

## So Many Dollars, So Little Beachfront

■ **Access:** Housing plans by Riordan and friends set off a fuss in Malibu.

By JIM NEWTON  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

It is an epic struggle, even by the standards of Malibu, where the cost of a mere spite fence can exceed the price of a single-family home in less lush environs.

This time, the fight involves not just commonplace things—like huge sums of money—but more valuable, if less tangible, commodities: power, influence and the stuff that comes with them. Contentious little Malibu's latest controversy involves Mayor Richard Riordan and his wife, along with a couple of their very richest friends. They're opposed by some of Hollywood's historic figures, along with a would-be home developer and

Please see **MALIBU, A18**



KEN HIVELEY / Los Angeles Times

Site that would be preserved under deal proposed by mayor.

## MALIBU: Plans by Riordan, Friends for Beach Houses Ignite Feud Over Access

Continued from A1

some local activists. Between them, the two sides have hackles raised high in Southern California's toniest beach town, an incorporated city that sits up the coast at the western edge of Los Angeles County.

The unenviable task of sorting it out falls today to the Coastal Commission, which will consider the strongly held views on both sides of the flap.

The conflict started conventionally enough. Trusts established by billionaire Eli Broad, television magnate Haim Saban and Nancy Daly, Riordan's wife, picked up six Malibu parcels from Pepperdine University and set out to demolish the houses that stood on them and then to replace them with three larger homes.

Given the size and configuration of what they had in mind, that meant cutting off the view of the ocean from Pacific Coast Highway. The Coastal Commission begged to differ, and demanded that each of the three home sites—which average about 100 feet along the highway—include 20 feet of "view corridor."

That didn't sit well with the trio. Broad, for instance, envisioned a house designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Richard Meier, the man behind the Getty Museum, and understandably was not happy with the idea of his landmark home constrained by a corridor so that passing motorists could glance at the water as they shot by at 50 miles an hour.



Los Angeles Times

Mayor Richard Riordan and wife, Nancy Daly.

So Broad and his friends made the Coastal Commission an offer: If the panel would let them cut off the ocean views around their homes, they would buy an 80-foot stretch of a nearby beach and protect it from development. Their argument: The Riordans, Sabans and Broads would get their houses, and the public would not only get more view—in many ways, a better view, since it would be in one chunk rather than three 20-foot intervals—but also public access to that beach.

That was all well and good for them, and it satisfied the Coastal Commission staff. But for the neighbors who live near the beach, it was no good at all. Why, they asked, should their beach be made more accessible to the public just so their famous and powerful would-be neighbors wouldn't have to put up with anyone looking over their shoulders at the sunset?

And, this being Malibu, the neighbors who complained—though not necessarily of the stature of a big-city mayor and a couple of business titans known for their political savvy and lavish contributions to candidates and causes—are no slouches.

One, for instance, is Freddy Fields, a legendary Hollywood agent who founded Creative Management Associates and later served as president of MGM.

"This is a ramrod job," Fields said Tuesday. "It's totally immoral to take your problem and dump it on someone else. That's what they're doing."

Broad declined to comment on the flap, as did Riordan.

Meanwhile, Malibu's abuzz. Some residents learned about the proposal in recent months; more discovered some of the details last week when the local paper, the Malibu Times, carried a story about it.

"You know the expression 'hopping mad?'" one local real estate agent asked. "That's what you have here."

Lou Adler—a renowned record producer who grew up in Boyle Heights and handled such recording artists as the Mamas and the Papas, Carole King and Sam Cooke—seconds that emotion.

"What these people are doing is not nice. It's rude," he said. "And it's really rude to the people who live out here all the time, not those who just come out for a few weekends a year."

Adler lives two doors away from the site that would be preserved to clear the way for the Riordans and their friends to maximize their home sizes. He and others argue that not only is it wrong for Riordan, Broad and Saban to duck the view-corridor require-

ment, it is doubly ill-advised for them to have picked the property they did.

That's because Adler and other local residents say the proposed site is on a dangerous curve with no beach parking.

"I'm fearful that some kid is going to get hurt trying to cross the street to get to this beach," said Richard Gitlin, an independent film producer who lives in Malibu. "The mayor and the others are just asking for hatred from everyone. Someday, someone is going to get hurt, and then everyone is going to say: 'This is what you guys did because you wanted to enlarge your properties.' That'd be blood on their hands."

As if all that weren't complicated and intense enough, there's still another angry party—Jeff Greene, a developer whose deal to buy 80 feet of beach from Pepperdine collapsed after 18 months in escrow. When Broad and his friends bought it instead, he felt cheated and complained loudly.

"It's a fraud," Greene said. "I can't believe they did this."

Greene suggested that Pepperdine officials had either been pressured by his high-powered adversaries or that the university had bent over backward to accommodate them.

In fact, Pepperdine Real Estate Director Dennis Torres acknowl-

edges that he did try to do Broad a favor—just not the one Greene thinks he did. In an interview Tuesday, Torres said Greene had previously been granted extensions to complete his purchase of the Malibu site, but had been told that March 1 was the deadline. After that, Torres said, both sides understood that either Greene would own the property or it would revert to Pepperdine, which would look for another buyer.

