geological Sciences, CSU Fullerton, and Ms. Sarah Sambolich. Dr. Carlin's project is titled, "Using the Sediment Record to Evaluate Future Sustainability of Critical Ecosystem in Upper Newport Bay in Response to Sea Level Rise: An Investigation of Seasonal to Decadal Sedimentation within Intertidal Areas" (\$1,000). Ms. Sambolich's project is titled, "Direct Observation of Larval Development in Marine Invertebrates and Optimization of Culture Methods Using the World's Smallest Aquarium" (\$629.91). The recipients will submit a progress report in September, 2016 and will present their findings at a future NBC symposium next year.

**Research Symposia.** In keeping with our mission to educate the public about the value of Upper Newport Bay as one of the few remaining California wetlands and estuaries, the Conservancy sponsored a symposium in January on "Wetlands in Southern California: Their importance, Status, Threats and Opportunities." Organized by Peter Bryant, board member and chair of NBC's Research Committee, the symposium celebrated the adoption of The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance which occurred in the Iranian city of Ramsar on 2 February 1971 and now celebrated as World Wetlands Day. The symposium brought together wetlands experts including our own board member, Dick Zembal, water resources and Ridgway's Rail expert. It was attended by environmental professionals as well as members of the public and exemplified the Conservancy's continued commitment to high quality research and educational programs.

NBC's summer symposium organized by Peter Bryant and the Research Committee focused on "Invasive Species and Their Impacts In and Around Newport Bay." The symposium featured a number of renowned experts who offered insights on the impact of climate change on invasive species and the effects of recent beetle, mammal and plant invasions in Orange County. The event was attended by more than 50 participants. For World Wetlands Day in 2016, the Research Committee is planning a symposium on "Climate Change, El Niño and Their Impacts on Estuaries". It will be held on Saturday January 30, 2016 at the Back Bay Science Center. We are considering a

theme that includes global environmental change, sea level rise, and adaptation to these phenomena especially in wetlands and estuaries of Southern California.

**Special Events.** NBC has sponsored, organized and administered a number of special programs which are effective in raising our visibility and influence in the community.

**Earth Day.** This global celebration, held locally at the Muth Interpretive Center in collaboration with OC Parks, demonstrated NBC's commitment to conservation and offered activities for everyone who attended. More than 25 "green" organizations participated in the event and were visited by 1200 attendees.

**Coastal Clean-Up Day.** Through the combined efforts of NBC, CDFW and OCP and 688 community volunteers, 2000 lbs. of trash was collected from the Upper Newport Bay. This event brings together elements of the community who desire to support the goal of a healthy bay.

**SOCALPAPA.** The Southern California Plein Air Painters Association held their "Plein Air Exhibition and Sale" at the Muth Interpretive Center in July. Forty painters participated and a thousand people attended despite rainy weather. The event is a unique collaboration of art and conservation. The artists generously contribute a share of their sales to NBC.

**Green Expo.** Sponsored by the Newport Beach Chamber of Commerce, the Green on the Green Expo was held on the City Hall Green to celebrate and encourage environmentally responsible planning and development. NBC volunteers hosted a hands-on outreach to the community that demonstrated our involvement in preserving the habitats of the Upper Newport Bay.

**Pacific Symphony.** Thai Composer Narong Prangcharoen, composer in residence at the Pacific Symphony, took what he heard and saw on a kayak tour in the UNB with volunteer Susan Kay and put it into a stunning symphonic piece called "Bird Song." The Pacific Symphony along with NBC and OC Parks hosted a performance of this work by a four-piece chamber ensemble on the Muth terrace. Approximately 50 people attended on a lovely moon-lit night along with Canada geese and clapper rails who contributed to the harmonies.

**Baycation.** A combined fundraising drive and community outreach event titled "Baycation" was held in October. NBC invited the nearly ten thousand people who live within two miles of the Bay to visit both the Back Bay Science Center and the Muth Interpretive Center. Many community members visited the animal, plant, Native American and marine life stations hosted by our volunteers. It was a welcome opportunity to connect with some of our neighbors.

### **Maintaining Our Relationships**

**California Department of Fish and Wildlife.** NBC has actively worked to strengthen our relationship with the State Department of Fish and Wildlife. Together we are pursuing plans including upgrading interpretive signage around the Bay, upgrading an unofficial trail below the Salt Dyke overlook and exploring the benefits of creating an overall trail and public access plan for the entire UNB open space.

