



Prisoners Harbor Coastal Wetland Restoration Project



The National Park Service (NPS) and The Nature Conservancy are actively restoring what was once the largest coastal wetland on the Channel Islands. The Prisoners Harbor Coastal Wetland Restoration Project revives a functional ecosystem at a coastal wetland and stream channel in lower Cañada del Puerto Creek on Santa Cruz Island. The value of this project is significant as coastal wetlands in California are increasingly rare—over 90% have been eliminated. The restored wetland will provide important habitat for wildlife and native plants.

A Site Rich in Natural and Cultural Resources is Altered

Prisoners Harbor on Santa Cruz Island sits at the mouth of Cañada del Puerto, a seasonal creek. Historically, the Prisoners area was once the largest coastal wetland on the Channel Islands. This rare habitat, comprised of a fresh water stream, coastal lagoon/wetland, and riparian woodland, provided respite from the long dry summers for a diverse array of species including the island fox. The wetland most likely served as a resting and feeding stop for migratory birds and nesting habitat for resident waterfowl.

Prisoners Harbor has an extensive legacy of human occupation including Chumash habitation, fishing and ranching. In the late 1800s island owners rerouted and channelized the creeks, filled in the adjacent wetland with gravels from the surrounding hills and creek bed. These actions reduced the ecological value and biological diversity of the coastal wetland system. It resulted in diminished habitat quality for island species, such as the Santa Cruz Island silver lotus, Santa Cruz Island fox, island scrub jay, and migratory waterfowl.

Protecting Resources by Restoring the Natural Function of a Coastal Wetland

To restore the natural function and ecology of the wetland, an engineering firm was contracted to remove the artificial fill from the wetland and reshape the landscape to its former condition. Using heavy equipment they removed a 250 feet of artificial berm that had been built up next to the stream, allowing it to flood naturally.

The project, which extends over nearly 60 acres of land owned by the NPS and The Nature Conservancy, includes about four acres near the shore and nearly one mile of stream habitat in the valley. The project involved earthmoving, removal of non-native species such as eucalyptus, and planting of native riparian and woodland species. Ranching structures in

the project area including, a scale house, loading chute, squeeze chute, and water trough were carefully relocated, and archaeological resources, were protected.

The return of natural function to the wetland is expected to increase the diversity and abundance of species particularly woodland birds, migratory waterfowl, amphibians such as Pacific tree frogs and salamanders. The increased water in the wetland will increase biological diversity due to more productivity and available food for wetland species. This will have a ripple effect throughout the food chain and other native animals like Santa Cruz Island fox will benefit.

Partners Essential to Wetland Recovery

The NPS and The Nature Conservancy are grateful for the support of many partners in this restoration effort. Key partners included the State of California Wildlife Conservation Board and State of California Coastal Conservancy who donated funds for site preparation and non native species removal. The Los Angeles

Conservation Corp assisted with site preparation. The University of California Reserve contributed periodic bird surveys and housing support. The Chumash community was critical in providing advice and review of project plans.