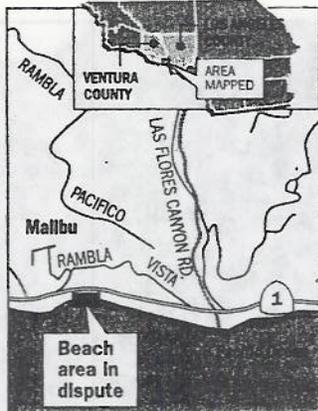
When Broad and company later indicated their interest, Torres said, they asked him to grant a 30-day extension to Greene, if Greene would agree to sell to Broad.

"I figured there are worse people to do a favor for than Eli Broad," Torres said. "But that favor was also a favor for Jeff Greene."

As it turned out, Torres said, he never ended up doing a favor for either of them. That's because Broad and Greene never cut a deal.

Greene says the only reason escrow did not close on March 1 is that Pepperdine failed to provide survey material due by that date.

In any case, Greene did not close the deal on that date, so Pepperdine sold it to Broad. He owns it now, and intends to turn it over to a conservancy as part of the deal with the Coastal Commission.



Los Angeles Times



Los Angeles Times

Television magnate Haim Saban, left, and billionaire Eli Broad plan to build homes next to mayor's.

# Controversial Malibu Plans OK'd

■ **Houses:** Coastal panel votes 12-0 in favor of Mayor Riordan's wife, Eli Broad and TV magnate. Critics claim favoritism.

By **BOBBY CUZA**  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Plans by Mayor Richard Riordan's wife, businessman Eli Broad and television magnate Haim Saban to build three sprawling homes on the beachfront in Malibu won unanimous approval Wednesday night from the California Coastal Commission, despite neighborhood opposition.

Under the plan worked out Wednesday and approved 12-0 by the commissioners, the homes will block a total of about 300 feet of public ocean view. In exchange, the partners will buy a nearby 80-foot stretch of beach and donate it to the Coastal Conservancy for public use.

"The total package we're getting here is very positive from the public perspective," said Coastal Commission Chairwoman Sara Wan.

Residents who spoke at the hearing disagreed, saying the commission was bending the rules for well-connected citizens.

"The state of California has charged you with the responsibility for looking out for the interests of all the citizens of this state, not just the interests of three exceedingly rich and very powerful people trying to rush their applications through," said Jeff Greene, a developer whose plans to buy the 80-foot stretch of beach were quashed.

The residents also cited safety concerns about the project, because the proposed public-access beach is on a curved stretch of Pacific Coast Highway with no parking.

Please see **HOMES, B5**

## HOMES

Continued from **B1**

"People are going to die there," said resident Brady Westwater. "I've seen cars demolished beyond recognition. It's almost a monthly occurrence."

The residents cited statistics from the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department showing that 20% of all vehicle crashes on Pacific Coast Highway from Topanga Canyon Boulevard to the western city limits occur along that curve.

A Coastal Conservancy spokesperson told the commission the conservancy will conduct a study of safety issues in the next several weeks and determine how best to resolve them.

The whole conflict started when trusts established by Broad, Saban and Nancy Daly Riordan, the mayor's wife, acquired a total of six parcels and made plans to demolish the houses on them and replace them with three larger homes.

Because of the size and design of the three proposed homes, the ocean view from Pacific Coast Highway would be cut off at each of the sites.

The Coastal Commission opposed the new plans and demanded that each of the three home sites, which average about 100 feet along the highway, include 20 feet of "view corridor."

The partners, displeased with that scenario, made the Coastal Commission a counteroffer: If it would let them cut off the ocean views around their homes, they would buy an 80-foot stretch of a nearby beach and protect it from development. They would then get their houses, they said, and the public would not only get more view—in many ways, a better view, because it would be in one chunk rather than three 20-foot intervals—but also access to that beach.

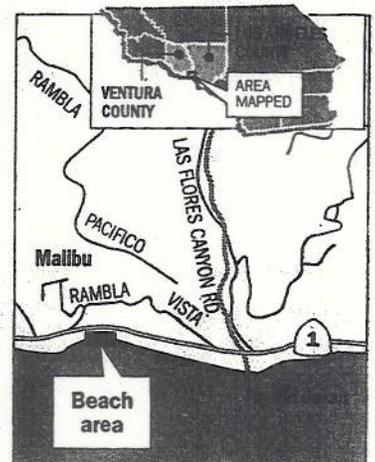
But resident Todd Sloan asked commissioners: "If this is such an act of high altruism, then why don't they offer the public access through their own view corridors?"

Another angry party to this agreement is Greene, a developer whose deal to buy 80 feet of beach from Pepperdine University collapsed after 18 months in escrow. When Broad and his partners bought it instead, he complained loudly.

"Pepperdine secretly sold the property using a hidden escrow . . . because of high-pressure tactics by representatives" of the partners, Greene said Wednesday.

