

## Restoring the College of Marin's Ecology Study Area

by Sam Wilson

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Back in the 1870s, cargo schooners sailed up Corte Madera Creek to load wood from the interior of the watershed, docking at an area then known as Ross Landing—near where, today, College Avenue runs into Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. (Literally translated, “corte madera” means “cut wood.”)

Before the area was modified to suit human habitation, the transition from riparian (riverside) to estuarine (tidally influenced) habitat fanned out by degrees, from dense growths of species including willow, elderberry, and alder to open vistas of salt-tolerant cordgrass, pickleweed, and salt grass. The watercourse broadened as tributary streams merged with it, becoming an expanse of meandering channels and sloughs, inundated twice a day by the tides. Over the years, levees were constructed to increasingly confine the creek, an endeavor that culminated when, around 1970, the Army Corps of Engineers constructed a mile-long concrete channel, with the intent of totally containing the stretch of creek between Ross and the College of Marin. Today, the flow is finally released from the channel in the vicinity of the college's playing fields, where the creek merges with waters from two side-by-side box culverts—what has become of the tributary streams draining Kent Woodlands and the neighborhood around Bridge Avenue.



*A 1998 view of the Ecology Study Area*

The channelizing of Corte Madera Creek has been less than a success in serving the flood-control function for which it was intended—the concrete channel having no larger a capacity for carrying flood waters than the natural creek it replaced. Moreover, many acres of riparian and estuarine habitat have been lost, and the severe, chute-like flows have seriously impacted steelhead and salmon runs. Hence, Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed envisions removal of the concrete channel and replacing it with a more natural water course, but others in the community want to see the channel remain. The issue is a familiar one in the Ross Valley and likely to remain contentious for some time to come.

Meanwhile, the college, in collaboration with Friends, is taking steps to preserve and enhance what remains on the campus of the historical riparian/estuarine transitional habitat. Aided by a grant from The San Francisco Estuary Project, Friends is working with COM in planning the enhancement of a three-acre parcel with great potential habitat value. In the 1970s the college dedicated the land—located on the northern shore just beyond the end of the concrete channel, and including the area inside the fence—as an ecology study area. A shortage of funds and the lack of a coordinated restoration effort have left the area a tangle of exotic species including eucalyptus, broom, and black acacia, with deposits of beer cans here and there. Until recently, a thicket of broom served as the background for a weathered sign reading “Ecology Study Area” fixed to a fence railing.

If you walk for a couple hundred yards down the multi-use path, along the top of the levee that extends from the end of the concrete channel, you will arrive at a point where what remains of the historical stream course of Corte Madera Creek passes under the pathway through a culvert. The dead-end slough no longer receives freshwater flow from the creek—it was cut off when the channel was constructed—so water circulation is poor and the water quality is rather stagnant. But looking up the slough, which hooks around to nearly encircle the preserve, gives one a hint of the area's former appearance. It's an area still frequented by many species of waterfowl including various species of herons, egrets and ducks. One of the goals of the enhancement project is to improve the water quality by repairing the partially blocked culvert, allowing more tidal circulation.

Friends is acting as a catalyst to encourage community support for the enhancement project. College faculty—including botanist Paul da Silva, landscape designer Fernando Agudelo-Silva, geologist Jim Locke, and wildlife biologist Joe Mueller—and their students will make contributions including inventorying existing resources and conditions and creating potential restoration designs. Also, Friends will work with the college to develop public presentations on the goals and benefits of habitat enhancement. We are also cultivating support from local schools. Kent Middle School and Bacich Elementary School are well situated to use the preserve as an outdoor classroom. Other schools will also be invited to participate. State and county agencies will also be involved. The state Coastal Conservancy's Invasive Spartina Project has offered to provide expertise for controlling the invasive, aggressively spreading species of cordgrass, *Spartina densiflora*. This exotic species has overwhelmed extensive areas of native cordgrass and pickleweed, diminishing habitat value for such wildlife as the endangered salt marsh harvest mouse and clapper rail. Other collaborators will include the Marin County Flood Control District and the Open Space District, which will repair the culvert and maintain the overlying pathway. This project requires more finesse than one might imagine, since the main sewer line serving the Ross Valley is embedded along the length of the levee.

In the upland area of the preserve (the area above the tidal zone) the goal is to eventually establish an oak woodland ecosystem, replacing eucalyptus and acacia with native oaks, buckeye and box elder. The enhancement will proceed gradually, taking into account the established communities of birds and other wildlife species that depend on the existing habitat. And there is a human element to consider as well. At various times, neighbors have expressed concern about issues including: the fire hazard that the area poses in its present condition, the importance of the vegetation to views and privacy, the poor water quality in the slough, and unauthorized uses on the site.

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