

# An Urban Park District Looks to the Future

*Robert E. Doyle*

MORE THAN 80 YEARS AGO A SMALL GROUP OF FORWARD THINKERS had the bright idea to create the East Bay Regional Park District with a grand vision, first put forth by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Ansel F. Hall, for “a park system for recreation in a natural setting.” That vision has inspired and guided us for eight decades.

The movement to create the Park District grew out of a unique San Francisco Bay Area environment, which was a hotbed of progressive thinking, intellectual rigor with the University of California at Berkeley nearby, conservation, and outdoor recreation. The social and political forces that coalesced around the cause to preserve land in a quickly developing area, and create an East Bay park system, were similar to the origins of the US National Park Service (NPS).

Park District beginnings are closely intertwined with the National Park Service, part of whose mandate was to foster the development of state and city parks. The legendary Ansel F. Hall, an early Park Service ranger and naturalist who was a University of California graduate (as was the first NPS director, Stephen Mather), played a key role in establishing the vision and plan for the proposed regional park system. While working for the Park Service, Hall prepared a preliminary survey and report outlining the proposed parklands. Part of Hall’s purpose was to provide access to urban residents who otherwise would not be able to visit the natural environment. His report became the basis for the Olmsted–Hall report of 1930, which not only lent credibility to the local preservation efforts, but also provided a blueprint for early park development.

As the Bay Area has continued to grow rapidly, so has the East Bay Regional Park District, pushing its East Bay boundaries to the four corners of two of the largest counties in California. At the Park District’s beginnings in 1934 there were about 575,000 people in this region; today there are 2.8 million. We live in an area that has diverse landscapes and scenic

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beauty, now preserved in the Park District's 120,500+ acres and 66 parks. We celebrate both the abundant recreation and picturesque landscapes we have protected. We are fortunate to have a dedicated and well-trained staff and a public that continues to support their Park District.

Much like eight decades ago, the times are uncertain. Among the key challenges that are shaping the East Bay Regional Park District of the 21st century are:

- Population growth, changing demographics and accessibility to parklands.
- Connecting youth to nature and building future park advocates.
- Improved scientific knowledge in the areas of natural and cultural resource management.
- The impact of climate change and resiliency for rising sea levels.
- User conflicts and increased demands for public access.
- Aging infrastructure in older parks.

One of the most attractive aspects of the East Bay Regional Park District is that its parks and trails are easily accessible to every resident in the Bay Area. Because of this, most of our 25 million annual park visits come from residents who can find regional parks within 15 minutes of their homes. Each year, we see more visitors than Yosemite, Monterey Peninsula, and Napa Valley combined!

As one can imagine, this high usage is both a blessing and a curse to the agency and the public. Every day, our staff finds ways to resolve increasing user conflicts, including over parking, while keeping our parks wonderful places to visit for everyone.

### **Community engagement**

**Youth outreach.** Each year, the Park District hires more than 400 young people with varied interests or career goals to work in parks, offices, and visitor centers. Our urban park system, which offers nature close to home, acts as a “portal” for learning about nature and the value of national, state, and local parks. Our youth engagement programs and visitor centers create positive outdoor experiences for city kids.

Our outreach programs include: Community Outreach Outdoor Program, Camps to Communities, Teen Eco Action, Adventure Crew, Leaders in Training, Youth Employment Program, youth internships, park job fairs, and Park District presence at externally hosted job fairs.

This high level of accessibility makes the Park District a leader in the Healthy Parks Healthy People movement, which encourages the use of the parks for healthful outdoor recreation.

**Healthy Parks Healthy People.** Encouraged by growing evidence that spending time in nature improves physical and mental health, the Park District has been spearheading an initiative to raise awareness about the synergy between a healthful community and well-managed local parks.

Ninety-nine percent of Park District visitors surveyed since 1988 have reported health and fitness as the most important reason they visit parks. Accessible parks near urban areas encourage residents to get outdoors and be active in ways that fit into their hectic schedules.



**Figure 1.** Healthy Parks Healthy People Wellness Walk attendees practicing yoga together in nature at Coyote Hills Regional Park (EBRPD).

“Communities, families, doctors, nurses, all of us know that our health is directly related to the amount of exercise we do each day,” says Dr. Rich Godfrey, director of the UCSF [University of California at San Francisco] East Bay Surgical Residency Program at Highland General Hospital in Oakland. “The East Bay Regional Parks are an amazing gymnasium of hills, oxygen, and natural wonders that await us seven days a week,” Godfrey adds. This is the Healthy Parks Healthy People connection.

