
South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

November 2016

Issue No. 14



This view of the Tijuana River Estuary in 1944 looking east shows a mixed use pattern of farmland and mud flats caused by periodic river flooding. The area was used as a sewage and trash dump from Imperial Beach and Fort Emory. Threats to the estuary in the 1960s came from a proposed marina development, a concrete flood channel, sand and gravel mining, even a planned nuclear power plant. With the help of citizen groups, scientists, and the federal government, Mike and Patricia McCoy were successful in designating the wetlands as a national estuary in 1980, protected by a growing number of conservation laws.

In This Issue

Saving the Estuary	Page 2
Photo Sources	Page 11
Meeting & Elections, Thursday, Nov.3 .	Page 12
Soil Shindig, Saturday, Nov. 12	Page 12

Saving the Estuary

By Barbara Zaragoza and Mike McCoy

Mike McCoy grew up in Boulder, Colorado and came to San Diego in 1970, the year he graduated from Veterinary School. He was awarded an internship at the San Diego Zoo. While going to veterinary school, he worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a biologist doing studies on the Northern Fur Seal on the Pribilof Islands in the Bearing Sea off the coast of Alaska. This experience, among other things, helped qualify him as a recipient of the San Diego Zoo Veterinary Medical Internship. It was the first extended internship offered by the zoo.



Fig. 1 - Patricia and Mike McCoy 1980

It was here that he met his wife, Patricia McCoy, an Englishwoman originally from London. She and her mother fled to Gloucestershire after losing several homes due to Hitler's bombing raids during WWII. She eventually became a city council member in

Imperial Beach and they both were avid environmental activists.

During the zoo internship Mike met and worked with Dr. Harold J. Hill who had a practice in Imperial Beach. Dr. Hill was formerly a professor at Colorado State University specializing in Theriogenology or the study of reproductive biology. He applied this knowledge at the zoo when it was needed.

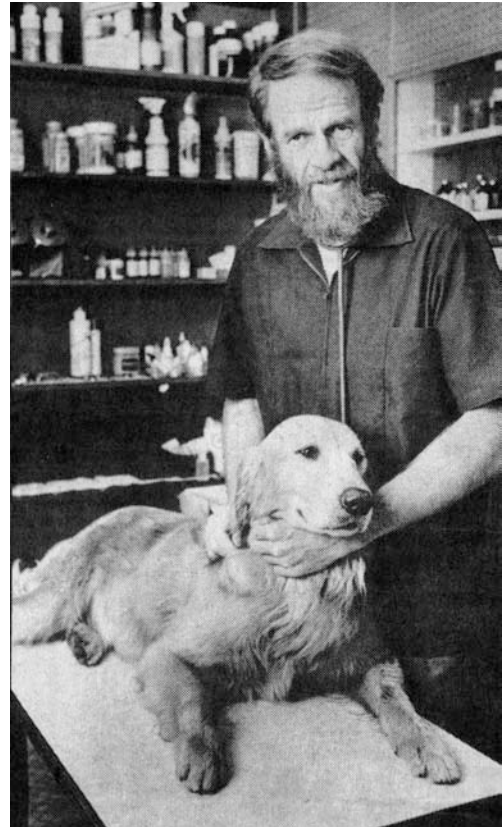


Fig. 2 - Mike McCoy at Imperial Beach Pet Hospital 1971

When the zoo internship was completed Mike joined Dr. Hill in his practice and worked toward being his associate. Mike moved to Imperial Beach and began to live and work in this small border town. During this time McCoy began, among other things, to treat injured wildlife in San Diego County and used the Imperial Beach Pet Hospital as the base of operation. Initially the endeavor was within the bounds of the Wildlife Section of the San Diego Chapter of the Sierra Club but eventually became what is now Project Wildlife. McCoy did the veterinary repair. Bob and Martha Hall along with Margery Kanothe

rehabilitated and released reptiles, birds and mammals when they had recovered.

Mike also realized Imperial Beach was geographically located between south San Diego Bay and the Tijuana Estuary. Most of the central and north Bay are heavily trammled by humanity but the South Bay still has some remaining relatively natural salt marshes. The Tijuana Estuary is the largest estuarine system left in southern California that has not been disrupted by railroads, roads, power lines or sewer lines. The estuary is relatively pristine compared to most salt marsh ecosystems in this region. Over 90% of the wetlands in California have been altered or destroyed due to lack of planning, ignorance, greed and corruption. Wetlands have only recently been recognized as valuable natural assets worldwide.

