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Easy solutions elude troubled Schwan Lake

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SANTA CRUZ — Neighbors of Schwan Lake in the Twin Lakes area had to stop windsurfing and sailing on the state-owned lake this summer when the water became overgrown with weeds and algae.

"Everyone is interested in the lake," said John Smith, who was born and raised next to Schwan Lake. "Everyone remarks what a beautiful lake. Except in the summer when they say, 'What is that, a cesspool?'"

The weeds are so thick they tangle on the oars of a rowboat. Algae has also created a yellow film on two-thirds of the lake's surface, making it unsuitable for swimming.

"We only swim here if it's accidental," Smith said, jokingly.

Now the residents, who have used this state-owned lake recreationally for decades, are working to save the lake and want the state to pay for it. But the state might not spend the millions it may take.

Les Sternad, wetland coordinator for the California Coastal Commission expressed dismay over the current state of Schwan Lake as a freshwater lagoon.

"There are a couple of property owners who wanted the state to maintain the lagoon as this pleasing urban wetland," he said. But Sternad said there are "insufficient dollars to manage something out of its natural state. ...

"I do have a serious objection of the public of California maintaining for a few individuals a system which isn't naturalized."

Originally Schwan Lake was a tidal estuary. But in the '30s, East Cliff Drive was built between the lagoon and the ocean, transforming Schwan into a freshwater lagoon.

A California General Plan for Twin Lakes written in June 1988 by the Department of Parks and Recreation supports keeping the separation between the ocean and the lagoon, up to a point. "Schwan's Lagoon will continue to be managed as a freshwater lake," it reads, "as long as that appears to provide

the best combination of natural, esthetic, and recreational benefits to the public."

"We have altered significantly in the last 100 years what that system does," Sternad said in a phone interview. "And in my opinion, the best solution would be to allow a naturalized system to return." He wants it reconnected to the ocean, like Corcoran Lagoon and Moran Lake.

"I'm convinced that East Cliff Drive will some day be wiped out in a storm," he said.

But if Sternad's idea of naturalizing Schwan were put into effect, the lake could empty and fill periodically with the tide.

"Our department got the feeling that the residents didn't want that," said state Parks District Superintendent Ray Jenkins.

"All you have to do is look down at Corcoran Lagoon," Smith said. "It's worse than this. It's matted. Ducks can barely get through it now."

Smith said when Schwan Lake used to empty and fill with the tides

of the ocean, an unacceptable odor ensued. "Old-timers remember one year, maybe more, when the odors were so bad it changed the color of the houses."

At a Wednesday morning meeting near the lake organized by Smith, 15 residents told state Park Resource Ecologist Kenneth Gray and Jenkins that they want the lake's weed problems solved and its status as a freshwater body maintained.

At the meeting, Jenkins told residents a staff biologist would start work on Schwan Lake's problem.

But in a phone interview after the meeting, he said this was a complicated issue with no easy answers.

"We're kind of caught in the middle of this thing," he said. "If there weren't people there we'd go natural. There's no really good answer to it unless you want to go into a multimillion-dollar process. We'll go for the lowest level we can get by with."

He said the county-owned dam on which the road is built also com-

plicates matters. "The county built the dam," he said. "They pulled the bridge out" that used to span the estuary.

Jenkins said that the state has had a general plan to deal with the lake on many issues, but up to this point it has been non-specific. "In a way this is forcing our hand, and saying 'get busy.'"

Gray said a situation like this wouldn't be a concern in a more natural environment. But the lake's use as a recreational site means it must be maintained as a freshwater body.

"If something like this were happening in a natural area we wouldn't do a thing," he said. "But here we've got specific objectives."

Jenkins said that poor access to the lake may hurt chances for government spending on it.

Residents near the lagoon plan to form a non-profit organization to try to gain assistance from the state-funded Coastal Conservancy, which gives grants to non-government environmental groups.