

The History

The Laguna de Santa Rosa

By Marco Waland

In order to know where we must go to effectively restore our natural environment, it is helpful to know from whence we came. This article reports on the historical ecology that existed prior to the white man's arrival and how this land has been altered since.

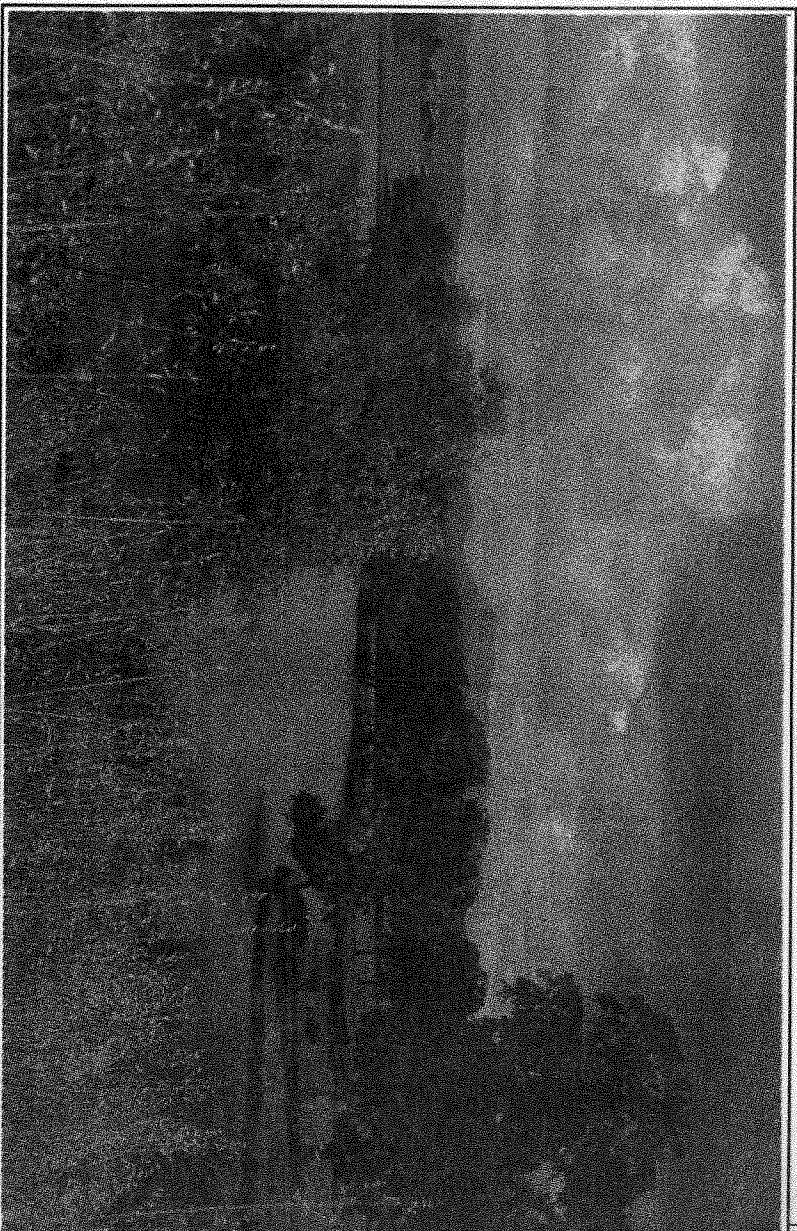
Records of the Past

Prior to the arrival of the white man, the Laguna region was occupied by three different Native American communities: 1) the Kohnomtara, claiming the Sebastopol side of the Laguna; 2) the Bitakomtara, claiming the Santa Rosa side; and 3) the Keitacemi, which claimed some of the Laguna near Mark West Creek. These groups were politically autonomous, but spoke dialects of the Southern Pomo language. They kept no written records, but early accounts were recorded by the non-indigenous settlers.

In 1850, wildlife and waterfowl were abundant in the Laguna. Journal notes written by one of the first settlers to come to Sonoma County, Frank Marryat, record observations about his new-found home. The ecosystem was "... studded with groups of oaks and flowering evergreens ... herds of deer ... and here and there a drove of elk or antelope ... [Marsh full of wild fowl ... wooded plain with grasses as tall as ourselves ... abounded with deer, elk and antelope ... shot all that came in our way ... native horses ... much wild duck ...]" Included in this scene were the grizzly bears which feasted on the silver salmon and steelhead migrating to spawning gravels throughout the Mark West Creek, Santa Rosa Cree and Laguna de Santa Rosa watersheds.

One of the most dominant ecosystems of the early Laguna environment was oak woodland vegetation. From a high spot on the west side of the valley, Marryat reported a "thickly wooded plain extended for miles — on one side bounded by mountains, on the other...the winding Russian River." In 1859, another traveler, Bayard Taylor recorded: "As we got out of the shabby little village of Santa Rosa, I perceived we were already in the Russian River Valley. Its glorious alluvial level, sprinkled with groves of noble trees, extended far and wide before us."