The Border in the 1970s

When Mike moved to IB, the border was basically open. You could freely cross back and forth within the Border Field area and you didn't have any restrictions. The marsh was in good shape and there wasn't a lot of sediment. There was even a golden eagle nest at the international border. Although the golden eagles used to come to the estuary, their home was disrupted by the border fence constructed starting in the 1990s.

The Fight Against A Marina

McCoy's lifelong political activism in Imperial Beach first began during the 1970's when developers wanted to dredge the estuary, create a concrete channel going from the U.S.-Mexico border to the Pacific Ocean and create an upscale marina. Actually, talk of a marina started way back in the late 1950's when businessmen dreamed of making money from a new luxury beach area. Plans for the

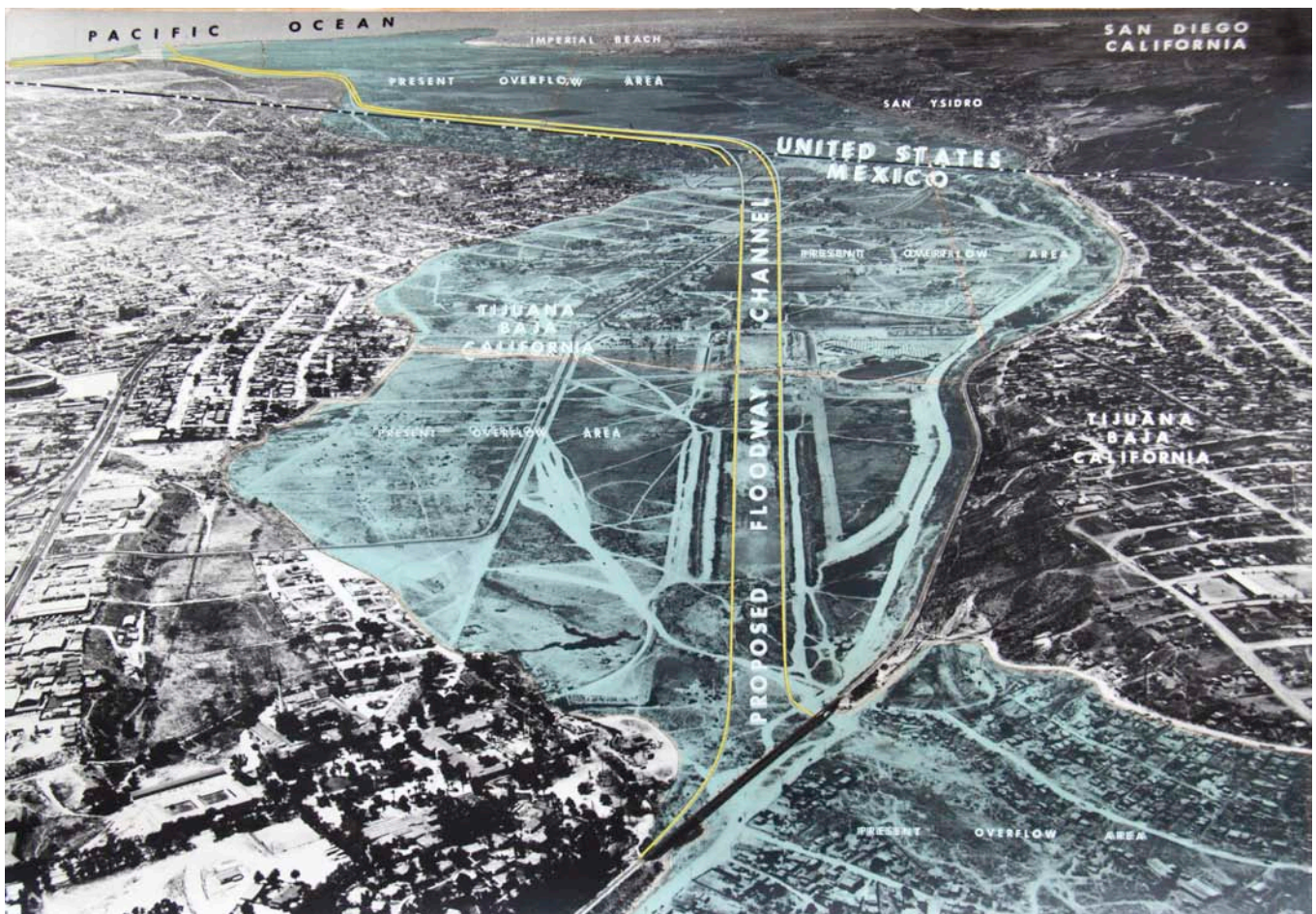


Fig. 3 - Drawing in 1965 of the proposed concrete flood control channel from Tijuana north across the border to the Pacific Ocean. The channel was built south of the border in Tijuana and dedicated in 1979, but the northern portion was vetoed by Pete Wilson and the San Diego City Council in 1974.



Fig. 4 - This map in 1976 showed land acquisitions for a proposed Marina development.

marina continued to be discussed throughout the 1960's.

This is where McCoy got involved. He was influenced by the research of local biologists Joy Zedler and Paul Jorgensen who maintained that an estuary was vital to water quality, air quality, ocean health and to humans. The area was also along the



Fig. 5 - The Clapper Rail was one of the endangered species along the Pacific Flyway.

Pacific Flyway, with about 370 different species of birds, both resident and migrants, relying on the area for their survival.

Mike began to organize local environmentalists and Imperial Beach residents in 1971. He enlisted Zedler and Jorgensen to resist the developers and together, they fought against the marina idea for over a decade.

Another issue mobilized citizens behind McCoy to keep development out of the estuary. In 1970, a large corporation known as Conrock (San Diego Consolidated Company) purchased 320 acres in Smuggler's Gulch and Spooner's Mesa to build a concrete and asphalt plant that would process the sand and gravel mining operation that had started in the area. The H. G. Fenton Company was mining in Goat Canyon, and the Nelson & Sloan Company was mining the mesa east of the Shelton Ranch (today, the Ranger Station on Monument Road). The Conrock proposal would vastly expand the mining

