

## It's time to get acquainted with the Laguna

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If you wash your car in your driveway in central Sonoma County, the grease and grit and suds likely will end up in the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

That's also the probable destination of whatever you leave behind when you take a shower, park your leaky car or spit in the gutter.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is the drain at the bottom of the big sink in which we live. Almost everything that happens in that sink - which stretches from Windsor to Hood Mountain, from Sonoma Mountain to Sebastopol - eventually finds its way into the vast wetland.

Almost everything, that is, except people.

The Laguna is a wilderness in the middle of civilization. Surrounded by cities, it remains cut off from all but the most determined explorers.

Which may be why it has been so mistreated for so long. Out of sight, out of mind.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation is out to change that. The nonprofit hosts a conference this week designed to focus attention on what it calls "the most biologically diverse region of Sonoma County."

That diversity has attracted a large field of scientists, ranging from university researchers to government regulators to consulting biologists. At least three dozen researchers representing two dozen agencies, universities, nonprofits and private firms will meet in what Laguna Foundation Executive Director Dan Schurman calls "a coming-out party" for the Laguna.

Christina Sloop, the research director for the Laguna Foundation, said the 250-square-mile Laguna attracts scientific interest because of its diversity of plant and animal life. Almost 300 varieties of plants, more than 200 species of birds and dozens of mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians have been identified as residents of or visitors to the Laguna.

"There are so many small eco- systems there," Sloop said. "You can find vernal pools all over California, but the ones in the Laguna are unique in so many ways that they attract a lot of interest."

In the Laguna, scientists study oaks, flowers, grasses and all kinds of invasive weeds. They study wastewater discharges, flooding, urban runoff and sediments. They study salamanders, slugs, turtles, crayfish, cows and sheep.

But while all of those have an impact on the Laguna, the area's long-term health most heavily depends on the impacts of a mammal more ubiquitous than cows and more destructive than any weed. I'm talking, of course, about humans.

We affect the Laguna every time we flush a toilet, start a car or sweep a few grass clippings into the street. We affect it through the leaders we elect, and the decisions they make about development, transportation, infrastructure and funding.

But we have no idea of the impact of our actions, because we have such little opportunity to experience this natural wonder. Other than some stunning roadside views such as those offered along High School Road north of Sebastopol, there are few ways to see the Laguna without a boat or a landowner's permission.

Efforts are being made to change that. Sebastopol's Laguna Park and the county Open Space District's plan for trails along the east side of the waterway are a good start. A trailhead with parking and a safe place to launch boats will be better.

Still, some who care about the Laguna balk at the idea of public access, arguing that portions are so sensitive they shouldn't be open to unsupervised visitation.

As those discussions move forward, though, the stewards of the Laguna should keep in mind that it's not the people who get to know the Laguna who represent its biggest threat. It's the ones who don't.

Field trips along the Laguna will be offered Sunday as part of this weekend's conference. For information, go to [www.Lagunadesantarosa.org](http://www.Lagunadesantarosa.org).