However, the environment had begun to exhibit the effects of man. Marryat noted, "The greater part of the land was evidently claimed and the series of fenced and



Laguna de Santa Rosa between Occidental and Highway 12 in Sebastopol.

cultivated fields on either side of the road was almost uninterrupted. It was melancholy to see how wantonly the most beautiful trees in the world had been destroyed, for the world has never seen oaks as grow in the Russian River Valley. The fields of griddled and blackened skeletons seemed doubly hideous by contrast with the glory of the surviving trees." Evidence of the extent of oak tree loss from the Laguna environs can be seen in typical railroad shipment data from the little village of Fulton in 1878: 9000 cords firewood; 1000 cords tanbark (oak used in tanning leather); and 150 railroad carloads of charcoal.

From these early accounts, it is clear that the Santa Rosa plain and Laguna were much wilder in the past, but the land was already subject to human induced modification. In fact, the local Native American Indian communities had a large effect on the landscape through the practice of burning: "The rainy season was approaching and the heat became occasionally intense," states Marryat. "At times, the Indians would fire the surrounding plains, the long oat-straw of which would ignite for miles. The flames would advance with great rapidity, leaving everything behind them black and charred ... The Digger Indians burn the grass to enable them to get at roots and wasp nests; the young wasps being a luxury with them."

Depletion of Wildlife and Waterfowl

Soon after the arrival of settlers, the Laguna provided much of the food supply for "Cold Rush" San Francisco. Marryat records that, "The wild fowl came over in heavy

The combined effect of the market hunters had decimated waterfowl to such a degree by 1897 that a local gun club prevailed on the Board of Supervisors to outlaw commercial hunting.

flight and settled in our vicinity. The geese were in incredible numbers; white and grey geese and brant. Of ducks we had several varieties and I regret that I failed, from want of materials, in my endeavors to preserve specimens of them. The geese are very easily shot when they arrive, soon became very wary...Herons and curlew were plentiful, and very tender; jack-snipe in great abundance; but I never disturbed them; for I am a good sportsman.

See Laguna on Next Page

Who Regulates What?

The Labyrinth of Regulations

Last issue we touched on wetlands regulation at the Federal level. This issue focuses on the State level. Although the number of agencies involved in some capacity still are numerous,* there is one State agency which plays the most important role: The Department of Fish and Game. Our research has uncovered the maze and lack of coordination between all the bodies. We hope that as more research is done, the picture will become clearer. Until then, the best way to explain what happens at the State level is to walk through the steps necessary to obtain a permit.

State

A developer wants to build something. Let's say his/her property is in the County. He must first apply to the County Planning Department. The County is responsible for identifying possible impacts and determines what agencies require review of the project. If the project appears to have a potential of encroaching on a wetland, the County sends a short form to the Department of Fish and Game. The Department of Fish and Game gives a cursory review, analyzing the project based on their wetland policies in relationship to loss of habitat and organisms dependent on the ecosystem. If it appears the wetland area is in danger, the Department recommends appropriate mitigation measures and sends information back to the County.

Now, the developer is responsible for surveying the property to determine if there is an impact. At some

point the Army Corps of Engineers needs to issue a permit or deny issuance. The County, however, doesn't send a notice to the Army Corps of Engineers, the developer is responsible for doing this. However, cities usually send a notice directly to the Army Corps of Engineers. Luckily, the Department of Fish and Game sends a copy of its analysis to the Army Corps of Engineers. It is important to note that the Department of Fish and Game is only advisory to the Army Corps of Engineers and to any lead agency requiring their input. Even if the County approves the project, it still needs to receive approval from the Army Corps of Engineers.

Sideline: The Water Quality Control Board doesn't play an important role — they have very little experience in wetlands. The San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board, however, does review potential projects in wetlands.

Next issue will clarify the County's role. By then, the picture will become clearer.

Source: Department of Fish and Game

*County of Sonoma, Sonoma County Water Agency, Sonoma-Marin Mosquito Abatement District, Local Agency Formation Commission, City of Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Cotati and Rohnert Park, North Coast Water Quality Control Board, Bay Area Air Quality Management District, California Department of Fish and Game, Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Wetlands Update

North American Waterfowl Management Plan:

Still in process.
Contact person: Ken Zanzi, Dept. of Fish & Game 707-944-5522.

Vernal Pool Task Force

Still in process.
Contact person: Tom Roth 576-1466.

Russian River Enhancement

Still in process.
Contact person: Karen Gaffney, Circuit Rider Productions 838-6641.

Restoration of Santa Rosa Creek

City Planning Commission adopted refinements to plan which eliminated some of the paths and outback restoration area. County Planning Commission is now reviewing it. Remains to be seen if County will consider original plan, recommend refinements, or alter the plan more. Some opposition from people concerning private property rights, although no adverse condemnation is written into document. Will most likely be going back to City and County Planning Commission for final adoption in late summer or early fall. Then, City Council and Board of Supervisors will be reviewing their recommendations.
Contact person: Bill Carle, 545-4910.

Laguna Master Plan

Draft Master Plan will be reviewed again by the Parks and Recreation Commission on June 3. Copies of Volumes I and II can be purchased at the Planning Department for \$10 each. Will go to the Planning Commission and the City Council in late June or July.
Contact person: Richard Splitter, Sebastopol City Planner 823-6167.