



Kurt Ellison

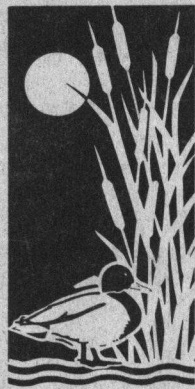
Watsonville Wetlands Watch members Dick Bernard, Pedro Castillo, Dot Steele and David Leland in Struve Slough in shadow of Watsonville Square shopping center.

Area residents organize to preserve local sloughs

(This is the third of a series of stories on Watsonville's sloughs.)

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

A year ago, when Watsonville resident David Leland first began to speak out against The Villages, a project that would place 900-housing units on sloughy land on Watsonville's northwest side, he felt alone.



"I just got blown out of the water by the (City)

Council and the Planning Commission," he said. "I'd just about given up hope."

But that's not the case anymore. Leland, and about 40 others, mostly residents of the Pajaro Valley, are members of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch, which has been fighting to protect sloughs and other sensitive habitats since its formation in April.

It may be Watsonville's first organized environmental group.

The Watch got its start when Watsonville Mayor Todd McFarren asked several local people to get together to discuss environmental concerns about The Villages project, said member Dick Bernard.

Until then, the environmental

organizations speaking against the project were based in Santa Cruz and Monterey, and there were "mutterings that these were outsiders," Bernard said. City officials, who wanted to hear what the environmental concerns were, had trouble at times figuring out how to contact the groups, and McFarren wanted some local people they could talk to consistently.

Bernard said he named the group Watsonville Wetlands Watch because he's "addicted to alliteration."

"The thing has just taken off since," he said.

The Watch attracted people such as Dot Steele, a Watsonville native who lives in Aromas.

See SLOUGH page 9 ►

Restoration's not a simple task

Wetlands restoration and creation sounds like a good thing, but not everyone in the scientific community thinks it is.

While "enhancements" of the slough — such as putting in certain native plants to increase habitats for animals such as the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander — are sometimes required of developers, more extensive projects to restore or create wetlands are not typically done.

The Lohr project, as originally proposed, includes removing some non-native species and planting natives. It would also create 6.2 acres of new marsh, and 27 acres of oak woodlands and native grasslands.

Bruce Elliott, a biologist with the state Department of Fish

restoration efforts have been "a complete bust...The balance (in a slough system) is extremely difficult to duplicate."

Elliott said people just don't have a complete enough understanding of all the intricacies of slough systems.

Unless the non-native species that have made their way into a system "are completely unproductive," he said, he'd rather not remove them. Much of the damage done to sloughs can be repaired through time and natural processes he said.

For the most part, naturalist Jerry Busch agrees with Elliott.

"I agree with that, but only in principal," Busch said. "I'm willing to look at enhancement means. Such things as wet-

land restoration, artificial wetlands, control of vegetation, the introduction of grazing (as a weed-measure) and possibly

tree planting are worth considering."

John Zentner, who specializes in restoration, thinks Elliott is wrong about restoration projects being unsuccessful.

"Certainly there have been failures," he said. "And there are certainly good arguments for leaving (wetlands) alone."

Zentner said that a number of Fish and Game's restoration projects have failed. But as a whole, projects around the state have had about an 80 percent success rate, he said.

People have been "managing" and altering the slough environment for hundreds of years, starting with the regular burns Native Americans used to do to make way for plants they favored.

"We have, therefore, several hundreds of years of experience working with wetlands," he said.

—Chela Zabin

SLOUGH

► From Page 1

Steele said she has lived near the Pajaro River all her life.

"One of my biggest concerns," she said, "is that my kids won't be able to swim in the river like I used to."

Steele, a senior administrative analyst for Monterey County, studied environmental science and has been a docent at Elkhorn Slough for four years. She said she has been working on wilderness-preservation issues throughout the state for many years.

The Wetlands Watch is also trying to avoid some of the problems other environmental groups have run into.

It doesn't want to be put in a position where environmental interests are pitted against housing interests. Members say the two don't have to be in conflict, and that they are willing to work on finding alternative sites for housing that would otherwise be placed in environmentally sensitive sites.

They also want to make sure minorities are represented in their membership and that they work with groups representing minority interests.

"Without the Latino community involved," Leland said, the perception could be that the Watch is made up of people who "have theirs" and aren't interested in anything else. It would be easy then, he said, to pit groups against each other, to "divide and conquer."

Pedro Castillo, a member of both the Wetlands Watch and the League of United Latin American Citizens, said minorities have compelling reasons to be concerned about environmental issues. Nationwide, minority groups and environmental groups are beginning to realize that they need to work together, he said.

Native Americans, he said,

are beginning to organize around the fact that toxic dumps often get put on or near reservations. Latinos, blacks and other minorities often live in neighborhoods that contain the biggest polluters with the least protections.

He said the Watch will be gearing some of its environmental education efforts specifically to the Latino community.

The group, which has no elected officials and does everything by consensus at its monthly meetings, has done quite a bit in its first six months of existence.

It has held four walks, led by naturalist Jerry Busch, in wild and semi-wild areas in the valley. About 20 people showed up for each. The group sponsored a cleanup in Watsonville Slough as part of Coastweek last Saturday.

The group has been most active in demanding changes to The Villages project to protect the sloughs and the rare Santa Cruz tarplant, which grows in abundance on 3.7 acres on the site. Its efforts led the City Council to require a change in a road the developer had planned for the middle of the tarplant patch.

Members of the group have also spoken against plans to put a new high school in the Pinto Lake area and have scrutinized another housing project — the 140-unit Horizon Hill — for detrimental affects on the environment.

They also want to make an impact on the city's General Plan, which is a blueprint for the city's growth and land-use issues. Although they weren't specific about what policies they want the city to adopt, members said the environmental section needs to be fully fleshed out then integrated with the other elements — such as housing and parks — to ensure that environmental concerns are taken into account.