

## Editorial board

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## VIEWPOINT

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## First Amendment quote

"The fair, accurate, contextual search for the truth is as important to the future of humanity as sunlight is to the future of the Earth."

— Eric Newton, vice president for journalism, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2009

## Partnering for conservation in the Tulare Basin: The Tulare Basin Working Group

The Tulare Basin Working Group organized its annual spring meeting around a tour of the Tulare Basin on April 27. The group met to observe and discuss the wetland and migratory bird stewardship, habitat restoration and integrated resources management successes and opportunities in the basin.

About 35 people took a driving tour of the wetland restoration sites of the California Waterfowl Association and Ducks Unlimited. That was followed by a walking tour of the Tulare Basin Wetlands Association's Los Alamos and El Cinco Duck Club wetlands.

The agencies, nonprofits and other stakeholders attending the tour and meeting were Audubon California, Ducks Unlimited, California Waterfowl Association, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, state Department of Fish and Game, Department of Fish and Game, Central Valley Joint Venture, River Partners, Conservation Strategy Group, Willands Inc., Tulare Basin Wetlands Association, Tulare County Citizens for Responsible Growth, Southern California Edison, College of the Sequoias and the planning organization, Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners.

Niki Woodard, communications/outreach specialist for the Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners, summarized the trip, and its key points, for Viewpoint.

When was the last time you stopped to really listen to and look at the remarkable diversity of bird species that fill our southern San Joaquin Valley skies, trees and watering holes? If it's been awhile, do yourself a favor and include your senses by taking a stroll to any number of Tulare County open spaces: Kaweah Oaks Preserve, Dry Creek Preserve, the Pixley National Wildlife Refuge or some of the creekside trails that run through our cities.

Along that stroll, you'll soak in a beauty that has become a rare sensory delight, but that once proliferated in the Tulare Basin (an area that stretches about from the San Joaquin River in the north to the Kern River in the south).

The Tulare Basin was once the largest expanse of wetlands in California with several lakes, including Tulare Lake, the largest freshwater lake (in terms of surface area) west of the Great Lakes. Those wetlands made this region the single most important wintering area for Pacific flyway waterfowl in California.

However, the Tulare Basin has lost a higher percentage of its native land than any other region in California. As the state's population has swelled over the last 150 years, water has been diverted for agricultural uses and urban consumption, drying up habitat that enabled abundant populations of species to thrive.

The need to strike a balance between nature and society's growth has never been more pressing, nor more complicated and expensive, than it is today.



ABOVE: This is a view of the natural wetlands at the Los Alamos Duck Club. BELOW: This is an example of the native landscape and seasonal wetlands in the Tulare Basin that can absorb surplus flooding. SUBMITTED PHOTOS



The key word, however, is "balance."

## How do we achieve balance?

Finding balance happens when diverse stakeholders come together to determine needs, challenges and opportunities. That is why the Tulare Basin Working Group was established in 2003 as a consortium of public agencies, private organizations and individuals concerned with the protection and restoration of natural communities in the Tulare Lake Basin. The group works to strike a balance between the often-competing interests of natural and economic outcomes.

The Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners is the action arm of the Working Group. They convene biannual meetings among the more than 70 participants to identify new conservation opportunities that achieve multiple benefits for wildlife, people and agriculture. Some of those multiple benefits include providing water for current wetlands, creating groundwater recharge basins, water banking, water recycling, reducing stormwater flooding and improving soil conditions on retired farmland.

"The energy that the Wildlife Partners has brought to the region has been tremendous and is exemplified by all of your pres-

ence here," Bob Shaffer, coordinator for the Central Valley Joint Venture, told those attending the tour and meeting.

The meeting and tour aptly titled "Celebration of Waterfowl and Migratory Bird Stewardship, Habitat Restoration and Integrated Resource Management in the Tulare Basin" toured several duck clubs northwest of Wasco.

Since the mid-19th century, some of the most strategic partnerships in habitat conservation have been the numerous duck clubs that dot the Valley floor.

Duck clubs undertake large-scale conservation and restoration projects in an effort to attract more ducks during the hunting season. However, these clubs provide habitat year-round, supporting growing populations of local wildlife, migratory birds and waterfowl, many of which are classified by state and/or federal agencies as endangered or of special concern.

