

# Celebrate 20 years of protecting wetlands

Wetlands

10-13-12

You're invited to a party at 11 a.m. Saturday behind Pajaro Valley High School at 500 Harkins Slough Road at which Watsonville Wetlands Watch will celebrate its first 20 years of protecting, restoring and providing public access to the area's rich fresh water slough system.



**DAN  
HAIFLEY**

*Our Ocean Backyard*

Spending a day exploring Watsonville's sloughs is always an adventure. But Saturday will also include a celebration of an effort that began with working people who made a conscious decision to organize the community to protect something important to it. The 20 years of work has produced results. One obvious example is that there are interpretive trails today where there once were shopping carts buried upside down in mud. If you lived in Watsonville before 1992, you can see the difference.

In 1991, Mayor Todd McFarren and a new Watsonville City Council grappled with proposals for development on the City's west side, adjacent to long-neglected wetlands. A group that included Dick Bernard, Jerry Busch, Christine Johnson-Lyons, Karen Mora, Marth and Michael Kenner, David Leland and Mike Kostyal began to meet to address the effects that proposed new commercial and housing development in the area could have on these bodies of water.

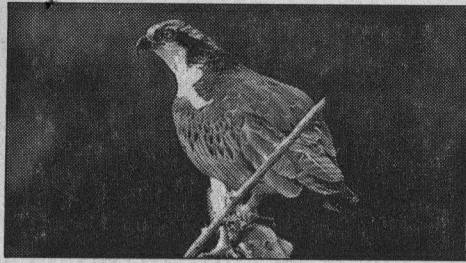
The newly formed Watsonville Wetlands Watch worked with city leaders to influence decisions relative to those development proposals. They also began to work with the city on a master plan to restore and manage the wetlands, and to provide public access to and education about them.

Slough cleanups and restoration efforts became regular volunteer activities as the organization became engaged in the city's general plan as well as the larger debate about land use and water in the Pajaro Valley.

The organization was involved in the discussions that ultimately lead to the approval of the construction of Pajaro Valley High School, just west of Highway 1 where there had been no significant development before. On its grounds today is the Fitz Wetland Educational Resource Center, constructed thanks to a condition placed by the California Coastal Commission as part of its approval of the construction of that campus, according to Watsonville Wetlands Watch member Kris Beall. A joint project of the City of Watsonville, the Pajaro Valley Unified School District and Watsonville Wetlands Watch, it serves as a hub for the development of a corps of docents for the sloughs and volunteers dedicated to maintaining the trails and the health of the wetlands themselves.

Watsonville has its own dynamic wetlands education center and trail system located behind Ramsay Park; it's visually delightful with knowledgeable volunteers and staff.

While many compare the Watsonville slough system to the Elkhorn Slough to the south, there are differences. About seven miles long, Elkhorn Slough is a saltier and smaller version



An osprey in the Watsonville wetlands.

EFREN B. ADALEM/  
CONTRIBUTED

## HAIFLEY

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of the coastal wetlands that preceded it over thousands of years. Besides land-based animals it also hosts a variety of ocean species such as the California sea otter and Harbor seals.

Watsonville's wetlands are a freshwater system that connects to the ocean through the Pajaro River. They include Hanson, Harkins, Struve, West Struve, Gallighan and Watsonville sloughs. Wetlands once covered more of the terrain, keeping the water in the area's underground aquifers plentiful and clean and providing a cradle and food supply particularly for the bird life that inspired Pajaro Valley's name.

Today the sloughs provide the setting for the area's annual Birding Festival, a living classroom

## ON THE NET

**WATSONVILLE  
WETLANDS WATCH:** [www.watsonvillevetlandswatch.com](http://www.watsonvillevetlandswatch.com)  
**CITY OF WATSONVILLE  
WETLANDS SYSTEM:**  
<http://tinyurl.com/8r7ebjf>

for students from area schools, and an interesting way to escape city life.

If you can make it to the event Saturday, I recommend that you go and check out the festivities. If you can't, then I'd encourage you to make some time to visit either the Fitz Wetlands Educational Resource Center or the City of Watsonville's Nature Center, and plan to spend some time on the trails. You'll be glad you did.

*Dan Haifley is executive director of O'Neill Sea Odyssey. He can be reached at [dhaifley@oneillseaodyssey.org](mailto:dhaifley@oneillseaodyssey.org).*