



WORKING: She's grounded in science

by George Snyder - Sonoma West Staff Writer



ON THE SPOT — Laguna Foundation Research Director Christina Sloop prepares to mark bird monitoring stations near the Rodoto Trail. - Photo by George Snyder

SEBASTOPOL - Just about everybody knows the Laguna de Santa Rosa as a semi-wild oasis of birds, bushes and wild critters squeezed in an urban sandwich between Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park and Sebastopol.

The Laguna, which includes the 14-mile channel stretching from Cotati to Forestville, is an important stopping off place for migratory birds as well as resident species including

200 species of birds and numerous other animals including coyotes, bobcats and river otters.

What Christina Sloop, the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation's new science research director, would like to know is just how many wild creatures, and how much of their natural environment, remains in the Laguna's 30,000-acre mix of wetlands, creeks, open water, marshes and uplands and what it takes to bring it back through restoration.

“My job,” she said in the crisp and deliberate manner in which scientists often speak, “is to use science to inform the restoration.”

Much of that information, Sloop said while out in a portion of the Laguna near the Joe Rodota Trail recently to flag bird monitoring spots, still needs to be gathered in order to form an ecological baseline, a platform from which scientific restoration efforts can be guided.

“The idea of restoration,” added Sloop, “is not to try to recreate history but restore ecosystem function for us to be stewards and use science as part of the stewardship role.”

A 40-year-old research ecologist and conservation biologist with a Ph.D in ecology from the University of California, Davis, an M.A. in conservation biology from San Francisco State University and a B.A. in biology from Sonoma State University, was brought on by the Laguna Foundation this summer.

“I was hired to continue the work done by Anna Sears who was a co-author of the foundation's Laguna restoration and management plan,” she said. “The document will serve as the jumping off point for future restoration projects.”

Sloop, a native of Germany, is married to an American, Marc Sloop, a consulting fundraiser for non-profits and has two children, Ian, 9, and Nico, 7. They live in the city of Sonoma.

“My focus,” she said of her new job, “is the development of a program to evaluate the physical pattern of the Laguna environment, the water quality, what sedimentation is doing, what invasive species there are, what habitat loss has occurred and use that knowledge to identify the areas where restoration is most important.”

Sloop, meanwhile, is no stranger to the charms of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, having worked for the City of Santa Rosa as an environmental technician in reclaimed wastewater wetlands assessing and restoring of vernal pool fauna and flora and valley oak regeneration there.

“I have a passion for nature and figuring things out,” she said. “I love being outdoors and also in making a positive change.”

She is still involved in the study of the genetic story of three endangered Laguna vernal pool plant species: Sebastopol Meadowfoam, Burke's Goldfields and Sonoma Sunshine.

“We're looking at the difference in population genetics among the plants which is important for future restoration efforts,” she said. “Can you mix the genetics of the various populations and just what is the gene flow? We don't know if birds carry the seeds, how long the seeds might be viable – nobody knows.”

Much of the information to be gathered will be done in conjunction with other agencies and groups, Sloop said, including the aforementioned bird monitoring.

The work will help the Foundation's efforts in restoring the Laguna's Middle Reach, the stretch between Highway 12 and Occidental Road east of Sebastopol, property held by the Open Space District, the County of Sonoma, Sebastopol, Santa Rosa and private persons.

In addition to an eventual public trail, that 1.8-mile stretch of the Laguna channel will see the rehabilitation of from three to five acres of degraded seasonal wetlands, restoration of 10 acres of oak savannah and the restoration of native, riparian plants.

“We just started the bird monitoring program a week ago,” she said. “We will be working with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory and with 12 volunteers who will monitor a specific area once a week over a long period of time. The data will hopefully show in the long term how restoration has an impact.”

She said some of the sites to be monitored will be those slated for restoration which will be compared with those in the Laguna that are still relatively environmentally intact.

Working with local agencies as well as volunteers, many of them experienced amateur naturalists, is a major part of Sloop's aim of involving the community in Laguna restoration efforts.

“For example we are trying to get the farmers to trust us, not really trying to change them but work with them in order to reduce adverse affects to the Laguna,” she said. We also want to involve locals and groups such as Audubon or the Native Plant Society. We want local people to volunteer to keep track of early invasive weed detection before the plants become too much of a problem.”

In addition to stewardship such involvement produces, Sloop said using volunteers will also help the Foundation's bottom line, adding that without such volunteer help, much of the Foundation's work would be difficult if not impossible.

“We are in the business of making the Laguna better for all of us,” Sloop said. “We are interested in bringing all of the people together and using science as the glue.”