

Surfers for Wetlands



What's Threatening the San Elijo Lagoon?



Where is the San Elijo Lagoon Located?

The San Elijo Lagoon is one of San Diego's largest wetlands. It is a nearly 1,000-acre ecological reserve that stretches from the coast in Encinitas, California inland to Rancho Santa Fe. It is a coastal wetland and home to hundreds of species of plants and animals, which many of them are endangered.

Why is the San Elijo Lagoon Important?

Twice daily, incoming tides cover much of the landscape with salt water. As the tide ebbs, mudflats are exposed that are rich with invertebrates, providing food for shorebirds and ducks. Fresh water from rain-fed creeks and storm drains mixes with the salt water. The plants and animals in this estuarine environment have evolved to survive at the intersection of land and ocean. In addition, it filters the urban runoff water that collects all kinds of pollutants that wash down the storm drains when it rains. This is important to keep the water clean for the surfers in Encinitas.

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Early transportation projects bisected these lagoons: the railroad, then Highway 101, then Interstate 5. That disrupted how water flows through them, which in turn increased bacteria. The decreasing water quality affects the fish species that can survive in the lagoon. It also affects the birds and other animals, so it is a cascading effect.

Currently, the sand at the mouth of the lagoon is heavier, which means it does not move as fast during tidal migration and eventually blocks the mouth of the lagoon, preventing water from flowing in and out. Caltrans has major projects underway to widen both Interstate Five and the railway line that cut across the endangered wetlands of the lagoon. To compensate for the disruption caused by the construction, money from the half-cent sales tax paying for the improvement has been earmarked for an unusual environmental restoration project.

The first thing a passerby on Cardiff state beach notices with the restoration project is the pipe pumping sand slurry — a mixture of sand and water — from the lagoon into the ocean. Doug Gibson, executive director of the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy, said this clean sand will help the beach. The new sand is lighter and is more like the native sand. It will move a lot quicker during tidal migration, which is a good thing because it will not block the mouth of the other lagoons down the coast. This will allow more water flowing into the lagoon and restore it closer to its original state.



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