Through collaboration with agricultural and environmental interests and funders, the clubs strike a balance between goals for recreation, conserva-



Among those attending the meeting and tour are, from left, Jacob Byers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Chris Hildebrandt, Ducks Unlimited; Bob Schaffer, Central Valley Joint Venture; Mike Unser, Rancho Visalia Duck Club; Ruth Ostroff, Central Valley Joint Venture; and Scott Frazier, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. SUBMITTED PHOTO

## MORE ONLINE

• **Website:** To learn more about the Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners, go to [www.tularebasinwildlifepartners.org](http://www.tularebasinwildlifepartners.org).

• **Facebook:** Find them on Facebook at Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners.

## tion and agriculture.

"Wetlands conservation is the core of Ducks Unlimited's mission and here in the Tulare Basin, water conservation and wetland sustainability are focal points for us," said Chris Hildebrandt, a regional biologist with Ducks Unlimited.

About 35 attendees toured the Rancho Visalia Duck Club, Widgeon Gun Club, Los Alamos Duck Club and El Cinco Duck Club to view projects, both recently completed and in progress, such as conservation easements to conserve, in perpetuity, important migratory bird habitat against development pressures against development pressures, and new pumps to supply water to wetlands and restored habitat that attracts waterfowl, including the tri-colored blackbird, a state and federal species of special concern.

These projects are completed through a highly collaborative process that engages partners like Ducks Unlimited, the California Waterfowl Association, nonprofit environmental groups and funding from multiple sources. Key funding agencies include the California Wildlife Conservation Board, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

To get an idea of the scale of wetland restoration accomplished by these groups, Ducks Unlimited has restored or enhanced 24,530 acres of wetlands and 3,880 acres of associated uplands in the last 25 years.

## The water-balancing act

One of the greatest challenges facing conservation work in the Tulare Basin is water availability.

Historically, California is prone to alternating periods of drought and flooding. The demands of a growing society require dramatic alteration of the landscape to secure a stable water supply. Those alterations have yielded unintended consequences, for which we are now trying to mitigate, as water needs for agriculture and urban use continue to rise.

Through such collaborative processes as the integrated resource management approach taken on by the Tulare Basin Working Group and its members, there is hope and opportunity for overcoming our water challenges in California.

One example of innovative thinking is a project being developed in coordination with the city of Delano to deliver recycled wastewater for use in Tulare Basin wetlands. With proper sanitary treatment, the water can be cleaned for use on agriculture, wetlands and groundwater recharge.

## Integrated resource management seeks sustainable outcomes

There is a relatively new mode of operation — integrated resource management — that is taking hold among managers of natural resources, including water, land, air, climate change and wildlife planning entities. The concept is collaborative in nature and its objective is to achieve long-term, sustainable outcomes that balance natural, socioeconomic and geographic priorities.

The principle of integrated resource management is fairly intuitive, although it

hasn't been practiced on a broad scale. It was introduced by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service more than 20 years ago and recently came to the policy forefront through the California Department of Conservation Watershed Program and the California Department of Fish and Game Strategic Vision.

By definition, IRM is "a planning and decision-making process that coordinates resource use so that the long-term sustainable benefits

are optimized and conflicts among users are minimized," according to the California Natural Resources Agency's December 2010 white paper and action plan, "The Future of Natural Resource Management."

IRM emphasizes community-based strategies. As California's funding resources are expected to continue shrinking, IRM provides a solution for achieving necessary protection of valuable natural resources.

In the past, funding for

natural resources projects favored purpose projects. The IRM approach aims to achieve results for multi-objective, multi-benefit projects, including recreation, public health, economic benefits and education. Such projects are more capable of combining funding streams, economizing on planning and implementation and, therefore, achieving better outcomes.

The system of statutes and policies that has governed state and federal natural

resource management was developed during a time when natural resources were still considered abundant and resilient.

As water, wildlife habitat, good soil and clean air become scarcer, and as increasing evidence supports climate change realities, society needs to approach the conservation and restoration of resources with an unobstructed vision toward the horizon.

IRM is the framework under which this new system

of natural resource stewardship must move forward, for the benefit of our land and its inhabitants.

The Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners facilitate IRM in this region through the Tulare Basin Watershed Initiative, funded by the state Department of Conservation, with support from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management and private funders such as Southern California Edison and Pacific Gas & Electric Co.

## WRITE TO US

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