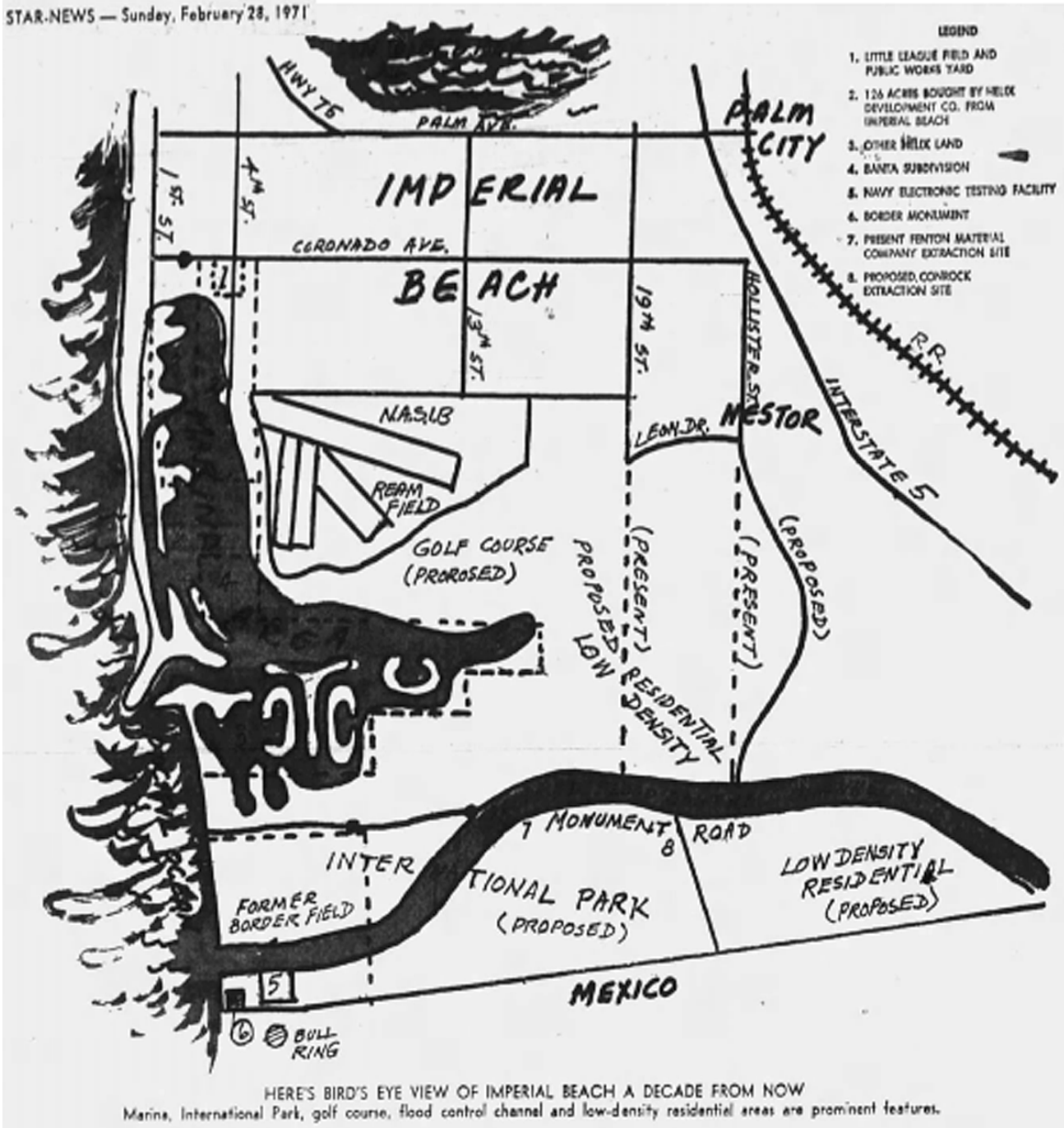


Fig. 6 - *The Chula Vista Star-News* in 1971 printed this view of what Imperial Beach would look like if the estuary was developed by a marina, a golf course, and residential housing. Along Monument Road, #7 and #8 were the Fenton and Conrock mining operations.

operations and would impact the southern part of the estuary. Hundreds of people protested against Conrock, including Laurel Grandquist would join McCoy to save the estuary and would be one of the founders of the Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association (SWIA).

April 15, 1974 was a turning point for the Tijuana River Valley. The cities and the county had decided upon three plans: one would develop the entire valley, including a concrete channel that would run from Mexico to the Pacific Ocean along with a marina replacing the Tijuana Estuary. The second plan would develop the area from about Saturn

Boulevard east to the border, and the rest would be open. The third plan would be to leave the whole valley open discouraging the development of a marina in the estuary. This was the major agenda item at the County Planning Organization, CPO, now SANDAG, that day.

Imperial Beach was the only city to vote for development of the Tijuana River Valley and the Tijuana Estuary. All the other cities in the county and the county voted to keep the valley free of channelization and development and from that day to the present this is the way it has been. Prior to this meeting McCoy met with Pete Wilson, the mayor of San Diego, and tried to convince him to leave the Tijuana River Valley open. He also met with Richard Ripinski who was the Chairman of the County Planning Organization, at that time.



Fig. 7 - Pat Nixon at the dedication of Border Field State Park, Aug. 18, 1971.

The dedication of Border Field State Park in 1971 was the first of several national events that helped McCoy and his citizen groups to save the estuary. In November 1971, the Navy condemned 263 acres west of Ream Field for a buffer zone for its helicopter landings and takeoffs. No marina could be built on these acres. In 1972 Ernest Hollings (D-SC) led Congress to pass the Coastal Zone Management Act that created a national system of estuary reserves. At the same time, California passed the Coastal Zone Conservation Act that prohibited any construction within 1000 feet of the coastline. Fish & Wildlife released a report endorsing a “South San

Diego Wildlife Preserve.” The San Diego activist group known as Citizens Coordinate for Century



Fig. 8 - Senator John Tunney

proposed bond propositions to raise money to preserve the estuary. The group was supported by John Tunney, son of heavyweight champion Gene Tunney. John was a California congressman with youthful energy and a Kennedy-like appearance who won election to the Senate in 1970 on a campaign that emphasized saving the environment. . In 1973 Congress passed the Endangered Species Act to protect wildlife using the estuary such as the clapper rail and the least tern migratory birds.



Fig. 9 - Patricia McCoy in Washington DC.

