86.6

Peaceful, controversial Laguna a sanctuary for wildlife

By EILEEN KLINEMAN
Correspondent

SEBASTOPOL — While canoeing down the Laguna de Santa Rosa, one can enjoy the sights of fish jumping and egrets peering down from valley oaks. It's a far different picture than the laguna's tainted image.

The 14-mile lagoon that stretches from Cotati to Forestville is best known to Sonoma County residents as a channel for treated sewage destined for the Russian River and for rising over bridges and into homes during major storms.

Yet there are those who see it as more than a pathway to the Russian River. They've heard tales and seen pictures of the lagoon as it was at the turn of the century, before civilization and agriculture caused the siltation that filled it in.

The laguna will never again be a series of lakes traversed by well-dressed Sunday vacationers in gondolas, but many people envision return of much of the wildlife habitat.

The tree-studded lakes have been replaced by a waterway only 100 feet wide at most during the summer. Still, the laguna is host to a variety of wildlife and is a well-kept secret among hikers, hunters and explorers who have discovered it as a mini-wilderness area.

Friends of Laguna was formed after last year's sewage spills brought cries of outrage from people concerned about the future of the Russian River.

"We wanted people to realize the Laguna de Santa Rosa was involved and wanted people to know what it is," said Friends member David Higgins.

Progress has been slow toward gaining public interest in the Laguna, where recreation is limited because most of the frontage is private property, the still water is hardly inviting and few fishermen are out for the carp and catfish.

"Do you need to be able to swim and fish in it to be valuable?" asked Higgins, a civil engineering student with an interest in water environments. He said that Great Blue Herons, egrets and eagles are among the wildlife, and the list would be longer if the indigenous trees and bushes remained as thick as they once had been.

The willows, oaks and other trees that line the laguna are slowly disappearing — some from cutting, others falling from eroded banks into the water.

"More vegetation would improve the water quality as well as providing scenic beauty," Higgins said. Hew believes more shade and cooler waters would decrease the algae and lead to a healthier environment.

He and neighbors have planted acorns and seeds as a "pilot project" and hope to see more efforts on the part of government agencies to encourage more.

Sonoma County Water Agency chief engineer Bill Stillman said that as part of the Spring Creek flood control project his agency last year planted trees on 60 acres of laguna wetlands owned by the city of Santa Rosa.

The city of Sebastopol recently adopted an ordinance to protect the wetlands, following a study of the Laguna de Santa Rosa initiated several years ago by former council member Juliana Doms with the support of environmentalists.

The study describes the Laguna as "an important habitat area for a variety of wildlife, including grasslands and riparian woodland. Within the grasslands there are numerous vernal pools which can support several species of rare and endangered vascular plants."

Aug 31, 1986
PRESS DEM.

86.6