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URBAN RIVER RESTORATION IN LOS ANGELES: THE COLLABORATIVE ROLE OF CALIFORNIA'S STATE CONSERVANCIES

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Abstract

This article explores an important aspect of the history and structure of urban river restoration in Los Angeles, California, focused on the pivotal role and support of four California state conservancies to materially aid grassroots, local and regional public partners, and other state and federal agencies in effective urban river restoration. Over two decades, these four state public Conservancies became essential partners in complex community-government collaborative urban river conservation and restoration efforts. We examine select experiences of the four conservancies over this time to offer some important lessons for modeling best practices to increase river restoration and conservation outcomes and to address a range of connected, landscape-level resilience and sustainability needs. We conclude that while the state conservancies' contributions have been, and continue to be, critical to successful river conservation and restoration, more research is needed to gain a better understanding of

their effectiveness in terms of the following: 1. Advancing the implementation of ecosystem-based river management and restoration; 2. building interdisciplinary technical and scientific capacity; and 3. synthesizing and communicating technical and scientific knowledge to policymakers, managers, and community stakeholders.

Introduction

The past decades brought a remarkable increase in river and watershed restoration in California, including urban river conservation in urban Los Angeles. Increasing attention to integrating natural resources protection and public recreation and use has spurred important changes in many different governmental and nongovernmental contributions, resulting in better coordinated and integrated public organizational capacities. Limitations in the effectiveness of traditional structures and forms of government organization in California to timely or adequately address complex,

natural resource and environmental management needs, including landscape-scale urban river restoration, have led to the development of new public programs, new organizational forms, and new agencies to coordinate and manage resource protection and river restoration in California. These public organizational innovations include important “boundary-spanning organizations,” among them, a suite of California state public conservancies.

California State Public Conservancies

California has ten conservancies established by legislation¹ to supplement its traditional state natural resource and public recreation agencies and help to protect regional resources of statewide significance. California conservancies are intended to act as creative problem-solving, cross-agency, collaborative, and environmentally integrative agencies to both facilitate the implementation and increase the extent of natural resource protection, including river restoration in California. The conservancies balance and integrate the often-conflicting goals of resource protection and public use. All are independent agencies within the California Natural Resources Agency, and are governed separately by independent bodies. All of the conservancies are non-regulatory, collaborative, state-local partnerships.

Each conservancy is charged with acquiring, restoring and protecting natural resource land in specified geographical regions of the state in order to advance certain statewide resource and conservation goals. Importantly, each conservancy emphasizes efforts to protect a particular “place,” such as the California Coast, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Lake Tahoe, the San Joaquin River and Delta, the Coachella Mountains, the Santa Monica Mountains, the Baldwin Hills, the San Gabriel/Los Angeles River, and the San Diego River.

Each conservancy is authorized to work with cooperating local and regional agencies, as well as other state agencies, to complete overall conservation and public access plans and help coordinate implementation for the jurisdictional areas the conservancy covers, including urban river conservation, enhancement, and restoration. Each conservancy has specific statutory powers and responsibilities, and all the conservancies are authorized to acquire and manage lands and to make grants to other agencies or nonprofit organizations. Most of the conservancies have goals that include public access and recreation.

While there is a state conservancy model in California, there is not simply one type of state conservancy. The structure of governance,

1 State Coastal Conservancy: Public Resources Code (PRC) sections 31000 et seq; Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy: PRC sections 33000 et seq; Sierra Nevada Conservancy: PRC sections 33300 et seq; San Diego River Conservancy: PRC sections 32630 et seq; San Joaquin River Conservancy: PRC sections 32500 et seq; Rivers and Mountains Conservancy: PRC sections 32600 et seq; Baldwin Hills Conservancy: PRC sections 32550 et seq; Coachella Valley and Mountains Conservancy: PRC section 33500; Delta Conservancy: PRC section 32300; and the California Tahoe Conservancy: Government Code sections 66905 et seq.

