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## **Restoring the Laguna**

### **Beleaguered waterway benefits from the work of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation**

**By Pete Mortensen, Sonoma West Discovery**

The Laguna de Santa Rosa has a somewhat checkered history.

Though an essential watershed of Sonoma County, the 14-mile-long chain of lakes was abused for most of the 20th century, as residential and commercial development went in along its shores, banks were channelized and lakes were drained for agricultural use.

But the Laguna has persevered, and the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation has worked to see it restored since its founding in 1989. Much remains to be done, but gradually the area has come to be viewed as a place to recreate in central Sonoma County. Foundation docents now offer guided walking tours, trees have been planted and swales constructed to bring the body of water closer to its natural state.

In 2004, the wetlands north of Occidental Road were restored, beginning to give the Laguna its natural shape back. That shape was lost in the 1960s to channelization. In the same area, hundreds of tons of ludwigia, an invasive species that has made serious inroads in the Laguna, were torn out and hauled away. For the first time in many years, the stretch of water leading north from the Occidental Road Bridge is navigable, leading to a rookery populated with great blue herons, cormorants and even the odd bald eagle. Moreover, river otters stalk the area, fishing and playing in the sun.

As soon as I heard the words “river otters,” I was drawn to the Laguna. I spent many days of my childhood and slightly younger adulthood on the rivers and lakes of northern Michigan near my grandparents' home. From a kayak or a canoe, I spotted herons and muskrats in the summer sun. It's a great way to spend a morning, not to mention an efficient method for getting a sunburn.

Joany Goodwin, the major donor and events coordinator with the Laguna Foundation, helped connect me with three wildlife and aquatic enthusiasts: John Condon, a retired police officer and river tour guide who lives about a mile from the bridge; Dan Jackson, a photographer and Denise Cadman, a board member of the Laguna Foundation and a Natural Resource Specialist for the city of Santa Rosa.

I met the four on a grey, drizzly Friday morning at Santa Rosa's Stone Farm facility, which will one day host the Laguna Learning Center. We loaded into Condon's truck, laden with five kayaks, and drove the last quarter mile to the water's edge.

Condon led us through a quick kayaking refresher course before taking us into the main channel. The water was placid and murky-brown. Cadman marveled at the constantly changing face of the Laguna.

“We come out here sometimes and the water flows north,” she said. “Other times, it flows south, and sometimes it's still like this. It's a different experience every time.”

Because of its ever-changing condition, safety is of the utmost concern when kayaking on the Laguna. Underwater hazards are not always visible, and a series of fences separate different areas of the channel that can only be crossed when the water is high enough. It is recommended that you only head out with an experienced guide and in safe conditions. You can contact the Laguna Foundation for more information by visiting [www.lagunadesantarosa.org](http://www.lagunadesantarosa.org) or calling 527-9277.

The Laguna received a lot of media attention (most of it unwanted) during the New Year's floods in January, as wastewater treatment facilities in Santa Rosa and Sebastopol both sent wastewater into the flood, contaminating the Laguna. During floods, the Laguna acts as an outlet to the Russian River. It's estimated that, without the Laguna, the River could rise as much as 14 feet higher during the most severe flooding. Despite the large release of waste into the water, Cadman said as we paddled, the flood hadn't been much of a setback from an ecological perspective, since it's designed to process natural waste.

“It's nothing compared to the run-off from roads,” she said. Such discussion made me think on the incredible resilience of waterways and wetlands.

“We're lucky they are,” Cadman replied. I nodded and paddled onward.

The section of the Laguna we were traveling was closed off to kayakers just a year ago, Cadman said. The removal of the Ludwigia, along with the promotion of swales at its edges, are keeping the channel open for winter recreation. Other than a couple of densely overgrown patches, the Laguna was calm and easy to navigate, even for an amateur kayaker such as myself.

As our party drifted away from the bridge and its traffic, we paddled toward peace. It's a rare spot, even in western Sonoma County, to find true solitude, but we soon entered a section so quiet and still that each splash of a paddle through the water stood out like a cough during a church service.

The mocking laughter of water fowl surrounded us on all sides. Wood ducks and great blue herons soared overhead, their silhouettes outlined against the late-morning sun. Again and again, I was amazed by the commonalities between the Laguna's corridor and the streams of Northern Michigan. Every animal was in common; even the smell in the air, fresh and musty, brought me back to my past.

After almost 90 minutes of paddling, the clouds had vanished, and we reached the rookery by the city of Santa Rosa's Delta Pond. A dozen cormorants dotted the canopy of a cluster of leafless trees to the east. Condon cautioned us into silence as we approached - here be otters.

Before us, in a scene out of a nature film, a mother otter and two pups romped in the winter sun, lazing on their backs and going for long dives in the flood waters. Naturally, we were too loud and too slow to get pictures, but those in my head will last longer anyway.

The Laguna is an incredible resource for the county, and I can't wait to see what it can become in the years ahead. Maybe one day its 14 miles will again be the wildlife haven it was always meant to be.