In June of 1974, Mike made his first trip to Washington D.C. He was taking part in a National Wildlife Conference and was able to speak with Nathaniel Reed, Undersecretary of the Interior, about the protection of the Tijuana Estuary from development as a marina. McCoy told the Undersecretary that they had a tremendous opportunity to save a national treasure, the Tijuana estuary.

McCoy hoped he could either work with the city of Imperial Beach to protect the estuary or work around them if need be. The Undersecretary explained that he needed to meet with the Congressman from the district. The goal became to protect the estuary by having the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acquire and manage it.



Fig. 10 - Marina plan of the Helix Co., 1976.

By 1978 the Helix Land Corporation proposed a \$200 million residential marina that would house 6,000 to 7,000 people, have a yacht club, a commercial and an extensive residential development. In June 1980 a newly appointed Imperial Beach representative to the Port Commission, Daniel Spurck, said he would work hard to ensure the commercial development of the Imperial Beach waterfront.

Richard Raymond Gets Shot

By May 1980, everything came to a head. That's when a friend of the McCoy's and an

environmental activist, Richard Raymond, was shot.



Fig. 11 - An old van became stuck in the mouth of the Tijuana River during the flood of Jan. 1980.

The river had flooded in January 1980, which wrecked havoc in "Cartolandia" in Tijuana (the 'cardboard' shanty area) and then the floodwaters destroyed a lot of the Tijuana River Valley area.



Fig. 12 - Imperial Beach citizens joined McCoy in the cleanup of the estuary after the flood. Serge Dedina is on the right without a shirt.

There were a large number of citizens cleaning up the estuary after the flood. That evening everyone gathered to celebrate the cleanup at the old I.B. fire station. Suddenly, four seedy looking men walked in and one pulled a gun and shot Richard Raymond point blank in the face.

They went to the penitentiary, but Mike McCoy maintains that nobody ever linked up the people

who put those guys up to it. Any ideas of a potential set up to get rid of the environmentalists remain unsubstantiated. There was certainly lots of speculation.

During this same time period, McCoy and his wife Patricia, got onto the freeway and found that the lug nuts on their car wheels had been loosened almost causing an accident.

There were many threatening phone calls during the entire process. Tempers flared and lots of money was involved.

“My feeling inside was, you know, if we’re gonna have anything left on this planet, you’re gonna have to put your life on the line. That was my feeling, directly, just you gotta do it. Either you’re gonna do that or you’re gonna lose it an inch at a time and I still feel that way today. It isn’t as violent today as it was then because there are a lot of laws in place today, but it’s just as dirty,” McCoy said.

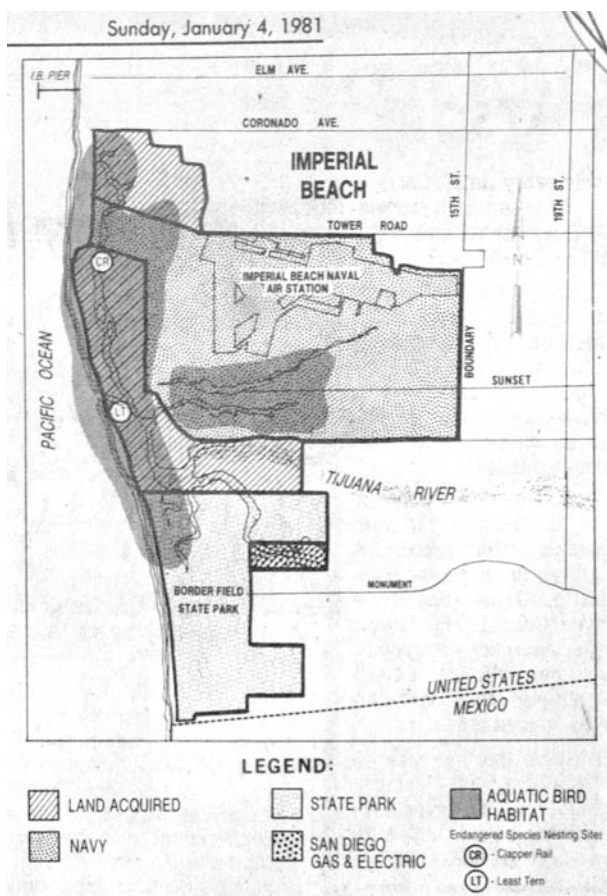


Fig. 13 - Map of the refuge in the *Star-News*.