Pepperdine Real Estate Director Dennis Torres denied that any pressure was brought against him or the university to sell the property to Broad and his friends.

For his part, Mayor Riordan angrily objected Wednesday to the suggestion that he had anything to do with the proposal that has riled some Malibu residents. He said the transaction involved the separate property of his wife, and vehemently disputed the suggestion that he had any role in the episode.



Los Angeles Times



## California

# Malibu's Beach Up roar and the Art of the Deal

It is possible, driving down the coastline that has made Southern California so famous, to forget entirely that, from end to end, it's a public coastline. There are stretches of beach frontage where you can roll for miles with no more than an occa-



**SHAWN HUBLER**

sional glimpse of the blue Pacific—just fences, walls and "private property" signs.

But the property rights only go so far—a fact that, while often ignored by the rich and sunbanned, actually is encoded in state law. Generally speaking, if you enter via a public access and stay on the wet sand, you can follow it to Mexico and not be trespassing. Everything beyond the "mean high tide line"—which, in most spots on most days, roughly translates as whatever was underwater last night—belongs, with rare exceptions, to everyone.

This is useful in considering last week's beachfront uproar in Malibu. In a vote destined to be-

come a full-employment act for real estate lawyers, the California Coastal Commission gave a thumbs up to a fresh obstacle between you and me and our public coastline—three new mega-mansions on the sand.

Eli Broad (the home builder turned investment company chief executive), Haum Saban (the TV deal-maker) and Nancy Daly Riordan (wife of L.A.'s deal-making Mayor Richard Riordan) got permission to scrape three lots along Pacific Coast Highway and erect lot-line-to-lot-line beach estates. The homes will block former "view corridors" that used to offer mini-glimpses of that wet strip of coastline that, remember, is our real estate.

To compensate, the deal-makers bought and donated what was billed as a whole new beach, with not only a peek of coastline for the public, but access for sunning and swimming, too. The catch was that this philanthropy was in somebody else's neighborhood.

Hence, uproar. But misleading uproar, in that the arguments involved didn't ring entirely true. The donated lot, for example, was cast as a gift and the neighbors' outrage as the sour grapes of rich NIMBYs. But it turns out that the lot—which belonged to Pepperdine University before Broad and

friends got it—has actually been more or less public for many years.

"They call it The Cove," a friend who grew up there told me. "As in 'Dude! The Cove is cookin'! Let's go check it out!'" It's a hangout, though surely not destined to be a rabble magnet. A good-sized beach blanket would cover the nonrocky dry sand, and at high tide, it's almost completely submerged.

If asked, the neighbors will concede that, OK, they've put up with visitors there forever. But what about the health hazard? they ask. The Cove is barred off with a rusty, locked, chain-link fence and has no official parking adjacent. Its neighbors say that nonlocals will end up parking along one of the worst blind curves of PCH.

But The Cove, as it turns out, is easy to get to—and without setting foot on the deadly highway. You just park behind a nearby county fire station, walk down to a gully that runs next to the building, and within steps, you'll come to a concrete tunnel that serves as a storm drain. It's maybe a minute-long walk to the wet sand next to the big, view-blocking house of the famous record producer Lou Adler. Firemen say the locals use the passage (to Adler's consternation) constantly.

The fact that this "new" beach was neither new as a gift nor as an intrusion didn't come up at the

commission hearing, but it has fueled much speculation in the aftermath of the vote. If the fight—and it runs deep—isn't based in some sudden risk of wrecks and rabble, what's the deal here? Inquiring minds want to know.

Some say status envy: The deal-makers' lots are on swanky Carbon Beach, where some major moguls have second homes. The donated land is one beach down, at the far edge of a beach called La Costa, which—though Ryan O'Neal has lived there, and Aaron Spelling is said to drop by sometimes—is slightly narrower and thus lesser. Ergo, simmering resentment between the haves and have-mores.

But a personal theory is that it's *the deal* that's bugged people. By this I do not mean the complaint of another developer who claims he had dibs on The Cove until Pepperdine sold it out from under him. No, it was the way in which the whole swap was conducted, the chutzpah, the breathtaking ease of it. It was the blocking of this priceless beach and the horse trading of that priceless beach and the certain understanding that the public would, of course, leap at even the semblance of having been cut in. It was the reminder of that other fact that's so famed yet oft forgotten: that Southern California is, above all, a land built on deals, from end to shining end.

Shawn Hubler's column appears Mondays and Thursdays. Her e-mail address is [shawn.hubler@latimes.com](mailto:shawn.hubler@latimes.com).



# San Francisco Chronicle

THE VOICE OF THE WEST

## EDITORIALS

### A Grand Vision for the Bay

**J**OHN FLICKER, president of the National Audubon Society, is promoting an ambitious plan for San Francisco Bay. He wants to turn back the clock about a century, when the bay had 100,000 more acres of marshes, tidal flats and other wetlands than it does today.

Flicker is fully aware of the magnitude of the challenge. He knows it will take more than \$1 billion. He knows it will take the cooperation of local, state and federal governments — and will require the will to say no to developers with other designs for the shoreline.

