
John Willett and the Otay River Valley

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Community Essay | South Bay

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By Katie Westfall

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John Willett stands on the banks of Fenton Pond, near the recently built ranger station of the Otay Valley Regional Park, dressed in his tan uniform with a "volunteer" patch embroidered above the left chest of his shirt. A member of "The Greatest Generation" and a World War II veteran, John, 88, now spends his time working to restore the Otay River Valley. John nurtures the valley in the same way a doting grandfather cares for his grandchildren.

Thanks to John's efforts, the restoration of the Otay River Valley is a remarkable story of revitalization and reclamation of what was once a neglected backyard habitat. The Otay River Valley is a greenbelt that cuts between the cities of Chula Vista and South San Diego and flows into the southern wetlands of San Diego Bay. It is designated the Otay Valley Regional Park, with a planning area of almost 9,000-acres that stretches 13 miles.

Ten years ago, the valley was filled with concrete debris, refrigerators and abandoned cars. Today, while hiking the recently completed trail system, visitors can find native plants such as the San Diego sunflower and the Otay tarplant. The valley is also a habitat for burrowing owls, California gnatcatchers and bobcats.

John dedicates between 30 to 35 hours a week in the planning, cleanup and restoration of the Otay River Valley. His cleanup efforts resulted in the removal of an astounding 700 tires and 1,200 tons of trash. He is also the chairman of the Otay Valley Citizen's Advisory Committee, a group of residents that volunteer their time to benefit the park. In recognition

of his work in the Otay River Valley, John recently received the Cox Conserves Heroes Award for his outstanding conservation efforts.

The cleanup of the Otay River Valley did not happen with the wave of a magic wand of a fairy godmother. It was due to John's hard work and the support of community residents, the cities of San Diego and Chula Vista, the county of San Diego and the California Conservation Corps. The park is a very much needed community resource for recreation and the enjoyment of nature, as it is one of the last remaining wild lands in the South Bay.

John Willett is part of a growing network of individuals and organizations working to restore and conserve once forgotten and neglected habitats and open space throughout Southern California. Efforts are now under way to restore the San Diego River, clean up inner-city canyon lands as healthy open space for children, restore a wildlife habitat and recreational corridor throughout the length of the San Dieguito River and reclaim the long neglected wetlands and tidal flats of south San Diego Bay.

In Los Angeles, community activists and conservationists have initiated a revitalization plan for the once concrete-covered Los Angeles River. Its renovation is seen as a catalyst for the urban revitalization of East Los Angeles.

The conservation and restoration of these wild lands is important for the wildlife and plant species that depend on them, improving community health in underserved neighborhoods, and for sustaining an environmental legacy for generations to come. Urban development has limited the amount of wildlife habitat and open space, which has threatened many species, species that future generations may only read about in textbooks. Our communities depend on these areas to play outdoors and for the enjoyment of a clean and natural landscape. On a global level, these open spaces with thriving vegetation allow for the exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen, which help us to reduce our impact on global climate change.

The work of John has been instrumental in reclaiming a river valley for wildlife and for all of San Diego's families. His determination to clean the park up, along with his humble sense of dedication and profound duty to the community serve as inspiration for all individuals looking to preserve and protect vital eco-systems. Restoring these open spaces will help San Diego return to being America's Finest City.

Westfall is the Otay River Conservation Program Manager at WILDcoast and a member of the Citizen's Advisory Committee of the Otay Valley Regional Park.