

## Being an Environmentalist

# Carolyn Dixon — A Dedicated Environmentalist

by Marya Glass

The bumper sticker on the back of Carolyn Dixon's Toyota wagon says, "Save H<sub>2</sub>O." And embedded on the side of her front lawn is a rock. Not just a rock, but rather, a huge angular boulder that weighs a couple of tons. It was a "gift" from a friend. Her two children climb on it and play; lichens and mosses live on it.

For Dixon, this mammoth organic lawn decoration typifies her life and work. She's a natural resources manager, who works to preserve and restore the natural habitats of Sonoma County—which include wildlife, native vegetation, wetlands, and, yes, even rocks.

For over a decade, Dixon has been tirelessly working on an impressive number of projects, all concerning the fragile state of Sonoma County's ecosystems. She has been or is involved with groups such as The California Native Plant Society, Sonoma County Farmlands, Sonoma County Wetlands Watch, North American Waterfowl Management Group, California Oak Foundation, and the Environmental Center, to name a few.

"It's hard not to be involved with any number of these groups because some of them overlap," says Dixon. "As a result, I end up circulating among a lot of organizations. There are some wonderful people out there who have inspired me."

**"I'm angry that quite often a developer or land speculator will temporarily — in order to destroy the resource value of a piece of property and then maximize its development."**

With an enthusiastic energy and down-to-earth disposition, Dixon takes a half hour out between work, fixing dinner and one of several extra-curricular meetings, to talk in the backyard patio. She's landscaped her house with native wildflowers, grasses and shrubs. Cricket, the family dog, settles in on the bench where we sit.

Right now Dixon is focusing on wetlands and waterfowl preservation, along with revegetation of native plant species. As a part time employee at the City of Santa Rosa, she works in the Reclamation Department. There she's out in the field, surveying land and helping restore local habitats, as well as spending part of her time behind a desk.

The other half of her work week is spent with the Sonoma Land Trust, a non-profit organization that buys and protects open space in the county. One of her tasks with the Land Trust is to organize occasional "broom bashes," where brigades of volunteers attempt to eradicate non-native Scotch broom, a shrub that threatens to choke out indigenous plant species.

Since she works for both the city government, as well as for an organization "on the other side," Dixon says some people might call her a "double agent." But she maintains that all of her endeavors are geared toward the preservation of the local natural environment.

Where does her energy and love of the earth come from?

"I've always been outdoors," Dixon says. "And we did an incredible amount of camping—my mother was a scout camp director."

She moved to Sonoma County in 1957, where she's been ever since. While balancing her family life with school, Dixon, 40, received her B.A. in environmental studies and planning, with an emphasis on natural resources management, from Sonoma State University last January. Her parents live in Rincon Valley, and Dixon has lived in west Santa Rosa for the last 12 years.

"I started out in my back yard, knowing there was something special about this flood plain and the Laguna," she says.

The back of her house overlooks expansive fields dotted with native oak trees and endangered meadowfoam

willflowers. She points to newly sprouted oaks while talking of the City's restoration plans.

"The City owns 100 acres in the Laguna (much of it near Todd Road and the Laguna Trail) which will be restored to natural habitat. It's part of their wastewater disposal program. They're trying to implement better management practices," she says. "They're taking areas out of agriculture and saving them specifically for wildlife habitat. A lot of people don't understand that the City of Santa Rosa is probably doing more active restoration than any organization."

To her dismay, Dixon sometimes spots unregulated, illegal filling in the flood plain areas of western Santa Rosa.

"If they really thought it out, they wouldn't be filling these vernal pools which retain flood water.

When you fill those holes, you just send the water into your foundation—or into the neighbor's yard. You're just dispersing the problem to somewhere else!" she says.

"Creating wetlands and saving wetlands is the key to the problem," Dixon says emphatically. "What we need out here is a series of preserves, established open space adequate enough to save endangered species and protect wildlife."

She cites other cities in California such as Visalia, Santa Barbara and parts of San Diego county that have strict riparian, filling and grading ordinances to which agriculture is not exempt. Here, she says, agriculture is exempt "from everything."

She adds, "I sympathize with the farmers and I want them to continue to farm. But I'm angry that quite often a developer or land speculator will endeavor into agriculture—temporarily—in order to destroy the resource value of a piece of property, and then maximize its development." Her passion runs deep, for Dixon sees the land as much more than a commodity.

"Land isn't just land anymore," she says. "It's a living, breathing, oscillating, functioning little micro-world of its own. And everything has something special to offer. Once you know that, it's hard to watch mismanagement."

She says a section of land doesn't have to have a pertified forest on it or contain a special landmark in order to be preserved. When surveying property, she's often asked, "is my land good enough" for preservation. To which Dixon responds, "Land is worth preserving not because it's special, but because it's normal."

Dixon spreads her message to the general public in many ways. She leads classroom field trips and gives talks at the JC and SSU. She presents a lecture series on water resources and conservation for classrooms in the Petaluma library.

But it's the hands-on field work that is the most gratifying for her. Just recently she worked with the City



Carolyn Dixon and her dog Cricket in their backyard.

of Santa Rosa and Circuit Rider Productions to plant 450 trees along the Laguna. She collects non-endangered common native plants and seeds for revegetation projects. "I'm really lucky because I get to go out and plant trees," she says with a grin.

Surprisingly, Dixon says she's never applied for a job or sent out a resume.

"I really believe that if you care about something and it matters to you, then you're gonna do it for fun, whether people pay you or not," she says. "And while you're doing that, people recognize that you know what you're doing and they want you. You create your own job."

Does Carolyn Dixon call herself an environmentalist? With some hesitation, she does. But with characteristic humility, she's quick to acknowledge all the guidance and help she's received from friends and colleagues.

"I'm a resource manager, and I'm doing the best that I can to resolve some very complicated issues. Some people would say that means I'm an environmentalist." But she adds, "I couldn't do it alone. Without the support of a lot of people, none of us would be effective."

Dixon's future plans may include the formation of a toxic task force for southwest Santa Rosa. And she keeps very busy with the ongoing struggle to save this area from widespread annexation, which she says, would increase the population from 11,000 to 42,000.

Is there hope for the native grasses, egrets, wildflowers and wetlands of Sonoma County? According to Dixon, yes.

"There's always hope. Because if you say there's no hope—you're right. If you've given up, you've lost the battle."

Marya Glass is an assistant editor for the E.I.R. She has a degree in environmental studies and planning, and recently earned her journalism certificate from Sonoma State University. She currently freelances and lives in Petaluma.

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