

Animal Welfare

Residents cry foul over plan for birds

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SANTA CRUZ — When they're eating homeowners' lawns and fighting over hand-fed bread, the domesticated ducks and geese at Westlake Pond are considered pests.

But when city officials recently unveiled a biologist's recommendations that the birds be removed — even killed if necessary — controversy broke out in the quiet neighborhood surrounding the pond and park.

Residents rushed to the defense of the white-feathered flock, most of which are former Easter pets "liberated" by their owners.

"They were once people's pets. Families still come up to see them," said Doris Maddock, who has lived on Majors Street since 1957. She and her husband, Robert, raised their children there, and even used to run an amateur duck hospital out of their garage.

Particularly upsetting to the neighbors was one recommendation that the domestic ducks and geese be put to sleep or donated to the UC Santa Cruz' Predatory Bird Project to be used as food for the hawks and other raptors there, if they couldn't be adopted.

"I don't want them all sent away, and I don't want any of them put to sleep," said Cathe Harris, a 35-year resident of Allegro Street.

"I'm not against thinning out the flock, but I don't want them killed," said Berna Nitzberg, another Majors Street resident. Referring to Adolf Hitler's plan to exterminate European Jewry, Nitzberg called the biologist's recommendations "the final solution to wildlife at Westlake Pond."

However, Brian Walton, coordinator of the UCSC Predatory Bird Project, said the birds would not end up as fodder for hawks and eagles, because the project raises its own animals, mainly chickens and domestic quail, and "could not accept" the Westlake fowl as food for the raptors.

Some neighbors of the pond have long been after the city's Parks and Recreation Department and Public Works Department to take better care of the pond.

Westlake Pond looks like it's in far better condition than most bodies of fresh water in Santa Cruz County. But tules grow tall and spread quickly. Silt builds up and constantly makes the pond shallower, murkier and more oxygen-deprived.

Suspicious-looking scum collects at the "head" of the pond, where a storm drain empties its contents into the water.

Both the neighbors and city officials agree that the pond and park need some improvements, but they disagree over what is really hurting the pond most.

Most residents believe the pond began to decline in the mid-1970s, when the city engineered a storm drain to dump into the pond. Many residents contend that most of the pond's health problems stem from polluted waters pouring in through that drain.

City officials, on the other hand, say they believe the street dirt and car oils that come in with the storm water are a minor problem. They say most of the pond's troubles stem from the overpopulation of domestic birds and from the messy, unhealthy foods that visitors innocently offer them.

