

MANAGING A WILD AREA IN AN URBAN SETTING: LESSONS FROM THE VENTURA RIVER*

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Managing a wild area in an urban setting presents special problems and opportunities. The experience gained over the last twenty years from efforts to better understand, manage and restore the Ventura River in southern California suggests some useful lessons which may apply in other urban (or even wild) settings.

The Ventura River is the northernmost major coastal stream in southern California, with a main course approximately 25 kilometers long, and another 72 kilometers of primary tributaries. The Ventura River begins in the Los Padres National Forest, but flows through several expanding residential communities before discharging to the Pacific Ocean within the City of San Buenaventura. Before the construction of Matilija Dam (1948) and the Casitas Dam (1958) on the river's major spawning tributaries, the California Department of Fish and Game estimated that the Ventura River supported an annual run of steelhead of between 4,000 and 5,000 adults.

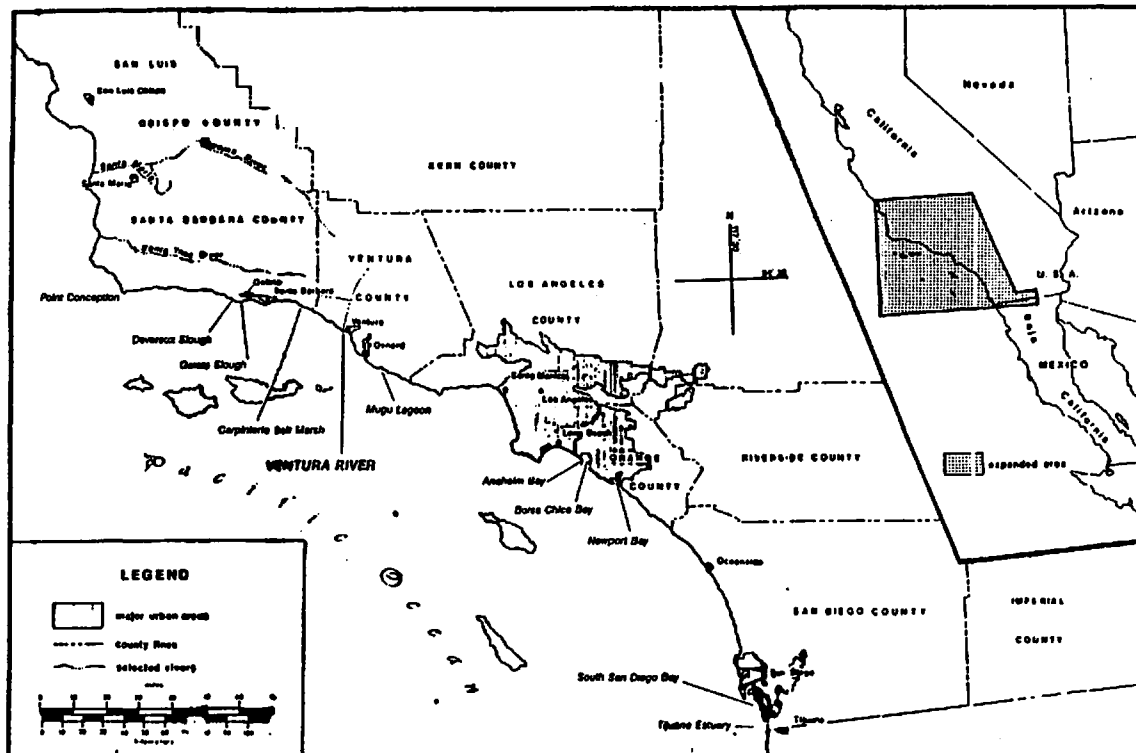
The sharp decline in the steelhead fishery on the Ventura River was accompanied by a sharp decline in the general interest in the river's other recreational, educational, and scientific uses. A renewed interest in the Ventura River was inaugurated in 1970 with an investigation of industrial pollution in the river by the Ventura County Fish and Game Commission. The investigation by the Commission culminated in a report in 1973 entitled: *The Ventura River Recreational Area and Fishery: A Preliminary Report and Proposal*. This effort, however, bore little fruit, other than raising public awareness of the river's past fishery resources, largely because its recommendations focused on controversial proposals to increase surface flows through releases from previously constructed reservoirs.