1970–79	1980–89	1990–1999 ³	2000–2009
State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) (1976)	Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC) (1980)	San Joaquin River Conservancy (SJRC) (1995)	Baldwin Hills Conservancy (BHS) (2000)
	California Tahoe Conservancy-CTC (1984)	Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy (CVMC) (1996)	San Diego River Conservancy (SDRC) (2002)
		San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC) (1999)	Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) (2004)
			Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta Conservancy (SSJRDC) (2009)

TABLE 1. California Conservancies formation history.

each conservancy’s statutory authorities, and sources of financial and funding support are specific to each conservancy.

Within the concept and model of the state conservancy in California, each is individual and particular, if not unique.² Table 1 shows the historical development of state conservancies in California and the increasing pace in creating new Conservancies in the past two decades.

The conservancies do not have land use authority and cannot supersede any local jurisdictional authority.⁴ The area under the jurisdictions of each of these conservancies varies from just two square miles to 1,100 miles along the coast, to over 25 million acres in the Sierra. The conservancies share many common goals, objectives, and practices and several of the conservancies cooperate and coordinate in cross-jurisdictional projects. The important common features include the following:

2 See Appendix B: Comparison of California’s state conservancies.

3 In 1998, the San Francisco Bay Program was established within the State Coastal Conservancy (SFBP/SCC, 2012).

4 The Sierra Nevada Conservancy may not acquire a fee interest in real property by purchase. See California Public Resources Code section 33347 (a).

1. Shared and transparent governance;
2. Multiple objectives;
3. Common collaborative practices;
4. Shared common characteristics; and
5. Integrated resource and ecosystem-based management (EMB) planning.

1. Shared and Transparent Governance: Conservancies’ governing bodies employ a collaborative state-local policy and approval structure to promote better integration of statewide, regional, and local priorities. Each conservancy has public members included in its voting membership.

2. Multiple Objectives: Conservancies’ programs and projects address multifaceted objectives, including conserving, enhancing, restoring, and preserving ecosystems, habitats and species, focused on desert, wetland, riverine, riparian, forest and watershed resources; preserving agricultural lands and working landscapes; improving public access and recreational opportunities; preserving open space; resolving resource and land use disputes; providing neutral broker forum and function; providing technical professional and financial assistance; and linking statewide priorities with regional and local priorities.

3. Common Collaborative Practices: Conservancies model many common collaborative practices, including: relying on public-private-community partnerships (community land trusts and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]); supporting conservation efforts with integrated technical and financial resources; creatively using demonstration projects; serving as policy and practice initiator and tester; and acting as experimenter and early adopter, including supporting innovative projects to establish “proof of concept.”

4. Shared Common Characteristics: Conservancies share many common characteristics, including an emphasis on voluntary, community-based action; use of plans as templates for achieving implementation goals; and utilization of a place-based, unique state-local structure. To date, although provided for some conservancies, eminent domain is never used. Conservancies share many funding and financing similarities, including the use of a diverse array of special funds, comprising regulatory penalties and a reliance on general obligation bond funds; limited use of state general funds; and strong leverage of local and federal funds.

5. Integrated Resource and Ecosystem-Based Management: Conservancies have pursued integrated resource protection programs, including habitat restoration focused on wetland/riparian/watershed enhancement and restoration; community-level prioritization and implementation; integrated coastal/marine-land/sea connection; and climate adaptation and mitigation.

All of the conservancies are founded on an explicit understanding that resource conservation program success is built on the collaborative efforts of state, regional, and local agencies and stakeholders, including representation from the public. Additionally,

as the number of conservancies multiplied, increased recognition of the “place-based” nature of successful community-level river and watershed restoration results in strong local representation on each conservancy governing body.

Even though the State Coastal Conservancy does not have “local” representation, per se, it does have a majority of public members among its seven designated members. Over the past four decades, many of these public members regularly “expressed” local desires and priorities in their votes on project and program approvals. All of the other conservancies have combined “state” and “local” memberships, in addition to significant public membership. The state members include constitutional, statutory, and representatives of state agencies, and most include representation from the California Natural Resources Agency and the California Department of Finance. The local representatives are chosen from local government representatives.

