

Santa Ana Sucker Conservation Team Meeting



Conservation Team

Monday, November 18, 2024

In attendance:

Brett Mills, RCRCD
Cameron Macbeth, OCWD
Edgar Tellez-Foster, Chino Basin Watermaster
Estafania Solorio, City of Riverside
Jonathan Baskin
Justin Nakano, Chino Basin Watermaster
Kai Palanscar - Valley District
Kevin Israel – ECORP Consulting

Leighanne Kirk – EMWD
Nate Scheevel – Scheevel Engineering
Nicole Greenwood, City of Riverside
Rebecca Christensen, U.S. FWS
Sheryl Parsons, OCWD
Gil Botello, SAWPA
Ian Achimore, SAWPA
Zyanya Ramirez, SAWPA

INTRODUCTIONS

The Santa Ana Sucker Conservation Team (Conservation Team) meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Ian Achimore via Zoom at the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) located at 11615 Sterling Avenue, Riverside, CA 92503.

2024 RIVERWALK – SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

Ian Achimore opened the discussion by inviting feedback on the 2024 Riverwalk, which took place on two dates in October. He encouraged participants to share what went well, potential logistical improvements, and observations regarding river conditions and data collection.

Feedback and Observations:

- **Cameron Macbeth (OCWD)** reported that his group used an app for data collection instead of GPS and paper sheets, and it worked well without any issues. An armed guard accompanied the group as a precaution, which was reassuring despite no safety incidents.
- **Kai Palanscar (Valley District)** noted that his group also used the app successfully and encountered no security issues, although they were accompanied by Riverside County staff for safety. They observed several gravel patches along their survey route.
- **Rebecca Christensen (FWS)** shared that her group also observed gravel on the second day but found only sand and wide areas during the first day's survey. There were some data syncing issues with the app, and the team is working to resolve them.
- **Ian Achimore** added that his group faced difficulties accessing parts of the river due to thick vegetation, which was not visible on Google Earth. He suggested using drones to survey inaccessible areas. OCWD offered to fly a drone for future surveys, and Ian expressed interest in collaborating on a field experiment to test substrate detection using the drone.
- **Nate Scheevel (Scheevel Engineering)** mentioned walking a stretch of the river in September when it was mostly dry and offered to share photos of the area to provide context on flow patterns and vegetation growth.

Ian noted that planning the Riverwalk was especially challenging in October 2024 due to a recent homicide in the riverbed, which raised safety concerns. Coordination with rangers and security was critical to ensure participant's safety.

The team plans to continue brainstorming safety and logistical strategies for next year, potentially incorporating drone technology for surveying difficult areas. Additionally, they are considering organizing an extra Riverwalk event early next year to build on lessons learned.

2024 PRELIMINARY DRAFT DATA

Ian Achimore presented the preliminary draft data for the 2024 Riverwalk project, noting that sharing the data early helped identify missing data from Rebecca Christensen's group. The data, compiled in Excel, includes various tabs such as transect data, canopy, substrate conditions, stream depth, and gravel bar locations.

Key Points:

1. **Gravel Bar Data:** Gravel bar locations were effectively recorded using an app feature that allowed users to mark the size and location, which has been emphasized more this year.
2. **Substrate Quality Classification:**
 - o Good Substrate: Gravel, cobble, and boulder make up over 65%.
 - o Marginal Substrate: These components make up 30–65%.
 - o Poor Substrate: Less than 30% of good components.
3. **Preliminary Observations:** This year's data shows a significant increase in marginal habitat compared to the previous year, though the good habitat percentage remains consistent.
4. **Data Quality Assurance:** There is a need to address data gaps and average multiple channel data points, as done in previous years. Ian will follow up with groups missing data and plans to involve a new planning intern to assist with data processing.
5. **Next Steps:** The data will undergo QA/QC, and once finalized, it will be sent out to participants.

TWO YEAR BUDGET REVIEW (FYE 2026 AND FYE 2027)

Ian Achimore presented the two-year budget review for the Conservation Team, explaining that the budget covers SAWPA staff costs, consultant expenses, and project funding through grants, member agency dues, and task force member participation fees. The new budget cycle begins on July 1, 2025, and the draft budget must be finalized by December 2024 to present to SAWPA's finance team.

The budget review compared the existing budget with the proposed two-year budget, highlighting revenue sources including interest from special accounts, task force member participant fees (e.g., City of Riverside, OCWD, and SAWPA member agencies), and potential grants. While a \$250,000 grant was anticipated in the previous cycle, it was not pursued due to project challenges and feedback.

Costs include staff time for project management, habitat mitigation, off-site meetings, and potential new projects at Evans Lake or Sunny Slope. With projected expenses exceeding revenue, the budget anticipates a drawdown on reserves, decreasing from approximately \$111,000 to \$80,000 over the next two years.

Ian encouraged members who find value in the Conservation Team's work to consider contributing financially, to help maintain reserves and fund future projects. Members have a week to provide feedback or discuss the budget with management, after which the budget will be submitted to SAWPA's finance team for the approval process.