Yet he knows it can be done. The Audubon Society has been involved in the equally large and complex effort to restore the Florida Everglades. It will take a similar strong national commitment to achieve Audubon's goal of bringing back the baylands.

"This is the largest estuary on the West Coast and one of the great wetlands systems in the country," Flicker told The Chronicle's editorial board this week.

The Audubon Society's first step will be to persuade the public — and policy-makers —

of the value of such a conservation project. And they are significant. The wetlands essentially serve a kidney function for the bay, filtering everything from toxic chemicals and bacteria to excess nutrients such as nitrates and phosphates. They act as nurseries and

stopping points for fish and wildlife. Tidal plants help control erosion, prevent floods and help replenish the air with oxygen.

Large tracts of the targeted areas are now covered with salt ponds. Flicker and his Audubon Society col-

leagues believe the timing is right — with state bond money and federal Land and Water Conservation Fund resources available — to develop a large-scale effort to acquire and restore these former wetlands.

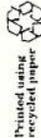
The bay is indisputably cleaner than it was two decades ago, mainly due to laws that outlawed the discharge of untreated sewage and other pollutants. Now it is time to bring nature back into the act of cleansing the bay that defines and enriches this region and its quality.

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*Audubon Society  
wants to save  
the wetlands.*

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# Marin Independent Journal

PM

April 6, 2000

Marin County, California

THURSDAY

## Audubon Society backs Marin wetlands plan

### National group pushes restoration of 2,600 acres

By John Nickerson  
*Id reporter*

The quest to restore about 2,600 acres of wetlands at Hamilton Field and Bel Marin Keys got a boost yesterday when the National Audubon Society pledged its support for the project and others like it in the Bay Area.

Standing atop Ammo Hill in Hamilton Field, the organization's national president, John Flicker, said, "This is a chance for this generation to

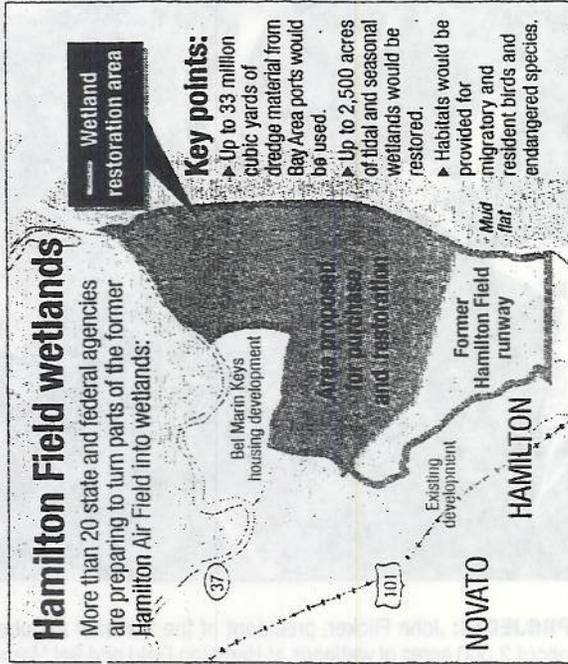
make San Francisco Bay like the place it was 200 years ago."

Overlooking the former airfield in southern Novato, Flicker said the effort to restore 100,000 acres of San Francisco Baylands compared in complexity and size with efforts to save Florida's Everglades.

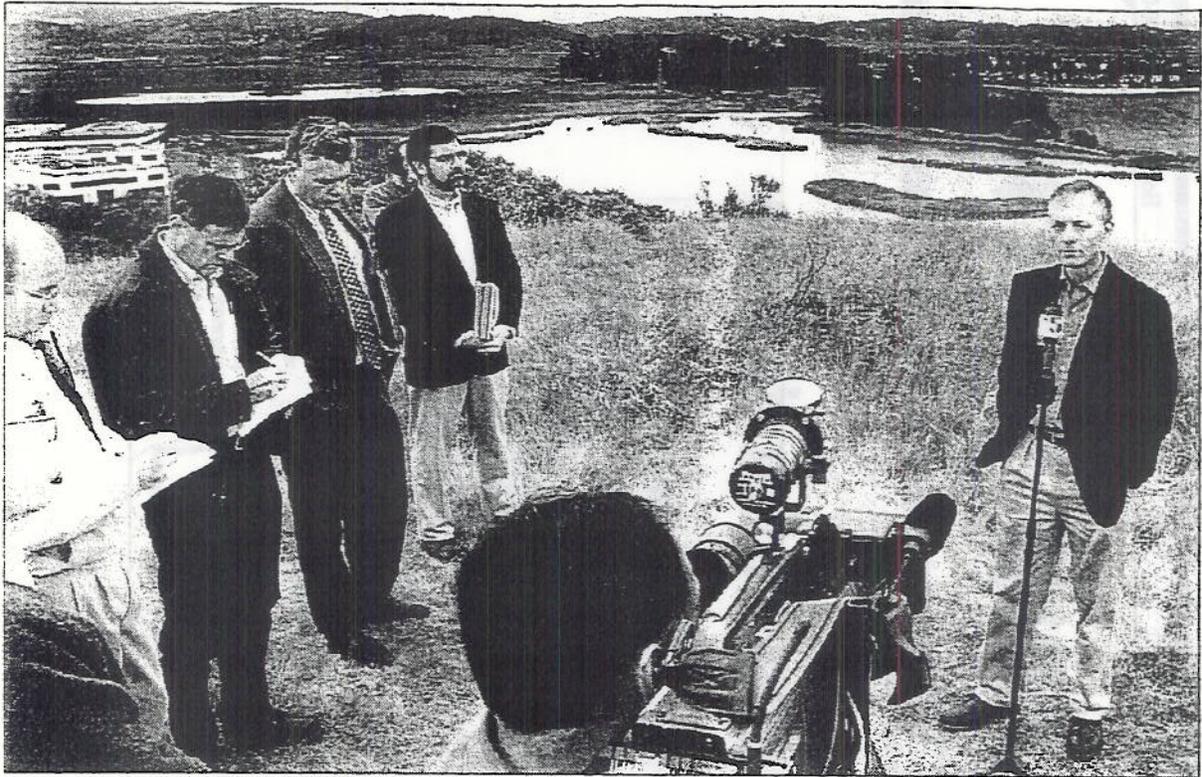
Flicker said a plan developed last year to restore and protect the much of the bay's wetland areas would cost about \$1.5 billion.