Table 2 below shows the distribution of membership by category for the four Conservancies located and/or active in urban river restoration in Los Angeles (see Appendix B: California Conservancies’ Governance). The different points of view, with important and numerous members of the public represented, broadens the sense of participation and ownership and genuine involvement and level of control over decision-making and implementation priorities.

Urban River Restoration in California, Southern California, and Los Angeles

For thirty years, California state government resource policy, protection, and restoration efforts were focused on urban river restoration, including importantly, river restoration in Southern California. A crucial element of these statewide efforts is the “River Parkways” program, which addresses river and stream and adjacent riparian areas, most often planned for a complex set of scenic, natural, open space, and recreational uses, and often encompassing

MEMBERSHIP	SCC	SMMC	RMC	BHC
Total	7	12	20	15
Voting	7	9	13	9
State	3	2	3	3
Local	-	3	9	1
Public	4	3	1	5
Federal	-	1	-	-
Tribal	-	-	-	-
Non-Voting	-	3	7	6
Legislative	6	6	-	-
Other	-	26	-	-

TABLE 2. Los Angeles Conservancies’ governance.

ecological restoration, flood management, water quality, and riverfront revitalization benefits.

California has been fertile ground for river and watershed restoration for over the past three decades (Kondolf 2007), and efforts in the state are among the most numerous and most advanced in the United States (Kondolf 2007; Bernhardt 2005, 2007; AWWA, 2012). California is home to multiple state-funded restoration programs evolved from diverse legislative mandates, ballot initiatives, and citizen-sponsored programs (McGinness 2005). Programmatic goals include watershed-based resource restoration addressing wetlands, streams, water quality, ecosystems, and habitat.

River restoration, watershed and water supply planning and implementation efforts were simultaneously developed within separate programs, although there have been increased coordination and integration in policy and program initiatives over the past decade, particularly with the development of Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP). Most recently, the increasing integration of river and watershed restoration efforts and the adoption of ecosystem-based management (EBM) approaches have resulted in increased collaborative and coordinated efforts. Collaborative efforts at coastal urban river restoration, including wetland and watershed restoration, though growing in number and significance, remain an experiment in public policy in California.

These collaborative initiatives seek to build voluntary cooperation between often-competing and adversarial stakeholders in order to promote more effective long-term coastal resource protection. While there is no agreement on the outcomes and effectiveness of collaborative, “voluntary,” and/or “incentives-based” initiatives, including river and watershed planning (Mazmanian and Kraft 2009), there is growing case study evidence of the positive outcomes associated with collaborative wetland, river, and watershed efforts. In the past decade, these types of coordinated, community-based efforts have continued to grow in importance, particularly within Southern California and Los Angeles (Jenkin 2005; IRWMP 2007).

In coastal Southern California, including the Los Angeles basin, there are many different efforts at river and watershed planning and implementation under way (SCWRP 2012). These efforts are long term, in some cases going back three decades, focused on the restoration and revitalization of the Los Angeles River and its tributaries, the adjacent San Gabriel River and its tributaries—both draining to San Pedro Bay, and watersheds, creeks and streams draining into Santa Monica Bay.

Los Angeles is and has been a fierce battleground over water quality, supply, pollution, and protection, including so-called “pollution wars,” that is, fights over polluted urban runoff, total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) of pollutants and the Clean Water Act, and coastal water quality and safe beaches in Santa Monica Bay. Increasingly, Los Angeles is cited as a national model for developing innovative successful program approaches to address these resource problems.



FIGURE 1. Los Angeles Basin region.

Since the 1980s, mounting community-based and multilevel government efforts have emerged to plan for natural resource, river, and watershed restoration of the Los Angeles River. These efforts were led by a number of neighborhood, community, and stakeholder groups, such as the Friends of the River (FoLAR), North East Trees (NET), and many community and neighborhood-level groups (Gottlieb 2005; Coast and Ocean, 2001).