The Park District has connected with health-care providers specifically in an effort to drive this message home to families with chronically ill children or patients in mental health clinics seeking relief from anxiety or depression. SHINE, or Stay Healthy in Nature Every Day, was created as a prescriptive to provide access to parks through transportation and programs to benefit these types of medical needs. From children’s hospitals to county medical clinics, the Park District’s SHINE program has received rave reviews from patients and health providers alike.

To reach multicultural members of the community, the Park District has implemented an outreach plan identifying trusted, ethnically diverse community leaders to encourage people to come out for “healthy nature walks” in regional parks. These activities bring together members of multi-ethnic communities for health and fellowship; it’s kind of an old-fashioned way to meet and break bread together—all with a nature-centric, park backdrop. The healthy nature walks also include traditional and non-traditional forms of exercise, from stopping

along a trail and doing tai chi or dancing a Zumba routine along the shoreline to making music using only items found along the way.

**Wildlands and habitats for endangered species.** As our urban populations grow, so does the impact on natural habitat around San Francisco Bay and the open spaces of the East Bay. For that reason, the Park District has partnered with federal and state wildlife agencies to address endangered species management by being the lead agency to acquire and manage tens of thousands of acres of land for permanent preservation. Because the Park District has so many large parks, we have focused our efforts on expanding wildlife corridors—connecting 40 miles of San Francisco Bay shoreline, including major wetland restorations, and critical habit connections in the ridgeland parks.

## Stewardship

The various natural and cultural resources of the East Bay Regional Park District—whether a rare plant or animal, a valley grassland or chaparral-covered slope, an ancient pictograph or bedrock mortar, a panoramic vista or a mountain peak—are all public treasures. The 120,500+ acres of mostly undeveloped, natural, open space parklands in Alameda and Contra Costa counties offer a variety of grassland, shrubland, woodland, forest, lake, shoreline, riparian, and wetland environments, which provide essential habitat for a diverse collection of wild plants and animals.

**Figure 2.** A view from Eagle’s Crest Trail at Del Valle Regional Park—a great example of a wildlife corridor that connects four regional parks and 40,000 acres (Greg Brian).





US Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell has said that because of the Park District's early efforts to acquire significant parkland we now have one of the most successful habitat conservation partnerships in the United States. One such partnership has resulted in the preservation of nearly 12,000 new acres of critical wildlife habitat in eastern Contra Costa County, with the goal of creating a 30,000-acre preserve over the next 20 years through a consolidation of previously fragmented and inefficient permit processes. Developers' project approval fees are used to purchase and preserve wildlife habitat to replace open space lost to development. The Park District has leveraged these fees, as well as its own park bonds and grants from federal and state sources, especially the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Since 2008, \$48.5 million in park, regional, federal and state grants, and \$13.3 million in fees, has been received for habitat conservation projects.

### Older urban parks

Like national and state parks built by the Works Progress Administration during the Depression, many of our older parks currently face infrastructure maintenance needs that we are working hard to address. Maintaining our existing parks and infrastructure is a very high priority for the Park District. A 2012 District survey found 91% of respondents strongly

**Figure 3.** An EBRPD construction crew repairs a storm-damaged water line caused by a landslide at Del Valle Regional Park (EBRPD).



agreed that the regional park system is a valuable public resource and 95% agreed that proper maintenance of existing parklands, trails, and recreation facilities should continue to be a top priority.

The problem of unmet maintenance needs is not unique to the East Bay Parks. Our California State Parks system has unfortunately been unable to keep up with the backlog of demand and has deferred maintenance totaling just over \$1.2 billion, with a maintenance shortfall of approximately \$120 million each subsequent year. The Park District operates three state parks, Crown Beach, McLaughlin Eastshore State Park, and Del Valle Regional Recreation Area, at no cost to the state, which means we are working through an inherited a backlog of maintenance projects with no money from the state to pay for them.

**Preparing for climate change**

With 55 miles of urban shoreline parks and over 120,500 acres of wildlands, the Park District is on the front line of defense against climate change and sea level rise, protecting millions of people. In response, the Park District is developing leading-edge strategies which will help the East Bay prepare for climate change in terms of sea level rise and wildfire. The Park District has also implemented strategies to slow and stop pollution by promoting green

**Figure 4.** An aerial view of McLaughlin Eastshore State Park. Climate change sea rise models predict that, without enhanced shoreline protections, this park along with most of the San Francisco Bay shoreline will be subject to tidal inundation and eventual submersion over the coming decades (Michael Short).



transportation, clean energy, and carbon sequestration. Located in one of the most urbanized estuaries at the confluence of two nationally significant waterbodies, the San Francisco Bay and the Sacramento–San Joaquin River Delta, the Park District’s parklands, and particularly the 55 miles of Bay–Delta shoreline managed by the Park District, buffer numerous at-risk communities. These are the same communities where residents live in close proximity to greenhouse gas emitters and energy infrastructure, such as refineries and energy plants.