"If we can take a runway and reconvert it into wetlands," he said, glancing at

See Wetlands, page A6



U map



J photo/Frankie Frost

**WETLANDS PROJECTS:** John Flicker, president of the National Audubon Society, announces the organization's support for restoration of about 2,600 acres of wetlands at Hamilton Field and Bel Marin Keys during a news conference at Hamilton.

## Wetlands

From page A1

the airfield's buckling tarmac below, "we can do it anywhere in the bay."

Coastal Conservancy spokeswoman Terri Nevins, who has worked on the 1,000-acre Hamilton project for two years, said the society's support will raise visibility for the bayland restoration effort and hopefully attract additional funding.

While an agreement to restore Hamilton Field has already been

made by the U.S. Army after clean-up operations are complete, the environmental group has only six months to raise \$16 million for 1,600 bay-front acres surrounding the Bel Marin Keys housing development. The property now belongs to California Quartet Ltd., which in the past proposed putting 801 homes and a golf course on the property.

Together, the Hamilton and Bel Marin Keys restorations, Nevins said, would be the largest project of its kind ever undertaken on the West Coast.

Nevins said that the Hamilton restoration project would take 10 years to complete.

According to Flicker, the society has eight chapters and 20,000 members in the Bay Area.

Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Petaluma, requested \$3 million for the Hamilton project, according to her spokesman Tom Roth.

Nevins said that the Hamilton land will cost \$55 million to restore, with the federal government paying 75 percent and the state paying the remainder.

Up to 65,000 acres of wetlands between San Rafael and Vallejo could potentially be restored, Woolsey said.

Contact reporter John Nickerson via e-mail at [jnickerson@marinij.com](mailto:jnickerson@marinij.com)

# EAST BAY

AND THE REGION

THURSDAY, APRIL 6, 2000

EDITORIALS A26

OPINION A27

A17

## Audubon Society Floats Proposal for Bay Wetlands

### President calls for 100,000-acre restoration plan

By *Cleen Martin*  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The president of the National Audubon Society conducted a whirlwind tour of San Francisco Bay yesterday, kicking off a hugely ambitious campaign to restore 100,000 acres of wetlands around the beleaguered estuary.

From a hilltop vantage at Hamilton Field in Marin County, Audu-

bon leader John Flicker gestured expansively at the decommissioned airbase's defunct runway and an adjacent complex of agricultural fields. The runway is already scheduled for restoration, and environmental groups hope to close a deal to purchase the fields for a similar wetland project in the near future, Flicker said.

"San Francisco Bay is the largest estuary on the (West) Coast," said Flicker. "It's an incomparable ecosystem, equivalent in significance to the Everglades. Eighty percent of its marshes and tidal flats have been destroyed. What we're trying to do is protect what is left and restore (large acreages)."

Flicker acknowledged the "Audu-

bon Baylands Campaign" will be costly, but said it enjoys wide support, among state and federal governments, a wide array of environmental organizations and the public.

Audubon staffers said the price tag for acquiring the land could run as high as \$1 billion, while restoration would cost about \$400 million. Acquisition and restoration would proceed over a period of 20 years, Flicker said.

Dan Taylor, the California director for the Audubon Society, said some state money might be available immediately for land acquisitions.

"Proposition 12 and 13 passed in the latest elections, and they collec-

tively provide about \$400 million for wetland projects, including those in San Francisco Bay," Taylor said.

Wetland restoration is an idea already in vogue, as evidenced by the hundreds of acres of tidal marshes in the bay, that have been restored in recent years.