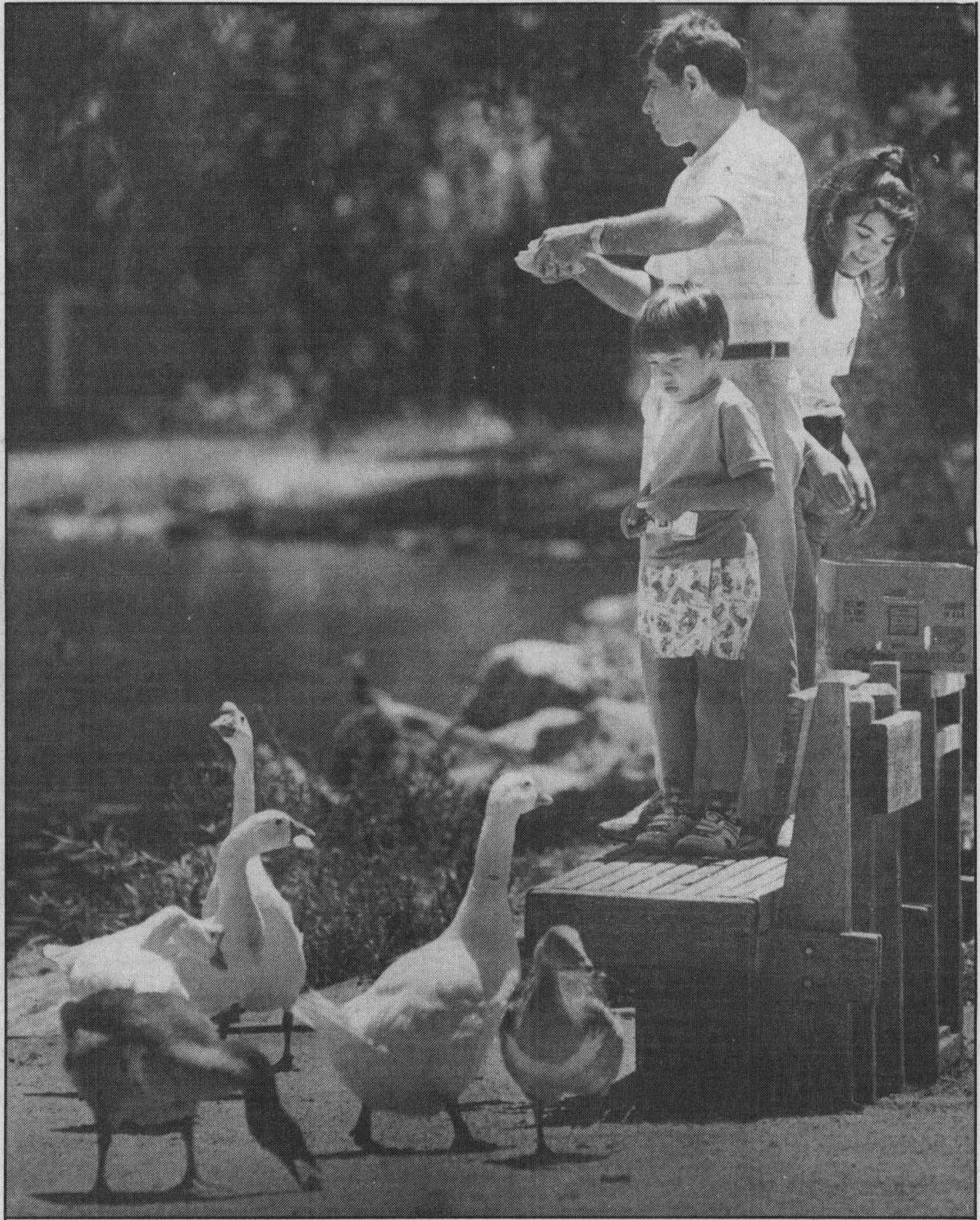
Maddock and Harris said they were pleased last month when Rudy Quintanar, city parks director, agreed to have the parks department commission a long-term water study to settle the question.

Some neighbors say that the city has failed to follow a pond maintenance plan recommended by experts in 1976, shortly after the city installed the storm drain.

City parks officials say many of the maintenance steps recommended in 1976, such as dredging the pond and cleaning streets frequently, are impossibly expensive.

The long-standing debate between the city and the neighbors came to a boil last year when the city instituted its "Dr. Duck" campaign to discourage public feeding of birds at all the city's fresh-water ponds.

The don't-feed policy went over like a lead zeppelin in the Westlake neighborhood after the hungry birds



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Ducks and geese at Westlake Pond thrive on free handouts from kindly visitors.

started foraging in residents' front yards, destroying their lawns in search of bugs and tender shoots, according to neighbors and city officials.

Quintanar said city officials started meeting with a neighborhood committee to work out the complaints, and the department agreed to commission the new pond report.

In that report, released in its final form this spring, the biologist said the pond would be healthier and have more "wildlife value" if the domestic birds were removed and the pond were left for the use of wild birds, such as migratory mallards and other, rarer species. The biologist recommended banning duck feeding because bread and produce equal malnutrition for the fowl.

Quintanar said the recommendations in the report won't be carried out until the department finishes negotiating and consulting with the neighbors. Quintanar said he hopes the city and residents can reach agreement on some points by September.