The Los Angeles River flows for fifty-one miles, draining from the San Gabriel Mountains and from the north side of the Santa Monica Mountains and Hollywood Hills, south to the Pacific Ocean in Long Beach, encompassing a watershed area of 824 square miles, about 20% of the total land area in Los Angeles County (Fig. 1). Jurisdiction for the Los Angeles River corridor is fragmented among a dozen cities, including the City of Los Angeles, the County of Los Angeles, and the federal US Army Corps of Engineers, making coordinated and integrated restoration and revitalization for the river and watershed, a complex, complicated, and time-consuming effort.

The communities bordering the river represent some of the densest urban communities in the county, and these communities lack recreation, parks, and green space (Wolch 2002; Trust for Public Land 2002).

In 2010, the population density for the dozen cities lining the river ranged from a low of 8,000 people per square mile in the City of Los Angeles to more than 23,000 residents per square mile in one of the smallest jurisdictions, the City of Maywood. In six of these communities, population density along the river exceeds 10,000 residents per square mile.

The modern battle over the future of the Los Angeles River began in the 1980s as the county and the US Army Corps of Engineers pursued modern flood control improvements, while citizens and stakeholders began to ask, “Why not re-envision the LA River as an

PROJECT NAME	ACQ.	PLANNING	DESIGN & DEVELOP.	IMP., CONST., RESTORATION	TOTAL FUNDS*
Confluence Park (Arroyo Seco)	X (2003)	X (Project Plan–2002)	X	X	\$7.7 M
Elysian Valley–Marsh St. Park	X (2006)	X	X	X	\$5.288 M
Tijunga Wash		X	X	X	\$7 M

*Numbers represent minimum amounts, as totals reported may omit some authorized funding.

TABLE 3. Select SMMC-supported Los Angeles River parkway projects.

actual river?” This conflict of visions and the controversy over the future of the LA River has now been widely documented (Gottlieb 2002; Kibel 2007).

By the end of the ’80s, these growing calls for action to rethink the “beneficial uses” of the river and for restoring the river and its damaged natural resources was heeded by the public owners of the Los Angeles River. In 1990, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley established a Los Angeles River Task Force to “articulate a vision for the future of the river.” The Task Force established a broad set of goals for the river along with three initial demonstration projects to kick start river restoration and revitalization.

In 1991, the County Board of Supervisors initiated the Los Angeles River Master Plan. The County Master Plan included input from the river corridor cities, in addition to representation from citizen groups and stakeholders, as well as state and federal agencies. These two efforts took place at the same time that growing calls for watershed planning were being registered nationally, echoing at the state level and the local level in Los Angeles.

Many of the past and current Los Angeles River restoration projects involve conservancies as key restoration partners. There are four California state conservancies active in urban river restoration in Los Angeles: the California State Coastal Conservancy (SCC), the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), the San Gabriel-Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC), and the Baldwin Hills Conservancy (BHC). Three of these (excepting the BHC) are active on the Los Angeles River. Three of these conservancies are located in Los Angeles, and the fourth, the SCC, operates its statewide and regional programs from Oakland.

The three state conservancies active in the Los Angeles River watershed have partnered with sub-state, regional, and local agencies to implement river and watershed plans and projects in urban Los Angeles. The LA River and its watershed have received a great deal of social investment from the conservancies’ efforts and

participation; this has accelerated in the recent decade, fueled in part by the technical and financial resources of the conservancies and spurred by several general obligation bond acts.

What did these conservancies contribute to the LA River and watershed restoration partnership efforts? Over the past three decades, these conservancies funded and supported major planning and implementation projects towards Los Angeles River restoration and revitalization. Since the early 1990s, the SMMC has been assisting in development and implementation of the Los Angeles River Parkway, and in the past fifteen years, working with the RMC on coordinating overall efforts and integrating collective efforts on the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers and watersheds.⁵ These efforts were augmented by the efforts of the SCC in supporting key initiatives focused on wetlands, public access, and urban parks development.⁶

Many tangible accomplishments, projects, and multiple project benefits resulted from these combined efforts and a select listing of project accomplishments for the Los Angeles River undertaken, funded, and/or completed by the SMMC are included in Tables 3 and 4. A great deal of the SMMC’s efforts focused on the Upper Los Angeles River watershed and on the “heart” of the Los Angeles River at its confluence with the Arroyo Seco River. The SMMC’s key planning implementation and management partner is the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), established in 1985, under the state’s Joint Powers Act between the SMMC, the Conejo Recreation and Parks District, and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District.