Success and the Environment



Fig. 14 - Larry Dean (on left, back to the camera) meeting with SWIA in the newly designated estuary, January 1981.

Mike recalled that in November 1980 he and Patricia got a phone call. They’d been working from about 1977 onward with the head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Division of Ecological Services. The Division Chief, Ralph Pasapia, would come to their house and discuss a plan to protect estuary against development. Finally, after working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of California Department of Fish and Game (now it’s Fish and Wildlife) and the State of California Department of Parks and Recreation, DPR, and other people in the community who wanted it like the McCoy’s wanted it, Ralph Pasapia from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said he wanted to meet with the McCoy’s at Seacoast Drive at 10 o’clock in the morning.

That November morning in 1980, ten years after so many people had started the battle to protect the estuary, we ventured to the end of Seacoast Drive. There sat a government car with four people inside, Ralph being one of the four. The other three were from Washington D.C. As we talked a pick-up truck pulled up and a man got out. He was wearing cowboy boots, a big rodeo belt buckle and a Stetson. He looked like a real bull rider. Patricia always called him the Marlboro Man. He wandered over to the group. Ralph introduced us: “Mike and Patricia McCoy I want you to meet Larry Dean, refuge

manager for the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge in Imperial Beach, California.”

It was truly an emotional moment, one of those once in a life time moments. I could only look back over the years and think of people who had literally put their lives on the line to save the estuary. Some are no longer with us but I will always remember them. Those who wanted to protect the estuary against development had prevailed against what I thought were insurmountable odds. It just did not seem possible. It was a moment that defined a tribute to the Tijuana estuary and the people who dedicated their lives to protect it. Some of the same people continue to protect and restore it today.

They were told to say nothing. It was just Mike and Patricia. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service told them they had bought the 500-acres from the Helix Land Corporation for \$7.6 million (acre-for-acre the most expensive refuge yet purchased), so that no development could happen.

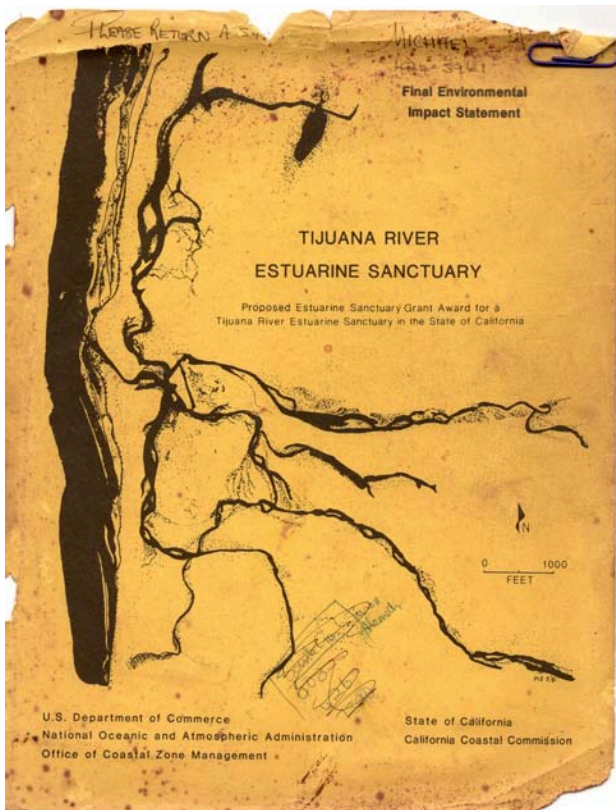


Fig. 15 -First EIS report for the new-named Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve in 1981.

“Christmas Day 1980, boom, we had a National Wildlife Refuge,” Mike said. Then, in January 1981 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said they wanted to site select the Tijuana Estuary as a National Sanctuary. The name then changed to Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve.

