

② Friends tour Laguna

by Bruce Robinson

A small but intensely interested group of local environmentalists turned out for an informal tour of portions of the Laguna de Santa Rosa

Saturday, and came away with a renewed appreciation of the unique waterway.

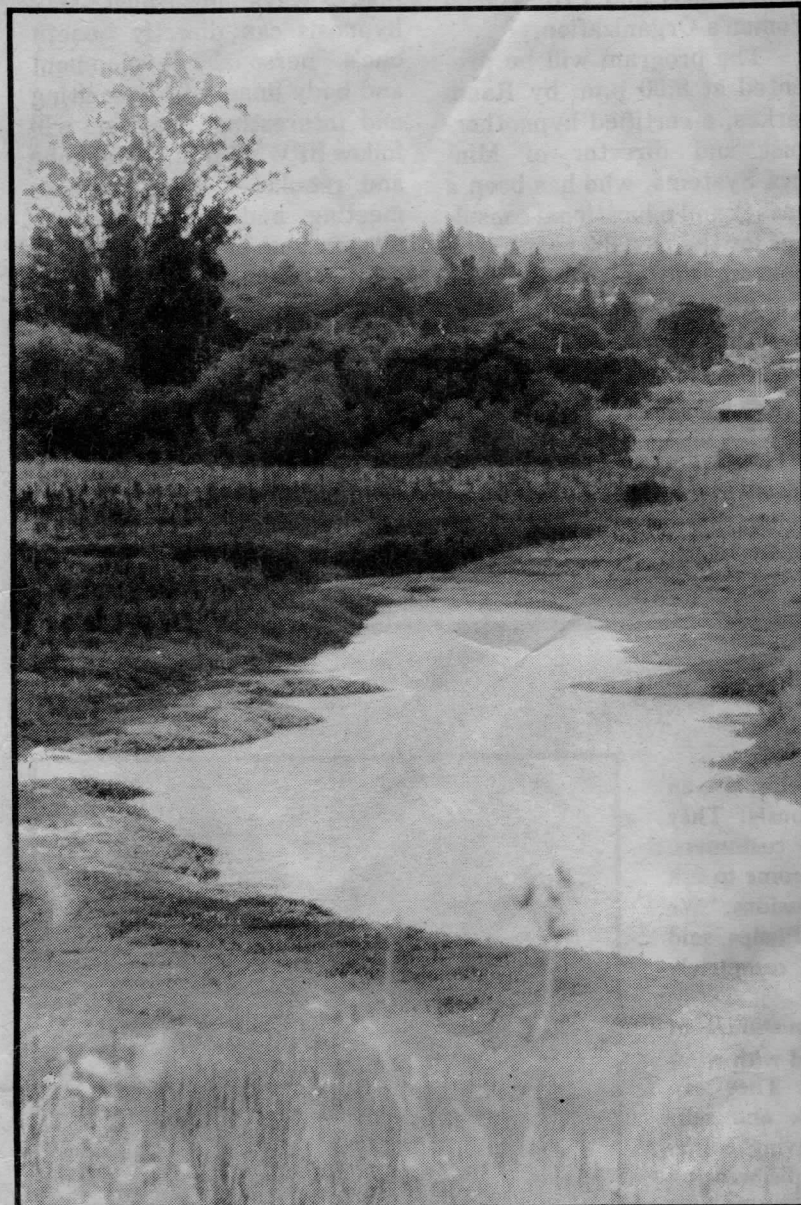
Led by Fish and Game ranger Bill Cox, the group visited several sites where revegetation projects and re-

creations of natural wildlife habitats are underway, as well as an area where the natural riparian forest has been left undisturbed.

The weekend walking tour was organized by Friends of the Laguna, a group of friends and neighbors who banded together early this year in response to the sewage spills that polluted the 14-mile long wetlands area. Many of the members live near the laguna, but knew little about its history and present status before forming their organization.

The three-hour visit to laguna ponds and marshlands Saturday represented a first-hand exploration of parts of the wetlands environment that the members of the grass roots environmental group had not seen before. "After seeing what I saw, I have a whole new perspective on the laguna," said Pam Morrow after the tour, adding that she was particularly impressed with the recently improved areas because "they show the possibilities that can happen" when efforts are made to restore some of the region's natural plant and wildlife.

Cox first led the group to an area west of Llano Road, adjacent to some fields where treated effluent is currently being used for spray irrigation. There, the Department of Fish and Game has constructed a series of connected ponds, each with islands in the center, to serve as renewed habitats for water fowl and other wildlife native to the laguna. The same wastewater that is used for the irrigation is circulated through the new ponds, where cattails and other natural marshland vegetation have quickly taken root in the year since the excavation of the ponds was completed. An encouraging



LUSH LAGUNA--This stretch of the Laguna de Santa Rosa west of central Sebastopol is flanked by thick green vegetation as it flows past the pasturelands where wastewater effluent is used for irrigation. But just a few yards away, a smaller channel has dried up for the summer, giving rise to an entirely different set of plants that emerge when the water level recedes.

85.1

Pg.1

West County News
June 27 - July 3, 1985

West County News
June 27 - July 3, 1985

85.1
Pg. 2



CONSERVATION CONVERSATION -- Fish and Game ranger Bill Cox explains how the man-made lake in the background was created to members of the Friends of the Laguna during their walking tour of the wetlands waterway last Saturday. In the five years since this lake was formed, it has become a popular habitat for migrating waterfowl as well as native wildlife and vegetation. (NEWS photos by Bruce Robinson.)

number of migrating ducks visited the area during the past winter, Cox reported. The circulated wastewater from those ponds is not allowed to flow into the main channel of the laguna during the summer months, however, so that other pools in the natural course of the waterway nearby had dried out, as they do each Summer, allowing other types of vegetation to grow there in contrast to the lush grass and rushes that lined the artificial pools.

Several miles to the north, just below Guerneville Road, Cox showed the small group another man-made feature of the laguna, a small lake that was formed in a pit where soil had been excavated for adjacent vineyards. By enlarging and shaping the hole in the ground, and diverting water into it from the main laguna channel nearby, Cox said a replication of the sprawling shallow lakes that once covered much of the Santa Rosa plain has been created, and has quickly begun to reestablish the area's natural vegetation, even without the active plantings of native species.

Cox, who designed the concept and oversaw the construction of the lake five years ago, admitted he still thinks of it as "my pond," but he was also generous in his praise of the adjacent property owner, the Frei Brother vineyards, for their cooperation in the project.

To conclude their tour, the group climbed a nearby rise that afforded a view of an undisturbed area of the riparian forest that once lined most of the laguna channel. Today, it stands in dramatic contrast to the man-modified lands that flank most of the laguna's length.

This was the first of several outings that Friends of the Laguna have planned. The group has scheduled a less scenic, informational visit to some of the sewage disposal system holding ponds on July 13, which will be led by a representative of the consulting firm that is now managing that system for Santa Rosa.

A repeat of the tour of the laguna itself will probably be scheduled sometime in the fall, in hopes that more people will join in on the second opportunity. For more information about these and other activities of the Friends of the Laguna, call 823-4548 or 823-3817, or write to Friends of the Laguna, 1209 High School Road, Sebastopol, 95472.



IRRIGATION CASUALTY?--Oak trees suffer when their roots are watered, but because it is a long-term process, there is insufficient data currently available to tell if the wastewater irrigation underway in this field just east of the Laguna contributed to the decline of the large oaks visible in the background behind the sprinklers. The thriving rushes in the foreground are growing along a small subchannel that feeds into the Laguna itself.

85.1

Pg. 2

West County News
July 3, 1985
June 27 -



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