Much of the money for those projects has come from Cal Fed, a joint agency of the state and federal governments that is attempting to build consensus solutions to California's long-running water wars. It is likely Cal Fed will contribute significant funds to the baylands project.

Much of the restoration will take place on North Bay farmlands in Marin, Sonoma and Solano Counties, in decommissioned salt produc-

tion ponds in the south bay and on diked islands in the Sacramento River/San Joaquin River delta.

Restoration will involve several techniques, including breaching dikes, reconfiguring uplands and channels with heavy equipment and filling subsidized lands with dredged silt and sand from bay shipping channels.

If the project is completed, it will mark the most successful ecosystem restoration project in the history of the nation — one that would essentially return the bay to an ecological state not seen for more than a century.

"With only 20 percent of bay wet-

► **BAYLANDS: Page A24 Col. 1**

# Wetland Plan

## ► BAYLANDS

From Page A17

lands left, this would boost it to about 50 percent of the historic acreage," said Taylor, as he gazed across the Hamilton Field airstrip to the bay beyond. "It's been a hundred years or more since the bay had that kind of habitat."

As Taylor talked, the muted honking from a gaggle of Canada geese could be heard from a distant slough.

"Just think what you'll see when you stand up here years from now and look out there," said Taylor. "There'll be vast flights of waterfowl in the winter, and tremendous numbers of shorebirds in the spring. It will be incredible."

The Audubon Society's support adds particular weight to the project. The society is one of the nation's most respected and venerable environmental organizations, appealing to people of disparate political leanings. A love of birds and the habitat they need provides a strong common bond.



John Flicker, of the National Audubon Society, toured Blair Island near Redwood City with Margaret Kolar of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Flicker — whose surname would've given namephreaker Herb Caen a chuckle, since it is also the name of a large North American woodpecker — said the time was right for a bold restoration effort because of the recent issuance of an exhaustive state and federal government report on bay wetlands.

"That was the game plan we needed to make our case," said

Flicker. "It reflected an amazing consensus on where we need to go. There's much more agreement here than there is on restoration projects in the Everglades. Now we need to pull everyone together to get it done. It's a big table, and there's room for everyone."

For more information on bay issues, visit [www.sfei.org](http://www.sfei.org).

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Monday, April 10, 2000

**Ventura River Ranked 3rd Most Endangered**

Environment: A conservation group lists the waterway among 13 facing severe degradation, laying most of the blame on Matilija Dam.

By [TINA DIRMAN](#), Times Staff Writer

The Ventura River is among the nation's most endangered rivers and its only hope for recovery is the removal of Matilija Dam, according to a study released today by a conservation group.

The Ventura River is ranked third in the country, behind Oregon's Lower Snake River and the Missouri River, on a list of 13 rivers facing the most "immediate, severe environmental degradation," according to American Rivers' annual report of the nation's most threatened waterways.

The only other California river to make the list is the north fork of the Feather River above Sacramento.

American Rivers, based in Washington, D.C., concludes that Matilija Dam is chiefly to blame for the Ventura River's dwindling health.

Critics say the dam, built in 1947 for flood control, has outlived its usefulness. Designed to hold 5,000 acre-feet of water, the buildup of silt and mud has reduced its storage capacity to 500 acre-feet. An acre-foot equals 326,000 gallons, enough water to supply two average-size families for a year.

The nonprofit conservation group, founded in 1973 to raise awareness of North America's river system, said the dam also prevents sand from washing downstream to replenish local beaches. Even worse, it blocks the migration of endangered southern steelhead trout to the sea, the group said.

County Supervisor Kathy Long said it was upsetting to learn the river is in such bad shape.

"I think it's a sad commentary on our environmental abilities when we can't keep something as precious as a river environmentally strong," Long said. "I didn't realize the river was in that poor condition. To look at it, the river is so pristine. But obviously there is a lot of trouble beneath."

Local environmentalists, coastal businesses and fishermen have long advocated tearing down the dam. But finding the \$30 million to \$70 million to do it has been a problem. Long and others said the new ranking might have at least one positive effect by gaining the attention of representatives in Washington, D.C., who could allocate the necessary funds.

"The removal of the dam is going to be a huge undertaking," said Mark Capelli, executive director of Friends of the Ventura River. "And it's going to require support on the national level. This is the first step in getting that support. So, it's an important recognition."

The 16-mile river originates on the north fork of Matilija Creek in the Los Padres National Forest and winds its way to the Pacific Ocean in Ventura. Periodic flooding led to construction of the dam.

Rebecca Wodder, president of American Rivers, called Matilija Dam a "classic example" of a dam that "doesn't make sense."

"It is a virtually obsolete structure that has a negative impact both ecologically and economically on the Ventura River and the surrounding communities," Wodder said.

