

Watsonville Wetlands Watch celebrates 20 years of preservation

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Wetlands RP 10-16-12

WATSONVILLE — As an American white pelican swooped down over a glistening Struve Slough, a group of tour-goers overlooking the wetland from Tarplant Hill excitedly grabbed their binoculars to take in the sight.

It is scenes such as this that the Watsonville Wetlands Watch has helped protect for 20 years, and this milestone was celebrated during a ceremony Saturday at the Fitz Wetlands Educational Resource Center.

The ceremony, attended by past and present volunteers, city dignitaries and others, reflected upon the organization's achievements and its direction for the future.

The event also featured a speech by U.S. Rep. Sam Farr and performances by the Pajaro Valley Ohlone Indian Council's Amah-ka-tura group and Aromas folk duo Alisa Fineman and Kimble Hurd.

A tour of the wetlands by Jonathan Pilch, restoration director, and John Pritchard, restoration specialist, rounded out the day.

"We are a small, complex and dynamic organization," said Kris Beall, executive director. "We wouldn't have



Kris Beall, executive director for Watsonville Wetlands Watch, speaks about the group's work.

Erik Chalhouh/Register-Pajaronian

accomplished anything without the robust and enthusiastic bunch of docents."

The organization was founded in 1992 when a group of people put a stop to an 800-home development project that had been proposed for the uplands of Struve Slough.

After the victory, the group expanded their goal to protect the 800-acre slough system in Watsonville.

Over the years, the group developed volunteer docent and stewardship programs which involve local schools, and became the definitive voice on the Watsonville slough system.

City Manager Carlos Palacios, who said he's been in Watsonville for 20 years, around the time the Watsonville Wetlands Watch got its start, watched the small group quickly grow into the organization it is today.

"It's been great," he said.

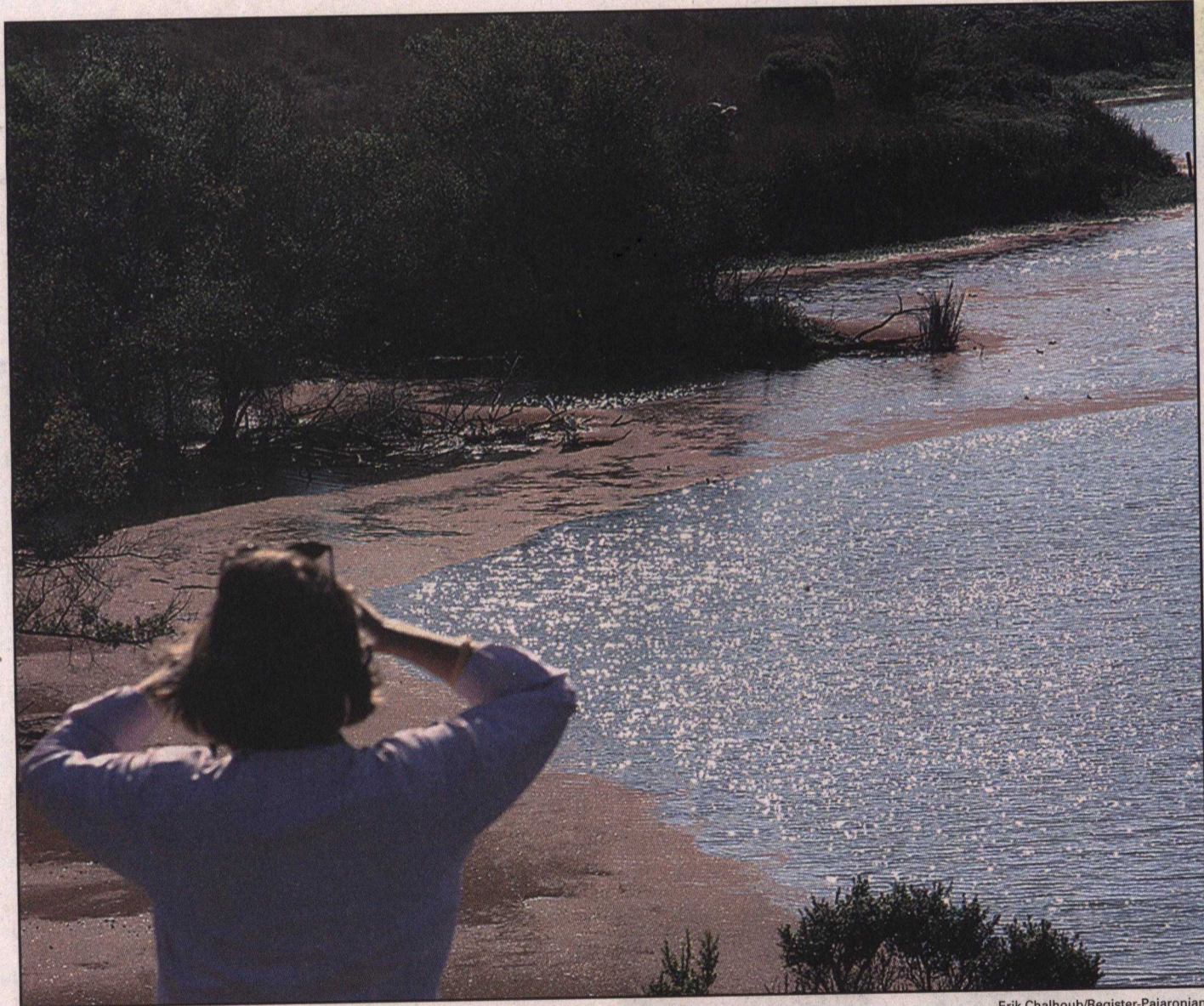
California has lost more than 90 percent of its wetlands due to development, according to the organization, and the Watsonville sloughs are one of the largest remaining freshwater marshlands in the state's coastal zone.