Because each conservancy is specific to the geography and political culture and structure of the locality, among the four conservancies active in Los Angeles, there are several important differences in the operations and results of each.

5 Common Ground, jointly adopted by the SMMC and the RMC in 2001, is a watershed and open-space plan for the San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers.

6 The SCC and the SMMC jointly developed and operate under a JPA for projects within the Los Angeles River watershed along the Arroyo Seco River.

PLAN/PROJECT	DATE	CONSERVANCIES	PARTNERS
Los Angeles River Park and Recreation Area Study	1990–93	SCC; SMMC	California Legislature-SB 1920: 1990
AIA LA River Report	1990–94	SCC	California Legislature-SB 1920: 1990
Los Angeles River Watershed Plan/Task Force	1996	SCC; SMMC	LA County Dept. of Public Works; US Army Corps of Engineers
Common Ground from the Mountains to the Sea	2001	SMMC; RMC	California Resources Agency
Elysian Valley Greenway/ Gateway Parks	1995–2010	SMMC/MRCA	Trust for Public Land; Northwest Trees; City of Los Angeles
LA River Center		SMMC/MRCA	
River Wetlands Study	2001	SCC	
Lower Los Angeles River Restoration FA	2002	SCC	City of Long Beach
Arroyo Seco Watershed Restoration FA	2002	SCC	Northeast Trees (NET)/Arroyo Seco Fdn
Taylor Yard Feasibility Study	2002	SCC	Coalition for a State Park at Taylor Yard; CA State Parks
Cornfield		SMMC	CA State Parks; City of LA
LA River Revitalization Plan	2004	SCC	City of Los Angeles
Maywood Riverfront Park	1995–2008	SCC; SMMC/MRCA	Trust for Public Land
Los Angeles River Urban Wildlife Refuge	2007	SMMC	
DeForest/Dominguez Gap Wetlands	2007	SCC; RMC	LA County; City of Long Beach

TABLE 4. Select Conservancy-supported Los Angeles River projects.

The SMMC has developed strong local partnerships to own, develop, manage, and steward, protected and public use lands.

The SMMC partnered with the MRCA focuses much attention on river parkway planning and development on the Los Angeles River and within the river watershed. Creating fifty-one miles of continuous river parkway and greenbelt along the LA River to implement the County’s LA River Master Plan is one of the six strategic objectives of the SMMC. SMMC has a small governing board for efficiency but it is backed by a large advisory board, which maintains deep community connections to maximize SMMC’s community support and participation. While SMMC staffing has remained small, its grant support and financial investments for planning, development, and project staff at the MRCA has leveraged significant accomplishments.

The RMC has a much different governing board, larger and more specifically representative of municipal level governments, and operates under a very specific plan approval process. The RMC has remained a small staff organization, establishing select partnerships to carry out projects, such as the Los Cerritos Joint Power Authority (JPA), established with the Cities of Long Beach and Seal Beach

and the SCC, to acquire, design, and implement wetland restoration activities at the mouth of the San Gabriel River.

The SCC always has relied on partnership-oriented, community-based ecosystem planning, technical assistance, and funding approach in its activities along and to the coast, and similarly in its river parkway activities in Los Angeles. The SCC’s river parkway activities in Los Angeles are closely coordinated with the other conservancies and local stakeholders, and it has established several formal partnerships with the other Los Angeles conservancies through multiple JPAs, MOUs, and other joint efforts, including coordinated acquisition agreements.

