

Report on Rancho Guejito land management misleading

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By: KIT WILSON

East of Escondido, north of Ramona, and south of Valley Center lies a largely unrecognized territory that may hold the key to North County's future. It is known as the Guejito.

A holdover from the days of the Mexican dons and missions, the Guejito, at more than 21,000 acres, remains as the last of its kind. It contains an intact Mexican Land Grant much as it was when it was created in 1845 before the county's population census reached 800 and just before the Battle of San Pasqual set California on course to a new future.

The Guejito was purchased in 1974 for \$10 million or \$465/acre by Benjamin Coates and remained essentially unchanged until his demise. Left in its own time-forgotten world, the Guejito has come to be known in recent years as "The Jewel of San Diego Conservation." Such a label is a remarkable honor considering that San Diego County is home to more endangered species than any county in the United States, a world biodiversity hotspot, and the focus of many conservation efforts.

Now the inheritors of the ranch are seeking to change all that. They are working to turn the rancho into an Escondido-sized development project situated in the middle of San Diego County. Their tactics include a false and misleading report (Jan. 14, "Report: Cattle, clearing saved huge historical spread") written by Henry Rupp, the attorney for the ranch's owners. The report attempts to take advantage of North County residents' justifiable fear of wildfire to literally clear the way for development.

The stage is set for this in the report by misreporting the damage done to the Guejito during recent firestorms. According to the story, while large portions of San Diego County were being evacuated from the path of an unstoppable firestorm last fall, some cattle and a firebreak saved the historical Rancho Guejito from burning.

Using the best state fire perimeter data available and county land records, I did a little analysis to see if this remarkable story was true.

First, I had to correct the size of the ranch from the reported 24,000 acres to around 21,500. In the 2003 fires about 59 percent of the Guejito burned, not the 80 percent cited in the report. The report purports that firebreaks created by cattle saved the Guejito from suffering another massive burn in the 2007 firestorm.

The fact is that about 52 percent of the Guejito burned in 2007. That's a little better but hardly anything

to boast about. Altogether, 93 percent of the Guejito burned in the 2003 and 2007 firestorms. I think a lot of people in Rancho Bernardo whose homes were razed by the fire might have had more than 7 percent of their property left unburned, but I doubt they found much satisfaction in that.

Based on this supposed fire success, the report moves on to degrade our public preserves as death traps for native flora and fauna because they are left in a natural state and not cleared of troublesome native vegetation like the Guejito owners are doing.

The native habitat they are attacking as a public service is often misunderstood and dismissed as overgrown brush, but it is actually coastal sage and chaparral. We have a remarkable natural diversity in San Diego, from oceans and lagoons to oak woodlands and grasslands to pine forests and deserts, but chaparral is the backbone that holds them all together. It is more than "brush-choked hillsides," as the North County Times reporter describes them. It is the very essence of natural San Diego.

The report states that "dozens of miles of wildlife crossing fence" were built. These fences force cattle to graze and trample areas of coastal sage and chaparral until it is wiped out in order to increase pasture for cattle. Rupp says that he is creating sanctuaries when he is actually engaging in the wholesale destruction of our natural environment for profit.

Mr. Rupp then makes an outlandish statement about the costs involved in ranching and being "good neighbors." As an indicator of ranching costs, he says: "They spend up to \$25,000 an acre each year to maintain the ranch." Well, $\$25,000 \times 21,500 \text{ acres} = \537.5 million in expenses. To allow for areas that are cheaper to maintain and still get an idea of the truth in his statement, I will set the total expenses at only \$10 million or \$465 an acre and allow a generous 15 acres per head of cattle. That would still be almost \$7,000 per head per year. That is some expensive beef!

What could be the motivation for such misrepresentation of the fires and facts? Is Rupp using the fear of wildfire as an excuse to destroy the habitat and conservation value of the Guejito in order to increase its potential development value?

When a developer proposes a development he must meet many very difficult and expensive requirements. One of these requirements comes in the form of an environmental impact report.

If the development will destroy native habitat the developer must compensate for that by preserving similar habitat elsewhere through a biological mitigation process. Fair or not, laws protect our natural environment. Agricultural development is also covered under these regulations. Habitat loss, clearing permits or mitigation may be required both inside and outside habitat conservation planning areas.

The county uses guidelines to determine what level of permit or mitigation will be needed for agricultural clearing permits, and environmental impacts are the key determining factor according to the Farm Bureau. When cattle graze, a certain amount of habitat loss is to be expected and may be considered incidental to ranching. When dozens of miles of fence are used to isolate areas of chaparral

and special chaparral-eating cattle are brought in to clear the area, can this be considered an unavoidable loss incidental to cattle ranching?

The expansion of existing agricultural operations onto any area that was not previously in agricultural use is specifically not exempt from habitat loss permits (Sec 87.202). Yet when I checked, the county could not find any record of reviewing the need for clearing permits on the Guejito. This oversight will allow the Guejito owners to convert prime habitat into disturbed non-native vegetation more suitable for building and with a greatly reduced need for expensive biological mitigation.

If the North County adopts the extensive clearing of chaparral as a fire-control measure we will be faced with a denuded and urbanized landscape throughout North County and possibly a new city named Guejito. The original story in the North County Times suggested such clearing as a way to stop recurring wildfires.

However, the fact that more than 80,000 acres that burned in 2003 fires burned again in 2007 makes me question just how effective brush clearing and prescribed burns are. In fact, 17 percent of the Guejito burned twice in only four years. Invasive plant species and weeds that spring up after clearing grow very rapidly, providing more than enough fuel to carry a fire.

Livestock, overgrazing and cleared land are primary ways that such invasives spread across the landscape. Advocating these destructive practices as a way to reduce fire risk and improve native habitat is disingenuous at best. Current studies show that extensive clearing beyond current standards does little to further protect homes. We need to focus on fire-safe houses, following through with existing clearing regulations and strategies that work, not knee-jerk reactions and exaggeration that mislead us.

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