The Park District can offset greenhouse gasses through sequestration by restoring and creating wetlands. The Park District recently updated an assessment which found the average amount of carbon sequestered by its wildlands is 300,000 tons of carbon dioxide equivalents (CO<sub>2</sub>e)—comparable with removing 59,300 vehicles from the road each year. By preserving natural land in perpetuity, these wildlands represent an important permanent carbon stock of over 52 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e. Moving forward, the Park District is developing a sustainability plan which will build on the work already done. It will provide guidance about how we can contribute more toward meeting the challenges presented by climate change. The Park District strives to be a leading climate change park agency by developing and implementing climate solutions.

As an example, this year the Park District broke ground on a 1.2-megawatt solar project which will provide shade for visitors and generate clean, renewable energy for facilities throughout the East Bay Regional Park District, enough to nearly “zero out” the Park District’s entire electricity footprint.

Although great strides have been made in understanding the possible consequences of climate change on wildlife and their habitats, predicting the exact changes that will be wrought upon the planet over the next 50 or 100 years remains an inexact science. On the one hand, organizations such as Point Blue Conservation Science have developed a host of predictive tools for how certain species may react to changing climate (see <http://www.pointblue.org/our-science-and-services/conservation-science/climate-change-solutions/climate-change-research/>). For example, they modeled the specific responses of tidal marsh bird species to predicted sea level changes on San Francisco Bay and used the results to prioritize marsh restoration projects. On the other hand, it is still an open question as to how some ecosystems, such as grasslands, will ultimately react to climate change.<sup>1</sup> It seems clear that no one could have predicted the extreme, drought-related die-off of over 66 million trees (and counting) in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California between 2011 and 2015.<sup>2</sup> Recently, scientists have called for more integrated approaches to assessing the impacts of climate change on.<sup>3</sup>

The Park District has partnered with organizations such as Save the Bay and the California Coastal Conservancy to improve marsh habitat for the endangered Ridgeway’s rail while at the same time controlling an introduced species of marsh cordgrass that has the potential to negatively impact bay mudflats. Island nesting habitat for endangered California least terns and the western snowy plover has been successfully created at Hayward Regional Shoreline with the help of hundreds of volunteers and thousands of volunteer hours. Not only has the colony of nesting California least terns increased from a few pairs to over 85 pairs in just 10 years, it has become one of the most successful breeding colonies for the species in California.



Finally, even green energy solutions that counteract climate change are presenting challenges for wildlife management and preservation. The Altamont Pass Wind Resource Area near Livermore is a major source of wind energy for California. Yet it annually kills thousands of birds, including hundreds of raptors, through wind turbine blade strikes. As the wind companies in the Altamont move forward with replacing numerous older wind turbines with fewer, larger and more efficient wind turbines, the Park District has been involved in numerous studies that seek to determine how raptors use the landscape of the Altamont. In particular, the Park District has been tracking golden eagles with GPS technology to develop risk maps that can be used to inform wind turbine placement to lessen the impacts of the new turbines on this iconic species.

## Conclusion

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of our National Park Service, more than ever we need to make parks and natural areas relevant to urban populations so residents will continue to value natural lands. Urban park systems are an increasingly important way to connect nature to people. For a long time urban parks were not seen as contributing significantly to the preservation of natural areas and wildlife because of their more urban landscapes and high use. The value of urban wilderness is not only their essential role as wildlife corridors with connectivity to other public open spaces. Today, urban parks play an even more important role: they act as portals to learning about and experiencing wilderness within densely populated and very diverse urban areas. This “first touch” with nature, or a program given by a naturalist, are very similar experiences to those of previous generations who camped in our national or state parks. The difference being that urban parks are close by, right where people live. We can’t sustain these parks and natural areas without a new generation of supporters; they will be with us as lifelong supporters if we reach out to them where they live.

## Endnotes

1. See <https://dgs.stanford.edu/DGE/Dukes/DukesEtAl2005.pdf>.
2. See <http://www.pnas.org/content/113/2/E249.full.pdf?sid=c401605a-8ef0-4b30-8a20-476a1055738f>.
3. See <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/sci/353/6304/aad8466.full.pdf>.

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**Figure 5.** EBRPD Wildlife Program Manager Doug Bell prepares to release a golden eagle outfitted with a lightweight radio transmitter (Joe DiDonato).