2025 QUARTER 1 PILOT RIVERWALK PLANNING

The 2025 Quarter 1 Pilot Riverwalk aims to capture a snapshot of river conditions (e.g., canopy, substrate, stream depth, and gravel bars) during the first quarter of the year to assess the impact of storm flows on Santa Ana sucker fish. Unlike the typical fall riverwalks conducted since 2006, this pilot will offer data on post-storm conditions.

Key Points:

1. Background:

- Traditional riverwalks have been conducted in the fall (October-November) since 2006, providing consistent habitat data.
- One winter riverwalk occurred in 2009 due to special stormflow conditions.
- The goal of the pilot is to assess habitat changes after stormflows that may occur between November and January.

2. Challenges and Considerations:

- **Turbidity:** Storm flows can cause water turbidity (chocolate milk appearance), making gravel detection difficult.
- **Spawning Season:** The riverwalk must occur before the spawning season (starts in February) to avoid interference.
- **Transect Selection:** Focusing on meaningful transect points that reflect changes in substrate and habitat conditions is crucial.
- **Data Verification:** There are concerns about potential data inconsistencies (e.g., an anomalous data point showing 100% gravel cover in 2022).

3. Observations and Findings:

- Recent data shows a trend of increasing gravel presence in historically sandy areas, but the reason for this change is unclear.
- Downstream areas showed good habitat conditions with ample gravel bars, while upstream from the Norco Bluff area appeared sandy and wide.
- A systematic approach will be taken to validate historical data and investigate substrate changes over time.

4. Next Steps:

- Fine-tune the pilot plan with input on transect points and timing.
- Verify data anomalies from past years and continue monitoring substrate trends.
- Coordinate with partners for further monitoring and data collection, including the use of drone imagery.

RESTORATION PROJECT UPDATES

Sunnyslope Creek – OCWD/SAWA Staff

Cameron Macbeth reported on recent non-native species removal and native species documentation efforts in Sunnyslope Creek. Non-native species observed included mosquito fish, green sunfish, and catfish. Notably, only one sucker was found this year compared to approximately 70 the previous year, while the number of chubs remained consistent. Cameron speculated that increased sandy sediments in the creek's lower reach, which previously had more rocky substrates, might have contributed to the decline in sucker presence.

A root blockage in the creek was identified as a potential barrier to fish movement upstream, and efforts are planned to address it. Maintenance will continue to focus on clearing debris and maintaining flow connectivity, influenced by storm patterns and water flow from the stormwater channel.

Kai Palenscar added that a native fish survey conducted in August and September in the lower section of Sunnyslope Creek also found one or two suckers and a few chubs, with reduced sediment and fewer non-

native predator species compared to previous years. Cameron confirmed that the lower section was almost devoid of both native and non-native fish, possibly due to changes in habitat and reduced pool formation.

Tequesquite Creek – RCRCD Staff

Brett Mills provided an update on Tequesquite Creek, highlighting that initial removal of palms and eucalyptus years ago successfully opened passageways, but funding has since become limited. Regular monitoring continues, and collaboration with Riverside County Parks and Open Space has improved trash and unhoused removal.

Recent changes to the creek include the formation of a large oxbow near the confluence with the river, which has significantly eroded the lower end of Tequesquite Creek, reaching close to gabion walls and metal retaining fences. While this has affected the habitat, western pond turtles have been observed in the area, suggesting some habitat persistence.

Brett reported finding a substantial population of arroyo chub near the garden and skate park, where vegetation removal was planned. The chubs were successfully relocated to prevent harm during maintenance. Despite periodic loss of hydrologic connectivity, the arroyo chub population remains in the upper channel.

Kai Palenscar noted that overall chub numbers have been low in the mainstream river, despite favorable conditions from recent high-precipitation years. Non-native predator numbers, including largemouth bass and channel catfish, were also down, though catfish may still be impacting chub populations. Sucker numbers remain good.

Brett added that the low-flow conditions in Tequesquite Creek during late summer create a disconnected habitat that may offer refuge from predators, allowing chub to establish small, isolated populations. Further funding and restoration efforts, such as implementing watering wells and using purple pipe for irrigation, are desired.

Louise Rubidoux Parkland – SBVMWD/OCWD/RivCo Parks Staff

Kai Palenscar reported that Chris Jones of Valley District is leading efforts to develop a master plan for Louise Rubidoux Parkland. The plan will focus on identifying optimal locations for new facilities, including a proposed nature center, while considering habitat restoration opportunities across the parkland, Pecan Grove, and adjacent Riverside County Parks land to the east. The goal is to enhance habitat quality in low-lying areas that are outside the active floodplain. Implementation of the master plan will take place over the next few years.

FUTURE DISCUSSION TOPICS - MEET IN TWO MONTHS

If there are any topics for future discussion, send your requests to Ian Achimore at iachimore@sawpa.gov.