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THE STATE

Another Piece of L.A.'s Natural Heritage Imperiled

December 24, 2000 | Cheryl Swift and Robert Gottlieb | Cheryl Swift, associate professor of biology, is environmental sciences program coordinator at Whittier College. Robert Gottlieb is the author of "Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change."

Landscapes tell stories, filmmaker Wim Wenders has remarked. For too long, the landscape of Los Angeles has told a story of nature suppressed, of violence and hostility to people and nature alike. Many places have become closed and foreboding, rather than vibrant geographies that incorporate the built environment and open spaces. Los Angeles is park poor, whether open-space corridors in the hills surrounding the city or in the inner city, where the sparseness is egregious, notwithstanding Mayor Richard Riordan's end-of-term pledge to make our relative handful of parks more habitable.

Remaking the landscape has become a rallying cry for traditional environmentalists and inner-city community activists. Open space in particular, once a cause solely identified with "nature lovers," has reemerged as an issue of ecological and community revitalization. Strong support from the Latino Eastside, African Americans in South Central and the bedroom communities of the San Gabriel Valley was key to passage of Proposition 12 in March, which provides funding for open space, wildlife corridors and urban parks.

But the obstacles to open space and the goal of revitalization remain formidable. The battleground in the eastern end of the San Gabriel Valley at Tonner Canyon, where open space has become a core issue, is a case in point.

Including more than 2,500 acres of largely undeveloped open land, Tonner Canyon, called the Firestone Boy Scout Reservation, represents an intact piece of L.A.'s natural heritage. But it is about to go under--literally. Its owners, the Boy Scouts of America, recently turned down offers from two environmental groups and instead sold the property--for \$1.5 million less--to the city of Industry's Urban Development Agency, which plans to build a reservoir on the site. The deal was partly brokered by Majestic Realty, headed by Ed Roski Jr. Majestic, you'll recall, wants to turn another piece of undeveloped land adjacent to the Los Angeles River at the Chinatown yards into a landscape of warehouses.

The Tonner Canyon deal is problematic, for a number of reasons. The proposed reservoir would constrict a major wildlife corridor, resulting in a significant loss of plant and animal habitat. At least 25% of the Walnut woodland in the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor would be eliminated, along with a perennial stream. The reservoir would further extend the tentacles of development that have already reached into the Verdugo, Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains, as well as the Puente, San Jose and Montebello hills. These types of development eliminate the water-storage capacity of native plants and produce storm runoff that has already forced the paving of 53 miles of hillside tributaries in L.A. river watershed alone. Too often, they spawn more development, which leads to a vicious cycle of increases in traffic, air pollution and runoff.

Tonner Canyon, which resides within the Puente-Chino Hills corridor, could become a place where peoples' hunger for contact with nature, including open space, would be satisfied. Stephen A. Trimble and Gary Paul Nabhan make a compelling case for the importance of the natural world in human development. In their book, "The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places," they contend that an appreciation for the connectedness of life fosters an appreciation for diversity that, in turn, nurtures tolerance. Experiencing nature becomes part of "coming of age," important to the development of both self-esteem and independence. This connectedness could be experienced through cleaner rivers flowing past communities rich in park space, made possible, in part, by intact watersheds like Tonner Canyon.

If Tonner Canyon could be preserved as is, everyone wins, right down to the scrub jays, the Boy Scouts and the people who live in the area. The birds could have their walnuts, the Scouts could be \$1.5 million richer and the people could enjoy open spaces in the form of parks, watershed and a wildlife corridor.

Taking the Tonner Canyon fight as a starting point, imagine a different water and land-use policy for the Los Angeles region. Imagine the San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers as part of a watershed marked with parks along their banks, complete with wetlands, where excess storm water is stored, that recharge underground aquifers. Then imagine this network of watersheds linked to the need for open space. The result would promote healthier communities and a healthier region.

This was the kind of vision first outlined in the Olmsted-Bartholomew plan proposed to the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce in 1930. Land-use decisions like the Tonner Canyon deal are crucial to whether we function on a regional, as well as a community, basis in capturing and elevating what is best in this vision.

In the next several months, an obscure process to revise the Los Angeles County general plan will unfold. Whether or not this process can address the need for open space and the value of maintaining wildlife corridors like the Puente-Chino Hills, it will be another opportunity for Los Angeles to recognize that landscapes do tell stories, and that we need to tell a life-affirming one. *