

The Laguna is at a crossroads

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The year was 1989, and public concern was growing about the health of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, the wetland complex which is the largest tributary of the Russian River.

Then-Congressman Doug Bosco created a task force to study the Laguna, and introduced legislation to create a Laguna National Wildlife Refuge. People throughout the community mobilized to address its deteriorating health.

A "State of the Laguna" conference was convened, and from it emerged an organization representing these sometimes conflicting interests, which slowly began to work together to improve the Laguna's many functions, not only as our county's richest wildlife area, but also its most important flood control feature and a tremendous community opportunity for education and outdoor recreation.

That organization is the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. Since then, we have worked to address the Laguna's impairments, seeking collaborative solutions that provide for the needs of ecosystems, landowners and communities, and to advance the many benefits the Laguna can offer Sonoma County's ecological health, economic vitality and quality of life.

Many of us cherish the sight of the Laguna's swelling waters during the winter, its abundance of wildlife and the sense of calm it inspires.

Yet most are unaware of the many services it provides to us. If water is the life-blood of our communities, the Laguna is our county's circulatory heart, filtering liver and transpiring, oxygen-giving lungs. All the water that drains from in and around Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, Cotati, Windsor and most of Sebastopol flows into the Laguna, seeping through wetlands, creeks and marshes across the Santa Rosa Plain from Cotati to the Russian River near Forestville.

As the Laguna seasonally captures and swells with storm water, it protects surrounding communities and those downstream in the river from damaging floods. When healthy, its complex biotic communities cool, cleanse and filter pollutants from that water.

The Laguna's unique combination of soils, topography and climate has nourished the growth and development of an abundance of life, from bald eagles, river otters and mountain lions to many rare and endangered plants and animals. Its Native American inhabitants thrived here for thousands of years and are still here today.

European settlers found a land so naturally abundant that they built an agricultural economy that remains among the world's most bountiful. Today, it is we who have inherited these riches, living in one of the most beautiful places on Earth.

It must be said: All is not ideal with the Laguna. The accumulated impacts of human activity and the growth of our communities over the past century have taken a heavy toll.

But after two years of work, the Laguna Foundation has now published "Enhancing and Caring for the Laguna," a plan that is a prescription for healing the Laguna's natural functioning and enabling our community's figurative heart to beat stronger, lungs to breathe easier and blood to flow cleaner.

While we expect our elected officials and governmental agencies to take the lead, each one of us should get involved.

This week, the foundation hosts the second "State of the Laguna" conference at Sonoma State University. We welcome all to participate and learn about the progress that's being made, the challenges that remain, and how each of us can help in saving, restoring, enjoying and celebrating this natural jewel in our midst.

Come to the conference this week and find out how.