Since the 1980s, the SCC has been involved in several key planning and implementation projects along the LA River. At the specific request of the State Legislature (Senate Bill 1920 in 1990), the SCC prepared a plan that included an assessment of the river’s potential for enhancement for public recreation and habitat. The SCC also funded the preparation of a report by the American Institute of Architects analyzing the major issues, opportunities, and constraints involved in a large-scale river restoration. The SCC manages and coordinates the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project

(SCWRP) and acts as the SCWRP's staff to coordinate coastal wetland and watershed projects, including riverine and riparian habitat restoration efforts. The Work Program for the SCWRP prioritizes important river restoration and enhancement projects on the River (SCWRP, 2012).

Table 4 includes a select list of some of the major river restoration planning and implementation projects in Los Angeles involving one or more of the California Conservancies. Several major planning initiatives for the Los Angeles River involve one or more of the state conservancies in a variety of roles, including funder, sponsor, project manager, and so on.

Successful efforts concerning river restoration in Los Angeles rely on a number of innovative public and private partnerships, in many cases materially aided by one or more of the state conservancies. For some of these partnerships, one or more of the conservancies played a key early adopter or early facilitator role in sustaining or propelling river restoration efforts. The conservancies' practices and programs recognize the need to build more cooperative and collaborative social network-based governance and management structures to facilitate natural resource restoration.

Table 5 shows the interrelationships between the conservancies and several different public and community partners and partnerships focused on the Los Angeles River. Collaborative planning and project development has been a signature "business" practice for these state conservancies. Several enduring state-local governmental partnerships were created, including the MRCA; the Los Cerritos Wetlands Joint Powers Agency (LCWA) and the San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers Watershed Council (now renamed the Council for Watershed Health).

Conclusion

This exploration of the collaborative history of conservancies' efforts related to Los Angeles River restoration offers some important lessons learned for modeling best practices in the future to improve conservation outcomes and to address a range of connected conservation resilience and sustainability needs. This article has substantiated many project and program accomplishments associated with the conservancies' contributions to river restoration as part of larger collaborative ensembles and community partnerships. Indeed, conservancies play critical and essential roles in river restoration in Los Angeles.

Like many other, if not most river restoration efforts, however, evaluation of outcomes resulting from this history of programs, agencies, and governmental and community activities still must be fully and adequately developed and analyzed. Monitoring and evaluation of environmental and resource condition change resulting from four decades of river restoration in California is severely lacking (Kondolf 2005). Analysis and evaluation of any specific impacts or outcomes resulting from institutional innovations, including from the experience and operations of the state conservancies, is still lacking.

Additional analysis and research is needed on the performance of innovative boundary organizations, such as the California conservancies. Actual performance results measured against a broad array of criteria are needed, importantly including information regarding transparency and the levels, types, and effects of public participation. More analysis of social, management, or decision-making conditions must be undertaken to support successful integrated river and watershed restoration. Many of the coordinated and collaborative efforts where the conservancies played a pivotal role in Los Angeles River restoration now are at least three decades old and need to be analyzed against a range of "success" measures. Further evaluation of the social capital component of river and watershed-based ecosystem management efforts is necessary to more fully understand best management practices.

Meeting these information and analysis needs requires more research at the interface of multiple social science disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and economics and law; various design disciplines; and multiple natural science disciplines, including hydrology, geomorphology, natural resource ecology, engineering, and hydro-ecology.

CONSERVANCY	PUBLIC PARTNERSHIPS	COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS
Santa Monica Mountains (1980)	Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority-MRCA (JPA-1985); Baldwin Hills Regional Conservation Authority (JPA-1999)	San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers Watershed Council
State Coastal (1976)	Los Angeles River Watershed Task Force (1996); Los Angeles River Interagency Agreement (2004)	Los Angeles County, DPW; CA State Parks; Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council
San Gabriel & Lower Los Angeles Rivers & Mountains (1999)	Los Cerritos Wetlands JPA (2006)	State Coastal Conservancy; Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council; Habitat and Science Advisory Panel (2004)

TABLE 5. Los Angeles River restoration partnerships.

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