

CALIFORNIA'S WETLANDS

History of Wetland Loss

Prior to European colonization, the region now identified as California possessed approximately 5 million acres of wetlands. Those wetlands provided habitat for an abundance of resident wildlife and plant species, hosted tens of millions of migratory birds annually, provided nurseries for thriving fisheries, and performed numerous other natural functions, including flood and erosion control, and water purification.

Primarily after the mid 1800s, those wetlands were diked and drained to expand agricultural lands and for other developed uses. By mid twentieth century, fewer than 500,000 acres remained from the historical inventory. As a result, the functions performed by the original wetlands were seriously impaired. Populations of plants and animals disappeared or were dramatically reduced; pollutants in open waters increased as wetlands ceased to provide the cleansing function which had purified them; and dry land became more susceptible to erosion and flooding as buffering wetlands were filled.

The consequences of a century of wetland loss can be understood in simple and straightforward terms: 55% of California's endangered species are wetland dependent; commercial fisheries have been extirpated from California's inland waters; the sport fishing industry in San Francisco Bay, the State's largest remaining inland water body, is headed for a similar fate; costly erosion and flood control programs attempt to perform functions once provided for free by wetlands; and pollutant concentration in rivers, streams and coastal waters has increased.

Intensified Threats to Remaining Wetlands

Disturbingly, California's remaining wetlands are still in great jeopardy. Agricultural operations convert wetlands by draining them or altering their surface topography during the dry season. Urban development poses an expanded threat as the State's burgeoning population paves over surviving wetland areas. Finally, water diverted for agricultural, industrial and municipal uses steals the lifeblood from those undisturbed wetlands which have survived into the 1990s.

Wetlands serve a variety of useful functions which are key to the success of CalFed's program elements. CalFed's Ecosystem Restoration Plan holds great potential for restoration of some of the wetlands which have been lost and for enhancement and protection of existing wetlands. Wetland functions which assist in achieving important CalFed goals include:

- * Serving as "nurseries" for salmon hatchlings and other significant species
- * Filtering toxic pollutants from groundwater supplies
- * Recharging groundwater basins, thus reducing the need for surface storage
- * Acting as sponges that naturally control winter flooding
- * Allowing winter-fallowed agricultural fields to serve as seasonal wetlands, thereby preserving important farmlands

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Restoring the Balance

The continuing trend of wetland destruction is indicative of a society out of balance with its environment. Wetlands are being destroyed for private gain, not for public good. It is not essential, nor even desirable to build housing in wetlands or to drain them for pasture. Enlightened planning can accommodate all necessary developed uses while preserving and restoring California's wetland heritage.

In order to reclaim the valuable benefits they provide, significant tracts of wetlands must be protected and restored so that the trend toward diminished wetland functioning is halted and reversed. Because wildlife are the best indicators of wetland vitality, sufficient acreage should be restored to assure the long term viability of California's wetland species. Scientists estimate that reduction of available habitat to 10% or less of that which originally existed can cause extinction of resident species. Since California already has less than 10% of its wetlands left, it is imperative that wetlands be expanded to prevent further species loss. Therefore, in order to provide minimal guarantees that wildlife loss will be arrested and reversed, one million acres of wetlands should be restored and protected to achieve a net wetland inventory of 20% of the historical acreage. One million acres would provide a small buffer against decline to the 10% level, and would ensure that important wetland benefits such as flood control, water purification and groundwater storage are maintained and expanded.

Practical Solutions

In order to achieve the objective of restoring and protecting 1 million acres of wetlands, the public should be educated about the importance of wetland protection, the administration of wetland protection laws and policies should be improved, and state and federal legislation should be enacted which promotes wetland protection and restoration rather than wetland destruction. California's citizens can only benefit from the preservation and restoration of the State's wetland ecosystem. Socially and economically, California's wetlands should be a vital component of a thriving society in the next millenium.

It is long past time to recognize the tremendous value of California's wetlands, and to insure their future vitality. Generations to come will reap the benefits of our foresight, as we challenge the pattern of needless wetland destruction. Just as the birds and fish, we are members of California's living community. As we have sprawled carelessly across the landscape damaging the homes of non-human creatures, we have also drained the vigor of our own community. Thousands of jobs in the fishing industry have been lost, catastrophic flooding has destroyed homes and property, millions of dollars are spent to clean up toxics from wetland land fills, and human lives are lost as structures built on wetlands collapse during earthquakes.

Campaign to Save California Wetlands is a coalition of more than 160 organizations dedicated to implementing these solutions. We provide informational and organizational services for our members, perform analysis of wetland protection policies and proposals, offer educational briefings for decision makers and interested public, and recommend actions to promote the preservation and restoration of California's wetland ecosystem.

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