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The Press Democrat June 9, 2002



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ARTISTS WORK TO SAVOR, SAVE BEAUTY OF LAGUNA

Published on June 9, 2002
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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

PAGE: Q 12

Armed with palettes and cameras to capture the nostalgic appeal of rustic farm buildings, vintage machinery, weathered palm trees, migratory bird lairs, sensuous oaks, serpentine streams of sleepy waters and other hallmarks of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, artists sought images to convey the essence of the endangered sanctuary.

Stewards of the area, a once abundant oak woodland and historic campground, rallied painters and photographers with the help of the Art Workshop of Western Sonoma County to help stimulate an awareness of the region's natural beauty.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation used the tactic to address the modern-day dilemma of accommodating conservation and progress. In an effort to promote public appreciation of the area, which is largely off-limits to the public, the foundation relied on artists to convey the magic of the Laguna.

``They look like butterflies flitting across the

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landscape with their colorful palettes," said docent Bob Evans, a longtime friend of the Laguna, former science teacher, retired school administrator and author of the first high school textbook on ecology.

Looking out across the terrain dotted with canvases sprouting with vibrant colors at the Alpha Farm on Llano Road one sunny, but chilly day, during the artist sessions, Evans said he could imagine the restoration of the region.

He said the area should become a resource for the community, not a candidate for private enterprise that would drive away wildlife and change the area's vegetation.

But rather than holding public forums to raise awareness or handing out pamphlets on ecology, the foundation and the artist workshop decided to let the Laguna's beauty speak for itself.

More than 100 pieces of art created on the site will be auctioned Friday at an art project also celebrating the City of Sebastopol's Centennial.

Sebastopol was a chief advocate in an effort to protect and restore the Laguna in the 1970s. The city's Laguna Wetland Preserve is the only publicly-designated natural park in the Laguna designed for passive recreation and educational uses.

There are also small, scattered, limited-access restoration efforts and projects under way by the State Department of Fish and Game, the City of Santa Rosa and the foundation.

The 12-year-old foundation is currently working on a political maneuver to create a 10,000-acre reserve among the 28,000-acre territory stretching 14 miles from Cotati to Forestville. However, most of the lands -- about 90 percent -- belong to private interests.

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Laguna foundation members and artists hope that raising public interest in the area will create a constituency that will speak out for the betterment of the area.

As real estate in the North Bay rises in value and demand, large expanses like the Laguna are garnering developer interest that makes the ecologist and nature lovers passionate about the historic area leery.

Artists attended sessions at four farms -- Alfa, Brown, Kelly and Stone -- owned by the City of Santa Rosa. The sites are farmed by tenant farmers raising horses, hay and cattle.

Docents from the Friends of the Laguna program led a troupe of painters and photographers onto the areas which are typically off-limits to the general public. More than 60 artists took advantage of the sessions, which lasted up to four and a half hours, over the course of two seasons beginning in December.

"It's all amazingly beautiful. The light is perfect and there are great afternoon shadows, but the most amazing part is that this area is so rich with views. You go a little ways and you're in France; then a little further and you're in Ireland and next the Everglades," said landscape artist Nancy Hutchins.

Helen Shane, an organizer of the event and workshop artist, said that the ultimate goal of the sessions and art auction is simply to create a "Laguna constituency," people who will respect and appreciate its beauty and are vested enough to speak for the Laguna when it is considered for golf courses and shooting ranges.

You can reach Staff Writer Debra D. Bass at 521-5216 or dbass@pressdemocrat.com. PHOTO: 2 by MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

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1: Susan Ball paints at the Laguna de Santa Rosa.(
teaser, Q3)

2: Pastel artist Helen Shane works on location at
the Laguna de Santa Rosa. Her work is among
those of artists whose images of the Laguna will be
displayed for the public.

Infobox: LAGUNA ART

What: Laguna de Santa Rosa art auction, sponsored
by the Art Workshop of Sonoma County and the
Laguna foundation.

Where: Sebastopol Veterans' Memorial Building,
Auditorium, 282 S. High St., Sebastopol

When: 2:30 to 8:30 p.m., Friday. Wine and hors d'
oeuvres will be served from 5 to 7:30 p.m.

Information: 823-3744

How to help: For information on docent training,
being Laguna Keeper or volunteering to maintain
the preserve, contact the City of Sebastopol
Planning Department, 823-6167, or the Laguna de
Santa Rosa Foundation, 824-2966.

Keywords: ARTS RIVER ENVIRONMENT

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