**OC Parks.** For the past year, NBC has 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. This transition has been challenging and has demanded flexibility on both sides. We have welcomed Scott Fegley and his new team to the Bay and we look forward to continuing to work with them.

**City of Newport Beach.** Our negotiations with the City of Newport Beach regarding potential safety issues on Back Bay Drive has resulted in significant improvements to the road. The City is 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.

### **Our Projects around the Bay**

As the year has progressed, our major projects, the Watershed Coordinator Project, the Bayview Restoration Project and the Uplands to Tidelands exhibit, have also moved forward.

**Watershed Coordinator.** Our 3-year grant from the State Department of Conservation ended on June 30 of last year and the project was completed at the end of 2014. In June 2014, the Department of Conservation awarded NBC an extension grant to identify practical projects that could improve water capture and retention in the watershed. The Final Report of the Watershed Coordinator Project was presented to the NBC Board by Krista Sloniowski. Four symposia were planned as part of the project to present the proposals to the community. Krista also produced an “Idea Book” with model demonstration projects for communities to consider. The Board agreed it would be a missed opportunity if NBC did not try to carry Krista’s recommendations forward and a committee was formed to explore options. The NBC Board is very aware that what happens in the larger context of the watershed significantly impacts the health and sustainability of the Bay and maintains an interest in monitoring relevant issues that affect the watershed as a whole. This is consistent with NBC’s role as an advocate for the Bay.

**Bayview Restoration.** The Bayview restoration project, supported by grants from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Southern California Wetland Restoration Project, was begun in November of last year. This project was designed to restore a severely debilitated area of the Upper Bay slope. Planting was conducted by Barry Nerhus of Endemic Environmental and supervised by NBC Board member, Sarah Kimball. Watering and weeding has been conducted for the past year by NBC Naturalist, Peter Ridley and NBC Board member, Frances Cork and a dedicated crew of volunteers. Thanks to the hard work of our volunteers, the once barren Upper Bayview site is now looking almost lush. Planting of the Lower Bayview site is scheduled to begin this month.

**Tidelands to Uplands Exhibit.** The Tidelands exhibit, which illustrates the wide range of habitats that exist in and around the Bay, is nearly complete at the Muth Interpretive Center. Thanks to Howard Cork, former NBC Board President, for facilitating the Tidelands exhibit and working with Amy Erickson from OC Parks to create the interpretive materials for the installation. Education information will be displayed on interactive computers. We extend our sincere thanks to the Hausmann Foundation for their funding of the Tidelands exhibit.

**ISOPod.** The ISOPod, a mobile marine aquarium, containing several saltwater tanks that house a collection of live southern California tide pool creatures, is now complete and on the road. A joint project between NBC and the City of Newport Beach, the ISOPod is now owned and operated by the City. This unique traveling exhibit was partly funded by a generous grant from SoCal Edison. Staffed by the City Department of Natural Resources, the ISOPod travels to scheduled schools and

events bringing tide pools and sea life directly to children and adults to teach about our oceans and promote stewardship of our environment.

## **Priorities for 2016**

NBC will continue to carry forward the strategic priorities for the Bay that the Board has identified. We will continue our effective educational and outreach activities around the Bay through our school programs, tours, symposia and special events. We will work to strengthen our relationships with the agencies and nonprofits that share our interest in supporting the sustainability of the UNB. And, we will continue to work to develop a vision for the Bay around which we can all rally our collective efforts.

I want to sincerely thank our dedicated Board members, staff, volunteers, and members who continue to support our efforts through volunteering and financial contributions. Without their active support and hard work our accomplishments and vision for the Bay would not be possible. We encourage you to view our website ([newportbay.org](http://newportbay.org)) for current information about the Conservancy and opportunities to volunteer or enjoy the Bay.

As NBC now moves into its 49<sup>th</sup> year of existence and we begin to think about our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we can celebrate the fruits of our efforts that I believe will carry us squarely into the next half century. Since environmental conservation is a process not an end, our efforts to preserve and protect the Upper Newport Bay will require constant vigilance and sustained struggle. I am very optimistic about the current direction and future of NBC and I look forward to our continued progress.

Peter Fuhrer  
President of the Board  
Newport Bay Conservancy  
November 1, 2015