Joan Rose, who has been a docent for six years, became a volunteer after she decided she wanted to give back to the community, and this "seemed like a logical thing to do," she said.

"It's truly the most active environmental group in this county," Rose said. "It's a very exciting thing, not only preserving the environment for future generations, but we also want the next generation to care about the environment. We're creating community leaders."

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A tour-goer looks at Struve Slough through a pair of binoculars on top of Tarplant Hill Saturday during Watsonville Wetlands Watch's 20th anniversary celebration.

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Marcia Burns, a retired teacher who has been a docent for four years, said she enjoys being a part of the wetlands' future.

"I love nature," she said. "I'm glad we're preserving it for future generations."

Carol Whitehill, who has served on the board of directors since 1993, said it was "a joy" to work with the organization.

"The best thing is it's a true community effort," she said.

Whitehill acknowledged the hardships the organization had in the beginning.

"It was a lot of moving

through the jungle with a machete," she said.

One of the earliest restoration attempts the organization performed were slough clean-ups, and members pulled out trash such as shopping carts, tires and even a car, Whitehill said.

The trash has thinned in recent years, she said.

Lou Rose, treasurer of the organization, said the future for Watsonville Wetlands Watch is "very bright."

Not only does the organization have a group of enthusiastic young volunteers to lead it into the future, he said, but it also has the financial support as well. This year, Rose said, WWW received the Coastal American Partnership award, which it

shares with five other similar programs nationwide.

"Financially, we're doing great," he said. "It's a big job, and you don't get that done without lots of partners."

During the ceremony, REI presented the organization with a \$5,000 award.

Rose also noted the six miles of trails are currently proposed to expand to about 30 miles under the Watsonville Trails and Bicycle Master Plan, which is still in the planning stages.

"It's a great organization," he said. "I love working with the people here."

Farr lauded the achievements of the organization during his speech.

"It's the scenery that has to be managed smartly," Farr said.

"You are that teacher."

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For information, visit www.watsonvillewetlandswatch.org.