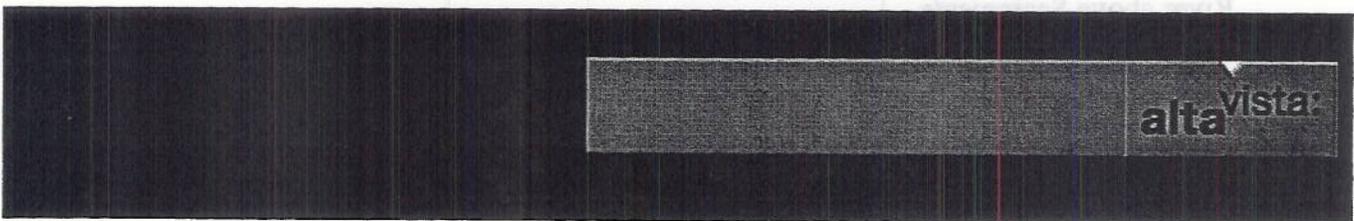
Work is already underway to tear down part of the dam. In January, the California Coastal Conservancy approved a \$200,000 grant to Ventura County to pay for a portion of a project to knock off part of the aging structure. The project is considered a first step to the dam's ultimate removal.

Despite the river's poor rating, John Buse of the Ventura office of the Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center said the study is helpful because it clearly outlines what the county needs to do to improve the river's health.

"I know it's sort of a negative thing to recognize the condition of the river," Buse said. "But we have to know this in order to recognize what steps to take to help make it better. And we know what we have to do to make this better: Remove the dam."

The Snake was ranked first because salmon and steelhead runs have been drastically interrupted by four dams.

The Missouri was ranked second because a series of dams and channels built over the last 70 years have altered the river, transforming it into what American Rivers called "a rock-lined barge canal and a series of slackwater reservoirs."



The nonprofit conservation group, founded in 1975 to help awareness of North America's river system, said the dam also prevents sand from washing downstream to replenish local beaches. Even worse, it blocks the migration of endangered southern steelhead trout to the sea, the group said. County Supervisor Kathy Long said it was upsetting to learn the river is in such bad shape. "I think it's a sad commentary on our environmental abilities when we can't keep something as precious as a river environmentally strong," Long said. "I didn't realize the river was in that poor condition. To look at it, the river is so pristine. But obviously there is a lot of trouble beneath."

Local environmentalists, coastal businesses and fishermen have long advocated tearing down the dam, but finding the \$20 million to \$25 million to do it has been a problem. Long and others said the new funding might have at least one positive effect by gaining the attention of representatives in Washington, D.C., who could allocate the necessary funds.

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Tuesday, April 11, 2000

**Dam Removal Gets Boost From Report of Ventura River Threat**

Environment: Groups seek funds to dismantle Matilija barrier and restore waterway found to be imperiled.

By GARY POLAKOVIC, Times Staff Writer

OJAI--With the decaying, 53-year-old Matilija Dam as a backdrop, a coalition of conservation groups on Monday called on Gov. Gray Davis and President Clinton to "tear down this public nuisance."

The dam has been blamed for everything from the decline of the endangered southern steelhead trout to the depletion of sand at Ventura County beaches. The damage caused by the dam is so great that the environmental group American Rivers listed the Ventura River as the third most endangered in the nation.

"It's a silt tub that has outlived its usefulness," Jim Edmondson, conservation director for California Trout Inc., said of the dam.

The decision to declare the Ventura River one of America's most imperiled streams was rooted in politics as well as science, observers said. Even though Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt has declared removal of the dam a top priority, finding the money to do the work, up to \$80 million, has been a problem.

Those who want to remove the dam hope that by elevating the issue to a national level they can pressure Congress and the state Legislature to allocate the money. Edmondson said opponents of the dam will send a letter this week to state Sen. Byron Sher (D-Stanford), chairman of the Committee on Environmental Quality, seeking \$45 million. Another letter will be sent, he said, to the governor's natural resources chief, Mary Nichols, seeking 24 specialists from the state Department of Fish and Game to work on a plan to recover the southern steelhead.

The dam was built in 1947 for flood-control purposes. Built to store 5,000 acre-feet of water, it now holds only 500--or 163 million gallons.

It is full of mud, cracking apart, doesn't produce electricity and stores an inconsequential amount of water. It also blocks the migration of southern steelhead trout to the ocean.

Virtually nobody supports the dam. Even the agencies that own and operate it, including officials at the Ventura County Flood Control Department and the Casitas Municipal Water District, disparage it.

"I'd love to see the dam taken down. It's absolutely worthless," said Jim

Coultas, a director at the Casitas water district.

Without it, beaches could gain sand, fish could return, and day-trippers would have better access to the Ventura County back country.

That's good for the county's \$808-million tourist industry, said Kathy Janega-Dykes, executive director for the county Visitors and Conventions Bureau.

"Outdoor recreation is a vital part of our visitor industry," she said.

On the other hand, no one has devised a way to remove the 6 million cubic yards of silt behind it. It has to be done carefully, lest sediment accumulate in the riverbed and increase flood dangers for people living downstream.

But while the Ventura River has its problems, it's a far better stretch of stream than others in Southern California. The New River, for instance, is a fetid sump carrying Mexico's industrial waste and sewage to the Salton Sea in Imperial County. Dams, cow manure and treated effluent mar the Santa Ana River between San Bernardino and Orange counties. And the Los Angeles River has been converted to a concrete gutter.

