

# Cleanup effort reclaims 'oasis' in Otay Valley

**By Marty Graham**

UNION-TRIBUNE

March 15, 2008

A team of dedicated workers and volunteers is planning to unveil five miles of new tailored trails in the Otay Valley Regional Park amid an open space reclaimed from tons of trash and concrete dumped throughout the valley.

“From a badly used, hidden spot, they've cultivated an oasis in the middle of the city,” said John Barone, a city of San Diego park ranger.

The new trails, which officially will be opened at a ceremony Monday, represent the first formal public access to the sections of the park west of Interstate 805, adding to the first mile of finished trails that opened in September.

Bicyclists and hikers will share the new trails, which mainly run east and west along the valley's south edge.

The trails and the 8,500-acre park have been a labor of love for the Friends of Otay Valley Regional Park, as well as city and county parks officials.

Since 1990, they have cobbled together pieces of land to form a greenbelt ring around the city of Chula Vista that stretches from north of the Mother Miguel Mountain south to the Otay Lakes Reservoir, then west to the bay.

The southern part of the circle will be accessible thanks to the new trails, which stretch from I-805 to the edge of the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

The trails, some built recently and some reclaimed from utility company access roads, meander through wetlands that are home to an astounding array of wildlife.

The regional park was launched at a 1989 meeting with then-county Supervisor Brian Bilbray, then-Chula Vista Mayor Greg Cox and then-San Diego City Councilman Bob Filner. Bilbray and Filner are now serving in Congress and Cox is chairman of the county Board of Supervisors.

By 1990, the cities of San Diego and Chula Vista and the county of San Diego had formed a joint powers authority to string this land together into a green getaway for city dwellers. Since then, they have invested about \$30 million in purchasing and cleaning up land, building a ranger station, trails and staging areas.

To Cox and his family, the park is about quality of life, he said. His wife, Chula Vista Mayor Cheryl Cox, plans to help cut the ribbon Monday with her father, John Willett, at her side. Willett is chairman of the citizens advisory committee for the park.



FRED GREAVES

Frank Ohrmund, secretary of Friends of Otay Valley Regional Park, rode his bike along a path in the park. About \$30 million has been invested in purchasing and cleaning up land and building a ranger station, trails and staging areas.

“I want to encourage San Diegans to spend more time outdoors, enjoying the beauty of our region and making our vast array of county parks their personal playgrounds,” Greg Cox said. “These new trails will make Otay Valley Regional Park a great place for families to do just that.”

In 1997, the JPA accepted a concept plan for a regional park along the southern edge of the greenbelt. The area west of the Lower Otay Lakes Reservoir includes at least 16 habitats for endangered plants and animals and extensive wetlands.

Willett remembers how each easement, each parcel and bit of access was obtained over the 18 years he has been working on the project. And he sees the holes in the area where the park stops, like Knott's Soak City water park and the Coors Amphitheatre.

"I'm the one who took a map and drew a red line on it and everyone said that looks good," Willett said. "After I retired from the Navy in 1986, I started going to (government) meetings with maps and saying let's do this."

Much of creating this stretch of park has been about trash.

The swath of land, bordered on the south by a high crest, has long been used as a dump for items such as tires and construction debris. Crews have found everything from asbestos pipes to motor homes as they cleaned up illegal dump sites.

“There were 51 separate concrete and asphalt dumps,” Willett said. “The California Conservation Corps has hauled 300 tons of concrete – they’ve done an amazing job but there’s an awful lot left.”

As Willett walked the trails recently, he delighted in guided side trips, at one point pointing to an ancient blue car improbably dumped deep in the brush on its side in a creek bed with brush growing over and through it.

“We've found nine cars and two motor homes so far,” he said.

Except for an overview of a grove of abandoned eucalyptus trees that Willett says paintball players have filled with their own peculiar trash, little of the area's sordid past is visible.

The trails, now lush with rain-fed green, weave through the valley, allowing for glorious views of the busy little Poggi Creek, the Otay River and the wildlife drawn to the water.

“We've had reports of bobcats,” said San Diego park ranger Matt Sanford. He pointed out a bird soaring overhead. “That's a red-tailed hawk, and we've got an amazing bird population: osprey, kestrels, red-shouldered hawks, and some endangered species whose mating season is about to begin.”

The trails carry the sharp scent of coastal sage and chaparral and are home to a few rattlesnakes and poison oak.

“It's like any other place you hike, you have to remember that you're out in nature,” Sanford said.

In the next few weeks, two new parking areas will open, along with a third already in use as part of a new ranger station at Beyer Road. The new parking areas are just before the south end of Rios Road and on the east side of Beyer Way. Visitors also will find bike racks, picnic tables and restrooms there.

Three more parking areas – at the southeastern end of 27th Street, at the north end of Saturn Boulevard, and on the northwestern side of Hollister Boulevard – will open later this year or early next year.

Another parking area is planned for the south end of Mace Street, off Main Street, where there will be parking for horse trailers and an equestrian staging area.

Much of the new hiking area can be seen from the overlook behind Myrtle S. Finney Elementary School, high above the south side of the valley.

From there, with the bay to one side and I-805 passing overhead, the valley looks almost pristine, except for the heavy equipment hauling out the last remnants of dumped concrete.

“This is a remarkable place,” Willett said. “People really need a place like this to get away from their worries for just an hour or two.”

---

■Marty Graham is a freelance writer based in San Diego.



FRED GREAVES

People walked along a trail in Otay Valley Regional Park. Five miles of new tailored trails will be unveiled at a ceremony on Monday. The first mile of finished trails opened in September.