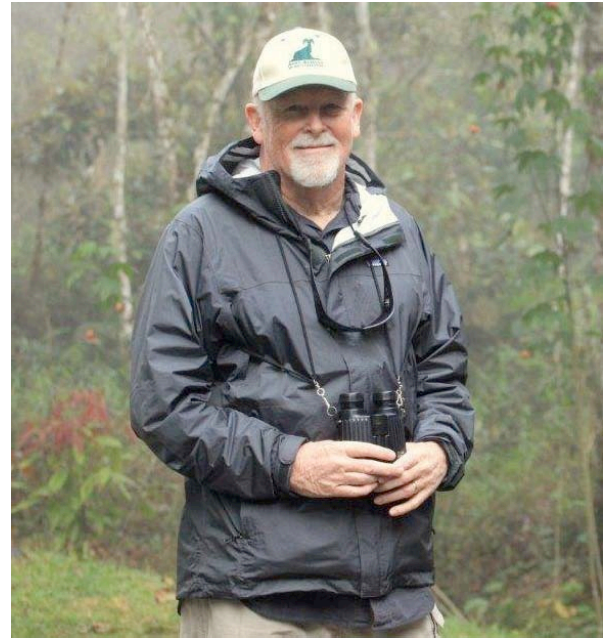


Fig. 16 -Paul Jorgensen, first reserve manager.

By 1982 the TRNERR was formally established. A management team was appointed by the agencies and jurisdictions that were involved. The National Estuarine Research Reserve System requires a formal relationship between NOAA and a recognized and appropriate state agency. The State of California Department of Parks and Recreation was and is recognized as the appropriate state partner at this site.

They then selected Paul Jorgensen as the first reserve manager. His research on the endangered Light Footed Clapper Rail, (now known as Ridgway’s Rail) recognized that the estuary provided critical habitat for the rail’s survival. Since the rail was protected by the Endangered Species Act, Paul’s research was essential in the ultimate protection of the estuary and the listed Light Footed Clapper Rail.

Finally, in 1979 McCoy was involved with the founding of the Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association, SWIA. SWIA is a cooperating association with the State of California Department of Parks and Recreation, DPR. In 1988 SWIA and DPR embarked upon constructing the Visitor's Center. The visitor center was completed and dedicated in 1990.

In April of 2005 the Tijuana Estuary was dedicated as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention.

In 2010 the mouth of the Tijuana River and adjacent ocean were site selected as a State Marine Conservation Area under the Marine Life Protection Act guided by the Governor of California.



Fig. 18 -This view of the Visitor Center is almost finished in this view of early 1990.



Fig. 17 -This view of the Visitor Center shows it under construction in 1989, following the design of architect Rob Quigley.

The Border Fence and Destruction of the Ecology

In the late 1980s there was a significant increase in drug trafficking and illegal immigration, so by the 1990's the Clinton Administration launched Operation Gatekeeper. The National Guard commenced to construct the first border infrastructure barrier cutting and welding sections of a military landing mat into a border wall. There was no real permitting system in place. The planning process was minimal at best. There was little communication between TRNERR and the National Guard.

Mexico stripped vegetation from the steep hill sides in contiguous canyons connecting to the estuary making way for new settlements as the border population grew. The loss of vegetation and destabilization of the hill sides along with the building of the border fence led to serious sedimentation of the tidal channels and lands surrounding the Tijuana Estuary.

The sediment problem became pronounced. It had to be controlled or the estuary would lose its tidal exchange capability. The border fence construction and construction in Mexico started disrupting the hillsides leading to sediment accretion in the

estuarine tidal channels and a decrease in the tidal prism.

“As you strip off the vegetation, you start to lay those hillsides bare and that’s what they did, they started taking the vegetation off. Anytime there was a rain, we’d start to get sediment. It got worse as time went on, it got worse and worse and worse ’til today it’s terrible because they stripped off those hillsides. That’s another thing. The immigration was getting worse and worse because of the disparity of wealth between the two nations,” McCoy said. “That started happening in the 70s and 80s. It’s been getting progressively worse. You’ve got the richest nation with the richest state in the world backed up next to one of the poorest.”

That’s when Mike started to feel the area was going to lose out. Once again, he became an activist. He says: “So we formed a group to begin to take this whole fence on. There were six environmental organizations... Basically we tried to point out, or our lawsuit was that the way the border fence was being handled was not constitutional. But in 2005, Congress passed an Iraq funding bill in May I believe it was...”

Indeed, in 2005 Congress passed the REAL ID Act, which stipulated a double fence along the entire United States-Mexico border. Section 102 of the act gave the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security the right to waive any law that would impede the rapid construction of the walls. The Real ID Act was attached to the Iraq funding bill hence it went right through Congress without resistance or opposition.

