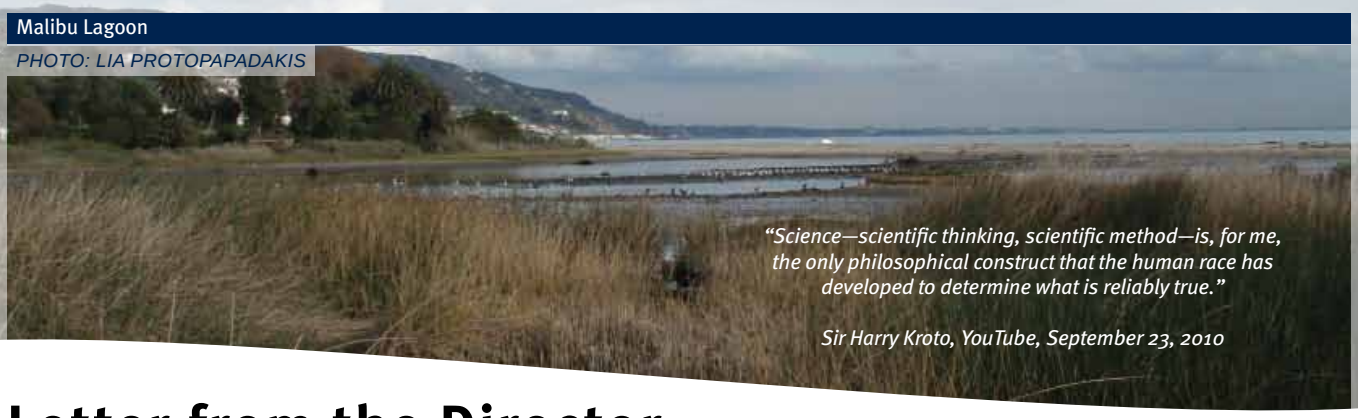
Welcome



Malibu Lagoon

PHOTO: LIA PROTOPAPADAKIS

Letter from the Director

In Science We Trust... Maybe

Science can be defined as the tested, systemized, and accepted knowledge of general truths or laws. As John Ruskin (1960) said, "The work of science is to substitute facts for appearances, and demonstrations for impressions." However, when it comes time to apply science, the tested and accepted knowledge may not fit with strongly held impressions or opinions, and then we find ourselves in conflict. We have seen this writ large in the politicized debate over climate change, and in recent work that the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission and others are doing to repair and enhance coastal wetlands in Los Angeles County.

It is no surprise. After all, there are many variables, interests, new pieces of information, and lessons learned from past applications to consider. While science strives to be black-and-white, the application of science is gray by comparison. Politics, passions, and opinions can easily cloud issues and sometimes outweigh reason and impede progress.

When addressing controversial issues, a scientist's role is to explain the facts and avoid subjective interpretation. Scientists are sometimes pitted against each other, when they are not actually in disagreement on the science, just its application. However, although some may choose to distort science through misrepresentation or selective use, these actions do not change the facts. The oceans are overfished, the climate is changing, and urban wetlands are endangered—regardless of how you and I feel about it.

Science is often ignored or distorted because of the inconvenience of facts when making decisions that also affect the environment. Applying science along our urban coasts requires tough decisions about balancing the restoration or preservation needs of the environment against other human interests and priorities. At Malibu Lagoon, for example, scientists agree the water is unhealthy and action must be taken to repair historic damage to the lagoon so it can support a thriving and diverse community of species and be resilient to future insults. This restoration project is supported by the most respected environmental groups in the region, including Audubon, Surfrider, Sierra Club, Heal the Bay, and Santa Monica BayKeeper. However, the project has suffered delays from a small but vocal group whose opposition is based on opinion and impressions, and not justified by science. The result is delayed action, continued damage to lagoon plants and animals, and escalating costs. Thankfully, the most recent court ruling affirms the robust science behind the restoration plan and allows the project to proceed in the summer of 2012.

It seems to be human nature to reject facts that get in the way of our opinions, but then our opinions get in the way of good projects and good science. It is the duty of scientists, including me, to communicate science in accessible ways, to promote better understanding of ecological principles, and to encourage the public to embrace change and create a more sustainable urban system. For our own survival, and that of the ecosystems we depend on, coastal communities must move forward with good projects based on good science. After all, allowing a few people's personal opinions to bog down restoration projects equates to doing nothing, and doing nothing will never solve our environmental problems.

Shelley L. Luce, Executive Director
Santa Monica Bay Restoration Foundation

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