

## SAN MATEO CREEK WATERSHED PROFILE



The following is an excellent synopsis of the history of the Watershed. It is excerpted from the *San Mateo Creek Watershed Profile* once, but not longer, posted on the California Conservancy website in the WRP information section (authors unidentified). The full Profile is available in the Resources section of this website.

### *History*

The landscape of the SMC watershed remained relatively undisturbed until the Spanish and European settlement of the region. With the arrival of a ranching culture, the landscape underwent significant changes. Native grasslands were slowly replaced by European and Asian weeds and other introduced plants. Some botanists argue that this invasion of exotic plants had more affect on the area than any other single factor (USFS, 1999a).

Many historic factors have affected the condition of the SMC watershed. The following representative eras summarize the SMC watershed's history.

#### Native Americans

The early native American inhabitants of the coast and the Santa Ana Mountains included the Kumeyaay, Luisaños, Cahuella, and Capeño. These groups fished the streams and found an ample food supply among the abundant plant life. The explorers Vizcaíno and Cabrillo reported that the native Indians did considerable burning of the brushlands, but the overall impact was probably not very great (USFS, 1999a).

#### Mission Period

In 1769, the Spanish mission expeditions led by Junipero Serra and Gaspar de Portolá established settlements from San Diego to Monterey. European settlement of the SMC watershed was centered around the Mission San Juan Capistrano. Portolá camped at an Indian village north of San Onofre on July 22, 1769 on his way north to Monterey Bay. This 133,441-acre area was part of Rancho Santa Margarita y Las Flores, which was granted to Pio and Andres Pico in 1841. The Mission Period, which began in 1769, initiated the changes to the river system through the introduction of irrigation systems. The Spanish brought knowledge of aqueducts, and they built a huge system of them throughout California. Water was supplied from surface water bodies irrigating extensive gardens, orchards, and vineyards. The missions prospered until the separation of Mexico from Spain in 1821. The Secularization Act of 1833 ended the Mission Period and virtually eliminated the mission-owned lands. This resulted in the opening of large portions of land to settlement by private ranchers and the beginning of the Rancho Period.

## Rancho Period

During this period, the land within the watershed was parceled out in the form of large Mexican land grants. These "ranchos" brought large numbers of cattle and sheep, which grazed upon the grasslands of the lower San Mateo Creek drainage basin. With the arrival of the Spanish, ranching became the predominant activity in the watershed. Large numbers of cattle and sheep grazed upon the grasslands of the lower San Mateo Creek drainage basin, drastically altering the native landscape. Widespread overgrazing throughout the area destroyed native vegetation. Rancheros cut brush and trees for fence posts and cleared underbrush with fires for foraging. Also, the introduction of plants from Europe and Asia displaced native grasslands, which probably created the single most destructive assault on the landscape.

Ranching continued with European settlement and became the main land use activity in the area until the early 20th century. The San Mateo coastal plain and foothills provided not only ample grazing territory, but also the creek itself served as the major water supply for livestock in the region. At least three historic windmill wells pumped water from the creek bed, the remnants of which are still present.

## Pioneer Settlers

In the late 1860's, an influx of gold miners from northern California descended upon the canyons of the Santa Ana Mountains within the upper SMC watershed. In addition to gold, other metals such as zinc, lead, and silver were mined and consequently altered the landscape. Trees were cut for mine timbers and firewood, and great expanses of brush were burned to make way for mineral exploration. Early reports from the 1870s and 1880s document uncontrolled fires that burned for weeks at a time. These events caused serious damage to irrigation works and threatened the water supplies of the surrounding rural areas and coastal towns. In response, the California Forestry Commission, established by Governor Stone in 1886, voiced the necessity for special protection of the watershed to prevent fires and subsequent erosion, which were "injuring the climate, agriculture and future prospects of southern California."

## Contemporary Period

The Forest Reserve Act was signed by President Benjamin Harrison in 1891 to curb illegal timber cutting, mining and other wasteful practices. This Act established the boundaries of the Cleveland National Forest, which included a majority of the SMC's upper watershed. The Cleveland National Forest originally encompassed over 1.9 million acres. However, between the years of 1908 to 1925, several transfers of forest lands to private and public entities significantly reduced the size of the forest (USFS, 1999a). Today the Cleveland National Forest consists of approximately 420,000 acres.

Early modifications to the San Mateo Creek included construction of the railroad embankment and trestle by the Santa Fe Railway, which stabilized the mouth of the creek (Fledmeth, 1987). In the 1930s, during construction of the old State Highway 1, a straight

channel and associated levees were constructed between the bridge and railway trestle. Upstream, several earthen reservoirs were constructed by farmers adjacent to the creek to increase percolation of runoff into the water table (Feldmeth, 1987). Levees were also constructed north of the current location of the I-5 freeway and on the western edge of agricultural fields. These levees were constructed to prevent the San Mateo Creek from meandering and destroying cultivated areas on the river terrace.

In 1950, the U.S. Marine Corps built Camp San Mateo to house recruits on the stream terrace just north of the confluence of Cristianitos Creek and San Mateo Creek. Sand and gravel were removed from the creek bed to supply construction material for the base. A sewage treatment facility for the base was also constructed, and it discharges treated effluent to the creek. The Marine Corps recently constructed additional housing east of Camp San Mateo on San Mateo Point, a coastal bluff adjacent to the San Mateo Wetlands Preserve and the Trestles surfing area.

In 1984, 39,540 acres of land in the SMC upper watershed were designated as the San Mateo Canyon Wilderness. This designation prohibited the construction of roads, vehicles, and structures while allowing camping, hiking, and hunting in both the wilderness area and the rest of the National Forest.

Recently, steelhead trout have been found within the creek. The Federal Register listing of the Proposed Range Extension for the Endangered Steelhead in Southern California can be found at <http://www.eswr.com/n12190.txt>.