“When you put a barrier in, it has an impact on the culture and ecology, socio-political, economic and ecological downside to putting barriers in where you can’t get cross-border fertilization. This is a rich area ecologically and socially,” Mike said. “It’s what I call it an ecotone. Cultural ecotone, ecological ecotone. It’s where two communities meet whether plant, animal or human and the richness there is greater than it is on the other side because you have more variety.”

Biggest Problem For The Estuary

What are the foremost issues that are really pressing today for the Tijuana Estuary? Mike says sediment, trash, tires, human population expansion, invasive species and water quality issues. Invasive species are often overlooked as leading to the demise of ecological systems. They replace the life blood of ecological integrity by out-competing those plants that are critical to maintaining the food web. When the web is broken and out-competed the system starts to unravel. The major invaders include: Salt Cedar also known as tamarisk, the Giant Reed also known as *Arundo* and the Castor Bean. These are some but by no means all the invaders.

A watershed is a drainage basin and because Tijuana sits 300 feet above sea level, when it rains or floods, urban runoff flows down the creeks, streams and rivers out into the sea by way of the Tijuana Estuary. Water passes across the border through the Tijuana River, and several other canyons. By the laws of the International Boundary Commission and Water Commission, four canyons and culverts along the international border between San Diego and Tijuana allow these flows to go out into the ocean.

Photo Sources

Unless otherwise noted, all photos are from the personal collection of Patricia and Mike McCoy.

cover, Fig. 17 - Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve Visitor Center, 301 Caspian Way, Imperial Beach, CA 91932.

Fig. 3 - International Boundary and Water Commission, San Diego Projects Office, 2225 Dairy Mart Road, San Ysidro, CA 92173.

Fig. 4 - Imperial Beach City Hall Collection.

Fig. 6, 13 - *Chula Vista Star-News*.

Fig. 7 - The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum/ National Archives and Records Administration

Fig. 8 - *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2013n.

NOVEMBER 3 MEETING.....

Our meeting on Thursday, Nov. 3, will be held at 6 p.m. in the auditorium at the Chula Vista Civic Library, 365 F Street. The first order of business will be elections of officers and Board members. The following current Board members are standing for election to another two-year term of office: Steve Schoenherr for president, Harry Orgovan for vice-president, Patricia Huffman for secretary, and Peter Watry, Mitch Beauchamp, Shelley Rudd, Barbara Zaragoza for the Board of Directors. The following have been nominated for new terms on the Board: Joyce Ward for treasurer, Mark Valen, Ceasar Castro, Ralph Munoz, Debbie Munoz.



Patricia and Mike McCoy will speak at the Nov. 3 meeting on the history of the Tijuana River Estuary. They became leaders of the movement in the 1970s to save the natural wetlands of the estuary, one of the few remaining coastal habitats for endangered species and migrating birds. Threats to the wetlands came from a marina development, a Mexican flood channel, sand and gravel mining,

even a nuclear power plant. With the help of citizen groups, scientists, and the federal government, the McCoys were successful in having the wetlands designated a national estuary in 1980, protected by a growing number of conservation laws.



The McCoys received an award in 1998 from County Supervisor Greg Cox in recognition of their leadership in wetlands protection at the state and county level. That same year they received the National Wetlands Award from the Environmental Law Institute. In 1990 Mike McCoy received the national Teddy Roosevelt Conservation Award from President George Bush.

NOVEMBER 12 SHINDIG.....

The Soil Shindig is a free day-long celebration of the natural resources of the Tijuana Valley on Saturday, Nov. 12. Family-friendly activities will be located at Suzie's Farm at 2570 Sunset Ave, Wild Willow Farm at 2550 Sunset Ave, and the Community Garden at the corner of Hollister St. & Sunset Ave. The South Bay Historical Society will have display at Suzie's Farm and



will have literature available about the history of the Tijuana River Valley. For more information, see the links on our web page at <http://sunnycv.com/southbay/activities/shindig.html>

NEW ROHR EXHIBIT.....

The Heritage Museum is planning a new exhibit next year on the Rohr company. Anyone who would like to help or donate artifacts. please let us know on our web page or post a message at <https://www.facebook.com/cvmuseum/>

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Bulletin No. 14, Nov.. 2016
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