But there is a solution to the Ventura River's problems, even if an expensive one. And the more attention the river and Matilija Dam get, the better the odds someone will help ante up to take it down.

The timing of the announcement was right for other reasons. A \$500,000 pilot project to remove an 800-square-foot chunk of the dam is scheduled in October. The California Coastal Conservancy is paying about half that, and the rest comes from local and federal sources.

The Lower Snake River in Idaho topped the list of most endangered rivers, while the north fork of the Feather River near Oroville, the only other California stream, ranked ninth.

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Among the hardest dictums for regulatory planners to swallow is this: possession is 90%. Nonetheless, it's a truism not lost upon a growing number of state conservancies, which have shown that acquisitions are among the best ways to safeguard California's natural resources and open spaces. And even though there has been grumbling about a perceived bias for funding of north state acquisitions over Southern California ones, recent history does not appear to support the complaint.

The state's oldest conservancy is the Wildlife Conservation Board, the purchasing arm of the Department of Fish and Game. The WCB buys habitat and linkage corridors with the express goal of preserving sensitive habitat, restoring habitat, and providing public access to areas for fishing and hunting. Since its inception in 1947, the board has purchased more than 630,000 acres, a land area almost the size of Sacramento County.

No summarized inventory of the acreage of projects based on a north-south split exists. But a review of projects by county might raise the question of whether there is a preponderance of WCB projects in Northern California. Arguments about north-south resource sharing loom large in California's history. But Executive Director John Schmidt scoffs at the idea that the WCB's acquisitions have been imbalanced. "You have to look at the cost of the project verses the resource gains," said Schmidt. "We look at the cost and benefit of acquisitions all over the state."

Although geography is understood as a background factor in purchasing decisions, conservancy planners strive to rise above regionalism. Still, in the expenditure of public moneys, politics are unavoidable. Conservancy officials all agree that land costs and population-based political power are both greater in Southern California.

They also acknowledge the historical predominance of state offices and their professionals in the north. And that may have led to some imbalance in acquisition efforts in the past. Take, for example, DFG's regional office distribution. Of six regional offices, four serve Northern California. And because the acquisition recommendations using WCB funds are forwarded out of the regional offices, it could be argued that 66% of the projects considered likely come from the four northern regions.

But Schmidt is quick to point out that all the state's resources are valued, and that favoritism plays no part of the picture. He cited the Santa Rosa Mountain project in the Riverside County desert as a case-in-point. The ongoing effort, begun in 1975 to protect Bighorn Sheep habitat, has resulted in the single largest property acquisition on the WCB's ledger — a total of 28,000 acres secured in the steep terrain southeast of Palm Springs.

But intangible evidence of bias still lingers. Schmidt himself

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STEPHEN SVETE

## Conservation Dollars Do Indeed Go South

remarked that "there's not much open space in LA County," ignoring the fact that only half of the populous but expansive jurisdiction is actually urbanized. A visit to the Board's web site highlights four current partnership acquisition projects — every one of them in Northern California.

Just as the WCB is tied to the Department of Fish and Game's official goals, the Coastal Conservancy implements the California Coastal Act and answers to the Coastal Commission. A look at Coastal Conservancy activities appears to flatly dispel any notion

of a northern bias. Though no formal inventory of land acquisition exists for the agency, recent purchases in the south state speak for themselves. In March, the Conservancy announced two major Ventura County acquisitions, the Ormond Beach wetlands and the Mandalay Dunes. According to California Coastal Conservancy spokesman Dick Wayman, the \$17 million Ormond Beach purchase of some of the last Southern California coastal wetlands represents the largest expenditure on one project during the agency's 20-year history.

Coastal Conservancy Planner Peter Brand suggests that the emergence of two circumstances gave rise to the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project, a unique regional effort being carried out by the well-regarded land trust. First, a broad public understanding of the importance of wetlands developed, driven in part by federal Clean Water Act implementation that has raised coastal wetland protection to the top of the Conservancy's agenda. Highly publicized development battles over Bolsa Chica in Orange County and Playa Vista in Los Angeles underscore the public concern over wetland development. Second, the emergence of substantial sums of money from Southern California port expansions — required by environmental permit conditions — has leveraged Conservancy acquisition efforts.

And, as Brand admitted, the south state has powerful friends in Sacramento these days.

Both Gov. Davis and Resources Secretary Mary Nichols forged their political careers in Los Angeles.

As conservancies gain strength, regional rivalries will probably dwindle — in direct relationship to Southern California's growing political clout. Of four

new regional state conservancies adopted by the Legislature during the last five years, three are in the south state.

Regionalism aside, land acquisition for conservation is immensely popular. "People understand that conservancies are a successful model of how to protect and manage land resources," said the Coastal Conservancy's Wayman. The rise in land trust support and power is none too soon.

"People in our business," said Brand, "realize that this is the last best chance to save these resources." ■

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### Wildlife Conservation Board

funding in millions of dollars projects by county fiscal year 1998-1999

