San Jose Mercury News
Tuesday, April 4, 2006

With planning, bay restoration can balance habitat, recreation

By David Lewis and Laura Thompson

For nearly a century, much of San Francisco Bay's southern shoreline has been diked off from the tides and fenced off from the public. Where fertile wetlands once supported diverse wildlife, private companies created evaporator ponds to extract salt. Millions of South Bay residents grew up without a shoreline they could see or enjoy.

Now, more than 15,000 acres of those salt ponds are owned by the public and poised for better uses. This enormous expanse provides a special opportunity to avert a conflict that has hindered other shoreline restoration projects—providing habitat for sensitive wildlife while also increasing recreation access for people.

At the time of the Gold Rush, San Francisco Bay was 50 percent larger than it is today and had 20 times more wetland habitat, including a continuous 40-mile band of wetlands along the shoreline from San Mateo to San Jose. Restoring bay wetlands now is vital to reverse the bay's decline, improve water quality and sustain endangered fish and wildlife like the California clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse.

Some wildlife advocates have insisted that restored wetlands, even in the heavily populated Bay Area, should be off-limits to the public. Recreation enthusiasts are eager for greater access to many of the same areas for kayaking, fishing, shoreline hikes and wildlife viewing. It can be tough to fit all of these uses into small parcels, but 15,000 acres can accommodate a wide range of possibilities.

Scientists, local governments, environmentalists, businesses and recreation advocates, working for more than two years, have crafted a balanced vision for the ponds that stretch from Menlo Park to Alviso, San Jose to Milpitas and Union City to Hayward. The group's research found that this sprawling area can safely accommodate new habitat vital for the bay's health and new connections that bring residents to the restored shoreline.

Large portions of the area can be protected from human intrusion to help threatened and endangered species nest, rest and forage safely. Some of the existing ponds can be maintained as shallow open water at controlled depth and salinity for birds that rely on such conditions.

Much of the project can provide new recreational, scenic and educational benefits to people around the Bay Area, improving the quality of life here. There is room to add new launch access for canoes and kayaks, and up to 37 miles of walking and biking trails, including the closure of critical gaps in the Bay Trail—a regionwide project that aims to circle the entire bay with a 500-mile continuous shoreline path.

Wildlife scientists can guide the choices about where public access is feasible and appropriate, aided by recent research that shows careful planning and design can avoid or minimize impacts to wildlife from humans.

With improved access in the expanded refuge, visitors will see the animals and plants their public agencies are working to protect, and also learn what each of us can do to improve the bay for wildlife and people through educational programs and interpretive exhibits.

Tens of thousands of volunteers now work actively to restore wetlands on the bay shoreline, and millions of people use the Bay Trail every year. From that front-row seat, we see increases in the abundance and diversity of birds and other wildlife where the restored habitats have begun to thrive.

These direct experiences foster stronger appreciation and support for wildlife protection among residents of the Bay Area. Their backing will be crucial during the salt pond restoration in this urban wildlife refuge—the largest project of its type in the nation.

Within the new, large complex of salt ponds now available for restoration, there is room to provide South Bay communities and all Bay Area residents with significant shoreline amenities, while adding thousands of acres of tidal marsh habitat that the bay needs, enhancing a refuge that both wildlife and people can share.

DAVID LEWIS *is executive director of Save The Bay. LAURA THOMPSON* is manager of the Association of Bay Area Government's Bay Trail Project. They wrote this article for the Mercury News.