In 1974 a private organization Friends of the Ventura River was formed to pursue efforts to protect and restore the fish and wildlife resources of the Ventura River. The group's efforts also centered on the restoration of the trout and steelhead fishery as the most dramatic symbol of the both the river's former importance and future promise. The group, however, expanded its interests and activities to include a broad range of land

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use and water management planning issues, including review of individual development proposals, flood control practices, and preparation of comprehensive waste and water management plans affecting the Ventura River watershed.

The Friends also sponsored research of the Ventura River's resources, including a Master's Thesis prepared by Mark Moore in 1980 entitled: ***Factors Influencing the Survival of Juvenile Steelhead Rainbow Trout (*Salmo gairdneri gairdneri*) in the Ventura River, California***, which was the first systematic study of a southern California steelhead population.



The Friends most extended effort, however, involved a legal challenge to the City of San Buenaventura and the Casitas Municipal Water District's proposal to settle a dispute over prior water rights in the Ventura River. Under a Conjunctive Use Agreement, the City would have allowed the District to divert the entire low flow of the upper Ventura River into the Casitas Reservoir. This water was to be stored in the reservoir for later reuse by the City. The area affected by the proposed diversion included a two mile stretch which constituted the last steelhead spawning grounds in the main branch of the Ventura River.

The City and District initiated the environmental review of the project in 1976, and after repeated revisions in response to extensive public and agency comment certified an Environmental Impact Report in 1983. The Friends' suit filed in 1984 alleged among other things that the City and District's proposal to mitigate the projects impacts by maintaining a minimum flow of 1 cubic feet per second in the lower river was not

supported by substantial evidence. After an initial ruling by the Superior Court in the Friends' favor, the Superior Court reversed its ruling and the Friends filed an appeal with the Appellate Court in 1987. The Appellate Court then reversed the lower court ruling finding that "there is no substantial evidence to support a fair argument that measures adopted by respondents (City and District) and approved by the court below, will mitigate the devastating effect on the steelhead . . ." After an appeal by the City and the District, the Appellate Court decision was upheld in 1988 by the California Supreme Court.

Despite the extensive efforts to protect the fish and wildlife resources of the Ventura River, the Friends major achievements up to 1988 have been to prevent or mitigate additional impacts to the river's resources, not reverse past damages. The long and costly disputes over proposed developments or limited water resources have not produced positive results, and in some cases have contributed to solidifying official opposition to the protection of the natural resources of the Ventura River.

A new phase in the efforts to protect and restore the Ventura River was begun in 1987 with the initiation of a comprehensive botanical study of the lower Ventura River and Ventura River Estuary. The Study, organized by the Friends and conducted under the auspices of the Herbarium at the University of California, Santa Barbara included portions of Emma Wood State Beach and the City of San Buenaventura's Seaside Wilderness Park. Initially, the Study was intended to provide only an inventory of the wetland and upland plants associated with the Ventura River Mouth. However, in 1988 the California Department of Parks and Recreation awarded a grant to the Herbarium to expand the study to include management, restoration, and interpretive components. After nearly three and half years the Study was completed in August of 1990 entitled: ***Botanical Resources at Emma Wood State Beach and the Ventura River Estuary, California: Inventory and Management.*** In October 1990, the City of San Buenaventura was awarded a \$50,000 grant from the California Coastal Conservancy (with matching funds provided by the City and the California Department of Parks and Recreation) to develop a comprehensive resource enhancement plan for the Ventura River Estuary.

Experience with the Ventura River over the past twenty years suggests a number of lessons: first, effective protection of fishery resources requires a comprehensive rather than a single species approach to management; second, land use issues (including industrial, residential and related flood control activities) are as important as traditional water issues; third, effective environmental protection is enhanced by sound scientific research; fourth, often over-looked botanical resources can be a key to building a broader basis of understanding and support for protecting and restoring the fish and wildlife resources of a river system.